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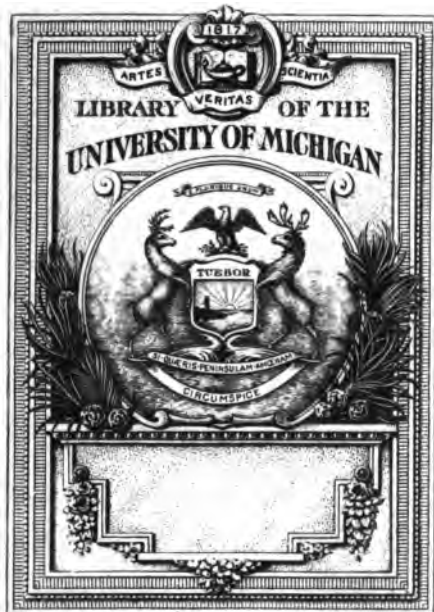
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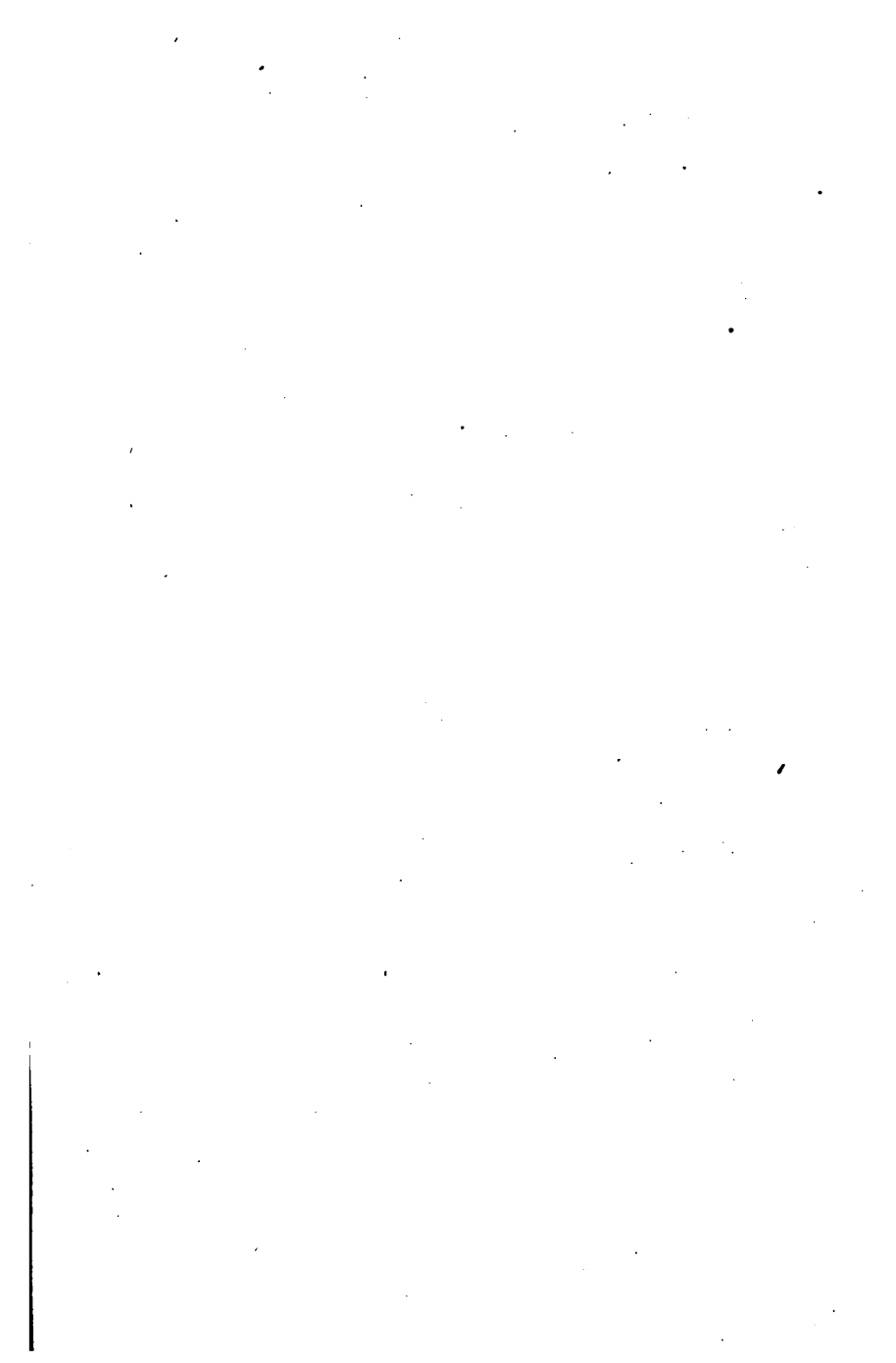
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HUMBUG

BY
E. M. DELAFIELD

TENSION
THE HEEL OF ACHILLES

De La Pasture, Edmée Elizabeth Monica

HUMBUG

A STUDY IN EDUCATION

BY

E. M. DELAFIELD



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1922

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TO PAUL

HUSBAND and COMRADE

*For the friendship of our days,
For your very pleasant ways,
For the many times we've laughed,
For your kindness to my craft,
Let me dedicate to you
The book of mine I hold most true.*



D. F. BUTLER
REQUEST
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"If people would dare to speak to one another unreservedly, there would be a good deal less sorrow in the world a hundred years hence."

SAMUEL BUTLER.

"I think the Church Catechism has a good deal to do with the unhappy relations that commonly even now exist between parents and children. That work was written too exclusively from the parental point of view; the person who composed it did not get a few children to come in and help him. . . .

"If a new edition of the work is ever required I should like to introduce a few words insisting on the duty of seeking all reasonable pleasure and avoiding all pain that can be honourably avoided. I should like to see children taught that they should not say they like things which they do not like merely because certain other people say they like them, and how foolish it is to say they believe this or that when they understand nothing about it."

SAMUEL BUTLER.

"Education, as deliberate moulding of people into set forms, is sterile, illegitimate, and impossible."

TOLSTOI.

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

Few novelists, if any, can have escaped the sprightly idiocy of a reproach couched in somewhat the following terms:

"Aha! I recognized the people in your last book. You can't deceive ME! The minute I came to that part about the old lady feeding the cat, I saw at once that you meant it for poor Aunt Jane."

And also, spoken several semi-tones lower:

"All the same, it seems rather a shame to have put poor old GRANDPAPA into a book, now that he's dead."

In an endeavour to forestall these intelligent criticisms, I wish to point out that Philip and Eleanor Stellenthorpe, Miss Melody, Aunt Clotilde, the Hardinges, etc., merely represent types—that I fear to be far from extinct—of amateur educationalists.

There are no individual indictments in HUMBUG, the book is not an autobiography, and Lily Stellenthorpe is not an attempt at foisting upon the reader a portrait of the writer as she would fain have herself considered, and as she is not.

E. M. DELAFIELD.

HUMBUG

I

GOOD women know by instinct that the younger generation, more especially when nearly related to themselves, should be equipped to encounter life by the careful and systematic misrepresentation of the more vital aspects of life.

The mother of Lily and Yvonne Stellingthorpe was a good woman, and had all a good woman's capacity for the falsification of moral values. Her husband was so constituted that it would not be unjust to describe him in identical terms.

Lily was so pretty that she did not begin to disappoint her parents seriously until she was seven years old, but Yvonne, who was not pretty and who displayed many less negative disadvantages as well, was a source of dismay to them from her very infancy, when she nearly died of water on the brain.

"Is little Vonnie quite like other children, I sometimes wonder?" fearfully whispered Eleanor Stellingthorpe to her husband, when Yvonne was five years old. And Philip Stellingthorpe, with that entire refusal to acknowledge even the possibility of any painful contingency so wholly characteristic of the sentimental, replied, also in a whisper:

"Hush, my dearest! I can't bear to hear you say a thing like that."

Accordingly nothing of the sort was ever said again, although it became perfectly obvious, in the course of another year or two, that Vonnie was "not quite like other children"—was, in fact, very, very slightly deficient mentally.

She was a quiet little girl, who could be intensely obstinate, with a hesitation in her always unready speech that hardly amounted to an impediment. She was tall and healthy looking, so that one scarcely realized her head to be too large, as it certainly was, for her body.

Little Lily loved Yvonne, her senior by two years, with the fierce, protective passion of a mother for a helpless child. It was a love that caused her the most acute suffering of which a sensitive and highly-strung child is capable, and the manifestations of which were sorrowfully described by her parents, in all good faith, as Lily's naughtiness, and tendency to impertinent interference.

It was naughty to rage and cry when Vonnie was punished for being obstinate or slow, it was impertinent to stamp and shout: "It's not fair! It's not fair!" when Vonnie was left at home, and Father and Mother were kind enough to take Lily out for a treat, such as a neighbouring garden-party, or a wedding, and it was naughtiest of all, when Vonnie was laughed at or admonished for not understanding things quickly, to interfere and cry out: "She can't help it—she is trying—it isn't *fair* to scold her!"

Lily knew that all these things were naughty, because she had always been told so, but the spirit of frenzy that possessed her always drove her on, the

consciousness of naughtiness notwithstanding. Therefore at a very early age there was implanted in her the conviction that she had been sent into the world with a natural proclivity towards wrong-doing.

Both children knew that Lily was their parents' favourite. It would have been impossible not to know it. She might be sorrowfully reproached for her "disloyalty"—a favourite accusation—to the cardinal article of belief that Father and Mother always knew best, but she was never punished. Her prettiness and her precocious cleverness were exploited and praised to her face. She was sent for to the drawing-room whenever there were visitors, and taken out in the carriage to pay calls, and very often given small, unexpected presents and surprises by her mother, in which Vonnie's only share was to be told that "next time" it would be her turn.

It never was her turn, and Lily and Vonnie both knew that the "next time" of the promises would never come.

Paradoxically, it was far harder upon Lily than upon Vonnie. She had the greater capacity for suffering of the two, and a strong abstract sense of justice besides, that rendered her absolutely incapable of accepting uncritically an unfair situation. In addition, the ardour of her love for Vonnie was proportionate to the intensity of all her emotions.

Theoretically, one loved Father and Mother best of everybody in the world. In fact, it would have been a "disloyalty" of the very naughtiest kind to contemplate any other possibility. It was proper to love one's sister third in order, and Lily and Vonnie were both persuaded that to these regulations they must and did conform. Lily, at seven years old, naturally did not seek logically

to reconcile this doctrine with the strange accesses of rage and rebellion against Father and Mother that seized her so frequently upon Vonnie's behalf.

Vonnie resented nothing, for herself. She was philosophical, humble-minded, and above all desirous of peace. The nursery storms raised by Lily in her defence were her chief source of grievance. She did not mind being left out of treats, very much. She minded the noise of Lily's angry screams, and Mother's argumentative reproaches, and the final grieved intervention of Father, very much more.

Fortunately, perhaps, for her peace, Vonnie very often failed to realize that it was her own inoffensive self that was the cause of these terrible domestic cataclysms.

She was absent-minded, and never much interested in what people were saying, so that very often the beginning of disturbance went quite unheard by her. Sometimes she only woke up to what was happening when Lily had begun to scream, as she always did sooner or later when her furious gusts of temper outran her powers of verbal expression.

Then Vonnie would think wearily: "Another scene!" which was what she always called a disturbance of any kind, and put her hands to her head, through which each one of Lily's shrieks sent a dull pain jarring. It made her feel rather sick in a curious sort of way, to see Lily shaking all over, the tears streaming down her scarlet cheeks, and Mother, as pale as Lily was crimson, with miserable eyes and a face that almost implored her to be good.

"My pet, how can you be so naughty? Can't you trust Mother to know what's best for *both* her babies?"

"It's not fair, it's not fair!" shrieked Lily as she had been shrieking for the last five minutes.

"*Stop* saying that, Lily. It's not true, it's very naughty. Don't you know that Mother would never do anything that wasn't fair?"

"Let—Vonnie—come—too," Lily sobbed more quietly.

"My little darling, leave Vonnie to me. You *must* learn not to interfere with Vonnie. It will be her turn next time. Besides, Vonnie doesn't want to go, do you, Vonnie my pet?"

"No, Mother," said Vonnie, watching her mother's face and only desirous of saying what would most quickly conduce to peace.

"You see, Lily! As though Mother didn't know what was best for her little Vonnie."

"She always says she doesn't want to go! It's not *fair!* . . ."

Lily had begun again, more frantically than ever. Father had to be sent for.

Father took up a high line at once. "My little Lily!" said he gravely. He firmly placed his little Lily upon his knee, a post of honour reserved exclusively for moments of serious appeal and which, even at the height of her frenzy, Lily would never have thought it possible to decline.

"My little Lily! Is this the way you show your gratitude, when an outing is planned for you? Don't you know that you are grieving us very much, when we are only thinking of your welfare and pleasure, and wanting to make you happy? God will be very angry with you, if you can't show a happy, grateful spirit."

Father and Mother were never angry—they were only

grieved. It was God that was always indignant and resentful on their behalf.

Lily was afraid of God, and secretly thought that He, who knew everything and could do everything, always punished her naughtiness by sending the thing that she dreaded most in all the world—one of Vonnie's fearful earaches.

The assurance that God was angry again made her choke down some of her defiant sobs and mutterings.

"We might all be so happy, if you were a good little girl, and it ought to be so easy with parents who love you dearly. Many poor little children have no father and mother or nice, cheerful, happy home. Now, my pet, are you sorry?"

"Yes," said Lily tremulously, thinking of God with the earache bolt still, as it were, suspended.

"Then I think you had better ask God to forgive you. Go and kiss your dear mother, and then run and get dressed. Don't keep the carriage waiting."

God, and Philip Stellenthorpe's magnanimity, had defeated Lily.

She crept away, dragging her feet.

Her head ached and her eyes smarted and, dressed up in her white silk frock and best hat, precociously sensitive to the contrast, she had to leave Vonnie in everyday clothes and nursery pinafore, a forlorn figure at the window, and take her seat between her parents in the open carriage.

As they drove, she heard them exchange comments over her head, as they very often did, in slightly lowered tones.

"Her poor little eyes are quite swollen——"

"Poor little thing!"

They always forgave her quickly, like that, however frightful her offence.

Would that God had been equally unresentful! All through the unappreciated afternoon, Lily was secretly addressing earnest, spasmodic appeals to that unappeasable Avenger.

"Don't make Vonnie have earache—not this time! . . . I did stop screaming at the end—I *am* sorry—I never, never mean to be naughty again. Oh, don't make Vonnie have earache—give me any other punishment—*(but of course He won't, because He knows that nothing else makes me half so miserable—)* If only Vonnie doesn't have earache this time, I promise I'll never be naughty again as long as I live—"

"Have you enjoyed yourself, my pet?"

"Yes, Mother."

It would have been naughty not to enjoy oneself when Father and Mother had given one a treat, and quite unthinkable actually to say that one hadn't. As well part at once with the last feeble shred of hope that God would withhold the earache punishment.

Those earaches to which Vonnie was periodically a victim were like the shadow of some monstrous nightmare, for ever hanging over Lily's head. The perpetual foreboding of them, which was never altogether absent from her, darkened her childish days, but when the nightmare was actually upon her, the foreboding realized, Lily knew the meaning of anguish.

Her tiny impotence would hurl itself against the cruel facts of Vonnie's pain, Vonnie's speechless and stoical acceptance of it, worst of all, the philosophic unconcern

of the surrounding grown-up people. Because Vonnie never cried, never complained, *would* say "Nothing is the matter" to all their enquiries, they would not see.

They were not really sufficiently interested to see.

When Lily had toothache—really a very little toothache—and tentatively said so, her mother petted her additionally, asking her continually if the tooth was hurting less, and giving her a story-book in the drawing-room at lesson time. She came into the night nursery with a carefully shaded light in her hand, in the middle of the night, and woke Lily up by putting a little plate with some grapes on it at her bedside. All of which was very pleasant, and Lily was quite sorry when next day it proved impossible, with any vestige of truth, to assert that the tooth was still aching.

But if anything hurt Vonnie, she would never say so. Lily knew this, but nobody else seemed to realize it. In the same way, Lily, by some mysterious instinct that she could not have analyzed, always knew by some quite indescribable look around Vonnie's eyes, when anything was the matter with her. She even knew, and the knowledge made her so miserable that she felt as though she could not bear it, that Vonnie sometimes tried to shut her away, too, and would rather that she had not known so much and so unerringly.

Vonnie's reticence was appalling. She would have suffered tortures, rather than risk a possible scene by complaining. She could only just bear Lily's piercing watchfulness so long as it found no vent in words.

On the earache days, and, worst of all, nights, both were at a pitch of strain that amounted to acute nervous tension and each reacted upon the other.

An east wind gave Vonnie earache. So did sitting in a draught, or staying out of doors late when it was damp, or sometimes just catching an ordinary cold in the head. Lily knew all this. A familiar sensation to her was that of a sudden sinking, a physical sickness that only lasted for a few seconds, when some grown-up authority observed carelessly in her hearing:

"Why, the wind has gone right round to the east to-day."

Once Lily had put her apprehension into words and said, breathless from misery:

"Then Vonnie will get earache!"

"What!"

'When the wind is in the east
It's neither good for man nor beast!'

her father made playful quotation.

But when Lily, frightened and resentful that she was not being taken seriously, repeated angrily: "But she *will* get earache—she always does, if there's an east wind," her father spoke gravely.

"Come, come, my pet. I don't like to hear you say things like that. That's not being a very good little girl, you know. It's only gloomy, ungrateful little people who run to meet trouble halfway. Little Vonnie doesn't mean to get earache. Do you, Vonnie?"

"Yes, Father—I mean no," said Vonnie vaguely.

She went out and she did get earache. Lily had always known that she would.

Yet Lily, from that day added to her store of small, perverted convictions, the unescapable conclusion that it was very naughty to foresee calamity, and still naughtier to voice that foresight.

She still sometimes said to the nurse, or to the daily

governess: "Vonnie's got a cold already. She'll have earache if she goes out to-day." The words seemed forced from her in a frail hope that would not be denied, that the catastrophe might be averted.

But the nurse simply said: "*Will* you learn to mind your own business, Miss Lily? I should hope I know what was good for Miss Vonnie by this time, without any interference from you."

And the governess said bracingly: "Oh, I don't think Vonnie's got much of a cold, have you, dear?"

To which Vonnie, of course, said No, just as she would have said there was nothing the matter, if earache had actually been upon her.

"There, you see, Lily! You really must give up always trying to speak for Vonnie instead of letting her speak for herself. It's not good for *her*, and it's not good for *you*. What will you do when you're both grown up?" said Miss Cleeve humorously, "if you're at a ball, let us say, and some gentleman asks Vonnie to dance, and then you, Lily, answer instead of her and say 'Oh no, thank you very much, she's tired.' Wouldn't that make you both look very silly, don't you think?"

Lily was no match for Miss Cleeve's ridicule. She could think of no confutation of this *reductio ad absurdum* of the situation, even in her own mind. She merely hated Miss Cleeve vehemently, and put her for ever into the large class of people who "didn't understand."

These were indeed legion, where was concerned the most vital preoccupation of Lily's whole being—Vonnie's welfare.

When an earache pain had actually begun, which it did almost always in the evening, not the day-time—and

Lily knew by the look on Vonnie's face that it was still quite endurable, there was a faint hope that if she went to bed quickly and pulled the blankets over her head, she might go to sleep before it became really bad.

But Vonnie would not, and Lily dared not, utter a word of this to the authorities, and consequently the half-hour spent in the drawing-room with Father and Mother before bedtime underwent no curtailment, on such occasions.

They played Happy Families, or Beggar-my-Neighbour, or listened to Father reading aloud, just as usual.

And all the time Lily, in an agony, was inwardly adjuring the Being to whom she believed all her misery to be directly attributable.

"Let them send us to bed *soon*—don't let her be bad to-night—oh, do make them send us to bed to-night—now at once. Let her go to sleep before it gets bad—I'll be so good if only You'll make them send us to bed at once before it gets bad——"

On one such evening, when Philip Stellingthorpe saw Lily's eyes fixed upon him, and her lips moving, as he thought, in earnest attention to his reading, he paused as he was about to close the book.

"What about an extra quarter of an hour, just for once?" he enquired benevolently. "It's almost too exciting to leave off here, don't you think, little Lily?"

He never really quite believed that poor little Vonnie, who never spoke, could follow the thread of any story, although he would have been much shocked if anybody had ever put such a thought into words.

And Lily, unforgettably, appallingly conscious of her own departure from sacred tradition, gratitude and

everything else to be accounted for righteousness, said in a voice that sounded loud and strained: "Please, I'd rather we went to bed now."

There was a dreadful silence.

The kind smile abruptly vanished from Philip's face altogether, and he shut up the book as though he could never bear to open it again, and put it away from him almost with horror.

Eleanor Stellenthorpe looked stricken.

"Run along, my pets," she said in the accustomed formula, but in an inward voice that suggested restrained suffering.

She received Vonnie's kiss automatically, as she always did, but when Lily put her arms round her mother's neck, fearful of omitting the customary hug that she knew was always expected of her, Eleanor released herself gently. Slowly bowing her head, she at the same time raised her eyes and fixed them sorrowfully upon Lily's face, producing an extraordinarily poignant effect of silent reproach.

Philip kissed Lily once upon the forehead, instead of as usual, two or three times all over her face and said deeply:

"My poor little child! Good-night."

Lily went upstairs in tears, indescribably guilty.

She had been naughty again, and oh! how like God it was, to have arranged things like that. If Vonnie didn't get to bed and to sleep before the earache gained its hold, then they must both suffer through one of those black nights of misery that Lily so dreaded. But when one was asked whether one preferred to go straight to bed, or to sit up while Father was kind enough to read aloud, it

was naughty and ungrateful to choose bed. So that God, having thus trapped one into naughtiness, was there all ready with His favourite punishment—the thing that He knew she dreaded most of all the punishments in the world—Vonnie's earache.

That night, the hand of God, as Lily saw it, was even heavier than usual. Vonnie's earache was agonizing.

Lily knew this, in the darkness of the night nursery, from the tiny, stifled moans that came from Vonnie's bed. Not a sound ever escaped her until the pain was almost unbearable, and even then Lily knew that she would never utter a spoken word, because the children were forbidden to speak after the light was put out.

Lily herself lay stiff and rigid in her bed, her hands clenched, her body quivering and sweating, with every faculty strained to its utmost in the intensity of her tortured listening. Each time that Vonnie's almost inaudible moan sounded, a pang went through Lily's whole frame. Every now and then she would discover that she was holding her breath, and find herself constrained to exhale it in a long, quivering, noiseless sob.

From time to time when the little moaning sound had not at once recurred after the brief interval of silence by which it was usually succeeded, a sick hope invaded Lily that Vonnie might after all be dropping off to sleep. But, redoubling the intensity of her own listening, she could hear sobbing, irregular breathing from Vonnie that shook her with a fresh despair.

"Vonnie!" she whispered.

No answer.

"Oh, Vonnie, is it very bad?"

"No," came the faintest of whispers in reply.

It was not true, Lily knew perfectly well, and she knew also that very likely next day Vonnie would deliberately go and confess to their mother that she had been disobedient and talked, after the light had been put out in the night nursery.

She would say nothing about her earache, nothing to excuse herself, nothing to incriminate Lily, and would accept rebuke or punishment quite speechlessly. Lily knew that Vonnie always craved any form of penalty that would ease her conscience of the imaginary burdens with which she was eternally loading it. But no one else understood this.

Presently a shaft of moonlight crept through the curtained window, and Lily sat up in bed. Then she saw, with a shock that made her feel sick, that Vonnie was sitting bolt upright, not lying down at all. Her small pillow was put up on end behind her and inadequately supported her shoulders, and both hands clasped her temples.

As a rule, Vonnie lay down on the side that wasn't hurting her, and kept both hands over her bad ear. Lily had never seen her sitting up like this before and it seemed to deny any hope of her ever being able to go to sleep at all.

"Oh, let me fetch Nurse," sobbed Lily, shaking from head to foot.

Vonnie shook her head very slightly in obstinate negative, and the movement forced a gasping sound of pain from her.

It was always the same thing.

Vonnie would not tell about her earache when it began because she was afraid of a fuss, and she would not tell about it afterwards for fear of being scolded because she

had not "said" sooner. If Lily told instead of her, then it was naughty and interfering, and very likely disbelieved besides, in the face of Vonnie's stoical denials. There was no hope anywhere, and the awful night would never, never end.

Lily sat up too, because it was impossible to lie down while Vonnie crouched there, racked with pain; and tense, angry appeals that she thought of as prayers, raced through her mind.

"Make her go to sleep—it's nothing to You to send her off to sleep—You *can't* let her go on like this all night. . . . It's cruel to punish Vonnie too, as well as me. . . . Why can't You send the earache to me, when it's me You want to punish?"

But God, who knew everything, would never be taken in by an argument of that sort, however plausible it might have been to the ears of human justice. Lily knew very well that God perfectly understood how, in some strange, naughty way that invariably made the authorities angry, Vonnie's sufferings hurt Lily far more acutely than her own could ever have done. And, of course, He took advantage of His knowledge whenever she had to be punished. Lily had even, sometimes, reflected with a forlorn kind of abstract justice, that this was fair enough. If He didn't so ingeniously choose the very way that hurt most, it wouldn't be a real punishment.

But, within sight and sound of Vonnie's torture to-night, she had no consideration for abstract justice.

She did what she had very seldom done before, and went to fetch the nurse.

Nurse was in bed and, to Lily's astonishment, had not yet gone to sleep.

"Did Miss Vonnie ask you to come for me?" she demanded suspiciously.

Lily had anticipated the question, which was always the preliminary, in the nursery, to an emphatic recommendation to mind her own business and leave Miss Vonnie to mind hers.

"Yes, she did," said Lily, feeling herself choke. God could hardly do much more than He had done already, even to a liar, and everything but present relief had become worthless of consideration.

"Now mind, if you've got me out of bed for nothing——" said Nurse threateningly. But she spoke in quite a kind voice, and put on her dressing-gown, and lit a candle. "Good gracious, child, why are you so white?" she asked Lily and took her hand protectingly and held it all the way to the night nursery.

Vonnie's moans were much louder now, and Lily, looking up anxiously at Nurse, felt that she must, for once, accept Vonnie's illness at its own valuation, and not at the slighting one that Vonnie herself would fain give to it.

"Now then, Miss Vonnie dear, what's all this?"

Nurse took Vonnie's hands down from her head. The odd look round Vonnie's eyes that had been so nearly imperceptible early in the evening had deepened in a very strange way, and after one glance at her small, leaden-coloured face, Nurse's manner changed altogether.

She went to the little medicine-cupboard high up on the wall, and lit the spirit-lamp, and heated water and put into it some sweet-smelling oil out of a green bottle. She put Vonnie's dressing-gown round her and a large shawl over that, and sat down in a low chair and took Vonnie on to her lap. Then she dipped some cotton-wool into

the warm oil and put it into each ear, and all the time she was coaxing and pitying Vonnie with kind, soothing words.

Lily never forgot the exquisite ecstasy of relief with which she watched and heard it all from her own bed in the corner. The violent reaction from her state of nervous anguish was so great that she began to cry and sob quite quietly, scarcely knowing that she was doing so.

Vonnie's moaning ceased almost at once, and her whole attitude relaxed, and presently Nurse got up and put her gently down in the low chair, with a pillow behind her.

"I shall be back directly," she whispered reassuringly to Lily, opening the door very softly.

She came back with their mother.

"She's dropped off now. I expect she'll sleep, poor little thing—she's worn out with the pain," said Nurse as they looked down at unconscious Vonnie.

"Poor child! Well, Nurse, if you'll move in here for to-night, I'll take Miss Lily into my room."

"Going to sleep with Mother" was a treat. Lily knew very well that if she had been the one to be ill, she would have been moved into her mother's room long since.

But nothing mattered, now that Vonnie was sleeping peacefully, and being taken care of by a kind, omnipotent grown-up person.

When Lily was lying snugly between the soft, scented sheets in her mother's enormous bed, with the pale pink quilt spread across it, her mother came and knelt beside her and put her arms round her.

"Go to sleep quickly, my pet. I shall be in bed directly. I've only got to take off my dressing-gown. Settle down comfily, now."

A delicious, drowsy feeling invaded Lily, and she turned over obediently on her side.

"Why, my poor chicken, you've been crying! There's nothing for you to cry about. Did you have a bad dream?"

"Vonnie had earache," murmured Lily, half asleep, and heard without surprise her mother's amused, uncomprehending laugh and answer:

"Why, you silly little goose, it was poor Vonnie who had earache, not you! There was nothing for *you* to cry about! You must have been dreaming."

II

LILY never knew whether the night that she had fetched Nurse to come to Vonnie had witnessed the culminating episode in that series of giant nightmares, Vonnie's earaches—or whether it only stood out in her memory from the acute sensation of exquisite relief that it had finally afforded her.

At all events, it was after one of the earache nights that a dreadful thought first came to her.

What a good thing it would be if Vonnie were to die! Lily was horrified at her own wickedness, but dwelt upon this solution with a sort of unwilling fascination.

She knew instinctively that Vonnie would never grow up like other people—would never be able either to take care of herself, or to find people who would take care of her. She would never be very happy, she would always have earache, and be left out of treats, and chidden for being so slow.

Whereas, if Vonnie died, there was an end of earache, of scoldings, of everything that was unkind or unfair. She would go to Heaven, where everybody was perfectly happy for ever, and Lily herself would never mind anything again, if once she knew for certain that Vonnie was happy and taken care of, even though out of sight. It seemed a very simple solution, although God, to say nothing of Father and Mother, would cer-

tainly be very angry with her for thinking of such a thing.

Lily, affrighted, put the idea away from her, although it came back again when she once overheard Aunt Clo emphatically remarking that Vonnie would certainly never live to grow up.

Lily did not know of the devastating effect produced by Aunt Clo's unsolicited pronouncement.

"*That* child won't live to grow up," said Miss Clotilde Stellenthorpe defiantly.

"Good heavens, Clo, what a thing to say in front of her own mother!"

Eleanor was half indignant and half tearful.

"Mark my words," said Aunt Clo inexorably.

Her brother Philip looked at her in pained rebuke.

"I don't like to hear you say a thing like that, Clo. It's —it's heartless. Poor little Vonnie!"

"But no! There is nothing heartless about it. You and Eleanor refuse to face facts, my poor Philip. Why, you have only to *look* at Vonnie to see that she isn't——"

Philip winced so painfully, holding up his hand as though in protest, that she broke off.

"But just compare her with Lily, who is two years younger! Look at the way Lily chatters, and the too, too precocious things she says, and the way she can read and play her little pieces on the piano! Not that I approve of the way you exploit the child, my Eleanor. It's very bad for her, alas! and I can see that she thinks herself tremendously superior to poor little Vonnie, always left out of everything."

"We have always been devoted to *both* our little chil-

dren, Clo," said Philip gravely. "It may be rather a temptation to take Lily about with us more than is quite good for her—she is a very pretty little mite, and one likes to hear her chatter, and to make her happy. But we love both our dear little girls equally, as they know very well."

It was perfectly true that the dear little girls had, at least, often been told that this was so, and neither Philip nor his wife ever admitted the possibility that their children might have come to draw other conclusions for themselves.

"Vonnie doesn't really enjoy being taken about. I've made a few little experiments with her, quite often, and they've never been a great success," observed Eleanor.

Her idolatry of her younger child had given her occasional moments of insight and she did not possess to the full her husband's monumental capacity for evading the acknowledgment of painful or unpleasant facts. A wistful desire for self-justification sometimes possessed her, and a complete absence of judgment led her to ask it from the quarter in which she was least likely to receive it.

"Why do you say things like that, Clo dear? Vonnie is very happy and well taken care of in the nursery. You don't think there's any jealousy between them?"

"I can hardly credit that Vonnie *likes* seeing her younger sister always preferred to herself," said Aunt Clo, shrugging her shoulders. "It would scarcely be human nature."

She was merely making application of a rule that she supposed to be general, to a particular case of which she knew nothing.

Vonnie had never in her life been jealous of Lily's privileges—and Lily herself bitterly resented them.

But Aunt Clo, who so scornfully accused her brother and sister-in-law of refusing to face facts, was quite determined that Vonnie was jealous because she was neglected, and that Lily was complacently ready to rob her sister of her rights as eldest.

Even Aunt Clo, however, never in so many words said that Vonnie's intellect was in any way feeble. She only continued to repeat that the child would most certainly never live to grow up, and since neither Eleanor nor Philip would conceivably have allowed, even in their inmost thoughts, that to die might prove very much easier for Vonnie than to live, Miss Stellingthorpe was not again asked to stay with them.

There was no break, or open quarrel—an open quarrel with Philip Stellingthorpe would have been a sheer impossibility—and the nearest that Philip ever allowed himself to go to an analysis of the disagreeable situation was to say to his wife:

"Poor Clo isn't very sympathetic in her manner, especially on subjects she doesn't quite understand, like the bringing-up of children. Perhaps, dear, we'll wait a little while before having her here again."

Eleanor understood, and the little while became of quite indefinite duration, without anybody's having to put a distressing resolution into painful words.

As it would have been "disloyal" to admit that a near relation could be anything but loved and admired, Lily and Vonnie were only told, as was indeed the truth, that Aunt Clo lived a great deal abroad. Lily, observant and critical, could, however, perfectly well have told the date

at which Father and Mother began always to speak of her absent relative as "your poor Aunt Clo"—and the adjective was to her perfectly indicative of some obscure condemnation.

Lily had intuitions about the grown-up people about her, especially her father and mother, of which they appeared to be quite unaware.

She knew that something, or someone, had made them at last realize that Vonnie's slowness and her rather inarticulate way of speaking were not so many manifestations of naughtiness on her part. They would have preferred it, Lily concluded, if these things had been naughtiness. In some incomprehensible way, they resented having to be anxious about Vonnie.

Sometimes, when Mother spoke to Vonnie sharply for the second or third time and Vonnie only looked at her dumbly with that scared, bewildered gaze which meant that she had not been "paying attention," Father and Mother would exchange a look that Lily indefinitely resented.

Then Mother would compress her lips, as though exercising great control over herself, and turn away without speaking.

And Father sometimes said, in that grave, gentle voice which both children perfectly well knew to mean profound vexation:

"Run away and play, little Vonnie. You needn't stay in the drawing-room any more. My Lily can come and look at pictures, if she likes. *You* can trot off and enjoy yourself in the nursery."

Lily never dared to ask whether she might go to the nursery too, although she knew that Vonnie, humiliated

crying at the dentist. Mere vanity was entirely responsible for Lily's courage on such occasions, and a desire to be told how brave she was. It would have mortified her self-esteem acutely, had she shed tears. However, she was always greatly praised for being so courageous, whereas nothing much was ever said about Vonnie's endurance, because Vonnie always remarked stolidly on receipt of the customary sixpence: "But it didn't hurt me much, and I didn't *want* to cry!"

Lily would have been incapable of so belittling her own achievement, but she was capable of a genuine appreciation, and even generous envy, for Vonnie's conscientiousness—which was more than Eleanor Stellingthorpe was. Such an ungracious reception of the parental praises and sixpences very nearly amounted to disloyalty, in her unexpressed opinion.

Her disapprobation was only felt by her children—it was seldom put into words.

Philip Stellingthorpe and anything in the nature of "scoldings" were unthinkable under the same roof, and Eleanor intensely disliked the system of punishment by which her own childhood had been made miserable.

Neither realized in the slightest degree that the atmosphere of oppressive disapproval and hurt feeling which they contrived wordlessly to diffuse whenever their children fell short of the ideal formed for them, caused infinitely greater suffering to both than the severest punishment would have done.

Occasionally, when Lily fell into one of the tempestuous crying fits sorrowfully alluded to as "temper," and entirely unrecognized as the inevitable concomitant of a highly wrought nervous organization forced into an un-

natural condition of life, Eleanor would talk to her long and seriously. She was afraid that her little Lily had a morbid disposition.

"What is morbid?"

Grievance-making. Did Lily realize what an *extraordinarily* happy little girl she ought to be? Yes—Lily, sobbing and crying in an access of uncontrollable misery, did know how very, very happy she ought to be—truly she did. Everything in the world to make her happy, her mother sadly repeated. Then she told Lily something about her own childish days.

Things had been very different for her. Grandpapa was very strict with all his children, and Grandmamma thought nothing of giving her daughter a good whipping from time to time. How would Lily like to be shut up in her bedroom on bread and water, after receiving a hearty box on the ears, because she could not say her Duty to her Neighbour?

"Never," said Eleanor emphatically, "never have I laid a finger upon either of you."

The stories of Grandpapa's severity were terrible, and so far removed from anything in Lily's experience was his system of blows and deprivations that sometimes, in the depths of her heart, she found herself wondering if all the stories could be perfectly true?

She stifled the disloyal thought, suppressing it. Suppression was in fact the only recognized method for dealing with any and every form of naughtiness.

It was naughty, obviously, since it was forbidden, for Lily and Yvonne to buy sweets.

"You don't want to spend your money on nasty, cheap sweets, my dear children" was Philip's fashion of dis-

couraging a propensity to which he himself happened never to have been liable.

Yvonne and Lily *did* want to spend their money on buying the sweets very often, but they were successfully debarred from doing so by the unpleasant conviction that the wish, for some quite unexplained reason, was something degrading and to be concealed with shame.

Even expensive chocolates, occasionally bestowed by visitors, were kept in the drawing-room and decorously handed round after tea when the children came downstairs.

"Don't they want to take them upstairs and finish the box in the nursery?" jovial Cousin Charlie Hardinge had once enquired, looking on with surprise.

"Oh dear no, this is quite an old-established custom. They like this way of doing it, don't you, Lily my pet?"

"Yes," said Lily, smiling happily.

She was far too responsive not to know instinctively just how terribly hurt and disconcerted Father and Mother would have been if she had answered otherwise.

Vonnie was at once less intuitive and more honest. But then she was very seldom appealed to, and even when both were impartially addressed, it was always Lily who made reply, partly from the old instinct of safeguarding Vonnie. It was so certain that Vonnie would blindly sacrifice Father's and Mother's feelings to her own truthfulness, and find herself in tacit disgrace thereby!

Lily herself seldom made such mistakes, although one or two terrible lapses stood out in her memory for years, as being amongst the worst and most devastating naughtinesses of a childhood that was perpetually haunted by a sense of uncomprehended sin.

There was the time when she had suddenly, and most disastrously, found courage to protest against the appellation of "little pet," that was bestowed upon her, so she considered, in and out of season.

"I'm not so very little," said Lily at nine years old, "and I'm not a pet when I'm being naughty. You say 'my little pet' even when you're scolding me."

"Lily! When did I *ever* scold you?"

Eleanor's tone was heart-rending, and she entirely disregarded the point at issue.

Not so her husband, frowning heavily.

"That's not at all a good way of talking," said he—and very nearly added, "my little pet." The consciousness of checking himself gave an additional force to his pained tones. "You will always be our little Lily, and God has given you kind and loving parents, and you are insulting Him when you jeer like that at things which ought to be sacred to you."

The magnitude of the indictment, no less than the sorrowful silence maintained for the rest of the evening by both her parents, reduced Lily to tears and a sense of crushing disgrace.

Things were always worse when God became involved in them—and besides, there was the earache menace if He grew angry.

But in that respect, God had stayed His hand of late. Lily, however, put no confidence in this forbearance, and felt herself thoroughly justified of her distrust when, quite suddenly, Vonnie fell ill.

At first, there was no such prolonged misery involved in this calamity as in one of the dreaded earache nights, and Lily was more surprised and gratified than rendered

anxious, when Vonnie's bed was taken out of the night nursery and placed in the dressing-room adjoining Mother's room, whilst Father and his bed went away into the Blue Room.

She spent a whole Sunday afternoon with Vonnie, and they played a long, quiet, interminable game, involving the recital of low-voiced and mysterious stories by Lily, and sleepy, pleased acquiescent nods and murmurs from Vonnie. She did not seem very ill, and Lily was allowed to kiss her, which was usually forbidden in times of illness because "it might be catching."

"Good-night, Vonnie. We'll play some more to-morrow."

"Oh yes, I shall be quite well to-morrow."

They kissed one another.

When to-morrow came, however, Lily learnt, for the most part indirectly from the servants' talk amongst themselves, that Vonnie had become much worse during the night. The doctor had actually been sent for before breakfast.

"Has she got earache?" asked Lily, feeling very much frightened and voicing the deepest fear that she knew.

"You run along, Miss Lily, and don't ask questions," said the parlour-maid. "Your Mamma particularly said as no one was to frighten you."

As usual, Eleanor, solicitously guarding her darling from others, had made no allowance for Lily's powers of either induction or imagination.

Miss Cleeve came as usual, but she sent Lily out of the room while she had a short conversation with the housemaid, bringing up some coals.

Lily felt convinced that Clara was telling Miss Cleeve something about Vonnie.

"What's the matter with Vonnie? When can I go and see her?" she asked instantly on being readmitted.

"Dear me, what an imperious little person this is!" said Miss Cleeve very brightly indeed. "Gently, gently, Lily, if you please. If you do your lessons very nicely and are a good little girl, perhaps you'll go and see Vonnie later on. We shall see."

Miss Cleeve looked very wise and very decided, and Lily distrusted her violently.

"Why haven't I seen Mother this morning?"

"She's busy, dear."

"But Nurse is with Vonnie too. Is Vonnie so very, very ill?"

"Ha, ha!" said Miss Cleeve with a laugh that rang singularly untrue. "What a silly little girl to talk like that, now! Come and sit down, and you shall choose which lesson you'd like to begin with, for a treat."

Miss Cleeve's brightness and Miss Cleeve's treats inspired Lily with a sickening sense of fear.

She was kept in the schoolroom all the morning, and when she and Miss Cleeve went downstairs to luncheon, Miss Cleeve held her hand with unnecessary tightness all the way. But Lily was alert, and she saw the doctor's little carriage going away down the drive from the window of the hall, and she also saw her mother standing, with head uncovered at the front door, and her mother did not look at all as usual.

Lily wrenched her hand away from Miss Cleeve's and ran to her.

"Can't I see Vonnie?" she cried urgently.

Her mother kissed her silently.

"I hope——?" said Miss Cleeve hesitatingly.

There was an interchange of glances between the two

grown women that the child's strained, anxious gaze sought desperately to interpret.

"Is Vonnie very ill, Mother?"

"There's nothing for you to worry your little self about, my darling," said Eleanor in a soothing voice, kissing her again.

A choking sense of her own impotence, resentment at their futile evasions, and above all a growing horror of all this mystery, made Lily burst into loud, unrestrained crying.

"Hush!" cried Miss Cleeve sharply, pulling her into the dining-room.

"Lily, Lily," said her mother. "Oh don't, my little pet."

She sank into a chair, looking overwhelmed.

"My dear child," said her father, suddenly emerging from the embrasure of the dining-room window, "you mustn't add to your mother's troubles just now. You must be a good little girl, and not think of yourself at all. Do your little lessons, and play about in the sunshine, and don't give any trouble, but be a good, happy little child."

It all sounded very kind and easy. The flood of misery that overwhelmed one must be some form of obscure, but extreme, naughtiness.

Luncheon was eaten almost in silence, and Eleanor went away before it was finished, stroking Lily's long brown hair as she passed behind her chair.

"Play in the garden this afternoon," she whispered, "and Mother will try and come to you in the drawing-room after tea."

Then a telegram was brought in and Philip, after reading it, said to the parlour-maid:

"The carriage will be wanted to meet the 3.30 train this afternoon. Tell Fowler."

Miss Cleeve looked up and said: "Is it——?" and raised her eyebrows.

"Yes. A second opinion will be a relief to us, though I'm afraid——" He checked himself.

Lily, not daring to glance at them, knew very well that it was because of her that they left all their sentences unfinished.

"——Probably a trained nurse, if he recommends it——" said her father, very low and rapidly.

What was a Train-Nurse?

Miss Cleeve went away, as usual on Saturdays, as soon as lunch was finished, saying warningly to Lily: "Now mind you go and play in the terrace garden as your mother told you. I think I should stay on the nice front terrace all the afternoon, if I were you. It'll be nice and sunny there."

"Yes, Miss Cleeve," said Lily forlornly.

There was probably something to be seen or heard from the other part of the garden, overlooking the drive, that they did not want her to know about.

In spite of this conviction, however, Lily went to the terrace, and looked up at the windows of the room where Vonnie was.

The blinds of both windows were drawn down so as to admit the least possible light into the bedroom and there was nothing to be learnt. Lily went into the potting-shed and sat there in the obscurity and cried.

She heard two of the servants walking down the path outside, as though on their way to the stables, and caught fragmentary words and phrases. . . . "It's awful—so quick, too."

"That's the way with tumours . . . don't you remember me telling you about my poor Aunt Gertie . . . just the same way it was——"

"Why, they may have to operate . . ."

"They say the pain's cruel . . . and for a poor little child, too!"

Lily put her fingers in her ears and cast herself upon the ground.

It was Vonnie they were talking about, and they said the pain was *cruel*—and no one would tell her anything, or let her go to Vonnie.

"I wish I was dead, oh, I wish I was dead!" sobbed Lily.

A child with an intense capacity for feeling can suffer to a degree that is beyond any degree of adult suffering, because imagination, ignorance, and the conviction of utter helplessness are untempered either by reason or by experience. Nothing in all Lily's life ever again held for her the bitterness of that afternoon in the potting-shed, when she had been sent out to be a good, happy little child, and play about in the sunshine.

After a long while, the housemaid Clara came and called her, and exclaimed with compassion at the sight of her when she appeared.

"Are you missing poor Miss Vonnie? There, never mind, dear, come along in now and have your tea."

Clara had tea with her instead of Nurse, and was very kind, and Lily, unable to cry any more, felt dumbly grateful to her and did not ask any of those questions which she felt sure that Clara would somehow contrive not to answer.

"Come and wash your face before you go downstairs,"

said Clara encouragingly, "so that your Mamma won't think you've been crying."

But Lily's mother was not in the drawing-room, when she went there with the traces of her tears carefully removed.

Her father was reading and he greeted Lily in a grave, depressed way, and told her to look at a picture-book.

They sat in silence for what seemed a very long time.

Lily only spoke once, and then she said quite suddenly:

"Father, please, what is a tumour?"

Philip cast a startled look at her, that added to the effect of rebuke in his shocked reply:

"Hush, hush, my child. That will do. You must not ask questions like that, you know."

Lily was conscious that he looked furtively and uneasily at her at intervals during the remainder of the evening.

"Shall I see Mother?" she asked wistfully when she went to bed.

"I will ask her to come and say good-night to you."

Waiting in bed for the redemption of this promise, Lily grew frightened again, and pictured Vonnie victimized by some terrible and magnified form of earache, wondering miserably why Lily had not come to play with her again, or at least to kiss her good-night.

She cried again, and dozed, and at intervals murmured some angry, urgently worded formula addressed to God, because her father had said to her very gravely that she must say her prayers, and ask God to bless everybody—Father and Mother and Vonnie. Lily had understood that he would not seem to attach special importance to Vonnie's need, by naming her only.

It was the middle of the night when she woke with a sudden start, and a new, compelling sense of terror.

Instinctively, she sprang, trembling, out of bed and groped her way to the door. There were lights and subdued voices without, and Lily ran out on to the stairs in her night-gown and caught at her mother's person. Dazed by the light and her own violent wakening from a heavy sleep, Lily hardly knew what happened next, or how she was taken back to her bed again.

But it was her mother who knelt by the bedside, with tears streaming down her face.

"Oh! Tell me what's happened?" said Lily. "Is it Vonnie?"

She did not know what it was that she feared.

"You oughtn't to know—I never meant you to be told till morning——" Eleanor was sobbing violently. "What can I say?—God—she's very happy with God, darling—gone to heaven——"

Amongst the disjointed words, Lily suddenly caught a flash of meaning.

"Is Vonnie dead?" she asked incredulously.

"Hush!" cried Eleanor in a sort of stifled shriek. But her head bent itself in assent.

Then Vonnie wasn't unhappy, wasn't ill—would never be either again, but always happy and well! It was like a dream come true.

Lily, after the long misery of the day, felt nothing but a rush of relief and comfort at the knowledge that Vonnie was dead.

The relief which is the outcome of a violent emotional reaction, however, cannot be expected to endure.

In any case, even had Lily not awakened to a changed

world, in which she hourly missed Yvonne, the inseparable companion of all her nursery days, Philip Stellenhorpe could never have rested content until the strange callousness manifested by his younger daughter had been explained away. "The want of realization of a little, sheltered child," he forbearingly called it.

But it had shocked him, all the same.

Whilst Eleanor was only blindly anxious to shield Lily from any fright or grief, where she herself considered that fright or grief might threaten, Philip was unable to refrain from exacting the due meed of conventionality that he took for a tribute to Yvonne's memory.

Yvonne's belongings disappeared mysteriously, and one day when Lily asked if she mightn't have Vonnie's paint-box now, her father, overhearing her, was gravely displeased.

"My dear child," said he, "you don't want to be a heartless little girl, do you?"

Lily did not want to be a heartless little girl at all, and still less did she want to be called one. Therefore she did not attempt to restrain showers of pitiful tears whenever she missed Vonnie most, and to cry in church whenever she saw her mother doing so.

After a time, Philip and Eleanor ceased to speak of Vonnie at all, although a great many photographs of her now pervaded the drawing-room and Eleanor's dressing-table.

It soon became impossible for Lily to connect the object of so much that was in reality a kind of exploited sacredness, with the real Vonnie whose impotent champion she had been, to whom she had always been preferred against her will, who had been of so little significance save to

Lily herself, in her tiny world during her short lifetime.

The Yvonne of the photographs, of Mother's occasional Sunday evening low-voiced talks, of Father's still more occasional, solemnly mournful references, gradually acquired a meaning for Lily, albeit a purely sentimental one, that had nothing to do with Vonnie, whom she really only remembered, after a little while, in occasional vivid flashes.

Nevertheless it was actually many years before, at the most casual mention of a cold east wind, Lily ceased to feel a sudden irrational rush of sheer jubilant triumph, because the east wind could never give Vonnie ear-ache any more.

III

"THERE are some gypsies on the common, Father."

"Are there, my pet? You and Miss Cleeve had better keep to the road, for the present, then. Very likely they have illness about. Those people are not very careful."

"There was such a thin little boy. He looked as though he didn't get much to eat," said Lily tentatively.

"Well, well, my darling, we'll hope he does. Did you find any blackberries on your walk this morning?"

"Only a few. They're not yet ripe. But, Father——"
Lily was ten years old, and nowadays when she saw that her father and mother were deliberately evading a subject upon which she desired information, something that seemed stronger than herself drove her on to urge the point, with an affectation of being unaware of their disapproval.

"Do you think that little boy was really starving, perhaps?"

"No, no, my child." Philip moved uneasily and glanced at his wife. "People don't starve in England nowadays."

"We won't talk about sad things like that, Lily dear," said Eleanor brightly. "People needn't be poor unless they want to, you know. They can always find work."

"Why hasn't everyone got a house then? Why can't that little boy live in a house like we do?" Lily demanded meditatively.

There was a silence weighty with disapproval.

Then Philip remarked simply and with finality:

"Don't ask foolish questions, my little pet."

Lily knew herself defeated and was guiltily conscious of having deserved rebuke by her deliberate pursual of one of the many topics that, for reasons never explained, should not be talked about.

During the year that had elapsed since Vonnie's death, the number of these subjects seemed to have increased enormously. Not only was Vonnie not to be talked about, but anything connected with death, funerals, and mortality generally must be avoided, and it was a general axiom that what Philip occasionally referred to as "sad, painful, distressing things" were never really fit subjects for discussion.

Curiously enough, the nervous sufferings of Lily's whole early childhood, culminating in the emotional crisis that she had undergone when Yvonne died, at this period deserted her. She was now merely sensitive in a petulant way, subconsciously antagonistic to all her surroundings, and obsessed by a resentful certainty that her father and mother did not understand her.

This ungracious conviction she once haltingly attempted to explain to Eleanor, early faced with the endeavour that has defeated so many, that of avoiding the only form of words obviously designed to express what she wished to have understood, and finding instead some other formula in which it might be conveyed with equal lucidity and yet less outspokenness.

The results were a number of self-contradictory statements from Lily, followed by tears.

"But what is it that I don't understand, my baby?" Eleanor urged her to return to the attack.

"Me," quavered Lily, suddenly explicit.

Her mother winced very visibly indeed.

Lily felt unutterably naughty.

"My dearest," said Eleanor at last, "how can a grown-up person not understand a little child? You're talking nonsense, you know. There can be nothing in a little girl of ten years old that's beyond the understanding of a grown-up, experienced person. And to say that a *mother* doesn't understand her own child, is to suggest something that can't possibly be. Some day you'll know what I mean."

"When?" said Lily.

Eleanor's absolute belief in the creed that she had enunciated perforce carried a certain conviction to Lily's bewildered and undeveloped mind.

"When?" she repeated.

"When you have a little child of your own," her mother replied simply.

There was nothing more to be said.

Until that far-away, unbelievable time when one would be sufficiently old to have a little child of one's own, it must be taken on trust that all grown-up people, especially one's father and mother, understood one perfectly, although they made one feel all the time as though they did not.

Lily's thoughts and her feelings became speedily more and more muddled and confused.

Her discontent, which originated in sheer perplexity, took the form of argumentative and tiresome contradiction of the rules imposed upon her.

"She used to be such a dear, little sunny thing," cried Eleanor piteously. "Of course, I know there's an awkward age for all children to go through but I never thought of Lily's beginning it so young."

She cried and looked pale over Lily's naughtiness very often, and Lily was tortured by remorse and self-accusations that were without any effect upon her behaviour.

One day her father, who was tacitly supposed to know of her naughtiness, but to find it too grievous to be mentioned openly, spoke to her.

"You will regret it bitterly later on, my child, if you grieve your mother just now. There are reasons which you can't understand why she should be spared in every possible way, at present."

Were these specific reasons, or only the usual mysterious ones held over one's head by the authorities, and generally supposed to have obscure reference to God?

Lily presently came to the conclusion that some definite event was impending, and that she was supposed to know nothing whatever about it. Things were said to her of which it was obvious that she was intended to make general application only, and to which, with intuitive certainty, she instantly attached a special meaning.

"You must always be a very good little girl to your mother, and pray to God that He may take good care of her."

Why should Father suddenly say that, when it was an old-established certainty that Lily knew she ought to be a good little girl, and had prayed for her mother every night ever since she could remember, as a matter of course?

Sometimes it almost seemed as though they wanted to see how far it was possible for them to go, before Lily

would make any sign of having noticed that there was a mystery.

"Nurse, I want you to bring those things that I spoke to you about into my room this morning."

"Yes, madam."

And then five minutes later :

"My little Lily must stay in the schoolroom and do her lessons very nicely this morning, and not go running about the house too much. Trot along to Miss Cleeve, my pet."

As though Miss Cleeve had ever dreamed of allowing Lily to run about the house during lesson time! Such a thing was quite unheard of, and Eleanor's casual tone did not for an instant deceive Lily into supposing that the prohibition had been a casual one.

On another occasion, a still more careless enquiry :

"You know you must never come into upstairs rooms without knocking at the door first, don't you, darling?"

A rule that Lily had known and had been made to observe, since she was three years old.

It appeared, therefore, that there was some urgent necessity for enforcing the rule now. Lily discovered that the door of the Blue Room was locked, all of a sudden.

She felt a strange inability to question her father or mother, but she tried to entrap Miss Cleeve into an admission, unconsciously imitating the air of carelessness with which Eleanor had tried, as Lily dimly felt, to entrap her into asking some question, to which a reply might be given that would direct curiosity into an innocuous channel leading nowhere.

"Oh, Miss Cleeve! Did you know the door of the Blue Room had been locked?"

Lily gave a high-pitched, nervous giggle. "Perhaps the key's been lost!"

Miss Cleeve threw her a very sharp glance of which Lily pretended to be quite unaware.

"Really, dear," she said in a very even voice. "Keys sometimes are lost, you know. But there's nothing to take you to the Blue Room, that I know of."

"Nurse goes in there sometimes. I've seen her coming out."

"I daresay she likes to see that it's kept dusted and tidy," said Miss Cleeve, in a preternaturally calm voice. "Now run and wash your hands for lunch, dear."

Lily felt thoroughly baffled by Miss Cleeve, and could not decide whether or not the governess had penetrated the motive of her artless enquiries.

Because she felt ashamed of her own attempts at solving the mystery that was in the air, she was sure that she was being naughty again.

When she went downstairs to the dining-room, her mother and Miss Cleeve were already there, talking in furtive tones to one another. Eleanor broke off the instant that Lily appeared and looked at her in rather a startled way, but Miss Cleeve, with the same determined naturalness with which she had spoken upstairs, uttered her final remark quite loud:

"So I thought perhaps a word to the wise, Mrs. Stelenthorpe——"

"Quite right, Miss Cleeve, thank you. I shall take care. Anyway it won't be very long now before——"

They both looked at Lily, who suddenly felt so uncomfortable that, to cover her own confusion, she almost involuntarily cried out: "Before what, Mother?"

Her mother and Miss Cleeve exchanged glances in a way that made Lily feel unutterably small and foolish and ignorant.

To her deep mortification, she felt her face burning with angry scarlet, although without knowing why.

"Poor little thing!" said Eleanor, and actually laughed, causing all Lily's inchoate disconcertment to culminate in a silent, furious resolution, that never again would she ask any of them about anything, so long as she lived.

The impassioned, childishy formed determination was not of a nature to endure. The inexplicable resentment that had caused it, Lily never forgot.

She could not have told what sudden intuition first made her suspect the truth, but when Eleanor, with certain circumlocutions and euphemistic phrases, told her that she might pray to God to send her a baby brother, Lily felt that she had known all the time that this was what all the mystery had been about.

"It's a great secret and you mustn't talk about it to anyone," Eleanor whispered.

Lily had no wish to talk about it to anyone. She was by that time thoroughly convinced that the arrival of a baby was something necessitating endless concealments and misrepresentations, and therefore of a highly shameful nature.

She was sent away to the seaside with Miss Cleeve for nearly six weeks, and when they came back again, the little brother was established in a blue and white cradle, and the Blue Room had been unlocked and transformed into a night nursery.

Lily gathered from various things that the servants said, that her mother had been ill, and that the illness was

in some manner connected with the baby's coming. The subject puzzled her, and troubled her thoughts very often, but she felt sure that it was wrong to desire enlightenment, and she knew that if she asked questions she would receive either jocular or untrue replies, or the shocked "Hush!" of enforced reticence.

Eleanor having a horror of pet animals, from which she feared the contraction of mysterious and unspecified diseases of the skin, Lily was safeguarded from any direct encounter with the crudities of Nature. Her imagination therefore continued to evolve theories and explanations that her common sense rejected, but that frightened and distressed her none the less, and that sent her furtively in quest of the information which she believed to be illicit, to such forbidden books of reference as the "Encyclopædia Britannica."

After Kenneth was born, Lily, to her unconscious relief, ceased to be the sole object in life of her parents, her governess, and her nurse. She spent less time in the drawing-room, and after Miss Cleeve had left for the day, remained in the schoolroom and read endlessly.

"Not too many story-books, my little darling," Eleanor occasionally said with a hint of disapproval in her tones, but as the books in the schoolroom were all story-books, and she was not allowed to touch the ones in the drawing-room, Lily continued to indulge her taste for fiction, although with the usual underlying feeling of guilt that seemed automatically to attach itself to whatever was pleasant.

There were curious *nuances*, never put into words, as that to read a new story-book was more reprehensible than to re-read an old one, and even when a recent birth-

day had occasioned the arrival of some delightful blue or red volume, the very giver of it might be apt to exclaim, with a sound of vexation, on seeing Lily immersed in it:

"Another new story-book!"

Lily grew to be so apprehensive of these expressions of disapproval that sometimes she slipped the new book, with its incriminating, shining binding, into one of the brown paper covers that concealed the wear and tear of the old books.

This manœuvre was one day penetrated by Miss Cleeve, who did not seek any explanation of it, but merely told Lily on general grounds that she was a most sly child, and didn't seem to know the meaning of the word "honour."

Lily wept and felt that it was true.

Gradually she came to consider her passion for reading as another sign of her own depravity, much confirmed in this view by the grave pronouncements of her father, who said to her from time to time:

"Dear child, you know you don't want to have your little nose buried in a story-book at every spare moment."

It was the question of buying sweets, all over again. Certain propensities, for reasons never specified, were evidently so undesirable that the existence of them might not even be admitted. One was told that one didn't want to do such things, and all the time was conscious of wanting to do them very much indeed.

Evidently, such desires must never be openly admitted.

The atmosphere became more and more charged with concealments, as time revealed more and more of the complexities of life.

When Kenneth was nearly a year old, he caught scarlet fever. The infection was in the village. Miss Cleeve succumbed, and Eleanor, panic-stricken, sent Lily away by herself for the first time in her life.

It was expressly explained that she was not going to school. No. There would never be any question of that. Lily was simply going to a beautiful peaceful convent, not at all far away, where she would be very happy with the kind Sisters and play with the pupils.

The scheme was Eleanor's. She had an ideal, totally unbased upon experience, of a convent school, that was of an extreme and highly sentimental picturesqueness. In her mind's eye, mild-faced nuns paced perpetually up and down a garden, and innocent children, in a more or less permanent state of preparing for their *première Communion*, were instructed in the arts of music and embroidery and *ancienne politesse française*.

She combated Philip's strong objections to letting Lily go within the sphere of Catholic influence.

"It isn't as though she were older," Eleanor urged. "She's only a baby, Philip. And it will be for such a little while. Please God, we can have her home again by Christmas."

It was really the last argument that had most weight with Philip, and the desire that his wife's mind should be at ease about their darling.

Neither had the slightest conception of the utter unfitness for any form of independence in which they had brought up their child.

Philip himself took her to the convent, emphatically telling her in the presence of the Mother Superior that she must always say her prayers night and morning just as

she had been taught them, and that she was not to think of herself as having been sent to school.

The reiteration of this last axiom rather disappointed Lily. It sounded much more grown up and like other girls to be sent to school, and school, according to many story-books, was an exciting place where one distinguished oneself easily and made interesting friendships and learnt to play games.

Lily was afraid that a convent might prove to be a very tame affair, by comparison. In effect, she never did learn to play games there, since the only one in vogue—a complicated system of running about wildly in the playground from one chalk-mark to another, called The Rescue of the Holy City from the Infidels—proved beyond her comprehension from the first to the last day of her stay.

Nor did she make interesting friendships, because any friendships at all were entirely forbidden and rendered impossible by a quantity of rules that were enforced by perpetual *surveillance*. Neither did she distinguish herself, excepting by the unprecedented number of humiliating and babyish mistakes that she seemed to be perpetually making.

Lily, for the first time in her life thrown amongst other children, heard from their unsparing lips various brutal truths about herself: She was a most frightful baby for her age.

Anybody could see that she'd been made a regular spoilt child of at home.

It was most awfully affected, the way she was always using grown-up words.

It was simply *silly*, always to get red and cry at the least little bit of chaff.

It was perfectly indecent to wear such a disgustingly short frock—the nuns said so.

Lily was only too thankful to exchange her brief velveteen skirts for a blue serge uniform dress, that flapped against her ankles and of which the collar-band scratched her neck.

But even the uniform did not save her from committing other outrages upon propriety, hitherto unsuspected. A brand-new category of sins sprang into being, all of them classed under the heading of Immodesty—a word that Lily had never heard mentioned before.

Legs were particularly immodest. To show them, to cross one of them over the other, to mention them by name, was all highly immodest. So was any allusion to any part of the human anatomy below the shoulder-blades.

There was an uneasy suggestion that it might at any moment become immodest to talk about any male creature other than a priest, the convent gardener, or one's own father. Even brothers seemed to be better left out of the conversation.

The hideous immodesty latent in the taking of a bath could only be defeated by a cold, shroud-like garment of white calico, that fastened just above the wearer's collar-bone, was buttoned at the wrists, and fell in folds to the ground.

A bath, accompanied by a bath-chemise, was in readiness for each pupil once a week.

Lily jumped trustfully into her first bath at the convent, pleased at finding that she was expected to take it without supervision, which she had never done before, got out again very quickly upon the discovery that the water, on a dank November day, was nearly cold, and

dried herself imperfectly in the chilly amplitude of the bath-chemise, which she supposed to be a towel of a new kind. The same afternoon a scandalized nun enquired whether Lily was in the habit of taking a bath "without wearing anything?"

"All naked? Yes," said Lily, nodding assent.

Then it appeared that not only was her practice immodest, but so was her language. The nun was not at all angry, she was very kind, but the vicarious shame that she quite obviously felt on Lily's behalf, remained unforgettable.

The affair could only be classed with Lily's other great outrage against decency, which was never destined to pass altogether from her memory.

The first time that she fell ill at the convent, which she did with the rapidity of a very much over-coddled child suddenly bereft of even ordinary supervision in the affairs of the body, Lily was sent to the Infirmary. She had fainted during breakfast.

"Poor little dear! You shall go to bed at once," said the kind old Sister in charge. "Where's your dressing-gown, dear?"

"In the dormitory."

"Then I'll fetch it for you. Get ready for bed as fast as you can."

Lily, interpreting this literally, made every speed in divesting herself of her clothes, forgetful that her night-gown was not lying waiting on the newly made Infirmary bed.

But the Sister would bring it, she decided, and sat close to the comfortable blaze of the Infirmary fire. Only a diminutive vest inadequately concealed her from the ap-

palled gaze of the returning nun. Lily found herself enshrouded in both night-gown and dressing-gown on the instant, and directed to get into bed.

The nun was very forbearing, and only said, when the first shock had passed :

“A modest little girl would never have done that. What *can* your poor guardian angel have thought?”

The Protestant Lily, however, was less concerned with the hypothetical embarrassment of her guardian angel, than with this new view of herself as a little girl lacking in modesty.

She was homesick while she was at the convent, and a good deal bullied by her contemporaries, nevertheless the discipline was of a more wholesome kind than any she had yet known, and the total absence of any real element of education in the teaching that she received was partially compensated by the nuns' conscientious observance of Philip's prohibitions, and the amount of dogmatical religious instruction that she thereby escaped.

She might even have profited by the three months she spent at school, if it had been the conventual habit to pay any slightest regard to the more modern laws of hygiene.

Lily was not naturally a practical child, although she possessed a certain fundamental common-sense, and a precocious ability to profit by experience once acquired. Certain simple hygienic practices of which the regular observance had been enjoined upon her at home, without any explanation as to the necessity for them, she had acquiesced in blindly as a matter of course, without the slightest realization of the fact that they were connected with the preservation of her bodily welfare.

As the extreme modesty enjoined by the nuns did not

permit of any supervision in such matters, even as regarded the youngest of the children in their charge, a state of affairs naturally followed that resulted in the very rapid deterioration of Lily's health.

Moreover, there prevailed at the convent, as at the very large majority of European educational establishments, the monstrous custom of curtailing the amount of sleep required for the proper development of growing youth.

Lily, although, like the other junior pupils, she was seldom in bed before nine o'clock, suffered less than they did—and very much less than the seniors, young girls all more or less at a stage of physical and mental development that made the utmost demand upon each one's constitution. Lily, at all events, need not obey the clamorous bell that summoned the school at a quarter to six every morning, in order that all might be assembled in the chapel by half-past six. She remained in bed until it became imperative to get up, dress herself—a task that she had not been allowed to perform unaided hitherto, and to which she was consequently highly inadequate—wash herself with an equal absence of thoroughness, partly because she was unaccustomed to ice-cold water, and partly because it was immodest to unfasten one's night-gown before various garments had been shuffled on underneath it—and then join the other children, who had now been fasting for more than an hour, for breakfast.

The food they were given was abundant, although inferior in quality, and completely lacking in variety. Each day of the week had its appointed menu, which was never departed from.

Sweets and chocolates were permitted only on Sundays, when, to equalize distribution and encourage gen-

erosity, the assembled gastronomical wealth of the establishment was placed upon the long tables of the refectory at dinner-time. No favouritism was permitted, so that each box or dish must be sent the length of the table by its owner, each of whose fellow-pupils would accept one specimen of the contents.

Naturally, the abstention of the week enhanced the necessity for profiting to the full by the plethora of Sunday, and Lily was not the only child who, when the day of rest and plenty was over, wished miserably, and for more than one reason, that Sunday privileges were allowed to extend over the cheerlessness of the week.

Philip came once to see his daughter, and was dismayed, without altogether knowing why, at her appearance when she was sent to him in the parlour.

The many inches of additional skirt by which the convent authorities had striven to obliterate the recollection of Lily's original display of brown stocking, made her look absurdly tall and thin, and her hands and little, slim wrists seemed to have grown bony.

Philip, scrutinizing her face anxiously, decided that she had lost some of her colour and that there certainly were black rings round her eyes. Her hair seemed to be in need of brushing.

To his enquiries, Lily replied, after the fashion of almost all children, that nothing was the matter. Yes, she liked the convent.

Had anyone been talking to her about religion? No, she didn't think so.

This relieved Philip's chief personal anxiety on Lily's behalf, and after cautioning her gently upon the use of slang and the care of her hands, he bade her say her little

prayers every day, and be a very good child, and said that he hoped she would be home by Christmas.

He went away inexplicably depressed.

Eleanor instantly felt the weight of that depression, but as Philip had seriously resolved that his wife must, for her own good, be subjected to no further anxiety whilst the little boy continued ill, he gave her a hollow and unsmiling account, which he made as brief as possible, of Lily's welfare and happiness. It would have been quite impossible to Eleanor to receive a statement of her husband's at any but its face value.

She pretended, even to herself, that she believed Philip's account, and only cried in the middle of the night, telling herself that it was because she was over-tired.

Whether or not this last was the cause of her weeping, it was certainly a fact.

With quite irrational self-immolation, she had refused to entrust the care of Kenneth to a trained nurse, and devoted herself to him day and night in a veritable orgy of maternal sacrifice.

Kenneth recovered, although probably less rapidly than he would have done under professional care, and Eleanor fell ill.

She had the fever very slightly, but after a time, she tentatively asked that Lily should be sent for from the convent.

"I must see her once more, Philip."

It was entirely characteristic of Eleanor Stellingthorpe that with all her impassioned idolatry of her favourite child, it never occurred to her that she might spare Lily's sensitive youth an emotional scene such as the one of farewell that she contemplated.

But Philip, although heavy with the sense of impending calamity, and the spoken weight of an unfavourable medical verdict, was incapable of abandoning his life-long endeavour to alter the nature of painful facts by dint of refusing to acknowledge them.

"Don't talk like that, Eleanor dearest," he begged her. "It sounds just a little morbid, and of course you'll be well again by Christmas."

Accordingly, nothing distressing was put into words, and Philip and Eleanor, neither of them inwardly deceived by their spoken denial of despondency, suffered separately and in silence.

For two days before she died, Eleanor was unconscious, but it was not until after her death that Philip said, with heartbroken sincerity :

"I gave up hope from the moment she fell ill. From the first, I really knew that she would never get well again."

IV

PHILIP did not want to send Lily to school. He and his wife had been at one upon this point. He regretted even the three months that she had spent at the convent, although he remarked at intervals for long afterwards that a girls' school and a convent were not at all the same thing.

"Besides, my little pet, you were only there for a month or two, and you were not at all well when you came away. It wasn't at all a success."

"But that was years ago," Lily protested. "I should like it very much, now, or best of all if only you would send me to a proper school, Father."

For nearly four years, ever since her mother's death, she had asked at intervals to be sent to school.

At first, Philip had answered her with a sort of mournful playfulness.

"What! Doesn't my little girl get enough lessons at home? We must talk to Miss Cleeve, and see if she can't manage an extra hour or two on Saturday afternoons—shall we, Lily?"

The Lily of ten and eleven years old had dutifully pretended amusement, and thought herself naughty for the inward pang that she experienced at being treated like a baby.

A year later, she was far more openly rebellious.

"It's so very dull doing lessons all alone, Father."

"If God had spared us our poor little Yvonne, you would not have to do them alone," said Philip, the allusion, in some mysterious way, having exactly the effect of a merited rebuke.

Lily immediately, and quite irrationally, felt that she had been heartless.

"Besides," continued her father, pressing the advantage that he perceived himself to have gained, although without quite knowing how, "you don't want to break up our poor little home-party any further, my child, do you? You and I and poor little Kenneth are all that are left now, you know."

Lily was silenced, although, dimly, she knew that she had been unfairly defeated. What he said was true—she cried herself to sleep at the thought of it sometimes—but her powers of clear thinking had been too thoroughly obscured for her to analyze the illogical attitude taken up by her father, who from time to time said, with the most obvious sincerity:

"Poor little children! How can I do anything for them? *She* made home, and now that she and little Yvonne are gone, there is nothing left but sadness and emptiness. I have no wish whatever to live, but it must be as God Almighty wills."

"It couldn't make any difference to him if I went to school," Lily reflected resentfully, after Philip had thus once more put in words the utter despondency that hung always over him.

By the time that Lily was fourteen, there was scarcely anything left of the pride and the species of doting affection that her father had displayed during her early

childhood. His ideal of a happy home had been rudely shattered by Eleanor's death, and he attributed the signs of Lily's inevitable development to a lack of veneration for her mother's memory. He was honestly incapable of perceiving that, if Eleanor had lived, conflict of the most irreconcilable kind must have arisen between her and Lily.

He dumbly and piteously resented Lily's incoherent attempts at self-expression, her struggling efforts to evolve her own personality in the midst of a stultifying atmosphere, with much the same blind sentimentality that he regretted the lost, blue-eyed prettiness of her baby days and the unescapable certainty that she was grown too tall to sit upon his knee.

Her continual requests to be sent to school distressed him profoundly. At one and the same time, he saw Lily convicted of disloyalty in wishing to alter the routine of life instituted for her by her mother, and as heartlessly desirous of abandoning her lonely father and little brother in their changed and saddened home.

At last he said to her:

"I can stand this no longer. Go, Lily, but remember that God Himself will condemn those who blaspheme against the sacred love of father and mother. You can go. I will keep no child at home against its will."

His face was drawn and grey with suffering, as he looked at the child who seemed to him to be growing up devoid of heart. Only the extremity of pain and disappointment would have made him speak so and Lily realized it.

She broke into terrified sobs, and saw herself with his eyes.

Both were shaken by the sense of an immense issue involved. The question had acquired a monstrous and devastating magnitude. Only the shamed and stifled, but still living, sense of proportion in Lily's soul, that warned her how bitterly she would, later, regret the folly of yielding to a sentimental impulse, prevented her from exclaiming that she never, never wanted to leave home as long as she lived.

An almost intolerable period of tension followed. The gloom of Philip Stellenthorpe became abysmal. Only little four-year-old Kenneth appeared to be cheerfully insensible to it.

Undaunted by his father's weighty tenderness, that was in itself an advertisement of melancholy, Kenneth continued to play with his toys, to shout for bread-and-jam with his tea, and to wriggle unconcernedly away when his father would have lifted him to Lily's old post of honour on the parental knee.

Kenneth was far from being the motherless baby boy of fiction. He evinced no special affection for anyone, and was quite unaffectedly impenitent when sins, that had once been the cause of heart-searching remorse to Lily and Yvonne, were pointed out to him with sorrowful gravity. Although only ten years separated them, Kenneth was in fact the modern child that Lily had never been allowed to become.

She watched him with more awe than affection, sometimes. He seemed to be a hard little boy.

The next phase of Lily Stellenthorpe's education was inaugurated by the astonishing announcement of Miss Cleeve, that she was going to be married and must go away.

"The old order changeth," said Philip, in tones of bewildered pain.

He gave Miss Cleeve a munificent wedding present, and reflected that yet another link with the past was breaking.

To look for another governess for Lily seemed to him an appalling task. His conscience would not have allowed him to depute it to his sister Clothilde, for ever since the fulfilment of her pronouncement that Vonnie would not live to grow up, Philip had steadily assured himself that poor Clo's judgments were not to be trusted.

Such is the curious effect produced by a prophet whose word has been too well verified in his own country.

Philip, like all sentimentalists, preferred asking advice to taking it. He decided to consult Eleanor's cousin and nearest surviving relative, unconsciously reserving to himself the right of finding that, after all, poor Charlie Hardinge was not a very sympathetic fellow, and held very little sacred, and that his counsels could not be worthy of serious consideration.

Besides the fact of his relationship—of potent weight with Philip—Charlie Hardinge was further qualified as adviser, in being the father of three little girls. The little girls, however, and Ethel their mother, had only been seen by the Stellenthorpes at rare intervals.

Charlie himself was in the habit of staying with them for two nights on his way to and from the north of England, in the course of every year. He always brought the children presents, and Philip always said in advance, nervously: "You must thank Cousin Charlie very nicely if he is kind enough to bring you a little present of chocolates, but you'll keep them downstairs in the drawing-room, like good children, won't you?"

He had never been able to forget altogether that Charlie Hardinge had once expressed injudicious surprise at the decorous restraint that prevailed over the distribution of sweets presented to the Stellenthorpe children.

Unconsciously, he liked Charlie much better *in esse* than *in posse*, and found even his exuberant habit of repeating everything he said three or four times over merely an ebullition of warm-hearted earnestness.

"Now, now, now, now," said Charlie. "You want some suggestion about this kiddie of yours—your Lily. I understand perfectly. What are you to do with her—fourteen, isn't she? Fourteen—yes—fourteen. Now, our Dorothy isn't fourteen yet, and Janet and Sylvia, of course, are younger still. Sylvia is just ten, in fact. You know they've just gone to school at Bridgecrap?"

"No," said Philip, startled. "I had no idea of it. I always supposed that you and Ethel meant to educate them at home."

His terrible fear of any unpleasantness made him hesitate, and feel unable to say, as he had meant to say, that he disapproved of girls' schools altogether.

"Well, it was a sacrifice," Hardinge admitted with a sigh. "A sacrifice. But we felt that it was for the kiddies' own good. No brother, you see. They wanted to be taught how to take chaff, and ragging, and teasing—that's what they wanted—they wanted to get thoroughly well teased. Now your Lily, my dear fellow—very pretty kiddie-widdie, mind you, beautifully mannered, and I'm only saying this because I'm fond of her—your kiddie doesn't know how to take a joke. I noticed it this evening, when I was chaffing her a little about holding herself so badly. That's another thing she wants—drilling. Drilling, drilling!"

Charlie hit himself a resounding blow on the chest.

"She wants drilling!"

"She is tall for her age," said Philip, who considered personal remarks ill-bred, unless complimentary.

"So's my Dorothy," Hardinge inexorably returned. "Now, how tall is your kiddie? How tall exactly?"

"I really don't know, but she is certainly taller than most children of fourteen. In fact the governess, before she left, told me that Lily was outgrowing her strength."

"Our Dorothy is thirteen and a half and stands five-foot five in her stockings. Five-foot five, and a back like a ramrod. Now, Lily isn't five-foot five, I'm positive of that. We'll measure her to-morrow, and you'll find she's not five-foot five. Nowhere near it."

Philip made a politely acquiescent sound.

"Drilling is what she wants, drilling and games. It's done everything in the world for my kiddie-widdies. Little Sylvia, now, didn't hold herself as well as the other two—was rather inclined to poke. And after one term at Bridgecrap she's holding her head up, and her shoulders back, and talks of nothing but hockey."

Philip suppressed a shudder at a consummation which appeared to him so utterly undesirable.

"You must send Lily to Bridgecrap," said Charlie Hardinge positively. "No place like it. Splendid air—right up above the sea, outdoor games all the year round—swimming and gym—everything you can think of."

"Who is the lady in charge?"

"A splendid woman—splendid woman. Miss Melody—Monica Melody. You've heard of her, of course—took a university degree, and has written some very sound stuff about education. Mind you, I sounded her very carefully

before I sent the kiddies. Ethel and I had really had no idea of sending them to school at all—but they were keen to go. It was their own idea—Dorothy started it.”

Philip almost groaned.

“I can hardly understand the idea of young children who actually *want* to leave home,” he said, considerably understating his case.

“Your kiddie-widdie wants to go to school too, eh?” said Charlie acutely. “I thought so. I thought so now, I thought so. You take it all too seriously, my dear fellow, far too seriously. It’s very natural, you know. My little girliedkins had one another, after all, but Lily hasn’t a soul—not a soul of her own age.”

“This is a lonely place, as you know,” said Philip stiffly. “There are no girls of her own age within a reasonable distance.”

“Well, are there any boys then, any boys?”

“Boys?”

“Boys—boys of her own age. Boys, boys, boys. If there are no girls for the poor kiddie to play with, I suppose she must play with boys.”

Philip rose from his chair and made elaborate examination of a slightly smoking lamp.

By the time that he had meticulously adjusted it, he was able to turn round and speak with calm.

“I shouldn’t like my little Lily to become a tomboy. She is quite happy in her own little nursery.”

“Now, what’s the good of talking as though she were still a baby? She’s not a baby—you really must make up your mind to it, my dear chap, that the kiddie isn’t a baby any longer.”

Philip was quite incapable of making up his mind to

anything of the sort, but by sheer force of iteration Charlie Hardinge succeeded in accustoming his mind to the possibility of sending Lily to Bridgecrap.

To Lily's dismay, almost as much as to Philip's own, Charlie asked her in her father's presence:

"Wouldn't you like to go to school, little woman, where my kiddie-widdies are? You've often heard of my Dorothy, now, haven't you? and she's always asking about you. They're all three of them at school at Bridgecrap now, as happy as the day is long. You'd like to go to school, wouldn't you?"

Lily cast a hasty glance at her father. His eyes did not meet hers, but she knew the profoundly dejected droop of his head, and was acutely sensitive to the meaning of his silence.

The atmosphere in which she and her father lived—of perpetually wounded susceptibilities, of suppressed verities, of only half-sincere demonstrations, continued long after they had ceased to be spontaneous—had made of Lily a super-sensitive, unbalanced creature, distrustful of her own instincts, and almost incapable of clear thinking. She had become the victim of muddle, the commonest and the most disastrous foundation upon which to build up a life.

It now seemed to her that it would be impossible to speak the truth in the face of the obvious pain that it would give her father, while at the same time she was aware of the utter uselessness of telling a lie. To tell a lie, incidentally, was a sin, but then so was it a sin to be heartless and undutiful, and the latter was fraught with the more painful consequences of the two.

Good-natured Charlie Hardinge saw, without understanding it, the conflict reflected on her small, pale face.

"Come, come, come, come! You look as though school would do you all the good in the world. My kiddies have got cheeks like roses, and Dorothy holds herself like a grenadier—head up, shoulders back! They think Bridgecrap the jolliest place in the world."

"Is it a large school?" asked Lily, evading the point at issue with absolute relief.

"Thirty girls. Miss Melody has some very nice kiddies there indeed—girls you're likely to see something of, later on. Very nice girls—girls that Ethel and I thoroughly liked the look of. Walk well, hold themselves well, keen on all sorts of games——"

It might be said that Philip eventually sent Lily to Bridgecrap in spite of Charlie Hardinge's recommendations, rather than because of them.

The thing that really moved him most, although he was quite unaware that it was the determining factor in his decision, was Charlie's positive assurance that Lily was losing her prettiness.

"The kiddie's pale," said Charlie accusingly. "She used to have a pretty colour when she was a little thing, and now she looks anæmic—and there are lines under her eyes. She's moping, Philip, that's what it is. Moping. No wonder she holds herself so badly!"

Philip did not like hearing strictures, that he could not feel to be altogether without foundation, upon the appearance of his daughter.

It cost him real and severe pain to let her go, although her presence at home gave him no happiness, and he did not attempt to conceal the extent of his sacrifice from Lily.

"Good-bye, my poor little girl. You shall have your

own way, and go right away from home for a time. I hope it may answer, my poor child, and send you back some day to those who love you best in the world. God bless you."

This was Philip's valediction, sending Lily to her new surroundings with a leaden weight of guilt at her heart, and a reproachful picture of a sorrowful and deserted father returning to an empty house.

Having more or less lost hold upon her own convictions, she felt that, had it been possible, she would gladly have renounced Bridgecrap for ever, and returned to her father.

In this frame of mind, and with spirit encompassed by the accumulation of false values that had steadily been put before her in one form or another by the two small worlds that she had known—her home and the convent—it may readily be assumed that Lily began her career at Bridgecrap school under a severe handicap.

The standards there were altogether different from any that she had known yet.

"Honour" seemed to be the watchword of the place. The girls who excelled in games, or in examinations, did so "for the honour of the school." Their own personal honour was appealed to, freely and frequently. The convent system of *surveillance* would have been unthinkable, at Bridgecrap.

"I want you girls to have just the Public School code of honour that your brothers have——" Miss Melody herself often rousingly remarked.

But although the Bridgecrap girls were to play games like boys, to hold the traditional boys' views about honour, and, theoretically, to receive an education that should as

nearly as possible conform to the pattern of that bestowed upon their brothers, they were never for a moment allowed to view the masculine sex as the superior sex. On the contrary, there was nothing, they were told, that a man could do which a woman could not do better. The old idea that women were not fitted for the professions that had hitherto been closed to them was being disproved every day. Miss Melody hoped to see many of her girls take their degrees, strike out careers for themselves. . . .

Many of the girls responded enthusiastically, although the majority of them belonged to a class of society in which careers, other than that of matrimony, are scarcely yet tolerated for its daughters; and seldom contemplated by them, schooldays once over. They were enthusiastic, although they did not realize it, largely because of the excellent physical conditions under which they lived.

Games were played all the year round, at Bridgecrap. There was an elaborate gymnasium, and once a week the girls went to the swimming-baths. Lily was good-naturedly despised by them all for her absolute lack of athletic training or proficiency and total absence of muscle.

Just as at ten years old she had heard the opinion of her contemporaries at the convent, and been humiliated by it, so at Bridgecrap she met with an equal candour, clothed in the slang that was tolerated, if not actually permitted, from the pupils.

"Look here, Lily Thingamy, or whatever your name is, you'll have to stir your stumps a bit. Can't hold a whole hockey practice up for *you*, you know."

"Just look at this kid! Why, she hasn't any more muscle than a kitten. If she weren't so thin, she'd be disgustingly *flabby!*"

"You want backbone, that's what you want. It makes one sick to see anybody of your age who's never been taught what ragging means."

"My dear kid, it's no use saying you don't know the rules of the game. You've bally well *got* to know them. What on earth *do* you know, if you don't know anything about cricket?"

There were things that Lily did know, although she speedily became aware that the knowledge of them would not bring her to honour or triumph amongst the girls, and scarcely even amongst the mistresses. It was not accounted as particularly creditable to her, for instance, that she took a high place in the school, and retained it easily. More might have been made of it, but for the fact that all Miss Cleeve's conscientious teaching had never embraced the form of cramming known as taking examinations, and at Bridecrap the taking of examinations was made the test of knowledge.

Consequently, however excellent her half year's work, Lily seldom succeeded in passing a test, to the form of which she was unaccustomed, and the lists were regularly headed by the captain of the hockey team, who had been at Bridecrap nearly six years, possessed a capacity for hard work, a well-trained, mechanical memory, and no intellect whatever.

The mistresses were almost all primarily selected for their proficiency in games, except the French teacher, a Swiss lady who gave all her lessons in broken English.

The Scripture classes were taken by Miss Melody herself, in each of the three divisions of the school. History was imparted in the usual patchwork of dates, anecdotes, and names famous in Great Britain between the reign of

King Alfred the Great and that of Queen Anne, geography was not taught beyond the Upper Third, botany was an extra, natural history ignored, and plain needlework not taught. Mathematics, except in the cases of one or two peculiarly constituted beings, presented itself to the girls, as to the majority of feminine minds, as a compound of meaningless "sums" that, if juggled with by a series of unrelated processes, might "come out right" at the end. Those of the pupils, Lily Stellingthorpe amongst them, who had least liking or aptitude for figures, received, by way of inculcating these, an hour's private and extra tuition in arithmetic once a week. Almost each one of them still surreptitiously counted upon her fingers, as little children do, believing it to be a form of cheating, but entirely unfamiliar with any more legitimate method of achieving the same result.

Literature, kept within the realms of English achievement, generally embraced one Shakespearean play thoroughly prepared, out of a school edition, for a coming examination. Shakespearean plays not judged suitable for this purpose, many of the girls did not even know by name. A few had "read Scott, because my young brother had to swot up 'Woodstock' last hols." Scarcely one could connect the name of any classic with that of its author, and all, without exception, would have felt heartily ashamed of being found, under no form of compulsion, to be reading poetry.

Few, it may be added, ran any such risk.

The religious principles of the school were Church of England, but religion, to Lily's relief, did not imply the insistent advertisement of outward and minor pieties that had prevailed at the convent.

A short daily service was held in the school chapel, and there were prayers morning and evening. Miss Melody held "Sunday talks" for the elder girls, of which the prevalent notes were brightness and broad-mindedness. Free discussions of Bible and Catechism readings were encouraged, with implicit avoidance of certain of the Commandments which apparently were not fit subjects for explanation.

Indeed, the nuns themselves could have displayed no more silent and resolute modesty than prevailed at Bridgecrap upon subjects that, sooner or later, must become of vital moment to every one of the feminine creatures there being educated.

V

LILY formed and retained a very acute impression of the Bridgecrap atmosphere, during the three years that she spent there, but hardly a single personality in the place made any lasting effect upon her memory. Yet it was during those three years that a secret and shamed conviction slowly crystallized within her; they were all what she inwardly called Real Live People, and she herself was only a sham. However much she might try to be like everyone else, sooner or later they would find her out.

She could not have explained wherein lay the difference, but connected it vaguely with a mysterious undercurrent of romance that ran through her daily life, and of which no one must ever, ever know.

She thought that no one but herself ever invented long, dramatic stories, that went on from day to day, in which one traversed strange and eventful scenes, always a heroine, always becomingly dressed, and always in full view of a selected audience.

Lily also supposed herself, with more reason, to be unique in another respect.

At fifteen, even at sixteen years of age, she still liked playing with toys. Not even such respectable toys as jigsaw puzzles, or ingenious mechanical contrivances—although even such tastes as these must have roused the extreme of scorn in the players of hockey—but terribly,

shamefully babyish things—wooden farmyards and tea sets and dolls.

Above all, dolls.

Officially, Lily had outgrown dolls at twelve years old. Miss Cleeve had expected it, had taken it for granted. She might, or might not, have known that there was a little wax baby-doll, in long clothes, hidden in Lily's bedroom.

But certainly neither she, nor anybody else, knew that the doll Sophy had accompanied Lily to school.

Worse—Lily played with Sophy in secret and took her into bed with her every night. She had a small bedroom to herself, as had most of the elder girls, and as soon as the governess in charge had paid her brief nightly visit of inspection, and extinguished the light, Lily crept out of bed, felt her way to the chest of drawers, unlocked the bottom drawer and took out the baby-doll from underneath a pile of garments folded at the very back of the drawer.

She pretended that Sophy had to be hidden away in a cave all day from danger of kidnapping, and that she might only visit her at night. She cuddled her, and talked to her in a whisper, and went to sleep with her in her arms.

With part of herself, Lily really believed that Sophy could understand what she said to her, and appreciate the caresses lavished upon her. There was never any question of her forgetting to conceal the little doll again in the mornings. She was far too genuinely terrified of being found out.

It appalled her, occasionally, to think of the effect that discovery might have upon all those Real Live People. Not only the girls, but everyone she had ever known—

governesses and servants, and relations like Aunt Clo and Cousin Charlie, or her father. Lily did not really feel that even her mother would have understood, although, like most motherless children, she idealized the memory of the dead woman. The only person with whom she knew that her secret could quite well have been shared, would have been Vonnie.

They had always played "pretence games" together, and Vonnie would have outgrown them no more than Lily.

It was partly this consciousness of a guilty secret, of which Lily was unutterably ashamed, that kept her from any intimate friendships at school.

Like many naturally reserved people, she held an ideal of friendship that included the most complete unreserve, and how could such a thing ever be possible to a person who would have to begin by saying:

"I am not like other people. I am not a nearly grown-up girl like you are—I still play pretence games with myself, although I am sixteen. All the pencils in my pencil-box have names, and ages and characters. I like quite baby toys, and I would much rather play by myself with a box of tin soldiers, than go for a school-picnic, or to see a Shakespearean play. *I have got a baby-doll and I talk to her and take her to bed every night, and I always mean to go on, as long as I live.*"

Whenever Lily reached this climax, in her imaginary confession, she always saw the recipient of it, not necessarily as derisive or scornful, but simply, blankly amazed and completely uncomprehending.

There *could* be nobody who would understand in the whole world.

The whole world, if bounded by the gates of

Bridgecrap, certainly justified Lily's instinct in that respect.

She liked most of the girls, although she knew in her heart that there was no real link between herself and any one of them. This she put down to that indefinable eccentricity of hers which differentiated her from the rest of the world. She knew that the girls were conscious of it too, although it would not have occurred to them to put it into words.

The discussion of an abstract question amongst themselves they would have considered to be an affectation, and bad form, although the youthful Briton's trick of freely making crude personal remarks flourished unchallenged.

"I say, what a scarlet nose you've got!"

This was entirely permissible and called for neither comment nor reply, other than a casual "Have I—what's it matter?"

But Lily always remembered the outcry that followed upon a remark once made by one of the younger pupils:

"I wonder why one gets that funny feeling sometimes of having done things before? Sort of like that Indian thing Mam'oiselle was reading about the other day—reincarnation or something——"

"Here! Chuck it, please. That was in a *lesson!*"

"Little girls shouldn't use long words they don't understand," said a senior severely.

"Snub for you, Elizabeth Fulham, showing off like that! Trying to be original, I s'pose! Did you ever hear of such affectation in a Fourth Form kid!"

Apparently no one ever had and no one ever did again, Elizabeth Fulham subsiding, with a very red face, into silence and subsequent orthodoxy. Certainly no one else

at Bridgecrap could fairly be accused of trying to be original. It would have been the unforgivable sin.

Everyone seemed to copy everyone else.

Many of the girls copied Dorothy Hardinge, the eldest of Charlie Hardinge's three kiddies, because she was very good at games and had won the High Jumping Competition two years running at the school sports. The Third Form girls parted their hair in the boyish way affected by Dorothy, and used the same slang that she did; and were "keen" on the mathematical mistress, because Dorothy was "keen" on her.

Schoolgirl friendships were not the fashion at Bridgecrap, and were cried down as "sloppy" by the girls themselves.

But it was *de rigueur* to have an infatuation for one or other of the teachers, with the exception of Mademoiselle who, being a "bestly foreigner," naturally "didn't count."

The majority of these enthusiasms might almost be described as being artificially manufactured to meet the requirements of that great law that enforced conformation to type. The mildest demonstrations only were indulged in.

"Isn't she *swe-eet*—isn't she *ducky*?"

Such was the prescribed formula when Lily was at Bridgecrap, and once it had been ecstatically uttered, the speaker was recognized as being "keen" on Miss So-and-So, and there the matter remained stationary.

There were one or two exceptions to this comparatively healthy state of affairs, as is inevitable in any community living under similar conditions of unnatural segregation. Lily, without knowing why, hated the headlong adorations that occasionally overtook a girl for one of the mistresses,

Dorothy, at fifteen, had attained to a degree of athletic prowess that admitted her to the comradeship of the most highly placed girls in the school.

She naturally took not the slightest notice of Lily, who was universally recognized at "a perfect duffer at games."

Of Janet Hardinge, Lily was frightened, although Janet was her junior. Janet was clever, according to the Bridgecrap standards, and she was amongst the few girls in the school who expressed a contempt that was not, in the main, wholly good-natured, for Lily's physical inefficiency. She had a spiteful tongue, that turned itself readily to personalities of a coarse and wounding nature, and Lily's sensitiveness was sufficiently obvious to render her a favourite target. Janet was not popular, and Lily was perhaps the only one of her school-fellows who realized that hers was simply the obtuse cruelty of the absolutely unimaginative. Her sister Sylvia was four years younger than Lily, and so entirely absorbed by hockey that only the chance of school theatricals revealed to either that they had anything in common.

A play was acted every year at Midsummer. At first, Lily had been convinced that she could act. She knew that the girls to whom the important parts were given frequently spoke their lines with perfectly meaningless intonation, and with emphasis very often laid in the wrong place.

She felt certain of distinguishing herself, although the first part given to her was a tiny one, and she noted with relief that her voice, when she spoke her brief sentences, sounded very clear and distinct, amongst those other voices that were almost all charged with self-consciousness.

Her satisfaction reached a brief climax and then was dashed to earth.

"Very good, Lily Stellingthorpe!" said an unnecessarily surprised junior mistress. "I wish you principals would put as much intelligence into some of your speeches. You, for instance, Dorothy Hardinge."

Dorothy Hardinge giggled. She was too good-natured to take offence, and it was clear that the whole question of the play seemed to her to be a very unimportant one.

Perhaps something of this attitude of mind was rather too obvious in her demeanour.

"Lily!" commanded the mistress sharply. "You can read that long speech of Dorothy's, and see what you make of it."

Ever since her arrival at Bridgecrap Lily had been convicted of her inferiority to everyone there.

Now, in a glorious flash, she saw her chance of at last achieving a success.

She read the speech without hesitation, and felt that she had read it very well.

"Excellent! I wish I'd given you a bigger part. We'll see . . ."

Lily was disproportionately excited.

The next day, she was told to give Dorothy's speech again, this time with the necessary action, which included a slow entrance and a dramatic exit prefacing the fall of the curtain.

"Oh, my dear child! Hold yourself properly--you can't walk like that. And your hands--no, no--that won't do. Can't you *move* properly?"

It was just what Lily could not do. Her instinct for the

correct manipulation of words and ideas did not extend to the disposition of her own muscles.

Enforced drill, gymnastics and detested games, begun too late and without any attempt at individual tuition, had failed to impart to Lily the natural poise and erect bearing that made Dorothy Hardinge's movements harmonious. Her body was as self-conscious as her mind was supple and alert.

"No use at all. We can't have her standing about the stage like that. What would Miss Melody say?"

"I'm sorry, Lily," said the junior mistress kindly. "It's a great pity you can't learn to hold yourself properly. Otherwise, you might act very well."

Lily's brief triumph was over, at the expense of this humiliation.

It was then that Sylvia Hardinge surprised her by saying quietly: "It's a shame! You said all that stuff perfectly splendidly—as though it really meant something. They ought to let you have a really good part—you act better than any of us."

Lily secretly agreed with her, whilst believing herself conceited for doing so, but she was none the less astonished and gratified at Sylvia's appreciation.

"I'm glad you think I can act. Did I really hold myself so very badly?"

"Yes," said Sylvia simply. "Frightfully."

It was like a douche of cold water.

Lily's friendship with Sylvia was destined to run a course that was neatly foreshadowed thus in their first encounter.

Sylvia admired Lily, thought her clever and very pretty, and was a sympathetic and affectionate companion.

Lily felt passionately grateful for her affection, and sometimes told herself joyfully that she had found a friend at last.

And then from time to time she was suddenly brought up short against the sharply defined limits of Sylvia's comprehension, and the jarring candour of Sylvia's ruthlessly unalterable condemnations.

Grown-up people always told one that in this world there was no such thing as a perfect friendship. Lily obediently generalized thus, and strove for philosophy in defiance of a hidden, quite unsupported certainty, in the depths of her own mind, that the generalization was a false one.

It was not until her final half year at Bridecrap that Lily came under the direct personal influence of the headmistress.

Miss Melody was fifty-seven, she had given up her life to the work of education, and she still brought to it the enthusiasm of a pioneer. Her solitary weakness was the not altogether uncommon one of an unshakable belief in her own infallibility.

"You may have a difficult time in front of you, childie," she said to Lily very kindly. "A motherless girl is very often at a great disadvantage. I was motherless myself before I was twenty."

She had a rounded mellow voice and always articulated her words with great deliberation and distinctness. "And the dear little brother! Is that a big responsibility, Lily?"

"Kenneth will be going to school almost at once," said Lily evasively.

She would like to have replied, as Miss Melody obviously expected her to do, with an admission of her own

perplexities as regarded her relations to Kenneth, but she knew very well that no responsibility would really be hers. Nothing vital bound her to Kenneth as she had been bound to Vonnie, and the immense gulf of her ten years' seniority had inspired in her no maternal solicitude towards her independent little brother.

"He will be nearly eight when I leave here, and I know my father means him to go to school when he's eight," said Lily.

"Child, you're not going to be a shirker, are you? Lily, Lily, isn't that the weak place? Ah, I thought so. I thought so. Afraid of responsibility, aren't you?"

Miss Melody's eye was at once penetrating and melancholy, as she fixed it upon her pupil.

"Now, childie dear, if you know what that weakness of yours is, fight against it. Fight against it, dearie, and pray. Don't forget what prayer can do for us all. The very weakest can be made strong, you know. . . ."

Lily listened with a sense of disquiet. She felt vaguely that Miss Melody, so kind and wise and helpful, had somehow evolved a preconceived idea that did not altogether fit the reality.

"I don't know whether it is exactly that I'm afraid of responsibility," Lily began, feeling that the help Miss Melody was so willing to impart must rest upon a basis of fact, if it was to be of value to her.

The schoolmistress laughed softly.

"Lily, Lily, haven't you learnt not to make excuses for yourself yet? I hoped all my girls were taught that in the lowest form in the school!"

Lily looked as thoroughly disconcerted as she felt. Was it making excuses for herself to try and explain what she

felt to be the truth, even though it happened to run contrary to Miss Melody's judgment?

"No, no, child," Miss Melody was grave again now. "Never be ashamed to own up to your weaknesses. I want you to think about backbone, dearie. It's what you need. *I* know, childie—perhaps more than you think. All sorts of girls have passed through my care, and I'm very, very proud to think that I've known something about each one of them—perhaps been able to give each one a little help. And there are no two alike, Lily, and each one has to be studied individually."

"And do you—have you really——?" Lily wanted to ask whether Miss Melody had really penetrated to the true self of every one of her pupils. It seemed so incredible, that girls like Dorothy Hardinge, for instance, should really have an inward life, even as Lily herself, and that Miss Melody should enter therein, and understand it all.

"Do I really study each one individually? Indeed I do, Lily, although it may seem to you girls that you see very little of the headmistress except in school, and on state occasions. Oh, *I* know," and Miss Melody laughed again.

Then she dropped her deep, soft voice impressively.

"I've studied you, childie dear, and thought about you very often. There's weakness, Lily—there's weakness. You'll have to be very much on your guard. I should like to have seen you much keener about games, much more in earnest for the honour of the school at our hockey and cricket matches. You may think that those things are of no very great importance in themselves, but there's a fine spirit behind it all, you know—a thoroughly *English* spirit. It's that keenness that you seem to me to lack."

Miss Melody paused, and looked with her characteristic air of profound scrutiny at Lily.

"Well?" she said encouragingly.

Lily felt that she was letting slip an opportunity for just such a clarification of issues as she had long sought after, but the habits of obscure and muddled thinking into which she had all her life been led stood in her way.

She made a consciously inadequate effort, belatedly.

"I think I could be more—keen—about things, if I only felt they were more worth it," she said confusedly. "I know I'm no good at games, but it isn't only that—it doesn't seem to me to matter frightfully whether one's good at them or not—and it's the same about other things, even lessons. I *do* enjoy them—some of them at least—but all the time I've got a sort of feeling—what's it all for?"

She paused, confused and frightened.

"Go on——" said Miss Melody. Her voice was slightly melancholy, but she was slowly nodding her head, as though in comprehension.

"I think if I could find something that seemed to me thoroughly worth while I could—could really let myself go and give my whole self to it. Something like a—person one loved very much, or a sort of life one felt was right for *oneself*—not just right in itself——" Lily stopped, in utter disarray.

She knew that she had not succeeded in conveying her meaning by those halting, ill-expressed phrases, but the extent of her failure was not apparent to her until Miss Melody spoke again.

"I'm very, very glad you should have spoken, childie . . . perhaps we can get this straightened out between

us. That's a terrible idea of yours, you know, that things aren't worth while. Why, at your age, anything ought to be worth while—over and over again, Lily. The games and the lessons, and the little brother at home—it's all worth while, dearie. While you're thinking and dreaming away about some imaginary call to devote yourself to someone or something, all the little opportunities are slipping by you—you're squandering all your energies on fancies that mean nothing. You must learn to put your whole self into what you're doing, Lily—into the living present. Why, it's all worth while! As I told you just now, it isn't the number of runs you make in the cricket match that matters, it's the spirit that holds the whole eleven together, that makes each one keen to see her side win the match. *That's what matters!*"

Lily looked with unhappy eyes at Miss Melody. Why could she feel no real response within herself to these rousing truths?

At that moment she hated her own tepidity, her own secret, alien standards. She made an earnest and violent endeavour to relinquish the latter for ever, and to range herself under Miss Melody's inspiring banner.

"The games in themselves are only games. True," said Miss Melody. "But there's something else, Lily. I wonder if you've ever thought of it? Everything we do, great or small, can be turned to the greater honour and glory of God. I think you know very well that the Apostle Paul has written about that—didn't we have it, not so very long ago, at our reading? And don't you think, if you want a motive, that you have an adequate one there? If you think of that, childie, you won't ask again 'what's it all for' or whether it's worth while, will you?"

Could Lily, at seventeen years old, have formulated her own obstinate, inmost certainty, and have replied to Miss Melody?—"The Apostle Paul spoke for himself. Neither he nor anyone else can speak for me. Until I have evolved my own convictions, I shall continue to suffer from that lack of motive which I have most inadequately tried to put before you, and of which you have quite obviously understood nothing at all."

Nothing is more certain than that no such arrogant lucidity sprang either to her mind or to her lips.

"I'll try, Miss Melody——" she said, earnestly and meekly.

"I know you will, I'm quite sure of it. There's a big effort to be made, Lily, before you can shake off that supineness of yours, but it can be done, dearie. Now, when you leave here I want you to feel that you can write to me quite freely and I shall always find time to answer you. Do you know that girls who left me fifteen and twenty years ago still write to me? Some of them have girls of their own at school by now.

"Tell me, childie dear, have you ever thought of what your own future is to be? Is it to be a career, or the making of a home for the little brother, or do you want a home of your very own—marriage, Lily?"

The mere knowledge that she had never before heard the word mentioned in such a connection by Miss Melody, made Lily blush foolishly.

The headmistress smiled—an omniscient smile. "I thought so—I thought so. Well, Lily, although I haven't married myself, I always advocate marriage for the majority of my girls. Most women are happier in the beaten track, and I don't think you're one of those that

are called upon to stand alone. Oh, there's nothing derogatory in that. Marriage is a very high calling, child, and there's a great deal to it—a great deal of *responsibility*, Lily."

Miss Melody's arch smile underlined the word, as though it had become a catchword, used to denote their dual consciousness of Lily's weakness.

Lily smiled back again, faintly protesting.

"Ah, you don't like that! It's the old bugbear, isn't it? Well, well, childie . . ." Miss Melody appeared to lose herself in reflectiveness.

The fiction of Lily's dread of responsibility was now firmly established between them.

"If I can give you any advice, or help you in any way, just let me know, dear child. We've had a nice, long talk, and I think it's been helpful to you."

Miss Melody paused so significantly that Lily almost involuntarily said: "Yes, Miss Melody."

"I'm very thankful for that, Lily—very proud and thankful. You must come to me again before the breaking up. Bless you, childie dear."

Lily understood that the interview was at an end.

Acutely sensitive as she was to Miss Melody's kind and serious interest in her welfare, it was almost inevitable that she should come to the sorrowful conclusion that Miss Melody, in her vast and tolerant experience, must be correct in her estimate of Lily's self. The thought depressed her.

She lacked backbone, and she was a shirker, squandering all her energies upon fancies that meant nothing.

In a vague and general way, Lily resolved to abjure those fancies and to readjust her scale of relative values so

that it should include all that Miss Melody had meant by such words as "keenness"—"a thoroughly English spirit" and "doing everything to the greater honour and glory of God."

VI

THE least highly spirited amongst us, however easily cowed by outside influence, seldom finds it easy or desirable to practise meekness when dealing with a near relative at home.

This law, which is a practically invariable one, deserves a candid recognition which it seldom receives.

Certainly it was never openly admitted to exist by Philip Stellingthorpe, whose house furnished a striking example of its workings after Lily had finally returned from Bridgecrap.

At school, she had been the victim of a diffidence engendered in the consciousness of failure.

At home, the consciousness of failure merely roused her to covert and irritable defiance of criticism.

She was no longer the sensitive and over-intuitive child steadily denying her own instincts wherever she foresaw that they must run counter to her father's unalterably sentimental ideals. But neither had she the moral courage nor the training in honesty of thought that would have enabled her boldly to analyze the causes of her own discontent.

She was resentful of Philip's arbitrary conventions, for which he never gave any other reason than that "Father says it will be best that way," and at the same time she believed her resentment to be wrong and undutiful.

She thought, and was shocked and unhappy to think, that there were times when she hated her father, whereas her hatred was in reality wholly for certain manifestations of his solicitude and affection for herself.

"A child that is impatient of its parent's love," Philip once called her, in bewildered pain and disappointment.

Lily felt herself to be unutterably heartless, cried herself sick with remorse and despair, and then had to bite her tongue to prevent herself from protesting aloud in exasperation the very next time that Philip called her his little pet.

A perpetually tête-à-tête existence might well have brought the state of tension between them to an unforgettable climax, but that the situation was saved by the Hardinges.

The Hardinges came to live within a mile of Philip Stellingthorpe.

The shock to him was less severe than if they had been people of whom he knew nothing, and the sacred tradition of Eleanor's day, that "the children were happiest in their own little nursery," was allowed to lapse when Lily between eighteen and nineteen years old, and Kenneth in his first term at school. Subtle and intangible conflict and the presence of the cheerful, commonplace Hardinges were unthinkable together in the same atmosphere.

Dorothy Hardinge, no longer able to play hockey with any regularity, philosophically turned her attention to other forms of amusement, and was quite ready to make a companion of Lily Stellingthorpe. Having reluctantly put up her hair and lengthened her skirts, she made the best of privileges that she had never coveted, took her clothes quite seriously, and discovered frankly, for the

first time, that Lily had at least one undeniable advantage over other girls that had never been recognized at school, in that she was extremely and unusually pretty.

Janet was less simple-minded, or less generous than Dorothy, and always made Lily conscious of her faint contempt.

Sylvia was still called Lily's friend, although they had much less in common than had Lily and Dorothy, now that Lily was accounted grown up, while Sylvia had three more years of school before her.

Charlie and Ethel Hardinge gave tennis parties and small dances, and picnic parties, and talked as proudly and volubly of "the girls" as they had once talked of "the kiddies-widdies."

They included Lily and Kenneth in everything.

"We've got two boys coming to stay with us next week. It ought to be rather fun," Dorothy Hardinge proclaimed. "There are never enough men to go round, here."

"There are so few families with sons, and anyway the boys always seem to be years younger than the girls—like Kenneth," said Janet discontentedly.

It had been the fashion at Bridgecrap to deride as early Victorian any assumption of the desirability of masculine society under any conditions, but Dorothy Hardinge at least had candidly readjusted her point of view amongst her new surroundings.

"We shall try and give a dance, while they're here. One of them is father's ward, Colin Eastwood—he's eighteen and awfully nice. Sort of quiet, you know, but nice. And he's bringing a friend, someone we don't know. Father said he might. He's at some University or other, and he's about twenty-two, or something like that. He'll

probably think himself as old as anything, compared to us," said Dorothy with a little laugh that betrayed excitement.

Lily felt excited, too. She had met very few boys indeed that were beyond the age of sailor suits, but she had indulged in as many romantic fancies of possible future conquests for herself, as were allowed her by the ineradicable memory of the convent theory that masculinity was *ipso facto* something to be, as far as possible, ignored by the modest feminine.

Much reading and an uncontrollable imagination had merely eradicated the recollection of conventual shibboleths, but Lily was still sufficiently bound by them to feel very much ashamed when she found herself wondering whether Colin Eastwood and his friend would think that she was pretty. Dorothy said that she was.

From time to time, when she had on a new hat or put on a summer frock for the first time, her father looked at her with an air of rather melancholy gratification, and then made some small, detached observation at the very end of the day, when it might be assumed to have no special significance to the immediate occasion:

"My little Lily is getting quite a grown-up girl, now. It's quite a duty for little people to take care of their complexions, you know, we're given these small advantages to be a pleasure to those who care about our looks."

Lily had thereby deduced that Philip was afraid of her becoming vain, and that therefore he, also, thought her pretty.

She sometimes took long and furtive observations of herself in the glass. Her eyes, dark-lashed and rather

deeply set, were not nearly as blue as Dorothy Hardinge's, but her nose at least was straight where Dorothy's turned up, and her soft skin had no freckles, and was sun-burned olive instead of red. She thought that her lips were too full, but at all events they were firmly closed, since she had always breathed through her nose, which not one of the three Hardinges could do for any length of time. And her hair was lovely.

Lily would never have applied to it, even in her own mind, such an adjective—redolent of vanity, according to the code—but nevertheless, that was what she really thought of it, when she brushed out the long, silky brown waves.

She counted vanity as being amongst her besetting sins, and strove to persuade herself that, against the evidence of her own senses, she really ought to believe herself plain and unattractive.

It was a mark of her own unregeneracy, that this should prove to be so extraordinarily difficult.

It became more difficult than ever, when Colin Eastwood and Lily began to meet one another every day at the parties and excursions arranged by the Hardinges in honour of their two guests.

Colin, as Dorothy had said, was nice, and very quiet. The indications of his admiration for Lily were so shyly offered that she only became aware of it by subtle and gradual degrees.

So restrained and delicate was that impalpable idyll of their extreme youth, that it never became the object of jarring and facetious comment, as was Dorothy's loud flirtation with Colin's cheerful and amusing friend, embarked upon within an hour of their first acquaintance.

Lily, at first, had indeed been inwardly mortified at the promptness of Dorothy's conquest. The undergraduate was a Real Live Person—so was Dorothy. So were all the others. Lily, just as at school, felt herself to be but an indifferent masquerader, through the badly sustained pretensions of whom they could all see plainly.

She found herself paired with Colin, in all the expeditions, and thought that it was because he had such nice manners that he always stayed beside her. But in a very little while she knew that, actually, Colin manœuvred for the place next her, and that his gaze always sought hers to share in the frequent jokes and allusions that had so soon come into being amongst them all.

He liked her better than Dorothy, or Janet or any of them.

It was just such a first romance as is only possible to certain diffident and highly sensitized temperaments, as yet unawakened to any thought of the cruder and more obvious manifestations of mutual attractions. Colin Eastwood was very nearly as ingenuous as Lily, and quite as shy.

He sat next her at picnics, and looked pitiful if the privilege was accidentally usurped by others. He once, daringly, and with shaking fingers, fastened her glove for her.

He asked her to call him Colin, and when she shyly acquiesced he was transported, but looked at her with a gaze that implored a yet further privilege.

Lily blushed at first, and then said timidly:

“And will you call me Lily?”

He said breathlessly: “Oh, I should love to.” The audacity of the words made both their hearts beat quicker, so that they could say no more.

When they played tennis at the Hardinges' house, Lily was generally assigned to Colin for a partner, as it was necessary to equalize the sets by coupling the weakest player, as Lily indubitably was, with the strongest.

At first she thought that he must resent her inferiority, but it was soon evident that he did not even acknowledge it to exist. When she played well, he praised her rapturously, and when she played badly he put aside her apologies with assurances that the sun, or the wind, or some mistaken movement of his own had been against her.

Under the stimulus of his admiration, Lily suddenly blossomed into a self-confidence hitherto unknown to her, and actually learnt to like tennis, and to play passably well.

Occasionally Colin was her adversary, and then he served his balls to her as gently as possible, and she knew it, and was thrilled by his chivalry, although she never made acknowledgment of it to him in any spoken words.

Such tiny little things seemed to count. The way one looked, or didn't look—the seat one chose in the garden at tea-time. The allusions that proved how carefully certain predilections or desires had been noted. And there were the photographs.

All of them had cameras, and groups were taken. Colin always placed himself next to Lily, or sitting at her feet, or standing just behind her, for these.

Colin took photographs of Lily, because that was such a very pretty hat, if she didn't think it rude of him to make a personal remark. And might he take one of her without a hat on at all, for a change?

Lily would just take one snapshot of Colin, because he had put her camera to rights, and they must see if it had been a successful operation.

Colin manoeuvred the unsuspecting Sylvia into making use of his Kodak, which was much superior to her own Brownie, so that the photograph which she took of Colin and Lily, alone together on the tennis court, appeared to be a sudden inspiration of her own.

But Lily knew that the whole was a deeply thought-out plot of Colin's, although he never said so. When the films were developed and printed, however, though Colin exhibited them freely, he let Lily know, casually, that only she and he were to have copies of that particular photograph.

The glamour of perfect summer weather lay over it all, and the scent and colour of the innumerable roses with which the Hardinges' garden seemed to be eternally decked. It was the beginning of August, when the halcyon days drew to a close, and on the last evening, they all, under a red harvest moon, went out to the favourite scene of their many excursions—a stretch of common land whereon the heather had just burst into purple bloom.

The undergraduate challenged Dorothy to a race through the thick, impeding clumps, and they sped far ahead, the youth gaining upon her every moment, in spite of a long start and the silk skirt that she had daringly wound round her waist, exposing her frilled petticoats and a shapely length of leg.

Sylvia and two contemporaries, encountered upon the way, linked arms and could be heard singing fragmentarily as they went. Kenneth, excited by the unwonted lateness of the hour, ran with the Hardinges' dog, and alternately teased and chattered to Janet, always left odd-man-out, and now relegated to the society of her father, who told her instructive things about the moon. Lily and Colin lingered far behind them all.

They were not articulate, even now, in spite of the soft allurements of the melancholy that possessed them both.

In Lily's mind, there floated a fragment once read somewhere:

. . . *De cet adieu, si douce est la tristesse.*

She said tremulously:

"I'm sorry you're both going away to-morrow."

She had not wanted to say *both*, but the word mysteriously forced itself from her.

"I'm sorry, too," Colin answered fervently. "I shall never forget this time. It's been the happiest of my whole life."

"I think it's been the happiest of mine, too."

Shyness overwhelmed and silenced them both.

"You don't want to catch up with the others, do you?" spoke Colin entreatingly.

"No—oh no. They're too far ahead," said Lily hurriedly.

The hillside became steeper, and the gorse-bushes that stood up amidst the tough springing heather became more numerous.

"I think I'd better go first and—and help you, if I may."

He thrust the stiff, green spires aside, and held out his hand.

Lily tremulously placed hers within his grasp.

They climbed slowly, without speaking.

"Shall we sit down for a minute?" Colin suggested, when the end of the steep path was reached, and Lily had softly, but definitely, withdrawn her hand from his.

They leant against a boulder, and Colin detected a tiny tuft of white heather.

"Let's each pick a piece of it, and not tell anyone where we found it."

Then they exchanged their pieces, rather solemnly and without speaking much. Colin's fingers lingered round Lily's as she tendered her little spray towards him, and they looked long at one another in the moonlight.

"I shall always keep mine," he murmured.

"As a remembrance," whispered Lily.

"I shan't need anything to make me remember," said the boy reproachfully. "Will you keep yours?" he added beseechingly.

"Yes."

Colin kissed his piece of heather and put it into a little pocketbook.

Lily tucked hers tenderly into the front of her gown. Then it was all over and the others joined them, and they went down the hill again all together, singing "For Auld Lang Syne," and Lily and Kenneth were left at their own lodge-gates.

And for the next few days, Lily found the picnics dull, and the tennis parties no longer events to be looked forward to, and the taking of photographs not worth while.

Once Dorothy Hardinge said to her, quite calmly: "I believe Colin Eastwood was awfully in love with you, Lily."

"Father says Colin is frightfully susceptible," said Janet quickly. "I heard Father and Mother laughing about him."

Lily did not mind the laughter of good-natured Cousin Charlie and his wife.

She wondered with shy, delicious tremors whether Colin really was in love with her, and whether some day he would come back again and ask her to marry him, and

take her away to some nebulous dream world in which all true lovers had their being.

Her dreams and fancies were nearly as unsubstantial as those that she had woven round imaginary adventures, and told herself from day to day, at school. She was still only pretending to be like other people. Really Lily knew that it was all pretence to say that she was now grown up.

Philip said it from time to time, even while himself still treating her as a child, with no slightest claim to either judgment or individuality of her own.

But when he one day found her, more or less surreptitiously, childishly devouring toffee in the garden, he reminded her seriously and with displeasure, of her years.

"You don't want to eat unwholesome sweetstuff, between meals, like a little schoolboy. That's all very well for the nursery," said Philip, disregarding the fact, resentfully remembered by Lily, that no such practice had ever been allowed prevalence in the Stellingthorpe nursery.

"I don't like to see you behaving so babyishly, Lily. It's—it's undignified, and unsuitable. I don't like to see it."

He saw it no more.

Lily, although regarding detection as shameful, was either not sufficiently convinced of the heinousness of eating toffee at nineteen years old, or else lacked sufficient self-control to refrain from surreptitiously indulging her desire for sweet things.

She made inconspicuous expeditions to the village sweet-shop, and returned with her purchases in her pocket, thoroughly despising herself the while.

Guilt, and a ludicrously disproportionate terror showed

plainly in her face when she once met her father, on her return by the least frequented entrance to the house.

"What have you been doing, my little pet?" Philip enquired with a suspiciousness foreign to his nature, but which must have been engendered in the most trusting of parents by Lily's confused and disconcerted expression.

"I just went up to the village," she stammered, and felt herself flushing.

Philip stared at her in a puzzled manner. "What for?" he said at last.

"Nothing, Father. Just a—a walk."

Lily hastened away from further questions with the sense of her own degradation strong upon her. She hated herself for having told a lie, and supposed that she had done so from a natural and ingrained tendency to deceive in the first place, and an uncontrollable and dishonouring passion for sweets in the second. She had become incapable of analyzing impartially the true grounds of her own moral cowardice.

Had her natural honesty of mind been less systematically and thoroughly warped, she might have received illumination from the sequel of the affair.

Philip, during the afternoon that followed their encounter, was silent with that peculiar silence which Lily knew, too well, denoted in him both grief and perplexity.

Then, at the end of the evening, he said to her suddenly:

"My little child would never do anything foolish without telling me, eh, Lily?"

"No, Father," automatically said Lily, neither of them awake to the absurd and improbable inconsistency of prefacing an act of folly by announcing it in a quarter where it would certainly receive scant encouragement.

"You must never play little, underhand tricks," said Philip nervously.

It was quite evident that he intensely disliked saying whatever he had set himself to say, and Lily's heart sank with the familiar feelings of shame and dismay as she realized that he was obliquely referring to her morning's walk.

"It's—it's not quite ladylike, not to be open and above-board. And little people have to be specially careful when they're rather older. There must never be anything like—well, like setting up a correspondence, for instance, with some youth or other, without saying anything about it."

For a moment Lily felt utterly bewildered.

"We don't want to put anything at all unpleasant into words," her father said hastily, "but sometimes a little hint . . . You see, my little pet, very young people can be rather thoughtless sometimes, and then it may lead to things that are perhaps a little bit undesirable—you'll understand better when you're older. But clandestine expeditions to post letters, or to call for them, are quite out of the question, and might lead to a great deal of talk and unpleasantness."

Philip stopped to shudder at the distasteful vista of possibilities thus opened up, and the perception suddenly flashed upon Lily of his ingenious misinterpretation of the object of her morning expedition.

It afforded her the most unaffected relief.

There was no humiliation, and but little inconvenience, in being suspected of misdemeanours on a scale to which she had never aspired. It was even, mysteriously, rather gratifying.

"You understand what I mean, my darling?"

"Yes," said Lily, trying to keep extreme thankfulness out of her voice.

"Then we needn't say anything more about it." But Philip still fidgetted uneasily with his newspaper and it was evident that he had more to say, and that he much disliked the prospect of saying it.

"Of course, one likes you to have plenty of innocent and ladylike amusement," he said at last, in reluctant and distrustful tones. "Certainly one does. And Cousin Charlie's daughters and—and their friends—are everything that is nice and proper, no doubt. But I shouldn't like to think that you ever get at all—excited, or unguarded, so that people might find you a little bit—undignified."

Lily's relief was now merged in acute discomfort.

Her father must be thinking of Colin Eastwood. Had she really been undignified?

To Lily's thinking it was an unendurable word, denoting indefinable forms of unrestraint, of an underbred lack of self-respect.

"One of these days," said Philip, carefully looking away from his daughter's discomfited face and perhaps scarcely less embarrassed than was she, "one of these days I hope to see my little girl happily engaged and married to some good, suitable man. But not for a long, long while yet, and in the meantime my little Lily musn't cheapen herself by foolish boy-and-girl nonsense."

"I haven't——" stammered Lily, scarlet.

"Hush, hush, now. You know you mustn't contradict Father like that."

The form of Philip's serious and unvehement rebukes had not varied since the days of Lily's babyhood.

"You'll be a good child, my pet, I know. If only your mother had been spared to us, there would never have been any little difficulties. You must take to Cousin Ethel, if there's anything she can help you about——"

"But there isn't anything——" Lily was frenziedly repudiating she knew not what.

"Well, well, we needn't talk of sad, uncomfortable things, my child. Only no little hole-and-corner affairs with letter-writing, remember."

But Lily had ceased to derive relief from the evident immunity from detection of the toffee scandal that was thus implied.

Her idle dreaming about that impalpable summer romance was over, and she strove with shame to forget the very name of Colin Eastwood.

VII

"You must have a talk with Ethel, have a talk with Ethel," said Charlie Hardinge. "My dear fellow, you must have a talk with Ethel."

Philip looked gloomy and distrustful.

He did not tell himself that Ethel Hardinge always roused in him a feeling of irritation that temporarily embraced the whole family of Hardinge, nor did he realize that she had a precisely similar effect upon most of those people who, with reluctant admiration, spoke of her as being such a good mother.

He told himself instead that Ethel was the mother of three daughters, and that therefore she understood everything about all young girls.

Without enthusiasm, he embarked upon a talk with Ethel.

"My motherless little child," said Philip, thereby involving himself in misunderstanding at the very outset, since Ethel supposed him to be alluding to little Kenneth.

"No, no," said Philip, pained. "Kenneth is at school. Besides, he is a boy. It's my poor little Lily that troubles me."

"Oh, but she's not a *child*," said Ethel brightly. "I assure you, you mustn't think of her as a child. A girl of nineteen is grown up, or she ought to be. My Dorothy is a year younger than Lily, but I should never dream of

saying she wasn't grown up. Besides, she'd resent it so much if I did!"

"I think Lily is content to let me judge for her——" said Philip stiffly.

Nothing in Lily's conduct justified the assertion—rather the reverse—but while Philip's necessity constrained him to ask for assistance, his dignity constantly impelled him to deny any need of it. This naturally increased the delicacy of his adviser's position, but Ethel Hardinge was cheerfully impervious to atmospheric conditions.

"There's a stage when they get discontented and out of hand," she remarked thoughtfully. "I went through it with Dorothy, and I'm going through it with Janet now. Girls thinking they can't get on at home, you know."

Philip was sincerely horrified.

"That is very sad and shocking," said he gravely. "Home is a young girl's natural sphere above all others, I should have thought. But I hope little Lily has no terrible ideas of that kind in her head."

"Oh, they all go through it," Ethel repeated comfortably. "It'll be my Sylvia next."

"Indeed?" said Philip, who felt no interest in Ethel's Sylvia, but would have thought it unsympathetic not to simulate one.

His conscientious observance of this self-imposed law retarded the course of the consultation a good deal, since everything that either of them said invariably served to remind Ethel of its applicability to one or more of her own children.

"It goes off, once they get other things to think about," Mrs. Hardinge observed optimistically. "Dorothy was quite all right again when we had those nice boys staying

here. They had plenty of fun all together, and it quite took her mind off her grievances."

"But why should little chil—should young girls, living at home, have grievances at all?" demanded Philip piteously. "They ought to be as happy as the day is long."

"Of course, our kiddies have everything to make them jolly—and really, I think they know it, at the bottom of their hearts. Dorothy and Sylvia are cheery enough, now, and Janet is only going through a phase. But your Lily—of course it's lonelier for her. And then, she's very affectionate and sensitive, after all—my girls always say she wants bracing—perhaps it rather reacts on her spirits to know that you—that you——"

Ethel called up a fit of coughing to her aid. It was never easy to make a personal remark to Philip Stellenthorpe.

He grew more rigid than ever as the sense of this one was borne in upon him.

"You mean that my own happiness is, naturally, no longer to be found in this life? But my little Lily can know nothing of that," said he in all good faith. "I should never dream of speaking about my grief to her, or allowing it to cloud her spirits."

"I don't see how you can help it," said Ethel bluntly.

Philip sat in astonished silence.

He had never thought of his children save as beings of quite undeveloped perceptions, and it was to him an incredible and unwelcome suggestion that Lily might possibly be aware of anything that had not expressly been put into words for her information.

"We always imagined, Charlie and I, that you'd give Lily a regular season in London as soon as she grew up.

I only wish we could afford it for our kiddies—but it's out of the question, with three of them."

"If Lily's dear mother had been spared to us, no doubt there would have been something of that sort," said Philip dejectedly. "But in the circumstances, it hardly occurred to me that I should actually spend three or four months in town, and take her to balls and parties and all the rest of it, myself. And I am really quite out of touch with London society nowadays. But if my duty to the child requires a sacrifice——"

"No—no," said Ethel hastily.

She rightly conjectured that the spirit in which Philip would approach the proposed immolation might safely be counted upon to victimize Lily quite as thoroughly as himself.

"Isn't there anyone to whom you could send her? It's so easy to make arrangements of that sort, as a rule. Most people are only too pleased to take a pretty girl about—by arrangement, of course."

"I could only entrust the charge of Lily to near relations, naturally," said Philip.

If Mrs. Hardinge failed to appreciate the force of the axiom, she made no sign of it.

"Surely there are aunts and people?"

"My wife was an only daughter, as of course you know, and her brothers are not married. I have only one sister, and she is unmarried and lives abroad."

Philip's manner suggested strongly that "abroad" in this connection might cover a multitude of sins. But Ethel knew all about Miss Clotilde Stenthorpe.

"Oh, but wouldn't she be the very person? I remember her quite well. Last time I was in town taking Sylvia to

the dentist I met your sister in the waiting-room. We had quite a long talk."

"My sister has a small villa in Italy, outside Rome. She lives there almost altogether, and I fancy she would dislike London."

Ethel entirely disbelieved that any woman would dislike London for a sojourn of which the expenses of herself and a young and pretty companion would be liberally met. But she felt unable to put this into words which should leave Philip's susceptibilities unwounded.

So she said instead, with an air of bright inspiration:

"Then why not send Lily to Italy? It would be a splendid education. I've often thought how much I should like Janet to get a trip abroad! She's the clever one, you know—it would be rather wasted on Dorothy, I'm afraid. From what your sister told me she has a most interesting circle of friends amongst the English colony in Rome, and knows all the Embassy people."

"Yes, that is so."

Philip appeared to be much more favourably struck with this scheme than with Ethel's previous suggestion.

He put from him the painful recollection of certain heartless words, spoken nearly ten years ago, and tried only to remember that poor Clo was his nearest relation, and Lily's aunt.

After all, she had loved the children in her own way, and Philip had long ago euphemized her terrible speech about Vonnie into "poor Clo's rather unsympathetic way of speaking about things that should be held sacred."

Whenever Philip Stellingthorpe came to within measurable distance of a decision, however, it was his invari-

able instinct to make earnest search for difficulties or disadvantages that might stand in the way of its execution.

"There are several drawbacks to the plan, of course," he began at once. "My sister may have other arrangements of her own, or the idea may not appeal to Lily."

"I shouldn't dream of consulting her, if I were you," said Ethel in a surprised voice. "Just tell her it's all settled, as a tremendous surprise for her, and she'll be delighted. Girls are like that."

"I'm sure my little girl would never be ungrateful for anything I had arranged on her behalf," said Philip sadly. "But I don't know whether this is the right time of year for Italy. I should have to find out about that."

"You would hardly send her for less than six months, surely," urged the practical Mrs. Hardinge. "*Some* of that would be sure to be the right time of year."

"And what about the journey?"

Philip pounced upon a further debatable point with gloomy triumph.

Ethel misunderstood him.

"That would be one point in favour of letting her go this autumn. She wouldn't have that long journey in the heat."

"I was wondering who should take her."

"Take her? Isn't she old enough to take herself?"

"It is one of my rules," said Philip sublimely, "that Lily should not go about alone. I have never allowed her to travel by herself, and I shouldn't dream of letting her begin by a journey to Italy."

"Of course, if she's never travelled by herself, she can't begin by going all that way. Our kiddies always go about together—but perhaps one by herself may be different.

Only it seems a pity she should be so helpless at her age."

Philip looked offended as he always did at any form of criticism.

"You could send a maid with her."

"My sister's establishment would probably not admit of an additional servant."

"She could see Lily into the train in Paris, and then come back. Come, you wouldn't mind her going straight through in a ladies' carriage by herself, would you?" said Ethel persuasively.

Philip reluctantly conceded that this might be permitted, less because the idea appeared to him satisfactory, than because he had just thought of a fresh objection to the whole scheme, and was desirous of bringing it forward immediately.

"I should be sorry if Lily made her friends amongst Roman Catholics, I must admit."

"I daresay most of Miss Stellenthorpe's friends are English. I believe there's quite a colony there. In any case, she wouldn't be likely to be attracted by a foreigner, would she?"

Ethel's abrupt descent from the general to the particular slightly scandalized her hearer.

"No—no. I don't know that I was thinking of anything very specific," he said untruthfully. "Only on general grounds."

"Oh well, of course, she's very pretty. There are sure to be plenty of people who'll admire her. That boy we had here, Colin Eastwood, was a good deal smitten."

Ethel laughed comfortably, but Philip remained quite unsmiling.

"Boy-and-girl nonsense is all very well," he remarked in tones which implied the contrary, "but of course it can't lead to anything, and only puts foolish ideas into the heads of little people. I naturally hope to see my poor little Lily happily and suitably settled some day, but there's plenty of time before her."

"I approve of early marriages," Ethel declared stoutly. "I hope if our girls are to marry, that they'll all marry young."

"I have no doubt of it," mechanically said Philip. "Thank you a thousand times for your help. I shall think over our discussion, and let you know what I decide."

He went away trying not to let himself perceive that it would afford his own harassed sense of paternal responsibility an immense relief to send Lily away from home for several months.

It was a disappointment to him when she received his announcement almost doubtfully, although he would certainly have felt, and said it, to be sad and unnatural had she exhibited unrestrained pleasure at the prospect of leaving home.

They continued to remain, therefore, at cross-purposes during the correspondence embarked upon with Aunt Clo, and the resulting arrangements for Lily's journey in September to the villa at Genazzano.

"No doubt Aunt Clo will either meet you in Rome herself, or send somebody else to meet you, and take you to Genazzano. The difficulty is your journey as far as Rome. Your Cousin Ethel suggested sending one of the maids with you to Paris, and letting her see you into the train there. Or I could take you so far myself."

Philip sighed heavily. He detested travelling.

"Why couldn't I go by myself?" Lily demanded, suddenly rebellious. "I'm sure Cousin Ethel would let Dorothy."

Philip looked at her in unfeigned surprise.

"Why, my little pet," he said gently, "you know very well that Father doesn't allow you to go about alone."

"But why?"

"Not that argumentative tone, my child. Some day you will be very, very grateful for all the care that I have lavished on you, and perhaps when it's too late you may wish that you'd shown a more affectionate and dutiful recognition of it. Now, don't let me hear anything more about it. You know it's a very old rule that you mayn't go about by yourself, so there's no more to be said."

And such was the time-honoured immutability of those arbitrary rules, that there really was no more to be said. It occurred not at all to Philip and only remotely to Lily, that the manner, if not the matter, of his prohibitions was senselessly tyrannical. He was honestly convinced that his favourite catchword—"Father says it will be better so" would serve as ample justification to the minds of his children for any commands that he might choose to lay upon them.

The resulting condition of resentful obedience induced in Lily, who was at once too sensitive and too fond of her father to risk reducing him to one of those states of despairing depression that were his only form of displaying vexation, Philip described as "a nice, happy, friendly, little home party, with no unpleasant discussions.

Since the death of his wife, he had known no more definite happiness than his own pitifully negative contentment whenever such a state of affairs appeared to him to

prevail in his house. He would have thought it a disloyalty to Eleanor's memory to suppose that he could ever be happy again.

The children might be so—in fact he wished them to be so, and was bewildered and hurt when his own lack of proportion created an atmosphere to which Lily, at least, reacted at a cost infinitely greater to herself than either of them realized.

Kenneth, ten years younger, was different.

The "difference" of Kenneth, in fact, was becoming positively appalling, to his entirely humourless father.

Kenneth disregarded the code with blatant impunity, and that not from a spirit of defiance, but apparently from sheer constitutional inability to regard it seriously.

He obviously did not believe that grown-up people were infallible.

Remonstrance never made him cry, nor imputations of heartlessness and disloyalty.

He never willingly sat upon anybody's knee after he was three years old, but would say cheerfully: "I'd rather not, thank you," as he walked away.

He held opinions of his own, and expressed them freely.

He did not instantly relinquish them when Philip gravely and gently told him that he was an ignorant little boy and that Father always knew best.

He was addicted to making personal remarks.

He spoke crudely and candidly about subjects that Philip had always tacitly impressed upon his children as being sad or unpleasant, and therefore unfit to be mentioned freely.

He asked indiscreet questions.

"How old are you, Father?"

"Hush, hush, little boy. That's a very rude question. You know you must never ask grown-up people their age."

"Why not?"

"Because it's very bad manners."

"Cousin Charlie asked Lily how old she was, the other day, and Lily didn't mind."

"That's different." Philip was at last beginning to learn that one could not put an end to Kenneth's enquiries merely by saying: "Come, come, you know Father doesn't like arguments."

"Cousin Charlie is a great deal older than Lily, and can say what he likes to her."

"Then it's only old people who mind being asked their age. Is that why you won't tell me yours, Father, because you're so old?"

Philip was exceedingly sensitive about his age, and quite incapable of assessing the utter meaninglessness of his son's estimate.

"That's a naughty, heartless way of speaking," he said, deeply hurt. "I don't want to talk any more to little people who can speak like that."

"Oh well, it doesn't matter," said Kenneth with supreme indifference. "I s'pose you're about seventy or eighty. I didn't know you'd mind being asked."

In the last assertion lay the painful core of the matter. Kenneth really didn't know, as Lily, and even Vonnie, had known, as much by intuition as by training, what Philip would "mind."

He transgressed constantly, and was gaily impervious to the devastating effect of his transgressions upon his

father and, by reflection, upon Lily. But Lily secretly admired Kenneth, and envied him that pachydermatous courage of his own convictions that she herself had never acquired.

Kenneth was never afraid of being himself, although that self in no slightest degree corresponded to Philip's ideal of a motherless little boy of nine years old.

He went to school and was not in the least homesick, and he seemed to be neither grieved nor ashamed when Philip expressed great disappointment at his first report.

"I hoped you would have been proud to bring back some nice prize or other to show me," said Philip wistfully.

"Prizes are fearful rot," said Kenneth.

He afterwards remarked in a detached way to Lily that, after all, what he did at school was his own business, more or less.

"Father pays for you to go there," said Lily, instinctively aware that only such practical considerations would carry any weight to her youthful hearer.

"Yes, of course. But he needn't want to know whether I've made any nice friends, and rot of that sort."

"I know it's rather aggravating to be asked about that sort of thing," half whispered Lily, feeling herself to be guilty of treason. "But after all, it's because he's fond of us, that he wants to know everything about us."

"Being fond is such rot," said Kenneth, in his graceless and limited vocabulary.

Lily was quite glad to see him return to school before her own departure for Italy.

"I'm afraid you won't see your sister at home next holidays, my boy, so you and I will have to cheer one another

up," said Philip nervously. "But it'll be a great treat for Lily to go abroad."

"Mind you send me some stamps for my collection, Lily," Kenneth said earnestly.

"Come, come, Kenneth. Try and not think quite so much about your own little concerns. Now say good-bye, my boy."

But the most determined sentimentalist upon earth could extract no conventional emotion out of Kenneth.

"Good-bye," he said casually, and turned an inattentive cheek to Lily's salute.

She would willingly have omitted the ceremony of kissing him altogether, knowing that he disliked it, but for her certainty that Philip, shocked and pained, would have insisted upon its due performance.

"I hope little Kenneth is not a heartless boy," said his father, turning away dejectedly from the scene of farewell that had impressed him so unsatisfactorily.

But hope was not the predominant note in his voice.

Lily was so sorry for her father—all the sorer because she was conscious that her own inmost sympathies lay with Kenneth's point of view—that she felt it incumbent upon her to show no elation at all at her own projected departure, although she was in reality fast becoming both excited and pleased at the prospect of going into entirely new surroundings.

The result of which filial piety was that Philip told Ethel Hardinge, in a resigned way and with a smile of great melancholy, that little people realized very few of the sacrifices made for them, and one must not expect to see them display gratitude.

VIII

"AHA!" cried Aunt Clo in a loud, ringing contralto.

She stood on the small, empty platform and waved her hand above her head with a spacious, graceful gesture, as Lily got out of the train.

Miss Stellenthorpe's short, iron-grey curls were uncovered and parted in a masculine style on one side of her head, and she wore a dark-blue, fisherman's jersey and a pair of dark-blue knickerbockers. Her large, well-shaped legs and feet were bare.

"Aha! Good! Good!"

She kissed Lily upon both cheeks in an emphatic, foreign sort of way, and gazed at her with a fondly humorous smile.

"*Ecco!*" said Aunt Clo.

She hurried Lily across the little platform, affectionately grasping her arm, and talking so cordially all the while that her niece felt quite unable to interrupt her.

At last she said:

"My luggage, Aunt Clo. I'm afraid there's a trunk——"

"A trunk! *Dio mio!* Let us not forget the trunk!"

Aunt Clo sped back again, appearing not at all disconcerted, and disposed of the trunk question with much animation.

"The trunk," she exclaimed to Lily in mock-bombastic style, "the trunk is provided for. All is well with

the trunk. It appears at the gate of Il Monasterio *au plaisir de ce brave Lorenzo.*"

There were many French phrases and a few Italian ones scattered through Aunt Clo's conversation, and she frequently gave a strangely foreign construction to the sentences that she spoke in English.

Lily was impressed by her fluency, by the perfection of her French, and by a certain humorous candour that Aunt Clo displayed in voicing her opinions.

Nevertheless, she could not quite kill her remembrance of having, as a child, disliked Aunt Clo.

Outside the station was a very small waggonette with a striped red and yellow awning. A sleepy, good-natured-looking peasant, his shirt open at the neck, sat on the box.

"*Ecco, Umbertino!*"

Miss Stellingthorpe waved her niece into the waggonette and sprang in after her. The vigor of her ascent seemed out of all proportion to the dilatory progress that they made along a baked and arid-looking road, the fields on either side unrelieved by any shade.

"But the vineyards round Genazzano!" said Aunt Clo expressively. "*Patienza!*"

Genazzano proved to be a small village consisting of one cobble-stoned street, winding up the side of a steep hill, and an ancient grey pile that stood raised from the roadside at the top of half a dozen irregular steps.

"The *Cathedrale*," Aunt Clo introduced it.

A mattress, imperfectly concealed behind a heavy red curtain, hung before the entrance to the cathedral after the Italian fashion.

A small, brown-skinned child was squeezing its way

inside, and a sturdy peasant woman, carrying a baby and a basket, was pushing her way out.

"*Buon' giorno, Teresa mia!*" cried Aunt Clo, waving her hand.

The woman smiled in reply.

"This is the country of the Miraculous Virgin," Miss Stellenthorpe told Lily. "The Madonna of Genazzano. The statue is in the cathedral and we have a wonderful procession once a year. Ah! *ce cher Genazzano!*"

Tenderness radiated from her face and voice.

The waggonette drew up before a small iron fence that enclosed a tiny stone house, built along the four sides of a square. A little cloister ran all round the house, and the space in the middle formed a courtyard where shrubs flowered in painted green pots.

There was no garden, other than the small and apparently untended courtyard, but within the house, Aunt Clo waved through the window at a thick trellis covered with vine tendrils and fig-leaves, and framing a sturdy arbour beneath which stood a rustic bench and table, and said:

"*La Tonnelle.*"

Beyond lay a sloping track of ground on which the vines grew round poles that stood in long, converging lines, reminding Lily of a miniature edition of a Kentish hop-field.

"Truly have not my lines fallen to me in pleasant places?" Aunt Clo enquired musingly. It was perhaps a slight relief to Lily that her tone required no reply. A bald negative or affirmative seemed so inadequate a rejoinder to Aunt Clo's rounded, elaborate periods.

When they were sitting in the *tonnelle* that evening,

however, just before the falling of the brief Italian dusk, Miss Stellenthorpe made enquiries to which more detailed answers were necessary.

"And what of Philip—what of your father, Lily?"

Lily answered as fully as was compatible with that old obsession that it was disloyal to present one's near relations to the gaze of another in any aspect save that particular one in which they might choose to regard themselves. She knew that Philip often described himself as a broken man, and conscientiously did her best to put a picture of a broken man before Aunt Clo.

"*Aha!*" said Aunt Clo, and "*Ecco!*" and nodded with deliberation, as though merely acquiescing in the recital of a state of affairs that had long been known to her.

"*Nous nous aimons de loin,*" she said with resignation. "It doesn't do to remove the crutches before a lame man is ready to walk. I myself have stood without a prop all my life, and I wanted to see your father and mother strong and straight and unsupported, too. But perhaps I was hard and hasty. I was young. They clutched at the artificial supports that I tried to make them spurn—they resented the council of perfection . . . Well, well . . . I thank whatever gods there be, that I myself have learnt to stand upright and face the sunlight."

Aunt Clo drew up her tall person as she spoke, and threw back her head in a gesture expressive of freedom and gallantry.

Later on, when Lily and she had dinner together, Miss Stellenthorpe became less metaphorical and more colloquial.

Her appearance was a surprise to her niece. She had discarded the blue jersey and the knickerbockers for an

admirably fitting drapery of flame-coloured brocade, closely following the lines of her fine figure, and a Greek fillet encircled her head. Her arms were bare to the shoulder and Lily, glancing surreptitiously downwards, saw that she wore flame-coloured stockings and shoes that were laced sandal-wise.

"Certainly, I descend to the conventions in the evening," cried Aunt Clo, not altogether truthfully, as her gaze followed Lily's. "Would you believe it, Lily, that I shocked Genazzano profoundly when I first lived here!"

Lily felt that she could believe it easily.

"'But,' they cried, 'the signorina shows her legs! She wears clothes like a man! It is immodest!' Imagine it—such a point of view here in Genazzano, which is like an earthly Paradise. I was confounded."

"'But is this Suburbia?' I asked. One expects Suburbia to be shocked—or even the provinces. Lily!" cried Aunt Clo in a tone of playful accusation. "I believe your father would be shocked. My legs—the legs that God gave me—would shock your father, if he saw them uncovered."

Once more the very fervour of Lily's inward acquiescence kept her silent.

"Oh, these people who are shocked!" said Aunt Clo with a musical groan. "But Genazzano is now used to my knickerbockers—who knows but that one day your father may be reconciled to the thought of uncovered legs? Or would he say—ha, ha!—would he say that they were immodest? an indecent spectacle? . . . I believe that's what he would say!"

Aunt Clo, speaking with mournful roguishness, seemed

disposed, in a breezy, open-minded sort of way, to attribute the most prurient-minded views and expressions to the rest of humanity.

She told Lily that there was a girl in the village who was suspected of being about to have an illegitimate child. She was only fifteen.

"I have sent for her to come up here to-morrow. Naturally, her relations can get nothing out of her. They have frightened her, and made her believe that she has done something to be ashamed of."

She leant forward and scrutinized Lily's face by the indifferant light of the two oil-lamps in the room.

"*Biglia Mia!* But I've made you blush! It suits you, and is charming—but why—why?"

Lily was indeed blushing, deeply annoyed with herself for so doing, and yet irresistibly compelled to it by Aunt Clo's open mention of subjects that were never referred to at home, and had only been furtively whispered about by the least endurable of the girls at school.

"I—I suppose I'm not used to hearing those things talked about," she stammered. "I've never been told anything—I'm not even sure that I know what 'illegitimate' means, exactly."

"Philip's child—Philip's child!" almost moaned Aunt Clo. "I might have guessed it! He would never face life himself, and he brings up his child to suppose that ignorance means innocence. Oh, horrible!"

She shuddered and almost sprang from her seat. "Come out under the starlight, my child—you want no fruit? That's right—you and I must have some talk."

Lily felt ashamed of the irrepressible feeling of disappointment with which she followed Miss Stellenthorpe,

whirled away from her beautiful untasted plateful of ripe figs.

But, of course, illegitimacy was not a subject to be discussed over dessert.

Aunt Clo, however, said nothing more about illegitimacy. She began instead to tell Lily how, long ago, she had solemnly warned Philip and Eleanor that they were refusing to face Truth; to look at facts as they were.

"It was about the poor little Yvonne. She would have been saved, if they had brought themselves to acknowledge her weakness, instead of trying to persuade themselves and the world that she was like other children. Let me see—you were two years younger—but you can remember?"

"Yes," said Lily rather curtly.

Vonnie had been so seldom mentioned, since her death, and then always in such consecrated phrases that Lily felt Aunt Clo's outspokenness almost as an indecency.

"Aha! *nous avons changé tout cela*—but when you were mites together, I remember very well how superior you thought yourself to poor little Vonnie. Hardly your fault, child—you were the favourite. They never disguised it, although, of course, they never would acknowledge it, in so many words. *Ah, quel système!*"

Aunt Clo shook her head.

"Dear little one, how much you've improved since then!"

There was delicate approbation in her tone, and in the large, genial, scrutinizing eye that Lily could just perceive, gleamingly turned upon her in the moonlight.

Although, theoretically, Lily supposed herself to be striving after perfection, it caused her a distinct feeling

of resentment to hear that she had "improved," but she dishonestly attributed her annoyance to her growing conviction that it would be in better taste if Aunt Clo were rather less candid in criticism of her niece's nearest relations.

With her disconcerting penetration, Miss Stellingthorpe seemed to be aware of some such unsympathetic atmosphere surrounding her.

"You mustn't resent my plain speaking. *Pour moi, il n'ya que la vérité.* When we have known one another a little longer, my Lily, you will realize that truth is an obsession with me. Nothing but the truth. Deceit in any shape or form is the one unforgivable sin!"

Lily gave a fleeting glimpse to certain aspects of herself with a feeling of veritable horror, and a most sincere resolution that these must be for ever concealed from her hostess.

It was impossible not to desire Miss Stellingthorpe's approval. She was so spaciouly generous in her appreciations, so gravely despondent in her well-weighed condemnations.

It was true that Lily was sometimes surprised at the courses taken by appreciation or condemnation alike.

There was the case of the village girl, Carla. Nothing could be more evident than that Aunt Clo's impassioned interest in her situation amounted to positive enjoyment. Lily heard her aunt's voice in fluent rhetoric, morning after morning, encouraging and upholding Carla, exhorting and rebuking Carla's tearful mother, eloquently proclaiming her championship of Carla to her own servant, to the young man who brought the milk, to the postman,

in fact to anyone of the little community of peasantry at Genazzano who would listen to her.

"Of course the man is the parish priest at Sta. Lucia—I don't doubt it. So, thank God, there can be no question of making him marry her. Thank God for that, say I!" Aunt Clo fervently told Lily at breakfast one morning.

"But wouldn't it be better if she was married before—before——?" Lily blushed again, bewildered.

"Never!" said Miss Stellenthorpe, striking the table with her open hand. "It would be a far greater wrong than the first, to compel that poor child to marriage."

The point of view implied was so new to Lily that she immediately felt, in her complete reaction from the standards set before her in her childhood, that it was probably the right point of view.

But as, for some inexplicable reason, she very much objected to those prolonged dissections of the *affaire Carla* in which Aunt Clo was so ready to indulge, Lily gently turned the conversation to a christening which she had seen take place in the cathedral on the previous afternoon. Aunt Clo was always ready to be intensely interested in ceremonies celebrated by the Catholic or other alien denominations, that would have bored her extremely in the Church to which she belonged.

But on this occasion, she showed but little enthusiasm on the subject of the postmaster's twins.

"Ah, and they've a child not a year old yet—and Heaven alone knows how many Augustino and Maria have had altogether. Criminal, criminal! When will they learn the folly and wickedness of breeding in that reckless way!"

Lily could suggest no helpful solution to a problem of which she scarcely grasped the outline.

To her it merely seemed as if Aunt Clo had no approbation to spare for babies unless they were illegitimate ones.

Staying at Genazzano, Lily began for the first time to experience in some slight degree what is meant by the liberty of the individual.

Aunt Clo showered books and opinions upon her, but encouraged her to form her own judgments of either. Not only was there no disloyalty in differing from Aunt Clo, but she seemed positively to prefer argument to acquiescence. Certainly, to adduce an opposite point of view, generally led to a lucid and eloquent exposition, embellished by many polished French phrases, of Aunt Clo's opinions of the subject in question, but she always said—"Aha?" and "So!" very kindly indeed to Lily's diffident interpolations.

There were certain, quite trivial, little things, nevertheless, which Lily felt that her aunt would despise in her, and the compulsion under which she thought herself to conceal these kept alive in her the old guilty feeling that she was not really like other people and was only pretending to be grown up.

She would rather have been detected by Miss Stellenhorpe in a forgery, than in the infantile practice of eating sweets, so insistent was her certainty that Aunt Clo would be far less contemptuous of the former predilection than of the latter.

Yet they had never discussed the matter, although Aunt Clo, in the midst of reminiscences of a day spent in Paris in company of a wealthy American friend, once said, in her emphatically descriptive style:

"He was so full of *petits soins intimes*, dear person! There we were in one of those enormous glittering *pâtisseries* shops, and I couldn't prevent him from loading me with great boxes of *pâtes de guimauve*, and huge Easter eggs of pink crystallized sugar . . . and all the while there was the most heavenly riot of scent and colour in a flower-shop next door. If only one could have exchanged all the *bonbons* for one single bunch of violets!"

Aunt Clo heaved a sigh of retrospective regret, and not for the world would Lily have owned to her own degraded preference for *pâtes de guimauve* and pink crystallized sugar above all the bunches of violets that Parma could produce.

Lily reflected impatiently that when she was a child it had been naughty to want sweets, and now that she was grown up, it would be childish. It seemed that there was no time of life at which such a desire could ever be laid claim to honourably. As for Aunt Clo, she often seemed to be quite unaware that such a thing as food existed.

When they went for expeditions, and visited Roman churches and museums, Lily was greatly ashamed of the undoubted fact that her enjoyment was constantly haunted by the fear that Aunt Clo, towards twelve o'clock, would exclaim in a breezy manner:

"*Il Palatino*, now, my Lily! Shall we take a base advantage of the Germans and Americans, who will all be flocking in search of food, and have the glory of the place to ourselves?"

And Aunt Clo would spring vigorously up the steepest paths, under the hottest sun, and very likely remember nothing more about luncheon at all until it was time to

take the tram to the station for their train, when she might observe with one of her most negligent gestures:

"Have we eaten? I forget! But *qu'importe*, in the midst of this—and this—and *this!*"

Once they even missed the train that should at least have returned them to Genazzano in time for tea, because Aunt Clo leaped out of the tram just before the station was reached, at the sudden realization that Lily had never been inside the Church of Sta. Maria degli Angeli.

Impervious alike to hunger, thirst, and fatigue, she remained on her feet for nearly an hour in the dim, cool church, pointing out in an impassioned undertone the reasons why certain frescoes were to be admired, and shuddering away from others to which the chief drawback appeared to be that all tourists always looked at them first.

Aunt Clo's knowledge of Art in all its branches seemed to be almost illimitable, and she gave Lily a copy of a thin book of her own, that bore upon the title-page: "Beauty: a Finger-post. By Clotilde Stellenthorpe. *Privately printed.*"

The Finger-post pointed to the great necessity for surrounding oneself with Spaces, and Silences, and occasional Splashes—of light or colour, or sound—and also indicated deleterious features in many hitherto accepted standards. It rather inclined to leave the reader with the impression that Beauty, as a whole, had received a thorough revision at the hands of the author of the book, and would henceforth be found to be within the range of the book's appreciators. There was an underlying suggestion that those outside this circle had not yet reached the stage

of development at which Beauty could be of any advantage to them.

Nowadays, Aunt Clo no longer wrote about Beauty. She told Lily that she tried to live it, instead. Everything in the tiny house at Genazzano had been chosen for the sake of either form or colour, and the little bronze mirror that hung, sloping, over Miss Stellenthorpe's writing-table possessed a further qualification.

"I like to go through life *le sourire aux lèvres*," said Aunt Clo, markedly accentuating the habitual pleasantness of her expression as she spoke. "It is pleasing, refreshing—to look up and meet a smile. What will you, if it happens to be one's own?"

Aunt Clo laughed outright at her own quaint fancy. "When I raise my head from my writing, I see reflected in my little mirror a pair of steady eyes, a face that holds the lines graven by many experiences, some grave, some gay, and a smile—I hope a strong, steadfast, humorous smile. Time was, my Lily, when the face that I saw in the mirror was that of a tragic muse. Thank God, the phase has passed!"

Aunt Clo not infrequently threw out similar sombre indications that her past had held some deep, unspecified cause for woe.

She was very kind to Lily, although frequently deploring in her the traces of her upbringing.

"You must learn to say Yes to Life!" she cried ringingly from time to time, her hand upon her niece's shoulder, her handsome head tilted backwards. "You know your Nietzsche?"

Lily shook her head, feeling much abashed and conscious that Aunt Clo thought her very young indeed.

"Courage!" said Miss Stellingthorpe. "Ah, *jeunesse, jeunesse!*"

Lily reflected quite irritably that Aunt Clo might just as well have said: "Youth, youth!" and have done with it.

IX

"TO-DAY—I give battle!"

Aunt Clo's voice sounded as though the prospect filled her with mingled elation and concern.

"Can you amuse yourself, my Lily, if I leave you for the day? Books—piano—flowers—birds——" Aunt Clo enumerated the resources of her establishment with large and expressive wavings of her well-shaped hands over the breakfast-table.

"I can write some letters, and you have lent me so many books. I shall have plenty to do."

"*Benissimo!*"

"Shall yōu be away all day?" said Lily tentatively. She had already learnt that Miss Stellenthorpe rather welcomed enquiries on subjects of which the importance apparently required an extreme reticence of reply.

A shade of gravity at once fell across her face. "Ah! who can tell? If the mission is to be successful, a day is not too long . . . but I am very much afraid. Not fearful, you understand, *cara*, but—let me say—aware of responsibility—immense responsibility."

Lily felt that she, too, must look serious, in sympathy, and regretfully realized that Aunt Clo was about to rise abstractedly from the table, although her niece greatly desired another breakfast roll. Sometimes, interested in discussion, Aunt Clo would sit over a meal interminably, her elbows on the table, her hands supporting her keen.

handsome face. At others, she would rise impatiently, flinging her napkin to the ground, and appearing regardless of the incompleteness of her niece's meal.

Lily had never yet found the necessary courage to remain in her place and continue stolidly to eat. Aunt Clo had a curious faculty for throwing into relief the grossness of material needs.

She now stood at the open window and addressed Lily slowly and sadly.

"Little one, do you know what it is to see a frail, foolish, lovely butterfly dashing itself against a lighted globe? To seek desperately to turn it elsewhere, to set it free into the cool, dark night outside—and yet to see it return again and again in search of its own destruction?"

Lily nodded. She always found it difficult to reply adequately in words when Aunt Clo became, as she often did, metaphorical.

"I go," said Miss Stellingthorpe, her hands extended, palms uppermost, "I go to try and deliver the butterfly from the lamp to-day. I can tell you no more, my Lily."

She left the house with the same mixture of portentous foreboding and exhilaration in her bearing, saying to Lily in farewell, as though her new simile still pleased her:

"Who knows but that I myself may come back with singed wings! Not for nothing has one the privilege of spending oneself upon others!"

"I hope it will be all right," said Lily—inadequately, she felt, as usual.

Aunt Clo also appeared to be conscious of the inadequacy, for she replied very gravely indeed:

"Ah! That is what it can never be. *Addio!*" She waved her hand above her head and strode away, clad

in the blue jersey and the knickerbockers which she never discarded in the day-time, except when proceeding on a sight-seeing expedition to Rome.

Lily turned back into the house, and felt rather guilty because she was relieved by the prospect of spending a whole day in solitude, free from the slight tension of spirit that always assailed her in the lofty atmosphere wherein Aunt Clo seemed usually to exist. She felt still more guilty a little later on, when she went in search of a book.

Aunt Clo had recommended several volumes to her niece from the many, bearing the stamp of the London Library, that lay about the house.

"Pater," had said Aunt Clo. "Incredible that you have not yet made acquaintance with the beloved Pater! Or Fénelon. Do you know Fénelon? Then there is the little '*Cinque-cento*' series—light, of course, but full of appeal. Or you may care for old friends, perhaps—I have Froissard, Ruskin, d'Annunzio—but not in a translation, I fear. Take your choice, *bambina mia*—I make you free of all my most precious companions."

Lily tried hard not to remember Aunt Clo's generous suggestions as she made her way to a small and remote bookcase that she had observed, on the first evening of her arrival at Genazzano, in a corner of the passage. The books were small and old-fashioned looking, and Lily had had no difficulty in discovering that almost all were children's books, that no doubt dated from Aunt Clo's incredible childhood. And Lily liked children's books, just as she liked toys, and sweets, and other babyish diversions, and she was just as profoundly ashamed of the one predilection as of the other.

She had read the volumes pressed upon her by Aunt Clo, and had liked one or two of them, whilst finding the majority strangely wearisome, but all the time there had lurked at the back of her mind a longing recollection of those children's books that were never taken from the shelf.

She knew that she would really enjoy them much more than even the novels conceded to her youthful tastes by Aunt Clo: "Jude the Obscure," "Daisy Miller," and "Sandra Belloni," none of which she had felt herself able to appreciate, or even to understand.

It was all part of that old sense that she was not a real, live person at all, but only a little girl pretending.

The relief of dropping the pretence was undeniable. Lily chose "The Little Duke" because it had pictures, a book called "The Magic Beads" because she liked the name, and a volume of fairy-tales because she always loved fairy-tales. She took them out into the garden.

She was a little bit ashamed of herself, because she felt so happy, knowing that it was childish pleasure in the story-books, and the sunniness of the day and her own feeling of freedom, that made her happy.

She had so often been told that happiness is the attribute of youth that she believed it, although she herself was young and not particularly happy. And as she had also heard youth spoken of contemptuously, or else with amused patronage, Lily had retained an impression that happiness was something slightly to be despised, especially when springing from trivial causes.

She had lunch by herself and kept "The Magic Beads" propped open on the table in front of her, and ate several more of the enormous purple figs than she would have

eaten had Aunt Clo, with her superhuman indifference to food, been sitting, very erect and animated, opposite to her.

The afternoon was even lazier and more blissful than the morning had been, the joy of it somehow enhanced as it became more liable to interruption. But Miss Stellenthorpe had not returned by five o'clock. Evidently the butterfly was showing determination, in its pursuit of the flame.

It was nearly six o'clock when Lily heard sounds that caused her to bestow the three small and shabby volumes into her work-bag, which she had guiltily extracted from disuse from the bottom of her trunk for the purpose, and hasten to the little iron gate in welcome.

Aunt Clotilde was not alone, and she looked, if possible, even more exhilarated than she usually looked after some particularly strenuous exertion.

"Ecco! I return with a friend, my Lily!"

Was this the butterfly, or the lamp?

Lily at once rejected the former hypothesis, and felt doubtful even of the latter, as she exchanged greetings with Aunt Clo's friend.

He was a very tall Englishman, in whose long face Lily discovered some freakish resemblance to a good-looking camel, and he had small, tawny eyes that twinkled, and very crisp curly hair, touched with iron-grey. His shoulders were so broad and his carriage so erect that even Aunt Clo seemed unimposing beside him.

Lily did not learn his name at once, since Miss Stellenthorpe had merely waved their introduction with both hands, and since throughout the evening she called the visitor either "Amico," "my very dear Friend," or "Mon cher."

It appeared that Aunt Clo's very dear friend was serving on a Royal Commission for the investigation of something unspecified, that compelled him to sojourn in Rome, now a hot and arid desert.

"But della Torre, you know the young Marchese della Torre, of course? Well, he is actually kind enough to stay on in a corner of the Palazzo della Torre, and make me his guest. What a good fellow he is—I met him once or twice in England, that's all—and now he turns up trumps like this! Isn't he a brick?"

The hearty English colloquialisms positively rang through the little room still vibrant with the cosmopolitan inversions and polished elegancies of Aunt Clo's habitual speech. Aunt Clo, however, was more animated than ever, and commented vivaciously several times upon the good fortune that had brought about the encounter with her friend.

"Would that I could offer you the hospitality of *mon t^otⁱt de chaumière, amico!* But alas! even my grey hairs would not protect me from the tongues of *ce bon Genasano*. I dare not do it," cried Aunt Clo in humorous despair. "But we meet again, is it not so?"

"I hope so! I should hope so indeed. Won't you and your niece come in one morning, and let us do some sight-seeing together, and then perhaps you will allow me to have the pleasure of giving you lunch at the Grand Hotel?"

He addressed himself to Miss Stellenthorpe, but after her gracious and sprightly acceptance of the invitation, the Englishman's kindly, twinkling gaze turned triumphantly to Lily.

She smiled at him shyly and almost involuntarily, at-

tracted by his eagerness and simplicity, and perhaps by the manifest admiration in his glance. "Why not to-morrow?" he cried. "Do come in to-morrow. What could we go and look at to-morrow?"

"Why not San Pietro?" said Aunt Clo.

"As a matter of fact, I've been there already," said the guest with great simplicity. "But by all means——"

"*Amico,*" said Aunt Clo, with some severity in her voice, "you do not see San Pietro in one visit—nor yet in two, nor perhaps two hundred. *Je vous donne rendezvous* at the Bronze Door at eleven to-morrow morning. *Va bene!*"

Lily looked forward to the proposed excursion and hoped that the Marchese would be as agreeable as was his friend.

She learnt from Aunt Clo that the name of the latter was Nicholas Aubray, that she had met him first in Paris, several years ago, and had then personally demonstrated to him the beauties of the Louvre.

"Not altogether a Philistine," said Aunt Clo thoughtfully. "There are possibilities there, my Lily; undoubtedly, possibilities. *Ce bon Nicholas!* I wonder what he finds in common with Giulio della Torre!"

Lily wondered too, when she met the Marchese della Torre on the following morning. He looked much younger than did Mr. Aubray, was extremely good looking in an elegant pink-and-bronze style, and was meticulously clad in a beautifully-cut grey suit, with a soft shirt, a pink tie, pink socks, and shining brown boots. Miss Stellingthorpe's acquaintance with him was slight, she had told her niece, but she addressed him as della Torre, in Continental fashion, and extended the back of

her hand for him to kiss. The Marchese also kissed Lily's hand, and she fancied that she saw amusement lurking in Nicholas Aubray's long, lean face.

She had expected that Aunt Clo, as usual, would live up to her rôle of *connoisseuse* in Beauty, and would deliver eloquent and pungently-worded dissertations upon the more eclectic subjects for admiration that surrounded them.

But it speedily became astoundingly evident that Aunt Clo's erudition was out-matched. Lily and Mr. Aubray, obediently waiting to be told what they might admire, found themselves overlooked in the clash of conflicting authorities. The Marchese gracefully countered all Miss Stellenthorpe's artistic and historical allusions with others even more recondite, and appeared to have command of ejaculatory phrases in at least six languages to her three.

"Michelangelo—*il maestro!*" said Aunt Clo reverently, gazing up at the dome.

"You forget Bramante!" cried the Marchese in tones of courteous anguish. "*Aie!* you forget Bramante!"

"Most certainly I do not forget Bramante," said Aunt Clo with dignified annoyance. "But I put the Maestro first."

The Marchese bowed with a gesture that far outdid, in its appreciative humility, the tone of Aunt Clo's tribute, through which an undeniable asperity had pierced.

"*E le due San Gallo?*" murmured the Marchese.

"Penuzzi!" Aunt Clo retorted with flashing eyes.

"Rosellino," said the Marchese politely, but securing the last word, since Miss Stellenthorpe had nothing ready with which to defeat the recollection of Rosellino.

"Your aunt is a wonderful person," said Nicholas Aubray in lowered tones to Lily. "She knows everything about Art, I suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose she does."

"She and della Torre must revel in one another's company. He's a most artistic fellow, very well read and full of information. I knew they'd have a lot in common."

At the triumph in his tone, Lily turned to look at him. He was evidently not in the least ironical, but full of genuine pride and satisfaction at an encounter which he obviously accepted entirely at its face value.

Lily felt momentarily ashamed of her own secret inclination to detect a concealed and embittered resentment at the other's pretensions on the part of either of the two exponents of Art.

She was half puzzled and half attracted by that characteristic simplicity of Nicholas Aubray's, that, to her more critical perceptions, was later on to account for his curiously limited capacity to judge correctly of his fellow-creatures, and that so oddly counteracted his unmistakable shrewdness of mind.

She found in him a very sympathetic companion, as they wandered together round the interior of the immense building, leaving behind them fragmentary echoes of the sprightly Spanish proverbs with which the Marchese appeared to be countering Aunt Clo's interpolated French exclamations and Latin quotations.

There was a feeling of relaxation in freely pointing out certain obvious glories and universally acknowledged masterpieces, such as Aunt Clo regarded as only to be commented upon by the general public, and Lily felt it

to be even more of a relief when Mr. Aubray calmly suggested, at the end of half an hour, that they should go outside and wait for the others.

"You'll get tired, if you stand about for so long in the heat," he observed matter-of-factly, and with a consideration to which she had, at Genazzano, become unused.

They sat down outside in the shade, and instead of abstract and impassioned discourse upon all that Beauty stood for, Lily found herself embarked upon such trivial and comfortable personalities as she could not help welcoming, after the long course of unbroken conversational altitudes upon which her hostess habitually promenaded her.

Nicholas Aubray actually seemed to think that anything about herself was interesting!

She told him about her home and about Bridgecrap, and he laughed whole-heartedly when she confessed that she was no good at games, and seemed to think it of so little account that Lily was encouraged to make a daring confession.

"Sometimes I read children's books—just because I enjoy them. It makes me feel as though I was only pretending to be grown up, you know."

"Oh, you splendid person! I think that's simply ripping!"

"You don't think I ought to be ashamed of it?" cried Lily, delightedly conscious that he did not.

"Good heavens, no! I think it's splendid. Why shouldn't you like children's books? I read fairy-tales myself and enjoy them immensely."

"Do you really?" Lily was enchanted.

"Tell me some more about yourself," begged Nicholas

Aubray warmly, and Lily was young enough to respond candidly to the invitation.

"We must make some more of these expeditions," was the conclusion reached by Mr. Aubray, when he and Lily had spent an hour in eager conversation eminently satisfactory to them both.

"I was a good deal bored at having to stay on and on here, excellent fellow though della Torre is, but this meeting with you and your aunt has made all the difference in the world. You'll come with me again, won't you?"

"Oh, I should love to!"

"Hurrah!" He looked quite boyishly delighted, and flung his hat into the air and caught it again.

"Now what about lunch? Food—food! I'm starving!"

He reiterated the announcement with the same unabashed exuberance to Aunt Clo herself, having returned into the Cathedral, to Lily's rather awed astonishment, for the express purpose of summoning her away.

"Come along, come along. We want our meal!"

He was just as vehemently enthusiastic about their excellent and prolonged luncheon at the Grand Hotel as he had been about St. Peter's or in denunciation of Lily's deprecatory confessions of her athletic shortcomings.

Aunt Clo's own vitality, to the strength of which she often made carelessly thankful allusion, was as nothing beside that of Nicholas Aubray.

But to-day, Aunt Clo appeared to have fallen rather below her usual standards of high-spirited graciousness and gallantry of intellect.

She even said "*Ay di me!*" in a rather wearied fashion as she sank into a chair.

"I'm afraid you are quite tired out," solicitously said the Marchese, in his fluent English idiom.

"I am not easily wearied of body," returned Miss Stellenthorpe, smiling sombrely.

"Food—that's what we all want!" Nicholas Aubray declared. "I may not always be hungry, but thank God I'm greedy, as the man said in *Punch*."

He laughed heartily at the hackneyed jest, and Lily noted with a slight feeling of disappointment that his laugh was perhaps the least attractive thing about him. It came too frequently, although always spontaneously, and was what the French call *saccadé* in character. Moreover, his laughter at his own indifferent humour, rooted more often in light-heartedness than in wit, was over-prolonged.

An adjournment for rest at the Palazzo della Torre was politely suggested by the Marchese, and Lily rather hoped that the invitation might be accepted, but Miss Stellenthorpe again gravely repudiated any suggestion of fatigue.

"But you make the siesta, surely?" cried the Marchese, astonished.

"Never," said Aunt Clo austerely.

The stately proclamation of her own immunity from the prevalent custom of an afternoon sleep during the hot weather, appeared somehow to restore to Aunt Clo her usual equanimity.

She bade an agreeable farewell to the two men, by whom an expedition to Frascati was proposed for the following week.

"We'll make a picnic of it," cried Nicholas Aubray joyously. "Take plenty of sandwiches and things, and eat them under the trees."

But even Nicholas Aubray's needless insistence upon the grosser aspects of the day's requirements did not, as Lily half feared, cause Miss Stellenthorpe to flinch.

"I'm glad," said she graciously that evening at Genazano, "very glad to do all in my power *pour égayer un peu les choses* for Nicholas Aubray. Tell me, my Lily, how did our friend strike you?"

"I liked him very much."

"Liked!" Aunt Clo shrugged away the conventional phrase in her most characteristic fashion.

"How significant that contrast was, *n'est-ce pas?* The frankly *bourgeois* enthusiasm of our friend—his *naïf* admiration for the obvious—and then that affectation of preciseness, that pedantic effrontery of young della Torre! It amused me, Lily—it amused me greatly."

Aunt Clo's mouth took on an embittered curve at the recollection.

"Let me recommend you to cultivate that young man rather more, *bambina*, when next our quartette sallies forth in company. He repays study, I assure you. Besides," added Aunt Clo with some acidity of tone, "I will not conceal from you that a whole day spent in listening to so much youthful arrogance would try my nerves considerably. He is your contemporary, my Lily. I shall leave you to deal with him."

Lily felt vaguely sorry to hear it.

"He is much younger than Mr. Aubray, isn't he?" she asked.

"By at least ten years, I should imagine," said her

aunt emphatically. "Nicholas Aubray must be nearing forty. But the heart of a boy still. *Ce cher Nicholas!* He should have married, as I have often told him. Now della Torre, who could well learn rather more of life in the wider, bigger sense of the word, is actually in search of a wife, as I know. But fools have ever rushed in——"

Aunt Clo ended with raised eyebrows and a sigh, leaving no doubt, in Lily's mind, that her own destined rôle in the Frascati expedition was that of recipient of the Marchese's polished conversation.

Perhaps her efforts were not sufficiently decided.

Perhaps Nicholas Aubray, with a certain joyful obtuseness that he was disconcertingly apt to display when dealing with the human equation, still triumphantly furthered the intercourse of the two fine spirits between whom he had elected to find so rare an affinity. Perhaps, as Lily herself suspected, the Marchese liked a youthful and ignorant hearer less well than one with whom discussion was at least possible, even if unprofitable. At all events, he explained Frascati to Miss Stellenhorpe, and twice informed her that she had been misinformed regarding the remote ancestry of the family of Aldobrandini, while Lily and Nicholas Aubray loitered beneath the trees, and Nicholas told Lily that he lived by himself in London and was often very lonely.

"But to you, I suppose, I seem almost old. Too old to want new friends?" he asked her with a wistful air of desiring contradiction, and at the same time throwing out his broad chest and straightening his always straight shoulders with obviously unconscious vanity.

Lily remembered her father. He was over fifty, and she certainly did not look upon him as being old, if only

because she knew that he would have regarded the application of such an adjective from a child to a parent as being both disrespectful and disloyal.

Nicholas Aubray was at least twelve years younger than Philip Stellenthorpe.

She reassured him whole-heartedly and was gratified at the satisfaction in his face, which he displayed with the frankness of a child.

"I thought you and I would be pals, somehow, from the first moment we met. Don't you think it's a great thing to have a pal?"

Lily felt herself to be unreasonable for intensely disliking the word that he had selected.

"That's a word I like—*pal!*" said Nicholas Aubray, striking one hand into the palm of the other. "Isn't it a splendid, hearty sort of word? That's what I should really like *us* to be—regular *pals*."

There was silence between them for the fraction of a moment, and then he added wistfully: "You don't think it's cheek of me to suggest it—you don't think it's absurd, at my age?"

On the instant, his odd, intermittent appeal made itself acutely felt once more.

"I should like it," said Lily, flushing. "I—I think it's an honour for me."

"No, no—it's all the other way round. What a splendid thing life is! Don't you think it's splendid, on a day like this, when one's just struck a bargain like ours? Real pals—that's what you and I are going to be. I can't tell you how much it's going to mean to me. Of course, you've got heaps of friends of your own age already I suppose. Perhaps there's even——"

He paused.

"I haven't any business to ask, I suppose. But since we're to be pals, you won't mind. You know I'm not asking from impertinent curiosity, but from very keen interest in anything that belongs to you." His voice had become very serious.

"Tell me whether there's anybody very special, that you take a—a great interest in, won't you?"

"No, there isn't," said Lily in a low voice. She did not feel humiliated by the unromantic admission, because she was acutely aware that it would somehow intensely gratify her listener.

She heard him exhale a long breath.

"Do you know that's a relief to me! I was somehow certain you were going to say that there was some young spark—and somehow I didn't want there to be."

He burst out laughing.

"There's no fool like an old fool, is there? I want my new-found little pal to myself, you know. I don't want to share her thoughts with some young blood at Oxford or God knows where——"

He went on laughing, in catches, long after Lily felt that her own faint smile had died upon her lips.

X

LILY thought a good deal about her friendship with Nicholas Aubray.

Sometimes she rejoiced almost incredulously in his flashes of sympathetic understanding, and in the frank enjoyment of childlike things that he, unlike her, never thought it necessary to conceal. Sometimes she applied to herself the old term of "disloyal," because an involuntary criticism of his simple vanity, or of his curiously unequal powers of judgment, occasionally flashed across her.

She was flattered and touched by his enthusiastic liking for herself, and presently she began to wonder, rather awestruck, whether he could have fallen in love with her.

When she suddenly found him looking at her in silence with eager, pleading eyes, or when he said: "We'll let the others go on a bit, let's walk slowly," she was reminded of the boy Colin Eastwood, and she then thought that perhaps Nicholas Aubray loved her. When Aunt Clo said, in her thoughtful, appraising way: "My very good friend, Nicholas, is accounted an able man in his own line. He has made a success of his career—oh, undoubtedly!" then Lily felt that only an incredible presumption could ever have led her to imagine that so clever a man and one so much her senior, could ever have thought of her save with the most passing, friendly interest.

His susceptibility to beauty was very evident, and he made it clear that he admired Lily's.

That, of course, was not at all the same thing as falling in love, Lily told herself.

She speculated a great deal more upon the state of Nicholas Aubray's feelings, than upon her own. One of the more solemn counsels which Lily had received from Miss Melody upon leaving Bridgecrap, had concerned the question of falling in love.

"Not too many romantic fancies in that little head, childie," had been Miss Melody's warning. "Remember that you've no mother to guide you, poor child, and keep a watch upon yourself. Not too much novel-reading—aha, Lily, isn't that a weakness?—and no day-dreaming, mind."

Lily had been quite as much annoyed at hearing herself called romantic as the romantic usually are.

"If love should come—as I hope it will, in due course—let it all come quite naturally. Don't think about it beforehand; don't indulge in fancies. Beware of that romantic imagination," Miss Melody had repeated with great significance.

Lily had listened very dutifully, but if she had ever analyzed this submissive spirit, she might have discovered that it was founded upon a curious, calm certainty that Miss Melody knew nothing whatever of what she talked about.

Not that the daughter of Philip and Eleanor Stellanthorpe, well versed in distrusting and suppressing her own instincts, would have made such an admission to herself. She was undeveloped, and had never been allowed the luxury of intellectual honesty.

She had, as yet, arrived at no conscious weighing of her own capacities. Her nearest approach to it took the form of an inward and rather derisive wonder that Miss Melody, who so advocated forethought and preparation in respect of examinations, choice of a career, and the like, should appear to suppose that something which Lily classified to herself as "the most important thing in the world" could be best approached after a course of completely ignoring its existence and tacitly denying its potency.

In defiance of Miss Melody, Lily allowed herself to wonder whether Nicholas meant to ask her to marry him. Her upbringing and her inexperience alike admitted of no other development of affairs than a proposal of marriage, to result in either a refusal and eternal separation, or an acceptance and subsequent wedding.

She saw Nicholas Aubray almost daily.

Lily felt flattered and excited, but her now ingrained incapacity for facing an issue definitely, allowed her to keep entirely upon the surface of even her own thoughts, and when she was seized by a misgiving that she felt no slightest real wish ever to marry Nicholas Aubray, she hastily rebuked herself for the vanity of supposing that he had any intention of asking her to do so, thus suppressing her consciousness of the problem in relative values that confronted her.

It was that policy of suppression upon which her whole education had been based.

Presently Lily became aware that Miss Stellenthorpe was turning a thoughtful and critical eye upon the situation.

Her manner to her niece acquired both a more weighty tenderness, and a slightly humorous air of appraisal.

She tolerated the Marchese della Torre with renewed geniality, and only upon one occasion relegated him to a lengthy *tête-à-tête* walk with Lily whilst she herself strode far ahead, apparently absorbed in earnest conversation with Nicholas Aubray.

It was on that evening that Aunt Clo, for the first time, spoke with great frankness and intimacy of herself and her own past to Lily.

"You have wondered, little one, why I have never chosen to marry, have you not?" she abruptly demanded, gazing shrewdly at her niece.

Fortunately, Lily felt, the shrewdness was not sufficient to penetrate her own embarrassment and pierce to the true answer of that portentous question.

Lily had always supposed, on the rare occasions when she had given the matter a thought, that Aunt Clo must have remained unmarried because nobody had ever wanted to marry her.

It now became almost overwhelmingly evident that such had not been the case.

"Why should I not say it? I have been greatly desired, and by many. Perhaps, *bambina*, it may help you, if I let you in where so few have ever yet penetrated—into the story of my heart. As a girl I was, perhaps, not beautiful." Miss Stellenthorpe musingly observed without, however, any great conviction in her tone. "Certainly I had not the exquisite daintiness, the porcelain prettiness, that I see in you, my Lily. But I was a strong, vital, passionate creature, and intensely magnetic—that, above all. Had I a daughter possessed of that magnetism, she should be guarded—most carefully guarded. The gift is not one to be played with. I suppose I was reckless. *Chi lo sa?* Ah well, the years have brought their own

chastening, maybe. Oh, not in my proud, solitary virginity—*that* has been my own choice.”

Aunt Clo upreared her head in a sudden, high-souled gesture.

“No. But—*ay di me!* How I have been loved! And I—I, in my turn have loved, *carina*. Once—and once only. I cannot tell you the whole story, little one. Some day, perhaps, when you, too, have lived and loved—though may you never touch the depths that *I* have plumbed! I had rejected many loves—lesser loves, as they seemed to me. Then came one—there is only *one*, in a woman’s life. Our souls rushed together—*une veritable fusion d’âmes*. There was one summer——”

Aunt Clo became lost in retrospect, her fine eyes fixed upon some point of the horizon far above Lily’s head.

When she spoke again, her voice had flattened dramatically.

“Autumn succeeds to summer, *carina*, and the deep-hearted, passionate red roses drop their petals one by one. . . . A cataclysm swept across my life. There was storm—separation, interference from others. I was doubly betrayed. There was a woman who had been my dear, dear friend, in whom I had trusted much. And she failed me, Lily. When the crisis came, she was incapable of meeting the demands that the privilege of friendship must always make, sooner or later. Ah yes—she failed me indeed!”

“Was she—one of the people who interfered?” Lily half fearfully enquired, as Miss Stellenthorpe paused as though for enquiry.

“Indeed, yes! She was ruthless—ruthless to me, and to that other. . . .”

"But did he—how could he let her . . . ?" stammered Lily.

"Ah how! But—," said Miss Stellenthrope sombrely, "she was his wife."

No revelation could have come with greater unexpectedness upon her breathless listener.

"Oh! Was he *married*, Aunt Clo?"

Aunt Clo bent a terrible brow upon Lily at the naïve colloquialism of the exclamation.

"Bound by our hideous English laws, he was," she said slowly. "But there are other, higher standards. He and I knew it—we had scaled the mountain-heights—but the little, feeble soul that had called herself my friend remained below, weakly wailing. The little soul that had only strength to hold on, like some small, sharp-toothed rodent! It held on—grasping the shadow between its tiny, poisoned fangs, when it could no longer hold the substance."

Aunt Clo passed a hand slowly across her eyes, as though to banish the vision of so perverted a tenacity.

Then she turned upon Lily a smile of rare, considered sweetness, blended with great sadness. "I have forgiven—long, long ago. One can outlive such bitterness, my Lily, and come out from the vortex stronger, and bigger and braver."

Lily felt a mad desire to enquire whether the unfortunate rodent of Aunt Clo's history had also emerged from it similarly uplifted.

"There was a time," said Aunt Clo, "when I asked myself despairingly—'*Does the road wind up-hill all the way?*' You know the answer, child. '*Yes—to the very end.*' I have accepted that answer now. Acceptance has

long ago become part of myself. Not the pallid, passive acceptance of submission, you understand, but some bright, strong, vital thing that soars upwards like a flame——”

Aunt Clo paused again, and her niece kept silence.

“You mustn’t call me brave, little one,” Miss Stellanthrope suddenly protested, when both had remained speechless for some while.

Lily showed no sign of defying the prohibition. Her aunt stood up.

“I will leave you. It grows late, and this has cost me something. But don’t reproach yourself, *bambina*—if I can help you but a very little, be sure that I shall never count the cost.”

Aunt Clo crossed the room slowly, with an unwonted gesture of supporting herself, as she reached a low table near the door and leant her hand upon it heavily.

She glanced back at Lily, and there was again a slight suggestion of baffled expectancy on her face.

“*Buona notte*, my child.”

With a grave and graceful movement she kissed the tip of her slim, fine fingers and waved them in the direction of her niece.

Then she appeared to detect suddenly the presence of her other hand, still grasping the little table, and drew it away with an air of surprised melancholy.

“Aha!” said Aunt Clo, half playfully, half sadly. “That is the first time, is it not, that you have seen me in need of extraneous support? That is not like me.”

She slowly nodded, two or three times, as though considering so new an aspect of herself, and then drew herself up to her full, stately height as she left the room. Lily felt that she herself had been somehow found remiss.

Comment, at least, had been expected of her, and she had been utterly unable to offer any.

She wondered uneasily if it were the measure of her own childishness, that Aunt Clo's story should merely have left her feeling uncomfortably bewildered, and anxiously conscious that her father would have been sincerely shocked by it.

Lily speculated as to what she should do if Nicholas Aubray were suddenly to discover himself as a married man. She indulged in an agreeable vision of his impassionate declaration, her own heart-broken renunciation of him, and their eternal farewell. After a long, long illness she would face life once more—her hair would be prematurely whitened. She, too, would tell some young, untried soul the story of her own experience. . . .

Lily had formulated one or two very beautiful sentences when she became aware that she was thoroughly enjoying herself. The discovery scandalized her sincerely.

These things were serious—they constituted reality, and here she was playing a kind of game with them!

Lily felt profoundly dissatisfied with herself and her own inability to regard as sacred the many things that her upbringing had taught her should be classified under that traditional heading of Philip's. It bewildered her to find that Nicholas himself, although his ardour touched and pleased her in a strange, exciting way, did not awaken in her any of the emotions that she had always associated with the dawn of love.

There was not even the vague, elusive sense of remote and delicate romance that Colin Eastwood had inspired.

But Philip had implied that episode to have been an

undignified and childish cheapening of herself—something that, in the belittling phrase of omniscient parenthood, “could not lead to anything,” and Lily herself, translating into the cruder and more direct terms of youth, had known that, between her and Colin, there could be nothing so matured and definite as a spoken engagement with definite prospects of marriage.

Consequently, her relations with Colin must have been unreal—those with Nicholas must be real. Thus Lily, faithfully endeavouring to follow the careful rule of thumb laid down for her, and unutterably perplexed at finding it so much at variance with that inner vision to which she believed herself to have no right.

Daughter of Philip and Eleanor Stellenthorpe, and product of their teaching, she found the way of least resistance in allowing herself to shelve the whole question, telling herself that it would certainly be mere folly and vanity to envisage prematurely the possibilities latent in a decision which she might never be called upon to make.

The issues at stake were consequently left to obscure themselves still further while Lily strove to persuade herself of their non-existence, and while the necessity for that decision which she was strenuously unfitting herself to make coherently came nearer to her every day.

The weather had grown crisp and cool long before Nicholas Aubray's affairs in Rome were concluded, and he came out to the villa at Genazzano to announce his approaching return to England.

“I shall be very, very sorry to go,” he said emotionally. “If anyone had told me, when I first grumbled at coming to Italy, that six weeks later I should actually want to stay on—I shouldn't have believed it.”

He looked at Lily as he spoke.

"Aha!" quoth Aunt Clo. "Italy claims us all. I—but I was long ago enslaved, as you perceive. You will return, my friend."

"I hope so. But good-byes are always sad things, I think. One is always sorry, I mean, to say good-bye to a place in which one has been happy." He was again addressing himself to Lily, surprising her, as he occasionally did, by the earnest warmth with which he could deliver himself of a platitude. She hoped that he did not see Aunt Clo wince as she rose from her place.

"Mes très chers, je vous quitte. One little half-hour. There is an unhappy child whose supreme moment is drawing very near. I have told you of my Carla? They are trying to persuade her that she has sinned—ah, the horrible folly and cruelty of it all!"

Miss Stellingthorpe hastened away, and Nicholas Aubray, after a moment, exclaimed, as he not infrequently did:

"What a splendid person your aunt is! I can't tell you how much I admire her."

"She is very kind," said Lily, trying to atone by the fervour of her voice for a certain blankness that invaded her at this fresh example of Nicholas Aubray's enthusiasm.

"Isn't she—isn't she? She's been a godsend to the peasantry here, I feel sure. She has," said Nicholas significantly, "been very kind to *me*."

"I know she likes you very much."

Lily spoke hurriedly and almost at random, overwhelmed by sudden nervous shyness.

"She's—she's enjoyed your being here, and all our excursions."

"Did she tell you that we had a long talk the other day?"

"She didn't tell me so specially," said Lily, and added hastily: "You've known her a long time, haven't you?"

"I have never seen as much of her as I should have liked, but I've always thought of her as a most splendid person, whom I should like to know much better. But it's never too late to mend, eh?"

He laughed, in jerks.

Lily seldom felt at ease with Nicholas Aubray when he was amused, although she forced her own smiles, in sympathy with the childlike appeal of the gaze that he was fixing directly upon her.

He grew grave again suddenly, after his wont.

"What about you? Am I to say good-bye to my little pal without anything to look forward to?"

Lily's heart beat with excitement and a sense of flattery, but she also felt overwhelmingly embarrassed, and quite unable to summon up the warm reply with which she would have liked to please him.

"I wonder whether you ever write letters?" said Nicholas, when he had waited in silence for some time.

"I haven't got many people to write to."

"You've got your pal—your old, ancient pal, who perhaps seems to you almost in his dotage——"

He broke off anxiously, and this time Lily's quick perception of his unspoken need of reassurance came to her help.

"I think of you as being of my own age," she exclaimed quickly, "or else just a little bit older, so as to be able to help me about things, and—and advise me sometimes."

"That's very sweet and dear of you to say that. I can't

tell you how much I appreciate it——” said Nicholas, with the abrupt huskiness of tone of a man easily moved to emotion.

Suddenly he laid one of his hands very gently over Lily’s, with a tentative, almost timid, gesture.

She knew that his sensitiveness would be instantly hurt by the least gesture of withdrawal, even though he was giving her the opportunity of making one.

Tenderness for his feelings, a half-frightened desire to see what would follow, and a certain exultant vanity, kept her motionless.

Subconsciously, there passed through her a regret, of which she failed to catch the significance, that it had always been physically distasteful to her to be touched. She accepted the dislike as being part of an inevitable state of affairs not susceptible to alteration.

“You didn’t mind my doing that, did you?” said Nicholas nervously.

He had taken his hand away, after a prolonged, gentle pressure upon hers.

Lily shook her head.

She could not have given with truth either a negative or an affirmative answer, nevertheless she was relieved at Nicholas Aubray’s exclamation :

“I’m glad of that! I wouldn’t vex you for the whole world, you know. If ever I do anything that you don’t like, you must tell me. Sometimes I think I’m too clumsy—and rough and—and elderly, to hope to keep your friendship. And it would make me very sad, if I lost it now.”

“No, no—you couldn’t!” Lily murmured.

“Well, will you let me hear from you—often—and see you when you’re in England again?”

"I hardly ever go to London, though, I'm afraid," said Lily naïvely.

"Perhaps I might be allowed to come to your part of the world, though. I want to get to know your father, and—and everyone and everything that belongs to you. I wonder if you realize that, little pal?"

Lily said: "I think I do," because she felt that that was what he wanted her to say, and then was terrified at the thought of what his rejoinder might be.

"Thank God for that!" cried Nicholas, with a sort of boyish, laughing heartiness.

She was half relieved and half disappointed.

"That's a bargain, then. We'll write to one another."

"Ought I to?" Lily faltered, with a sudden recollection of the obnoxious phrases as to hole-and-corner correspondence, once employed by her father. The remembrance caused her to crimson, and Nicholas Aubray looked at her very kindly.

"I told your aunt, when we had our talk together the other day, how very much I should like to be allowed to hear from you," he said quietly, "and she was good enough to suggest that I might propose it to you. So it only depends upon you, now."

Something chivalrous in the words and manner alike sent a rush of affection and gratitude through Lily's being.

At such moments she felt that nothing was wanting in her liking for Nicholas Aubray.

"I'm so glad you did that," she said impulsively.

"You don't think I could ever take advantage of your youth and kindness to ask you to do anything that you might for an instant regret later on!" he exclaimed. "I'm

not such a skunk as that! No. Thank God, you never would do anything of the kind that some of these modern girls seem to go in for. . . . That was just one of the things that attracted me to you so awfully—if I may say so.”

“You don’t think I’m old-fashioned and priggish? I often think I’m not like most other girls—I think I was brought up differently.”

“All the better!” cried Nicholas vigorously.

“I’m glad you think it’s all the better,” said Lily. “Sometimes I—I’ve felt that I hated being unlike other people.”

She glanced at him wistfully, half wondering if he would reassure her, if she confessed to that old, hidden feeling of not being a Real Live Person, but only a pretender.

“I only wish there were more people like you,” said Nicholas Aubray. “Some day you must tell me all about your bringing-up, and why you think it’s made you different. Will you?”

“It’s quite dull, I’m afraid. Only about how I was at home, and then at a convent for a very little while and afterwards at school.”

“I’m sure I shouldn’t find it dull,” said Nicholas Aubray, “I should never find anything dull that was about yourself. I want to hear everything.”

His look, straight into her eyes, emphasized his words.

“I should like to feel that you were able to make a real safety-valve of me—tell me anything and everything, quite freely.”

Lily’s liking for him just then was so strong that the required assurance came in a rush of sincerity.

"I don't think I should mind telling you anything, and I've always wanted a friend. So few people seem to understand——"

A certain recollection, awakened by the words, made her pause.

"Of course there are a few things," she said shyly and wistfully, "that I suppose no one ever puts into words, exactly. Things one knows about oneself, that—that nobody else in the world could be expected to understand——"

"I won't ask for those," gently said Nicholas, smiling at her, rather puzzled.

He was naturally unaware that Lily was thinking just then of a battered wax baby-doll lying at the very back of the wardrobe in her bedroom.

XI

WHEN Lily left Italy, it was with the definite certainty that Nicholas Aubray meant to ask her to marry him.

It appeared that he had discussed his intentions openly with Aunt Clo, who spoke of him to Lily on the evening that preceded her departure from Genazzano.

"Developments unlooked for indeed," said Aunt Clo with a whimsical smile. "But tell me—the idea does not displease you, little one?"

She looked at her niece with an air of interested enquiry as she spoke, but went on talking herself before Lily had time to reply.

"May and December, perhaps! Or so it seems to the youthful eyes of May. But there are worse alliances than that—many, many worse. And some natures, of which it seems to me, my Lily, that yours is one, demand less than others. Those are the happy ones!"

Aunt Clo sighed tempestuously and flung a hand across her eyes. It was evident that she did not count herself one of that favoured band amongst whom she assigned place to her niece.

"The temperament that seeks, and gives, passionately, is not one that I could wish you. *Qui dit aimer, dit souffrir*. Never were words more true! nor, perhaps, had any woman better cause than I to know it."

Miss Stellenthorpe groaned slightly and, having made

the inevitable personal application so irresistible in discussing the affairs of others, was able to resume, with her quick, brilliant smile:

"But it is not of myself that I want to speak, *mignonne!* I ceased, long ago, to look upon myself save as a helper, a soul with experience and tenderness behind it, to stretch out a hand and aid the unknowing, the struggling, the unlearned, the *young*. For myself—*che sara sarà!* But for you, my Lily, what is it to be?"

"I—I don't know," said Lily, very lamely indeed.

Aunt Clo looked more omniscient than ever, as she gazed at her niece.

"So undeveloped a little soul, is it?" she mused tolerantly. "Love would do much for you, little one—perhaps all."

"But I don't feel sure that—that I'm at all in love," Lily faltered foolishly.

Inwardly she was asking herself with bewilderment why it was that she could not speak sincerely about this thing to Aunt Clotilde. Perhaps it was because it was impossible not to feel that Aunt Clotilde was a good deal more interested in her own analytical dissection of the situation than in the people primarily concerned.

At all events, Lily found Miss Stellenthorpe of small assistance to her, and she had been too thoroughly imbued with the doctrine of distrust of her own instincts to consider the possibility of solving her own problems without extraneous advice. She did not want to consult Philip, because he was her father, and she took it for granted that he would therefore take her decision upon himself, with a strong bias in favour of any course least advocated by herself. Theoretically, Lily had been taught that parents

sacrificed everything for their children. Practical experience of Philip's and of Eleanor's anxious, tender tyranny and immutable conviction of their own omnipotence no less than omniscience, in all matters concerning their offspring, had quite unconsciously led her to the opposite conclusion.

She thought timidly of consulting her old schoolmistress, Miss Melody. Had not Miss Melody put herself and all her experience at Lily's disposal, and had she not declared that girls who had been once under her charge at school still turned to her for help and counsel that she gladly and proudly gave?

With this species of mental reservation to strengthen her, Lily left Genazzano without making any definite confidence to Aunt Clo.

"I don't really feel as if I knew my own mind, just now," she said apologetically, and not altogether untruly.

"Ah, *jeunesse!*" smiled Miss Stellenthorpe. "Certainly, child of my heart, you do not love as yet—if you can ask yourself for a moment: *Do I love?* then it is certain you do not. But it will come—it will come. If not Nicholas, then another. But I think—however, I had best not tell you what I think! Only remember that it is not given to everyone to inspire love in so gallant a gentleman as is Nicholas Aubray. '*Sans peur et sans reproche*'—those words often come to my mind when I think of Nicholas!"

"I like him very much," said Lily, more and more feebly, as Aunt Clo's periods overwhelmed her more and more with the sense of her own utter inadequacy.

Aunt Clotilde's smile became more pronounced, and also more deeply imbued with delicate and patronizing scorn.

"Well, well—the little 'like' may develop into a little 'love'—who knows? You need fear nothing tempestuous, nothing overwhelming, my Lily. Yours is not the passionate temperament. Don't look discomfited, child. I mean nothing derogatory—perhaps I envy you, in certain moments of soul weariness—*chi lo sa!* But I mean nothing unkind—nothing belittling. Only with me, as you know, Truth is a veritable obsession—entire frankness."

Lily was left with the subconscious suspicion that Aunt Clo's obsession for entire frankness was principally indulged in the direction of an unsparing candour with regard to the deficiencies of other people.

She did not resent Miss Stellingthorpe's diagnosis of her niece's emotional capacities as superficial. With all but the very lowest strata of her consciousness, she was inclined to endorse it. It was less trouble, even if rather less flattering to one's vanity, to take for granted the slightness of one's own demands upon life—and happiness—which latter Lily instinctively thought of as synonymous with love.

She replied to Nicholas Aubray's letters, which came often, with friendly, rather self-conscious epistles, answering his frequent, "Tell me about yourself, little pal," with rather laboriously enthusiastic accounts of her reading, her expeditions to Roman churches and ruins, her impressions of life at Genazzano.

Nicholas had said to her: "I've been told that I write rather good letters. I don't know whether I do or not, but anyhow I shall like writing to you, and I shall just put down anything that comes into my head—as though we were talking."

She found the letters he wrote to her delightful pro-

ductions, full of an indescribable spirit of spontaneity, and was fully aware of the immaturity that characterized her own replies.

There were not many personalities in their correspondence, but Nicholas, towards the end of each letter, told Lily that he missed her companionship—that he looked forward very much to the time when he should see her again. Lily wondered rather tremulously when that time would come, and specially how it would be viewed by her father.

She tormented herself with various derogatory speeches that she put into Philip's mouth.

"My little pet, you mustn't talk nonsense . . . little people of your age don't have proposals from grown-up men, you know. . . . I shall tell this Mr. Aubray that I can't have him writing to you like this . . . a hole-and-corner correspondence. . . ."

No! Even one's father could never say that. Nicholas Aubray had been as punctilious as Philip himself, and had obtained Aunt Clo's sanction to the correspondence before embarking upon it.

Lily wondered whether Aunt Clo, first and last, had acted upon her own initiative, without any reference at all to Philip.

If so, he would still be in complete ignorance of the cataclysmic fact that Lily's whole destiny was shortly to be decided. She phrased it thus to herself in an unconscious attempt to safeguard the dignity of the situation, that she felt would be threatened by Philip's habitual treatment of her as a very young and irresponsible child.

Philip's first greeting of her dissolved the fear, and left her with a wondering sense of intense gratification. True

to his life-long restrictions, nothing was put into words, but Lily was at no pains to account for the new pride and pleasure in her that was suddenly displayed by her father.

He openly praised her looks, and said once or twice that "Aunt Clo's accounts of her little companion" had given him great pleasure.

His least indirect reference to Lily's new standing as the desired of Nicholas Aubray was made a very few days after her return, as he bade her good-night one evening.

"Good-night, my child. God bless you and give you happiness. I only want you to be very happy, you know. One is young for such a very little while——"

He sighed, but Lily was reflecting, rather humorously, that never before had he hinted at any possible term to the youthfulness upon which he had so often insisted.

Nevertheless, she was touched by his kindness, and by the new pride in her, which she divined in his frequent, half-surreptitious glances at her and occasional wistful smiles.

Very soon she found courage to mention that which she well knew that they both had in mind: the coming of Nicholas Aubray.

"You remember Aunt Clo's friend, that I told you about, Father?" Thus Lily, feeling unaccountably deceitful in so describing Nicholas, although she knew that Philip knew the exact relation in which Nicholas stood, both to Aunt Clo and to herself, and also that he knew her to be quite aware of his knowing.

Such strange and silent interplays of knowledge were uncomfortably frequent in association with Philip Stellenthorpe.

"I mean Mr. Aubray. I think he might rather like to come and—and see us, if you wouldn't mind."

"Not at all," said Philip graciously. "Your friend is quite a distinguished man, my dear child. Did your Aunt Clo speak to you of his career as a barrister?"

"A little."

"Curiously enough, I recently came across a very striking little pamphlet of his on the subject of the Shipping Law. It is a good deal too technical for a woman, but I found it of great interest, and was much struck by the style in which it was written."

Lily was principally conscious of a secret increase of self-esteem because Philip, indirectly, had spoken of her as a woman.

Such small and subtle appeals to vanity gave greater titillation to her spirits than did the anticipation of again meeting Nicholas.

In the interval between their parting at Genazzano and their meeting again, she had viewed the abstract prospect of a possible proposal of marriage from Nicholas with complacency, sometimes even with a thrill of exultation.

She had played, alike, with the ideas of accepting him as lover and future husband, and of refusing him only to find more overwhelming bliss in some dim future with another. In none of her fancies had she ever thought seriously and sincerely, for the reason that she had never been taught to think at all.

When Nicholas Aubray had accepted the invitation and was actually come, his presence alternately brought enjoyment and embarrassment to Lily.

That Philip was pleased with him was evident, and so completely had Lily assimilated the theory that her parent

was above criticism, that it did not occur to her to wonder whether the admiration was altogether mutual until Nicholas said to her with rather a rueful smile :

"Your father doesn't very much care for joking, does he?"

"Doesn't he?" said Lily, vaguely surprised.

Philip's occasional jests with his children were of a melancholy and stereotyped kind, but it had not consciously struck Lily that he was deficient in humour.

"I only mean that I was telling him one or two stupid stories after dinner to-night about things I've come across in Court. I daresay I told them clumsily. Please don't think that I'm being impertinent enough to venture the least shadow of criticism. I only thought perhaps I'd been rather clumsy and *mal-à-propos*. You know, I'm awfully keen for your people to like me a little bit, as well as you."

"Of course they will," Lily assured him. "You and Aunt Clo are friends already. But I haven't very many near relations. There's Kenneth, but he's only a little boy."

"Good!" cried Nicholas. "I like little boys. I'm not afraid of them."

He laughed, and Lily laughed, at the preposterous implication, but it was by just such flashing glimpses of an essentially child-like spirit that Nicholas Aubray endeared himself to Lily.

She liked him so much that she would hardly acknowledge to herself the occasional pangs of revulsion suffered by her liking, when his laughter, rather grating and always over-prolonged, seemed to her to be almost unmeaningly provoked, or when his appreciation of the Hardinges, which in itself Lily welcomed, found bewil-

dering expression in its utter lack of coincidence with her own intuitions.

"Miss Janet Hardinge is more silent than the pretty, golden-haired one, isn't she? I should think she was one of those shy, very reserved sort of people, who are easily overwhelmed."

Lily, who had been at school with the unpopular Janet, and knew her to be neither shy nor easily overwhelmed, felt at a loss.

"Which is your friend?"

"I see most of Dorothy now, but the youngest—the one who's still at school—was the one I liked best, Sylvia."

"'Who is Sylvia, what is she?'" quoted Nicholas Aubray, and again his laughter appeared to Lily to be quite inordinate.

With a sort of superficial attempt at impartial candour, she tried to balance Nicholas Aubray's claim to a sense of humour, vaguely aware that such an adjunct must be desirable in the close companionship implied by marriage.

He *had* a sense of humour.

Many of his stories of experiences in Court, whether appreciated or not by Philip Stellingthorpe, had made Lily laugh. In Italy, they had laughed together over many trivial things. Lily, when amused, had never appealed in vain to him to share in her amusement.

Slightly bewildered, she decided at last that her own sense of humour had need of extension, in order to cover the area of ground whereon Nicholas Aubray found subject for mirth.

She omitted to note that such ground stretched widely on either side of the line of demarcation that divides the subtlety of irony from the obviousness of mere comicality.

Nicholas stayed with the Stellingthorpes for nearly a week, and Lily took him for walks, and played the piano for his loudly expressed admiration, and was both vaguely disappointed and slightly relieved at the impersonality that generally prevailed in their conversations. She actually surmised in Nicholas a certain shyness that he had not shown in Italy, as though he sometimes doubted his own powers of pleasing and attracting her.

It was inevitable that gratified vanity should play a large part in Lily's view of the clever and distinguished man, so much her senior, who sought to win her favour with a diffidence that filled her with wonder.

Philip's manner towards his daughter had also altered, and on the day preceding the last one of Nicholas Aubray's visit, it needed only her father's pleased yet anxious glances towards herself, and in the tone in which he said: "Why not stay in this afternoon, Lily? I don't like that little cough of yours," to convey to Lily that the two men were to hold a conversation together, and that although she was not to be present at it, her father desired to make sure of her presence in the house. She acquiesced, as she had all her life acquiesced in his obliquely conveyed wishes, in part from the inculcated habit of obedience, and in part from her own moral cowardice.

"I think I shall sit over the fire in the library. Shall we have tea there? It's much warmer than the hall."

"Certainly. We'll join you there."

This time Nicholas, as well as Philip, cast a glance at her that seemed to bear unspoken meanings.

Lily's afternoon in the library was not a reposeful one.

She tried at first to feel pleasure in her own undoubted resemblance to the heroine of a novel. Situation and set-

ting were alike traditional. No doubt Nicholas Aubray was at that moment asking formal assent of her father to the right of proposing to her.

Lily stifled at birth a rebellious fancy that she might have preferred less formality and more impetuosity from her lover.

Her upbringing, assigning to parents a right little less than divine over their children, and her sense that Nicholas scarcely belonged to her own generation, alike enabled her to view his method of procedure as the desirable outcome of his scrupulous chivalry.

She played for a little while with fancies that she herself qualified as childish, concerning a diamond ring, the excitement of telling the Hardinges that she was engaged, and the glory of being married at twenty.

Mrs. Aubray—she would be Mrs. Aubray!

Lily Aubray.

She wrote it down and looked at it, feeling more than ever like the heroine of a novel. Then Lily suddenly told herself that it was her duty to face this question—and again had to stifle an unwelcome idea that the time for facing it had already passed when she had first suggested to her father the visit of Nicholas Aubray. It was extraordinary, the difficulty of facing the question.

Her mind kept wandering to trivial considerations, and she rehearsed to herself the imaginary speeches that Nicholas might make. She could not focus her thoughts at all to the point of supplying her own answers.

“But I must know whether I mean to accept or to refuse him!” Lily expostulated with herself.

She remembered the accepted convention that no

woman need allow a man to offer her marriage in so many words if she intends to humiliate him by a refusal.

"A nice girl can always stave off the actual proposal, and make the man understand that it's no use," Dorothy Hardinge had once seriously informed her.

But Lily did not now feel that any amount of subtle "niceness" on her part could possibly stave off a declaration which had got so far as to receive the sanction of her father.

Staring into the fire, she thought that she was making up her mind when she told herself resolutely: "Now, I must decide once and for all whether I'm in love with him or not."

Aunt Clo's words—almost the only ones that had remained with her out of the many so lavishly scattered for her benefit—returned to Lily with a sense of uneasiness.

"If you can ask yourself for a moment, *Do I love?* then it is certain that you do not. . . ."

Lily did not want to think that it was certain that she did not love Nicholas Aubray.

There were times when she did love him, she felt convinced. She was less certain whether she was "in love" with him.

Oddly enough, the memory of the boy Colin Eastwood recurred to her again and again, not by value of his own personality, but as the object round which certain infinitely vague and delicate emotions had centred.

"But they were such little things," Lily murmured to herself, frowning.

It had mattered whether or no Colin had the place next to hers at the picnics—whether, in exchanging

good-nights at the end of a moonlight walk, his last "good-night" had been for her—whether they were partners in the tennis tournament or not—whether they danced the last waltz of the evening together. If he was in the garden while the rest of them were clustered round Lily at the piano, she acknowledged a slight feeling of restlessness that consciously vanished at his footstep—which she could always distinguish—on the threshold of the French window.

It had, somehow, been an incident in the day, if he touched her hand in helping her up some steep bank, or in handing her a tennis ball. Philip's unspecified, but thoroughly understood, condemnation of the whole slight episode had relegated it to the extreme background of Lily's consciousness. It had become foolish, something to be slightly despised—on account, she supposed of Colin's youthfulness and the negative property described by her father as "leading to nothing."

Nicholas Aubray, so much her senior, "led to" something. In some ways, Lily felt that he understood her, and like all young and over-sensitive souls, she craved to be understood.

Nicholas had understood about her liking childish things—he had even appeared to share her tastes. She knew, instinctively, that they had, mentally, much in common.

It was impossible to imagine everyday life lived with Colin Eastwood; but with Nicholas Aubray she could picture to herself a life of companionship, of books and theatres, and friends shared by them both.

"I might have a baby," Lily reflected, after deciding that she would like to live in London.

It pleased her to reflect how fond Nicholas was of

children, and it was quite easy to picture him with the blue-eyed baby of Lily's own most private fancies.

Whereas the thought of Colin Eastwood as a husband and father seemed absurd—almost indecent. He belonged to a dream world.

The little things that had seemed to matter so much belonged to the dream world too.

It had certainly never seemed important whether or no Nicholas sat next to her at tea-time, nor had she any particular recollection of ever distinguishing his foot-fall from that of the Marchese della Torre, or her father's or Cousin Charlie Hardinge's.

The new and mysterious instincts, conjured momentarily into being during a midsummer holiday, had nothing to do with Real Life.

For a moment, Lily visualized strange possibilities, of that dream world inextricably interwoven with Real Life, in such fashion as could never be realized through the medium either of Colin's personality or of Nicholas Aubray's.

"Body, soul and spirit——"

Words, somewhere read, floated across her mind, implying something of union scarcely apprehended, to the very existence of which she had no clue, save only that most deep-rooted instinct which she had been taught to ignore and to distrust. Like a clarion call across the faint stirrings of an all but extinguished breath of life, came the rousing echo of Miss Melody's teaching, impressed by many repetitions:

"No day-dreams, childie! Beware of that imagination of yours—don't let yourself get morbid. . . ."

Morbid! That was the word—the terrible, degrading

word, that was never analyzed, which was applied to private thought and the construction of private ideals. They were morbid.

Lily regarded it as a sign of grace that this timely recollection caused her to feel ashamed. She rallied to the call of Miss Melody's wisdom.

"I shan't decide anything in a hurry. I ought to make sure, and so I'll ask him to let me give him an answer in a little while. And perhaps I'll go and stay at Bridgecrap and see Miss Melody and talk to her—it will help me to get my thoughts thoroughly clear, if I put them into words. There's nothing to be at all frightened of—I needn't do anything I don't like—I'm a free agent. I mustn't be morbid."

Lily felt braced and relieved, when she had thus discovered that a line of least resistance still existed, and that the facing of a direct issue might still be postponed, and perhaps almost altogether avoided, by shifting the onus of decision on to Miss Melody's advice.

She trembled very much when Nicholas, late in the afternoon, came and joined her, standing over the great armchair into which she had sunk back.

It seemed to her, that he, too, was nervous as she looked up at him speechlessly.

"I've had a—a very nice talk with your father," he said at last. "I've been talking to him about something which is more important to me than anything else in the world, just now."

Nicholas paused and Lily saw that he, also, was shaking a little.

At the same moment he dropped on to one knee beside her and laid his hand over hers.

"Lily dear," said Nicholas Aubray, speaking with great simplicity, "you know that I'm very much in love with you. Could you care for me enough to be my wife?"

Instead of the exultation of mind she had expected to experience on hearing this, her first proposal, Lily felt an odd inclination to tears. She looked down at Nicholas.

"Do you really want me to?" she asked him falteringly, and like a child.

A sudden laugh flickered in his gaze as it met hers.

"You dear child! Of course I do. Do you think I don't mean it? Why, Lily, I've thought of nothing else since those very first days in Italy."

He looked at her wistfully.

"Do I seem to you too old, my dear? I do love you so much. I think I could make you very happy."

"But you—could I ever—you must think of your happiness too——" said Lily incoherently. "Oh, please, will you let me think it over for a little while and write to you?"

"Then you'd like me to go away to-morrow, back to London?" said Nicholas slowly.

Lily felt ashamed and sorry as she saw the disappointment in his face, but she nodded an assent.

"It must be just as you like, my dear, of course. I could hardly have hoped for anything else, perhaps." He rose to his feet again.

His face was very much overcast as he stood silent, in front of the fire.

Suddenly he threw back his head and squared his shoulders with the gesture she had so often seen, and gave a little laugh.

"Never say die, eh, Lily? You know, I shan't take no

for an answer very easily. Tell me, dear, you do like me a little, don't you?"

"Very, very much."

"Then won't you trust me to look after you, and make you happier than you've ever been? I believe I could, Lily."

"I do trust you. Only—it's too serious," said Lily timidly. "I want to make sure that—that I care, too."

There was a silence. Then Nicholas Aubray said abruptly:

"You're right, my dear. You shall have time, all the time you want. But can't you give me a little hope, meanwhile?"

His response to her appeal had moved Lily to that intensity of gratitude and admiration that his chivalry could always evoke in her. The sudden, warm recognition of his generosity roused the like impulses in herself.

"I think it will be all right," she said naïvely.

"You little darling!"

On the instant all his gravity had vanished and he wore the aspect of buoyancy that contrasted so effectively with his grizzled head and broad shoulders.

"There's something I want now, Lily. I wonder if I shall get it—just to send me back to town happy?"

She looked at him rather apprehensively.

"Please, please don't look so frightened, dear! It wouldn't mean anything you don't want, you know."

"What?"

"Mayn't I kiss you, Lily—once?"

The first impulse of a coquetry in reality foreign to her nature stirred in Lily.

"No one ever has, yet," she said, and smiled.

"I know that, my dear. I was sure of it. You're like your name—a little, untouched flower."

A tiny thrill shot through her at the words, the first approach to direct love-making that she had ever heard addressed to herself. She felt sorry when the characteristic British reaction against an open expression of sentiment came swiftly from Nicholas.

"You see, you're actually making me poetical!" he exclaimed, with a hastiness that obviously covered a certain confusion, and if his ensuing laugh was jerky and over-prolonged, it needed but little intuition this time to attribute it to scarcely disguised nervousness.

"What did Father say?" Lily asked, in reality speaking almost at random so that he should stop that unamused, spasmodic laughter.

"He was very kind to me, and gave me leave to come down here whenever I like. So you see, I can come for my answer as soon as you like to send for me. But you're a little fraud, my dear, to turn the conversation like that! Will you let me have *one* thing to remember?"

He was looking full at her with ardent and yet kindly eyes.

Lily nodded faintly.

As he bent over her she raised her head a little and turned her face sideways to him, closing her eyes. For the fraction of a second Nicholas Aubray hesitated, and then stooped and kissed her very softly on the cheek.

She wondered why, as he straightened himself again, he laughed—this time very low and gently.

XII

"My little pet, you must decide for yourself."

Philip Stellenthorpe was deeply moved.

"My little pet!" he repeated. "It only seems the other day that you were playing with your toys on the nursery floor. I can't deny, my child, that it would make me very, very happy to give you to such a man—one whom I could trust so absolutely. He would make you very happy, Lily."

"That's what he said," answered Lily, with no ironical intent.

"You must study your own feelings, Lily. Remember that it's a responsibility. . . . Aubray is a very able man, my child, with a career before him. It's a great honour to be asked to share the life of such a man. You do feel that?"

"Oh yes, Father."

"That's right, darling, that's right. I don't wish to persuade you in any way. At the same time it would make me happier than anything else in the world, now, to see my little Lily married to such a man. It's—it's a wonderful opportunity, Lily. My little motherless girl, living quietly at home, to marry a distinguished man of Aubray's standing, before she's twenty!"

The triumph in Philip's voice, of which he himself seemed to be half ashamed, touched Lily acutely.

He might say, in all sincerity, that he did not wish to persuade her, but he could have found no more effective means of so doing than by his very forbearance.

His wistful pride in the opportunity that he so obviously was longing to see her accept, and the restraint that he put upon himself in order to leave her free, filled Lily with a passionate wish to please him.

She knew that, were she to disappoint him in this, he would not reproach her. Only the mute pathos of a deepened silence, a more constant melancholy, would do that.

"He wants me to be happy, after all," reflected Lily, knowing also that Philip would only see happiness for her in just such a marriage, in just such a life, incapable of believing in the reality of any happiness that he could not personally apprehend.

Nor, indeed, had Lily any specific alternative interpretation of the term to submit to him. Marriage, in spite of Miss Melody, had always appeared to her as the natural goal of woman, and she was young enough to tell herself very seriously that this, her first offer of marriage, might perhaps also prove to be her last. The dread of perpetual maidenhood, in fact, possessed Lily so firmly that she almost found herself urging it to Miss Melody herself, as a reason for accepting Nicholas Aubray. For Miss Melody, interested and incisive as ever, had spoken.

"Childie dear, listen to me. You must weigh the pros and the cons very, very carefully. I'm very glad you take this question seriously, Lily, very glad indeed. Now, dearie, do you know what I recommend? Write it all down, Lily, put it all on to paper. Write down the *For* and *Against*, just as though it were one of the old school exercises. There's nothing like method, dearie—you

know that's what I always say. Do you think me very unromantic?"

In truth, Lily did think so, and she looked apologetically at Miss Melody.

Her old schoolmistress laughed heartily.

"Well, well, it's very natural you should think so, but you must beware of that romantic little head of yours. Do you remember, Lily, when you were leaving school, that I warned you against letting your imagination run away with you? Oh, you've improved since those days, I know—I know. But now, my dear child, you have come to cross-roads, and there must be no mistake here. It's too important. Tell me, what does your father say to you about this?"

"He has been very kind. He hasn't said much. I know he wants me to feel quite free. But, of course, I can't help knowing that he would like it very much, and I should like to please him."

"He would like it very much, would he?" repeated Miss Melody reflectively. "Well, childie, that seems to me a very big item on the side of the Pros. Not as a sole reason for marrying, you understand, or even as a chief one—but simply because your father's judgment of this man is likely to be a very, very sound one. If he likes him so much, and trusts him well enough to want to give you to him, why, then, Lily, I think we may safely take it for granted that he must be a very admirable person. A man is a better judge of another man than we women can ever be, you know."

If Lily, in some undefined way, felt that Miss Melody had failed to touch upon the real point at issue, which in no way concerned the intrinsic worth of Nicholas Aubray

—she had too much faith in the voice of external authority, and too little in her own convictions, to pause upon the thought.

“Then there’s another thing, you know, dearie. You say he is a good deal older than you are. Well, childie, that seems to me in your case to be a real advantage. You lack backbone, Lily—you know I’ve always told you so. I should be frightened to think of you at the head of a household without a very, very steady hand behind you, childie. Don’t you feel that yourself?”

“Yes, I think I do.”

Miss Melody shot out a plump forefinger almost triumphantly.

“There you are, again! *I think I do*. You must *know*, childie dear, not think! Oh, Lily, Lily!”

Miss Melody shook her head and dropped her deep voice. There was humour in her kindly, penetrating eyes.

“It seems to me that a clever, strong-minded man, older than yourself, is the very husband you need, Lily. Tell me—you trust this man?”

“Oh, yes.”

“That’s the great thing—absolute trust. But there’s another question too, dearie—one that only you can answer. Do you care for him?”

Had Lily replied in accordance with her state of mind, she would once more have said, “I think I do.”

But she felt that this formula of uncertainty was now barred to her.

“Sometimes I do,” she remarked finally.

“Sometimes, sometimes!” repeated Miss Melody in melancholy impatience. “What a half-hearted little person

it is! Lily, Lily, either you care for this man or you don't care for him, surely. How can you say 'Sometimes'?"

"There are times when—when he's nicer, and I like him better, than other times," Lily confusedly tried to explain.

Miss Melody's brow cleared.

She laughed.

"And are there no times when you are 'nicer' as you call it, than at other times? We're all human, you know, dearie. You mustn't look for perfection."

Lily had often told herself the same thing, and illogically derived reassurance in hearing from somebody else the truism that had failed to impress her from within by any applicability to her especial need.

"I'm not certain that I'm in love with him," she said timidly.

"You mustn't confuse being 'in love' with loving, childie dear," said Miss Melody.

They looked at one another in silence.

Apparently Miss Melody had no further assistance to give to Lily. Her subsequent counsel was merely repetition, and she concluded it by telling Lily gravely and kindly that nobody could really advise her, or had any right to try to influence her. She must decide for herself.

Lily left Bridgecrap with the complete certainty that the wise and experienced Miss Melody was strongly biased in favour of her pupil's immediate marriage with Nicholas Aubray.

"I shall expect to get news from you soon," said Miss Melody significantly in farewell.

It in no wise mitigated the significance, that she should add with an inscrutable smile:

"One way or the other."

It would fall extremely flat, Lily reflected ruefully, if her news were to be "the other," after all.

The novel sense of her own importance was so agreeable that she felt no more than a passing shock at the discovery that the Hardinges were perfectly aware of Nicholas's proposal.

Ethel Hardinge, after a few brisk preliminaries as to the disadvantages of being motherless, sought candidly to advise Lily.

"There's nothing like first love," said Ethel in a hearty sort of way. "They say nobody marries their first love, but I did, and no two people could be happier than we are, of that I'm certain."

"Then it does last?" said Lily tentatively.

"Being in love? Well, no, dear, not in the same way, of course. One must look at these things sensibly, and yet at the same time without being foolish," said Mrs. Hardinge with clarity. "I'm speaking to you as I should speak to one of my own girlies. You mustn't expect to remain in love for ever and ever."

Lily felt that Cousin Ethel was taking too much for granted.

"But Cousin Ethel, I don't know that I am in love at all, yet."

"Oh! Well, of course, dear—just hand me the white cotton, dear—Sylvia is so hard on her knickers, always—But you do like him very much?"

"Yes, very much."

"He certainly is charming—so utterly unlike most clever people. He's a good deal older than you are—perhaps that's what you're thinking of? Dorothy never looks at them if they're over twenty-five, but then you and she are very different."

"Yes," said Lily dejectedly.

She had an undefined feeling that any possible vestige of romance was being eliminated from her love-affair by all these bright and kindly discussions. She felt more at a loss than ever.

"But, after all, Lily, nobody can make up your mind for you. It's a thing you must really decide entirely for yourself. The scissors, if you wouldn't mind, dear. I should hardly feel justified in talking to you at all, if I wasn't so fond of you, and then you've no mother, poor dear! But I shouldn't dream of influencing you, one way or the other."

There was a pause, and Lily picked up a reel of cotton and handed Mrs. Hardinge the scissors.

"It would give your father the greatest happiness, of course, and he's had a sad life, Lily. He never got over the loss of your mother, as Charlie says. And then if anything happened to him, well, of course, there'd be a home for you and for Kenneth and someone to look after you both. Not that you couldn't always count on us for anything we could do, but nothing can be the same as one's very own belongings. With a husband, you see, there's always somebody *there*."

"That's just what I'm afraid of, in a way," said Lily, at last gathering courage. "I mean that it would be so dreadful if one found one didn't care enough, and yet one was permanently tied."

"But, my dear child," said Mrs. Hardinge earnestly, "there is a love that comes after marriage, you know. Not the same thing as being in love, but something that really lasts. Many a girl who hasn't known whether she was in love or not, or who really isn't in love with the man at first,

finds everything quite different once she's really married to him."

Lily listened believingly. Nothing seemed to her more probable than that the married state, about which there hung many mysterious reticences, should operate some startling change of outlook by means unguessed at by the uninitiated.

"Perhaps," suggested Mrs. Hardinge hopefully, "you're more in love than you think you are. Very often girls don't realize things—and then before they know where they are, it's too late, and may mean a life-time of regret."

Thinking this over, it appeared to Lily that Cousin Ethel, who was so kind and knew so much about young girls, held that if one was in love, very likely one didn't know it until after one had married the man and that if one wasn't, it was still worth while marrying him because there was something better than being in love, that came after marriage.

The only remaining alternative seemed to be the life-time of regret.

Having derived no stable satisfaction from the advice that she had already received, Lily began to consider where she could seek for more advice, and involved herself further and further in the endeavour to see truth through the vision of others.

Dorothy Hardinge was crudely positive.

"I wouldn't have him, Lily, if you aren't in love with him. There are sure to be heaps of other men who'll want to marry you. They even want to marry me, and you're a million times prettier than I am, and heaps of men don't care a bit about games. I mean whether one's good at them or not. Of course that's one thing in Mr. Aubray's

favour, I suppose—as he's frightfully clever and rather old and lives in London, he wouldn't mind about your being rather bad at games, would he?"

"He doesn't mind at all; he's told me so."

"That's all right then. I suppose you wouldn't tell me what he said when he proposed? I *can't* imagine him doing it, somehow." Dorothy giggled. "I bet he was very grand and formal."

Lily raised her chin slightly.

She had no desire to hear Dorothy's wit, the elementary form of which was well known to her, expend itself in this direction.

But it was never difficult to change the trend of Dorothy's thoughts.

"You've had a great many people in love with you, haven't you, Dorothy?"

"We hardly ever see a new man down here," said Dorothy discontentedly. "But I must say, I generally have somebody or other to make things amusing—one meets them at tennis, and so on. But of course you know, they don't all propose, or anything like that."

"What happens, then?"

"Well," said Dorothy, in a candid and interested voice, "there are generally what I call the three stages: eyesie-pysie, handy-pandy and footy-wootie. First, one just looks at each other and sort of gets going that way, then they squeeze one's hand whenever they can, and try and get hold of it in the dark, coming home from dances and that sort of thing, and then they stick out their foot under the table or somewhere, and press yours, and you go on talking to other people all the time and looking as if nothing was happening. It's sort of fun in a way, though

I wouldn't dare tell Mother about it. She'd say it was vulgar, I suppose."

The same unpleasing adjective also appeared to Lily to be highly applicable.

"No one's ever done that kind of thing with me," she said, without emphasis of any kind.

"I suppose you're not the sort, or else you haven't met enough men. That's what I mean, Lily. I do think it would be a frightful pity to get married right away, before you've had any fun at all. Of course, one couldn't go on with that sort of fooling about after one was married, it wouldn't be playing the game. But I must say it's fun, and I can't see any harm in it, so long as one doesn't take it too seriously. Of course, I shouldn't let things go too far."

"What would you call too far?"

"Well, there are girls who say that a dance isn't any fun, unless one gets—well, kissed, as a matter of fact."

"Oh!" said Lily disgustedly.

"I know it's rather awful, when one says it in cold blood like that; and mind you, I don't go in for it myself, Lily, I really don't. I won't say that no one ever has, but it was a sort of accident, truly it was."

"Didn't you mind?"

"No," said Dorothy, "I can't say. I did. Afterwards I sort of felt ashamed of myself because I knew Mother would think it so awful if she ever knew—which God forbid! But it sort of seemed natural, kind of, at the time."

"I don't believe I should ever like it," said Lily with finality.

"I think you ought to give yourself a chance of finding out. It's all very well," said Dorothy argumentatively, "if

one's frantically in love with anyone, I suppose one's mad enough to want to be tied up to him for ever and ever. But personally I don't want to fall seriously in love for ages yet. Just have a good time while I'm young and have heaps of great friends, and then perhaps, later on, a real, proper *grande passion* or whatever they call it, and get married."

"I think one might be rather sorry, then, that there had been other people first," said Lily shyly.

"I think that's sentimental tosh," said Dorothy Hardinge with simple finality.

The verdict disquieted Lily but slightly; nevertheless, Dorothy's wisdom had its effect upon her decision. If eyesie-pysie, handy-pandy and footy-wootie constituted happiness in youth, then better far be married, and to relinquish youth.

Lily felt certain that she had no talent for such a form of enjoyment, and she thought that it must be on this account that no such overtures as those described by Dorothy had ever fallen to her lot. The daughter of Philip Stellenthorpe knew no regret, however, for the deprivation.

She could never afterwards recall with any definite certainty the moment in which she took her final decision. When she found herself betrothed to Nicholas Aubray, it seemed natural enough, and the sense of irrevocability that thenceforth encompassed her, Lily almost welcomed.

No one gave her any advice now. They all congratulated her, and even Dorothy Hardinge, after she saw Lily and Nicholas together, and when Lily, herself awestruck, displayed an emerald and diamond ring and a diamond pendant, said cordially:

"Well, I must say you were right in a way, Lily. The trousseau and the presents and all this fuss about you must be simply too heavenly!"

Lily herself derived unforeseen excitement and pleasure from all these accessories to her engagement, her father's intense gratification and pride in her, the warmly-worded congratulations that she received, and the admiring welcome that her youth and prettiness met with from the bewildering number of new friends and relations to whom Nicholas presented her, even the trousseau frocks and the jewels and the wedding presents, all gave her a dream-like feeling of astonished delight.

She did not doubt any more whether she was in love.

- There was a glamour over her days that could only mean happiness, and happiness and love were still, to Lily's way of thinking, synonymous.

Sometimes she realized with surprise how impossible it would be now to disappoint all this kindness, and saw herself as much bound to Nicholas as though she were already married to him. And she felt with a certain joyful astonishment, that any lingering doubt must be dispelled by the discovery that the personality of Nicholas Aubray seemed to be far more in harmony with her own as a lover than as a friend.

XIII

THE person of whom Lily seemed to see least during the period of her engagement was the man whom she was to marry.

Jests about placing them beside one another at the many hospitable tables to which they were invited seemed to be inevitable, but each was obviously expected to talk and make acquaintance with the friends or relations of the other.

Everyone congratulated Lily whole-heartedly.

"He's awfully nice, Lily—he's got such a nice twinkle," said Dorothy Hardinge.

Now that Lily was really engaged, with a ring, and presents arriving every day, and a trousseau imminent, Dorothy was full of excitement, and appeared to have forgotten all her previous strictures.

Perhaps there was something infectious about the glamour surrounding a wedding.

Lily reflected naïvely that she had never before realized how impossible it would be to break off an engagement once it had been made known. Would one have to return all these glittering, shining presents, countermand all the things that had been ordered, write explanations to everybody, and an announcement to the papers so that one's change of mind should be made public? Surely nothing could be more utterly impossible. She had a strong sus-

pcion that the mere imagining of such a contingency would unhesitatingly have been labelled as morbid by Miss Melody.

She abandoned it willingly.

A letter from Miss Melody, the reading of which was very like listening to Miss Melody's own deep voice, did much to confirm the surmise.

"Well, Lily dear, and so the die is cast! Shall you think me quite a witch, childie, if I confess that I wasn't *altogether astonished* at the news, although very, *very* much pleased?

"The love of a good man is a great thing. I am glad you look upon the responsibility that it entails upon you as a serious one. At the same time, however, don't let your thoughts dwell too much upon that side of it. Remember that 'the burden is fitted to the back!' Perhaps not very complimentary to Mr. Aubray, but you'll understand what I mean, dear child."

Lily could almost hear the low, rich laugh with which Miss Melody repudiated any uncomplimentary intent in the not very felicitous expression that she had selected.

Many other letters reached her, some of them from relations whom she had scarcely seen. Most of the writers seemed to have heard of Nicholas Aubray as a distinguished and clever man, some of them had even met him, and those who had not done so were as enthusiastic as those who had, since hearsay had endowed him so plentifully.

It was all very like a dream.

Nicholas urged an early wedding, and was rather timidly seconded by Philip.

"I am in favour of early marriages," said Philip, with

his habitual air of affirming a theory in the hope of making himself believe in it.

"Yes, yes, yes—for the girl, certainly," said Charlie Hardinge.

Even without Cousin Charlie's tactful implication, it was evident that no one could suggest that Nicholas was making an early marriage.

"He isn't a widower, is he?" said Sylvia to Lily with an air of horrified apprehension.

"Oh no! How could you think so?" Lily was equally horrified.

"I thought he might be, as he's so old—and I must say I should hate to think of your doing anything like that!"

"So should I," said Lily with perfect sincerity. "I should want to be the only person that my—my husband had ever loved."

She was innocently consequential, and Janet Hardinge's scoffing laugh jarred on and surprised her.

"All that is stuff out of books. Nobody ever loves only one person, I don't believe. Not in a *long* life, anyway."

"Of course, one cares for a lot of people," said Sylvia indignantly, "but Lily and I mean the falling-in-love sort of love. I should hope she *was* the only girl he'd ever been in love with! I wouldn't marry a man unless *I* was."

"Mother herself says that very few people ever marry their first love," said Janet quite firmly.

This led to a serious conversation with Cousin Ethel.

Lily did not exactly seek it, but she was ready to resign herself to what she supposed to be a necessity.

"You have no mother, poor child."

Ethel spoke the time-honoured *cliché* very kindly.

"I am glad you are going to be married, Lily. After

my own girls, I don't know that any engagement could have given me so much pleasure. Not only for your father's sake—though I'm delighted to see how happy it makes him—but for your own. Oh, my dear, make the most of your time. It's so wonderful to be young, and happy, and in love."

Lily tried to appear responsive, and was angry at the slight self-consciousness that alone possessed her as she tried to contemplate the causes for rejoicing enumerated by Mrs. Hardinge.

"You're a very, very lucky child. He's a man in a thousand, and it's a wonderful thing to have found one another in time. All the nicest men are generally married long before they're anywhere near his age."

"I suppose," said Lily, remembering Janet, "that I oughtn't to expect, perhaps, to be his first love?"

She looked at Mrs. Hardinge, hoping for reassurance.

"My dear child! Of course, there's love *and* love, you know. Men have their fancies, but it's the woman they want to marry who really counts. Has he ever told you about—about anything of that sort, in his life?"

"He told me he'd never asked anyone to marry him before."

"There!" cried Ethel in a tone of relief. "What more can you want? I think that's marvellous, at his age. And, Lily dear, let me give you a word of advice. You've no mother, poor child! Now that he's so generously and frankly told you that, you'll be content, won't you? I mean, don't go on and on asking him about the time before he knew you. Some girls are so foolish and wreck all their own happiness with that sort of thing. But I don't think you're like that, are you?"

Lily was puzzled, and also rather distressed. Was married life to contain merely a fresh series of those silences and reticences that had made life at home a thing of eternal difficulties?

It did not seem characteristic of Nicholas.

At last she said: "I should like us to tell one another everything, I think, Cousin Ethel."

Mrs. Hardinge burst into a rather nervous laugh.

"Oh, my dear little girl! Now I'm going to talk to you just as though it were Dorothy or Janet. You see, dear, men aren't the same as women and we mustn't expect it. Nicholas is—is a good man, you know, or your father wouldn't let you marry him. But no man can be expected to tell his wife everything, as you call it—especially when there is a difference in age."

Lily began to feel as though they were talking at cross-purposes.

"You must trust your husband, you know, dear," said Cousin Ethel.

"We do trust one another."

"I'm sure of it. And remember, Lily, that men know a great many things that women aren't expected to understand, and so you mustn't be disappointed if Nicholas has interests in which you can't altogether share. It's bound to be so, even in the very happiest marriages."

Lily felt vaguely disappointed. Her ideal of companionship had been otherwise, and no doubt Cousin Ethel would have joined with Miss Melody in apostrophizing it with that disparaging adjective, Romantic.

"You young things are always so romantic," cried Mrs. Hardinge, causing Lily to start guiltily. "Of course it's natural and right that you should be so, and one's glad

of it. Dorothy is just like you, Lily, and so is even little Sylvia. Goodness knows I don't want any of you to be old before your time. I'm often worried about Janet, and the things she says. But you know, dear, it wouldn't be fair not to warn you that there's always something to put up with in marriage. There must be give and take on both sides. And it's a great change for a girl, too—naturally it is."

"What did you feel like when you were first married, Cousin Ethel?"

"I was very much in love," declared Mrs. Hardinge, "and so was Cousin Charlie. And we've been as happy as the day is long together. But of course there were things to put up with. I was one of a very large family. We lived in London at first, and my home was in Ireland and we were much too poor to go there and pay them visits as I should have liked to do. I remember at first, when Charlie was at the office all day, I used to wonder how I could bear the loneliness. The housekeeping didn't take any time at all, and I couldn't shop much, because we hadn't a penny to spare, and we couldn't afford a library subscription even, or a piano. I used to do a lot of sewing, and when it got dark, and I wanted to economize and save the gas bill, I used to sit and do nothing, and think about them all at home having a jolly time in the old school-room, and I don't mind telling you now, Lily, what no one ever knew, that I used sometimes to cry my eyes out with home-sickness."

"Oh, poor Cousin Ethel! And what did Cousin Charlie do?"

"He never knew anything about it. I wouldn't have let him know for the world. He would have thought I was unhappy."

Lily was more perplexed than ever. It seemed that because a wife was unhappy, it must at all costs be avoided that her husband should think her unhappy.

"Wouldn't he have understood?"

"I daresay he would. I'm sure he would have been very dear and kind. But men do dislike that kind of thing so much. You know, dear, a woman, after she's married, has to forget herself and think of her husband."

Lily had been taught to regard self-abnegation as a virtue, and she saw nothing but cause for shame in her own fleeting suspicion that it might in reality be nothing but a weakness.

"There's one thing, you won't have the wretched question of money to worry you. When I first married I had no allowance, and had to ask Charlie for every penny. Not that he ever grudged it, poor dear—far from it. But it used to make it so difficult, somehow, to ask for a shilling here and a shilling there—even though it was absolutely necessary. Of course later on, when we were a little better off, he gave me a fixed sum for the housekeeping, and I always saved on that. Charlie sometimes asked me how I'd managed to find a new bonnet, or some little thing for the babies, but I never told him very much about it." Ethel laughed reminiscently.

"Would he have minded?"

"Oh, I don't suppose so. But one never quite knows about money, with men. They're so odd about that sort of thing. And, of course, women don't know anything about money matters."

It seemed a pity that there should be so many things that women knew nothing about.

"Marriage is the only life for a woman, my dear. I

hope all my three will marry. I can't tell you how sorry I am for women who are old maids—no interests, no children, very likely no home. Whereas a happy married life——” She paused expressively, and then said:

“You were too young to notice very much when your mother was still alive, but look at your father without her! He has never got over her loss. They were absolutely devoted to one another. Or if you want to know what really happily married people are like, Lily dear, you've only to look at *us*.”

The contemplation of Mr. and Mrs. Hardinge left Lily still speechless.

Perhaps something of this dubious spirit showed in her face. At all events Mrs. Hardinge said very earnestly:

“Now don't mix up love and romance, Lily. They have nothing whatever to do with one another. You girls never seem to realize that, and then of course you're disappointed. Being in love is one thing, and a very right and natural and charming thing—but you mustn't expect to stay in love all the days of your life.”

“I suppose not,” said Lily doubtfully.

She had not the moral courage to suppose anything else, imbued as she was with the theory that it was both her duty and to her advantage to accept her opinions ready-made from her seniors.

“I don't want to sound hard and cynical, dear,” said Ethel, looking harassed and motherly. “Of course you're in love with Nicholas and he with you, and it's the very happiest and most idyllic time that you'll ever know. I only meant to put you a little bit on your guard—after all. . . . No mother, poor child!”

It came in almost like the refrain of a song.

"And even if—when the actual glamour of falling in love is over, then, you know, there's something very much better that takes its place."

"What, Cousin Ethel?"

"Oh, my dear child! Love—trust—confidence—all the little ups and downs you've been through together—even the little quarrels. It all helps to draw you more closely together. Charlie and I laugh together now sometimes, at all sorts of funny things that happened to us years ago. It all helps."

Helps—what did it help?

Lily would not ask any further, because of a strange, sick feeling that kept on invading her and to which nothing would have induced her to give the name of dismay.

So that was love.

She felt ashamed and almost angry at the thought of her own secret, past dreams. Romantic, indeed. Miss Melody and Cousin Ethel, extremely unlike as they were, would most certainly have joined issue in kindly condemnation here. Both would alike have made use of the self-same words. Beware, foolish little child, of romance and of imagination alike.

Love was a thing of ephemeral excitements, greatly accrued self-importance, preparations, gifts, congratulations, a great deal of talk and discussion.

It was also a thing of rather bewildering demands and claims. Nicholas had the right to hold her hand now whenever he wanted to, and he always did so whenever they were alone together, playing with her engagement-ring, bending back the supple fingers, examining the tips of them, very often kissing them. He put his arm round

her when they were together, frequently. He kissed her lips at each meeting and parting—sometimes he unexpectedly bent and touched her cheek or her forehead.

It had been a relief to Lily to find that his touch did not actually displease her, as did that of most people.

She was by temperament, she supposed, undemonstrative, but it disappointed her vaguely that certain latent possibilities in herself had not in any way been roused by Nicholas. She wished that there was anyone to whom she could turn for explanation.

But of course everybody would make the same humiliating accusation, and inform her regretfully that she was romantic. These wild, sweet dreams had been romantic, undoubtedly.

She had thought of love as a thing of flames and carnations—the odd, beautiful words had served her fancy instinctively. Something so wonderful that talk would spoil it. Or if there had to be talk and discussion and preparation, it would all pass by unheeded, because of something that mattered so infinitely more.

She had a curious idea that one would not care to have a wedding, and a beautiful lace veil, and all those presents. It would be more like an inevitable recognition of a great central fact in the whole universe, and then—what?

She hardly knew, but could formulate vaguely the picture of a going forth. The soft, dark-blue gloom of a summer night, and the trusted, hidden depths of a known and loved beech-wood, or the lashing wind of a grey, winter sky and the shelter of a flung cloak and the lee of a high boulder—what would it matter, which the setting were?

O folly, O romance! O shadows of Philip Stellenthorpe,

tremulously proud of a future position, of Charlie and Ethel happily married and discussing the new asparagus-bed, and the children, and the ups and downs of their joint past, of Dorothy Hardinge, gaily pursuing her course of handy-pandy, eyesie-pysie and the rest of it, and yet frankly envious of Lily's new dignities!

Those were the real things, the real necessities, and so were the wedding preparations, and the beautiful ring, and the endless consultations over clothes and furniture and journeys. . . .

The dreams were—just Romance, to be condemned and eschewed, now that Reality had come. And Cousin Ethel had said that this was the happiest and most idyllic time of Lily's life.

It was full of excitement, certainly.

"Lily dear, you'll have to settle about that blue brocade quickly, if you want to take it away with you. Of course, if you wait for it till you get back there's heaps of time."

"Oh, must I write another letter, Cousin Ethel?"

"Poor child, your hand must be tired. Janet can write it for you quite well if you tell her what to say."

And Janet, not at all unwillingly, was pressed into the service.

Lily's own sudden importance positively bewildered her.

"My dear child, the vicar wants to know your choice of hymns for the ceremony. Will you and Nicholas talk it over, and let me know as soon as you can? Nicholas will be here on Saturday, I suppose?"

"Yes, Father. You know you said every week-end until the wedding."

"Of course, my little pet, of course. I only wish he could give us more time; but after all, he'll want the holi-

day more, later on. How long are you hoping to be away?"

"He thinks he can spare a month quite well."

"That's excellent. It'll be a wonderful time for you both, my dear child."

"Lily, Lily!" Kenneth burst into the room. "There's another enormous parcel for you just come—it says *Glass*. Come and see what it is."

"A telegram for you, miss."

"Nicholas can't get away on Saturday, Father. He isn't coming."

"Dear me, how very disappointing. My poor, dear child!"

"He'll come next week-end, for certain."

Lily was actually experiencing an unacknowledged relief at the thought that the claims upon her time necessitated by the presence of Nicholas were at least postponed.

There were so many letters to be written, parcels to be unpacked, clothes to be tried on, and it was all so very important.

"That's my good little girl," said Philip, in a tone that expressed as much relief as though he had feared the outbreak of tears to be expected from a child disappointed of its treat.

Mrs. Hardinge was plain-spoken.

"Well, you'll see plenty of Nicholas after the wedding, and now you can get some of those letters off your mind, Lily. You can make them very short. Everybody knows that a bride never has time for long letters, and you simply must get everything finished up before the wedding."

Before the wedding—until the wedding—because of the wedding.

They all said that, in a frenzied sort of way which implied that the wedding was the final goal towards which Time itself was tending as to the ultimate bourne.

“After the wedding” was only alluded to as some remote period during which rest might obtain which must until then be utterly foregone. Lily’s own imagination refused to entertain more than the crowding preoccupations of the present. She knew that she and Nicholas were going to Paris together, but all that she could realize was that by that time all the presents must be acknowledged, all the new frocks finished and packed up, and all the various business of the last few weeks finally accomplished.

The relief of it would be incalculable.

The last Saturday before the wedding-day brought Nicholas, but this time he stayed with the Hardinges. Lily saw him, alone, less than ever.

“Can’t I see you in your wedding-dress, just for a minute?” he urged.

“Good gracious, no!” Cousin Ethel was horrified. “Don’t you know it’s unlucky? She isn’t going to put it on again till she goes to the church. You’ll see it then. And she looks lovely. It’s the prettiest wedding-dress I’ve ever seen.”

Lily thought of the misty whiteness of her wedding-dress, swathed in tissue paper, hanging alone in a large closet, with a dust-sheet spread upon the floor beneath it, across which lay the heavy gleaming folds of the embroidered train.

She could not believe that she was to wear it. On the

eve of her wedding, the preparations all somehow miraculously completed, Lily was principally conscious of overpowering physical fatigue.

The wistfulness of an utterly over-wrought spirit possessed her, and she felt strangely inclined to tears.

"It will be a very sad house without you, little Lily," said her father pathetically.

"Oh, I hope not, Father."

"Well, well—I mustn't let my loneliness sadden your joy. You *are* happy, my darling?"

"Very," said Lily in a choked voice.

"Remember that if you have the slightest doubt of your own feelings, it's not too late to say so. Even now, at the eleventh hour," said Philip solemnly. "It's not too late."

It was the first time that he had made any suggestion of the sort, and Lily was by this time quite incapable of viewing it as a practical possibility. The beautiful and costly wedding-dress hanging in the closet upstairs, the lace veil and the pearl necklace, the packed and corded trunks with new-painted initials, the very fact that within less than twenty-four hours a number of guests would be assembling in church, made it quite impossible to receive Philip's portentous warning as being more than a mere form of words.

It almost seemed as though he regarded it so himself, for when Lily murmured an inarticulate and meaningless reply he said:

"You've chosen a good man, and one to whom I am proud to give you."

He kissed and blessed her very kindly, rather as though it were part of some grave ritual.

"I approve your choice on behalf of your mother, as

well as myself. If only she were here, Lily! Poor child, it's hard on you."

Philip suddenly began to fidget with whatever lay nearest to hand.

"You've had a little talk with Cousin Ethel?" he said meaningly.

Lily had had innumerable talks with Cousin Ethel, but a terrifying certainty suddenly invaded her that her father was alluding to none of them.

She said "Yes" nevertheless, and Philip said hastily: "That's right, that's right," and did not look at her.

Lily hoped fervently that there the mysterious question would be allowed to rest.

When Mrs. Hardinge sought her that evening, however, she knew that her hopes were futile.

Cousin Ethel looked at the wedding-dress, scrutinized the white gloves, told Lily to drink a glass of hot milk so that she might sleep, and then began to wander aimlessly round Lily's bedroom, straightening small pieces of furniture with a confused and absent air.

"Everything is absolutely ready, I think, and Dorothy and I will be round in good time to help you dress. You—you're all right, dear?"

"Yes, thank you, Cousin Ethel. I'm so tired I believe I shall go to sleep at once."

"That's right. Try and not think about anything, but just go off to sleep."

Cousin Ethel seemed to hesitate, picked up a packet of labels and put it down again, and said rather hoarsely:

"You mustn't be nervous, my dear. Poor little thing—I wish you had your mother. But it'll be quite all right really, you know."

Mrs. Hardinge gazed at her with an apprehensive look.

"You've lived in the country all your life, after all. You—you know—— Well, dear," said Mrs. Hardinge in a sudden burst of courage, "after all—you've seen the animals."

The expression was perhaps infelicitous.

Lily, terrified and over-tired, began uncontrollably to cry.

XIV

It was a surprise to Lily Aubray to learn, while she was still upon her honeymoon, that her husband considered her to have been a spoilt child in the house of her father.

He did not in the least make this a subject of reproach, but humorously took it for granted.

"You were probably much too pretty *not* to spoil," said he.

The accusation mortified Lily.

"But I really don't think I was particularly spoilt, Nicholas. Not after Mother died, anyway. Father was rather strict about a good many things. I was not allowed sweets, for instance, and hardly ever saw any other children, and never went to parties. And you know how particular he is—and always was—about manners."

"Too particular," said Nicholas significantly. "He never scolded you, I suppose?"

"Not exactly."

"Just let you see when you'd done the wrong thing, eh? That's the trouble, my dear. A little wholesome criticism would have made you much less thin-skinned. It's a great pity there's so much difference in age between you and Kenneth. You've practically been an only child since you were ten years old."

Lily remembered various disparaging comments applied to herself by the girls at Bridgecrap, and certain doubts of

her father's absolute infallibility, stifled conscientiously hitherto, began to stir within her. It was true that she was childishly over-sensitive, brooding over a trifling criticism, and hurt by it the more, when she could not help recognizing its truth. Philip, when obliged to point out a defect in his offspring, had always done so with portentous elaboration and had himself suffered so obviously in the composition and the delivery of his rebuke, that each such occasion had acquired a monstrous and deplorable significance.

Nicholas, whether he praised or blamed his wife, did so with cheerful and unsparing candour. Far more often than he criticized her, however, he paid her extravagant, and not always discerning, compliments.

"You're so keen about things, Lily, that's what's so splendid of you. So thoroughly interested in everything."

Sometimes Nicholas said this when Lily had not been interested at all, but had merely, in accordance with the training of her childhood, simulated interest or amusement, in order that she might not disappoint him. She was not sufficiently well-educated to enjoy a very great deal of sight-seeing, and certain prolonged visits to art galleries and museums in Paris tired more than they pleased her. Music, of which she had a real appreciation, Nicholas professed to love, but Lily found that although he beat time with his hand very enthusiastically at the beginning of any well-known work, and frequently hummed something rather indeterminate under his breath, he found concerts in reality tedious.

When they visited a large cordite factory, he was enthusiastic, and Lily endeavoured to be so as well, understanding very little of what he told her, but saying "Yes,

I see," and asking questions that she hoped might please him.

Sometimes a fleeting wonder crossed her mind as to the possibilities of companionship between two people of identical tastes and desires. Once, even, she found herself reflecting upon the extreme, and obviously unattainable, luxury of perfect honesty, frank admission of likes and dislikes, frank recognition of differences to be admitted and respected. An impractical idea, and one that verged upon the disloyal. She did not mention it to Nicholas. There were, in fact, several things that could not be mentioned to Nicholas, although this, like so much else, Lily would not have owned to herself.

She was never at a loss for conversation with him, as she had often been with Philip, saving up small remarks and comments that occurred to her during the day in order to produce them at meal-time and promote talk.

With Nicholas, there were no weighty silences. He was almost always ready to talk, and Lily found it very easy to please him. He always seemed to find her amusing, and was equally ready to laugh at her jests and at his own.

Even his love-making was of a jovial, exuberant kind now, and he often exclaimed joyously and loudly that it was a topping world.

"Isn't this simply great now, little pal? Isn't it all splendid?"

An odd self-consciousness invaded Lily on these occasions; she wished that her replies were less perfunctory than she felt them to be.

She did not, somehow, feel exuberant, as Nicholas did, but oddly bewildered and tired.

Sometimes Nicholas was solicitous for her and asked

anxiously whether she had a headache, or felt fatigued, but he was curiously lacking in discernment, and seldom made the enquiry on occasions when Lily really was tired.

She decided, after a time, that he only did so when prompted by some lassitude of his own.

Lily was not consciously disappointed by a certain lack of sympathy between herself and her husband, partly because it was only evinced in small and infrequent ways, and partly because she conscientiously recalled to her memory the many warnings received from Cousin Ethel and other authorities.

Marriage was a thing of give and take, they had said.

Nothing was perfect in this world.

Romance was an affair of the imagination, and imagination was something to be kept strictly within bounds.

With these and other platitudes Lily contrived to stifle the memory of her old day-dreams, so kindly and gravely condemned by Miss Melody.

There were a great many lighter aspects of her new life that gave her a childish sense of gratification.

She liked the glances of surprise which strangers occasionally cast at her wedding-ring, and the polite astonishment of the shop assistants when they discovered her to be "Madame" instead of "Mademoiselle."

The many compliments that Nicholas received from acquaintances upon the beauty of his young wife he faithfully transmitted to Lily, and they added to her pleasure in her new dignities.

She enjoyed wearing her new and beautiful jewels, and when Nicholas, regardless of her already elaborate trousseau, begged her to buy Paris frocks, Lily declared herself

desirous of a black velvet evening dress, because "only married women wore black velvet."

Nicholas laughed heartily at her pretensions, took her to the most extravagant *couturier* in Paris, and had her photographed in the black velvet gown, that admirably enhanced her fair, child-like beauty.

He praised her looks continually, and Lily presently discovered that she could please him very much by allusions to his own height, the breadth of his shoulders, and his fine carriage.

Sometimes he suggested that they might be taken for father and daughter, but he obviously wished the idea to be received with friendly derision, and Lily never failed to gratify him.

Nevertheless, Lily in her own mind very often contrasted Nicholas with her father.

On the whole, life was very much easier and more natural with Nicholas than it had been with Philip. Each, in widely different ways, was exacting, but Nicholas only demanded an intensification of display, where Philip had required a suppression of natural characteristics. Nicholas was actually pleased when Lily admitted that she liked sweets, and did not at all appear to think it a waste of money to buy her *fondants* and *marrons glacés*.

Sometimes she thought that the most child-like qualities in her were the ones that he most valued. She wore a different frock almost every day, and knew that he delighted in her display of vanity. The new frocks themselves pleased her, too, and the novelty of her independence, and even such trivialities as her new address.

"Mrs. Aubray," she read aloud with a certain triumph, on the envelopes of newly-arrived letters.

Mrs. Aubray glanced self-consciously at her wedding-ring, visualized herself in her new clothes, and the graceful disposition of her wavy hair as manipulated by her new maid, and read her letters from England.

"My dearest little child,

"The house seems very sad and empty without you, especially now that Kenneth has left it too. However, it is very pleasant to think of your happiness, and no doubt you are greatly enjoying your time in Paris with your husband. Poor little Kenneth went off to school very pluckily, and showed no signs at all of feeling upset. I was vexed at receiving no telegram from him to announce his safe arrival, although I gave him the money for one when I saw him off at the station, and begged him to ask some elder boy to see to it for him the moment they arrived. I wish now that I had done this myself, as no telegram came.

"I had to send off a wire myself, with answer prepaid to the school, and received a satisfactory reply yesterday afternoon.

"Your letters are a great pleasure, and your descriptions of your sight-seeing most clever and interesting. Cousin Charlie is very kind about enlivening my solitude, and we have had some capital games of chess. Your Cousin Ethel is in London with Dorothy, and has kindly been to the new house several times to see that all is in good order for your return. She is, I believe, writing to you about this, and also to give you a piece of news, which will doubtless interest you greatly, but which is to be kept a secret at present, I understand. I will therefore say nothing further until I hear from you.

"We have had very poor weather here since you left, but I hope that Paris is in sunshine.

"My love to Nicholas and to yourself, my dear child, and may God Almighty bless you both.

"Ever your devoted Father,

"Philip Stellenthorpe."

"I hope poor Kenneth wasn't dreadfully furious at having that prepaid telegram," was Lily's reflection.

She opened Ethel Hardinge's letter.

"My dear Lily,

"Delighted to hear such excellent news of you, the girls all enjoyed your letter. We have a great piece of news to tell you. Dorothy is engaged to be married. 'One wedding makes another' they always say. He is very nice, indeed, and we are delighted. It has all happened very quickly, and it's quite private, so please tell no one, except, of course, Nicholas.

"He is a Captain Durand, a soldier, and we greatly fear that it means many years of foreign service, but they are really in love, and I think I can talk Cousin Charlie into letting them be married before the regiment sails for India next year.

"D. will write you all details, of course. You never saw anyone so radiant as she is—but I expect you know all about it!! I know you'll be delighted at her happiness.

"Your house looks lovely. D. and I have been round there several times, and hustled the workmen, and everything ought to be quite finished in another ten days. We go home to-morrow, after a very busy time, as you can imagine, with all this excitement. Everybody wearing

yellow nowadays, it seems to me, and everything very frilly. Pink and blue seem to be quite out of fashion, such a pity, as D. always looks bilious in yellow or cream-colour. But, of course, you'll tell us all about clothes and colours when you get back from Paris. I hope the new frocks are a great success. Did the black hat travel all right?

"Best love, dear Lily. It's such a real delight to think of your happiness.

"Yours affec'ly and in haste,

"E. H."

Lily searched hastily amongst the remaining envelopes for Dorothy's letter. It was a very long one scrawled in Dorothy's untidy handwriting at various intervals of time.

"Dearest Lily,

"You will be surprised. I'm engaged!!! Really, I can hardly believe it myself yet, and it's deadly private at present, though why I can't think, but you know what old people are like, taking about being caushus, and waiting and seeing, et cetera. But of course I said I'd have to tell you at once, you having had all the same excitement yourself such a little while ago.

"Well! I'll try and begin at the beginning, and not to be too frightfully excited to write sense. His name is Frank Durand, and he is a soldier, taller than me, thank goodness, though not, I must say, nearly as tall as yours. He is honestly and truly good looking (not just me thinking so, but everybody says so) with brown eyes, rather long eyelashes, and a short moustache, and brown hair, very short and thick. He's got ripping teeth, which makes

him look particularly nice when he smiles, which he pretty often does. He is a good deal sunburnt—brown, not red, I am thankful to say. He is twenty-eight, and has done frightfully well in the Army, for his age, though he doesn't seem in the least clever, which is lucky, or I should have been terrified of him.

"The whole story of it was that we met at the County Ball just after your wedding, and he asked me for hundreds of dances, and I must say Mother scolded me like anything afterwards, and very nearly threatened not to take me to London with her at all, but I knew she would, of course, all the time. In fact I'd told him I was going to London next day for a fortnight and told him the name of the hotel and everything. He came and called the very day after we'd arrived, and luckily Mother liked him, and asked him to lunch—this was Friday—and on Sunday we met him in the Park, and I had to pretend I was frightfully surprised. (I wasn't in the least, really, having said in a casual way that Mother loved the Park and I always took her to sit there after Church.)

"On Tuesday I wore my new saxe-blue frock—that I must say Miss Jones has made simply heavenly—and he came to tea, and asked if we'd come to a theatre party that had been got up frightfully hurriedly for the next night. (He told me afterwards he'd got it up on purpose, of course.) There was a man there for Mother, old and rather deadly—and two other men from his regiment, and his sister, rather pretty, but quite old, at least twenty-nine, I should think—and a Miss Ballantyne, who had the most disgustingly lovely hair, real auburn and very curly. You know how impossible it is to get mine to wave, even with tongs! However, I had on my new evening frock

that you haven't seen, a really good white satin, with plain pearl trimming, and I didn't look bad.

"We had dinner first at a restaurant, and I was feeling so excited all the time I could hardly speak. I didn't sit next him at dinner, but I did at the theatre, and there was nobody on his other side, because he sat at the end of the row. I can honestly say, Lily, that I didn't hear a single word of the play, though the other people were roaring away like mad, with laughter.

"I simply can't tell you the sort of things he was saying to me the whole time, but of course you can imagine!

"Well, it was raining when we came out, and there was the usual fuss about cabs and things, and Mother keeping on about wanting a four-wheeler, and the other men went away by Tube, and the Ballantyne girl had a tiny sort of broom sent for her and took Phyllis Durand and there was room for one other, and of course it ought to have been Frank, but he found a hansom and said could he take me home in it, and Mother go in the broom?

"Can you imagine Mother allowing such a thing? Of course I felt certain she wouldn't, but I did look at her to give her a hint, and she said yes like a perfect lamb!!

"Well, he did it in the hansom, just as we were turning out of Shaftesbury Avenue into Piccadilly Circus. I was frightfully surprised in a way, because it seemed so frightfully quick, but I was simply frantically happy, and only afraid I should wake up and find it all a dream.

"I must say, I'd no idea life could be at all like this! When I think of how we all stodged away through the days at Bridgcrap, and thought ourselves quite happy! Doesn't it all seem a long way off?

"Well, my hand is getting frightfully tired, so I must end as quick as I can.

"I told Mother next morning, and I must say she was very nice, and he came round and they had a long jaw, and seemed to hit it off very well together. Mother wrote her usual reams to Father, and pretended that it all depended on him, but of course we knew it was all right the minute she approved.

"I haven't got a ring yet, but Father is coming up here, or we're going home early next week—it isn't yet decided which—after that we can be properly engaged. Of course we really are, now, but we pretend to think we're not, to please Mother, et cetera. Frank luckily has no relations except his sister. I am dying for you to know him, he is so awfully nice, and we're simply too happy for words. Do write a long answer to this.

"Best love from

"Dorothy.

"P.S.—I feel rather a selfish pig for writing all about myself, but I knew you'd want to hear the really interesting parts. I hope you're having a heavenly time too, with your one, but of course you are. Your house looks simply ripping. Frank and I will probably live abroad in bungalows and things when we're married, and not be a bit rich."

Happiness had positively endowed Dorothy with descriptive powers hitherto unsuspected in her.

Lily felt excited and pleased, and oddly sad, all at once. She read Dorothy's letter over again.

Not a word about handy-pandy, footy-wootie and eyesie-pysie! Lily could not help wondering whether

these adjuncts to courtship had been dispensed with. She was inclined to hope so. Dorothy's happiness was, evidently enough, above the realm of trivialities.

Lily read the letter through for the third time. Dorothy had always been inarticulate, but it seemed now that she was suddenly able to express herself. However colloquial the words that she might have selected, Lily felt that they somehow conveyed very vividly an impression of sudden and overwhelming happiness.

Lily, in a strange and confused way, felt as though, through Dorothy, she saw exemplified the brilliant descriptions given to her of the joys of early love, descriptions which, when she had tried to apply them to herself, had seemed extraordinarily unreal. Her will had repeated the assurances of her happiness, but her emotions had remained unstirred.

She told Nicholas the news that her letters had contained.

"By Jove! That's excellent. I hope he's a good fellow. When are they going to be married?"

"She doesn't say, but Cousin Ethel evidently thinks it will be before next year, when his regiment goes to India."

"Splendid! Funny you and she should be married more or less at the same time, eh? You'll be able to tell her all about the management of a husband—an old married woman like you." His laughter, as always, prolonged itself considerably beyond the limits of his wife's very faint amusement at the jest.

"Give her my best congratulations, Lily. I'm so glad about it. She's a first-rate girl, isn't she? I should like her immensely even if she wasn't a great friend of my little wife's. Captain Durand is in luck, isn't he?"

Lily assented eagerly.

"Don't you think Dorothy is pretty, Nicholas?"

"I know somebody who's much prettier." He laughed and kissed her.

She felt ungrateful because she wished that he would give her the opinion she had asked for instead of caressing her.

The next moment he did so.

"Yes, I think she's quite nice-looking. She's got plenty of brains, too, hasn't she?"

His tone took an affirmative reply for granted, and Lily gave it because she was afraid that it would sound ungenerous to express the opinion that Dorothy was emphatically devoid of brains.

She reflected, besides, that Nicholas was more likely to be a competent judge of brains than she was herself.

Lily was always willing to tell herself that the judgments of Nicholas were more to be trusted than were her own. She liked to acknowledge to herself his superiority, believing that because she acknowledged it, she relied upon it.

But in the recesses of her soul, into which she had been taught to shun investigation, her own intuitions and convictions remained unaltered.

"Where are they going to live? In India?" Nicholas enquired.

His absorption in any matter under discussion was always cordial and unfeigned, and always came as a joyful surprise to Lily, accustomed to Philip's elaborately polite pretences at an interest which he in reality seldom felt in the affairs of other people.

"I suppose they'll live in India," she said. "I don't know how many more years of foreign service he has, but he's only twenty-eight. Dorothy says something about living in bungalows and places."

"Good! She means to go with him, then?"

"Oh, I'm sure she does," said Lily, surprised. "Cousin Ethel will miss her dreadfully."

"So will someone else, I'm afraid," said Nicholas kindly. "I hoped you were going to have her to stay with you when we were settled in town. I'm afraid it will be lonely for you sometimes, when I'm very busy, as I sometimes am." He looked at her for a moment. "Perhaps we shall be able to put that right later on, eh, Lily?"

She smiled at him.

Such references did not discompose her in the least, and she was placidly glad that Nicholas should so much desire a child. It had pleased and relieved her to find that her husband did not consider the subject of potential babies as improper as she had always supposed it to be.

"But there's another sister, the little one at school. You like her better than Janet, don't you? We can have her to stay with us, I hope. But I shall tell Dorothy that she's let me down, by running off like this to India."

Nicholas laughed heartily.

"All the same, she's a plucky girl. It's no joke for a woman to spend all the best years of her life following the drum. It means bad climates very often, and no fixed home, and perhaps separation from her children—certainly separation from her own people. All that means some pretty big sacrifices."

"Yes." Lily spoke dreamily and with hesitation.

"But you think it would be worth it, eh?"

"Yes," said Lily with more of emphasis in her tone than was habitual to her.

"Oh yes, worth it over and over again for the man one loved."

"You little dear!" cried Nicholas exuberantly.

She realized with a violent shock, as he caught her in his arms, that her thoughts had been of some visionary abstraction, and not at all of Nicholas Aubray.

XV

SOMETHING which could hardly be called a reconciliation, but which was gracefully apostrophized by Miss Clotilde Stellingthorpe as a *rapprochement*, took place between Philip and his sister after Lily's marriage.

Philip would neither admit that they had ever been estranged, nor that the undoubted fact that Lily owed her acquaintance with Nicholas Aubray to her aunt, was in any way connected with their renewal of intercourse.

It needed Miss Stellingthorpe to carry off the situation with what she would herself certainly have described as *désinvolture*.

"My good, my excellent Philip!" she cried in tones of patronage. "Well did I know that you could not persist in your undignified sulks for ever. It was more than time that you and I met again."

Her excellent Philip, with every appearance of being seriously annoyed, replied unsmilingly:

"Circumstances have been very much against our meeting, my dear Clo."

His eyes were fixed upon the ground, but it would not have been possible to escape hearing the contemptuous snarl of Aunt Clo's thumb and middle finger.

"You still refuse to call a spade a spade," she said with mingled scorn and compassion. "I recognized your

old weakness when I received our little one at Genazano."

"Lily is a good, happy little child, I hope," said Philip quite automatically, making use of the formula that he had always opposed to any criticism of his parental methods.

Aunt Clo shrugged her shoulders.

"She is singularly ill-equipped to encounter life. You ask me why I come to such a conclusion, what I find in our Lily? I find in her an invincible ignorance of the true facts of life, the tendency of an ostrich to hide her head from the light, an entire absence of that frank, free outlook that is the birthright of every thinking soul. I find her wrapped in the conventionalities and sentimentalities of a bygone age."

Philip remained perfectly silent, but Miss Stellenthorpe was not thereby debarred from carrying on a spirited conversation.

"Did I then, you enquire, break down the foolish wall of prejudice and ignorance, and show our Lily something of the blue mountains beyond? I reply that I did. My own bigger, wider, clearer vision was what I strove to teach her."

"You gave Lily a most delightful visit to Italy," said Philip in measured tones. "She is very much beholden to you, and so am I. Nicholas Aubray, of course, is an old friend of yours."

"Aha! we turn the conversation!" cried Aunt Clo, with an air of greater shrewdness than was altogether warranted by her penetration of Philip's exceedingly obvious manœuvre.

"Ce bon Nicholas! He will widen the little one's views.

You have never taught her to seek for the great things of life, Philip. Perhaps as well! I myself have been storm-tossed and passion-wrecked, and now that the evening has come, I look back upon the day of tempest with a great calm. But all are not fit."

Miss Stellenthorpe shook her head repeatedly, and fixed her gaze upon vacancy.

Philip making no attempt to break the retrospective reverie of his sister, she roused herself from it briskly, with her characteristic laugh, her head flung back.

"But I scarcely know how I came to speak of myself. That is not worthy of either of us. Tell me, my Philip, how goes life with you?"

"I am very well, Clo."

"The body, yes!" cried Aunt Clo with impatient scorn. "But the spirit, the imperishable, the eternal?"

"You know that life is over for me," said Philip, gently and with perfect conviction.

"No!" said Miss Stellenthorpe in a voice like a trumpet-call. And with a still greater effect of emphasis she substituted, "Nay!" a moment later.

"Nay! Can life ever be over while the sun shines, the wind blows, the open road lies before you? Come, my Philip, this is not well!"

Aunt Clo struck a rousing hand between Philip's shoulder-blades.

"*Avanti!* There is work for us all. Because you have failed once you need not despair."

"Failed?"

"You refused to listen to me—when I bade you face the truth. You deluded yourself with catchwords and pretty phrases, and allowed Vonnie to——"

Philip Stellingthorpe faced his sister with a grey face and compressed lips.

"That will do, Clotilde."

"Ah, coward, coward!" said Miss Stellingthorpe. But she spoke in lower and more doubtful tones and made no immediate attempt to impel her brother to face life with her own unflinching enjoyment of the process.

Her visit upon the whole did not greatly disturb the monotonous and purposeless routine of Philip's days. For many hours at a time Aunt Clo remained invisible, after announcing gravely and with a certain air of sad, steadfast responsibility, that she had many, many letters to write.

"Not idle, trivial notes or pages of foolish gossip, but words of counsel, of cheer to a darkened soul, I trust. There is one *là-bas*, who needs me, needs me greatly. A frail, delicate bird of foreign plumage, dashing its head against the bars of a gilded cage."

Sometimes it was a bird, sometimes a slender bark tossing upon stormy waters, sometimes a pale flower bent before the blast. But always Aunt Clo's support was craved, and always was she ready to devote her time, her energies, her pen-and-ink, to the task.

The Hardinges pursued acquaintance with Aunt Clo with a certain amount of awe, although she was gracious to the three girls and to Dorothy's *fiancé*, as one who watches with benevolence the antics of a tribe of aborigines.

"How young! and ah! how English!" murmured Aunt Clo, with an air of having nothing whatever to do with the nationality in question.

Before Lily and Nicholas Aubray returned from their honeymoon, Aunt Clo had left England again.

"What would you?" she enquired of the interested Hardinges, who listened to her as to an astonishing oracle. "What would you? I cannot breathe in the atmosphere of my brother's house. It has always been so. *Pour moi, il n'y a que la vérité!* I must have the truth, fearless and outspoken, or I die!"

The Hardinges looked startled.

"What a household, his and poor Eleanor's! You"—Aunt Clo's finger flew out accusingly at Charlie Hardinge—"you were there often, while my sister-in-law was alive?"

"Yes, yes, often enough. The kiddies were badly brought up—badly brought up. I used to tell Philip so."

"I also," said Aunt Clo grimly. "The little Vonnie, now. Well did I see that the child was not destined to live long. I sought to open their eyes—oh, most gently, most kindly—and with what result, you ask? With the result that they declared themselves hurt—they proclaimed me unsympathetic. Me! Ha!"

Aunt Clo gave a short laugh.

"Well, well, well," said Charlie pacifically. "That's all over now, and Lily has a very nice home of her own. I'm sure you must be very proud of your niece, Miss Stellingthorpe. She's a charming girl, and a very pretty girl."

"Lily is as yet a child," said Miss Stellingthorpe, unconsciously quoting her brother.

"I'm glad she has a good husband," said Ethel decisively.

To Ethel's way of thinking, all husbands were good husbands, provided that they were not actively bad husbands.

"Lily is very sweet and gentle," she said, "and very easily influenced. It's a very good thing she married young."

"Easily influenced? Ah! Well, it's at all events a *likeable* weakness——" graciously returned Aunt Clo, merely resting upon that pleasant sense of superiority engendered by the contemplation of any weakness unshared by the contemplative one.

"I cannot wait to see her, *hélas!* There are other claims upon me. Sad, sad, lost ones, groping through a labyrinth," said Aunt Clo darkly.

To the rescue of these straying souls she accordingly hastened.

Lily, settling down into her new life, felt a shamefaced satisfaction that she should escape the slight strain entailed by the effort of living up to Aunt Clotilde's exalted ideals.

It was easier to choose furniture for the drawing-room without the terrible certainty that one's writing-table would be found Philistine, one's colour scheme crude.

Lily enjoyed arranging her possessions, but she was both inexperienced and diffident, and it was a relief to find that Nicholas had eclectic and cultivated tastes.

"Did you invent that sort of panel thing?" said Sylvia Hardinge in awe.

Lily shook her head. She was nearly as much overwhelmed as was Sylvia.

"Nicholas got it. It's Chinese lacquer."

"My goodness!" said Sylvia, with a crispness and crudity of utterance that Lily felt inclined to echo.

Paris had been a curious, transitory stage of dressing up every day, sight-seeing, meeting new people, dining in crowded restaurants. There had all the time been a sense

of impermanence, as though it was all a strange experiment that might be relinquished, half regretfully, half with relief, once accomplished.

At first, life in the London flat as Mrs. Aubray, seemed nearly as experimental.

There were a great many new people, already seen in glimpses during that confused and crowded period before the wedding, and scarcely distinguished one from another. Lily turned to Nicholas with a new sense of seeking a comparatively familiar refuge, after a bewildering number of encounters with these kind, strange faces.

Nicholas was out every day now, and Lily first awaited in herself the deplorable state of tearful loneliness that Cousin Ethel had once upon a time described to her as the portion of young wives. But whether because Nicholas, unlike Cousin Ethel's husband, was able and willing to give his wife a subscription to Mudie's Library, or whether because Lily had not been torn from the society of numerous brothers and sisters, no such dejection of spirits assailed her.

Housekeeping seemed to be an extraordinarily simple matter with an experienced cook, admirable servants, and the ample allowance given her by her husband. Lily's most arduous task in her household was the choosing of exquisite and expensive flowers at a Bond Street florist, and disposing them in her drawing-room.

She played a great deal upon the Erard piano, read a great many novels, a little poetry and an occasional volume of memoirs or biography, and tried to think of requirements in needlework that should keep her new maid occupied. It seemed a pleasant, leisurely, rather aimless

sort of existence. Not quite what imagination had pictured married life to be.

But Lily shied, mentally, at the fatal word "imagination," the thing which had so often been pointed out to her as a dangerous pitfall.

Kind old aunts of Nicholas, or young married women who, nevertheless, were for the most part older than herself, asked Lily directly or indirectly whether she was happy, and she always assented readily enough.

She had been told that certain things constituted happiness, had been trained to accept her values ready-made, and was consequently able to enjoy with placidity those things which her natural instincts, long since stifled and overlain, would have held in a quite different estimate to that of the people surrounding her.

On Sundays Nicholas was with her all day, and very often they went into the country from Saturday to Monday.

For the first few months after her marriage Lily went to church every Sunday as she had always done, and Nicholas accompanied her. She could hardly have said when it was that she first became aware of his attitude towards religion.

"I wouldn't interfere with anybody's faith, my dear, least of all with yours," said Nicholas, thereby causing his wife, for the first time, to ask herself in what her faith consisted.

"Do you only go to church to please me, then, Nicholas?"

"I like to go anywhere with you, darling."

"But tell me what do you think about religion?"

I don't know that I know very much about it, my

dear. The old aunt who brought me up was a Presbyterian, as I think I told you. I had a good deal of church-going to put up with, as a small lad, and Sunday was a very dull day, when I mightn't play with my toys or get my clothes dirty, and that's pretty well all I know about it."

"And after you grew up, Nicholas?"

"I went through the usual phases, I suppose. I remember telling my tutor, when I left school, that I was an atheist."

Nicholas stopped and looked humorously at his wife, and they both laughed.

"Good! I was beginning to think I'd married a little saint. Atheism is a common complaint amongst the very young, I imagine."

"What are you now, Nicholas?"

"I suppose an agnostic," said Nicholas reflectively. "I can hardly imagine any thoughtful person, over a certain age, being anything else. Though I suppose that's nonsense, when one thinks of the number of deeply religious people that exist in all denominations."

"I suppose you'd call Father a religious man?"

"He ought to have been a Trappist monk," declared Nicholas.

"But that's Roman Catholic! Father is very much prejudiced against Roman Catholics."

"I know he is."

"They have no sense of honour," said Lily seriously.

Nicholas looked at her quizzically.

"How many Catholics have you known, Lily?"

"I was at school at a convent for a very little while, when I was ten, but I certainly didn't get to know any-

body there very well. I don't think I should have been allowed to have a Catholic friend."

"Well, I think if I were you I shouldn't judge them quite so severely until you've had some experience of them. I have some very good friends among Catholics, and some of them priests, into the bargain."

Lily looked at her husband, rather bewildered.

"One must respect any sincere form of belief, don't you think?" he said gently, "even though one doesn't happen to share it. It's pure accident that you or I weren't born of Buddhist parents, after all."

"Do you mean that you don't think it matters much what Church one belongs to?"

"I don't think it matters in the least. How can it? The great thing is to try and keep straight, isn't it?"

Nicholas remained meditative for a moment.

"Look here, Lily darling, don't run away with the idea that I want to—to destroy your faith, or any nonsense of that sort. I've never studied these questions, and I don't know anything about theology and all the rest of it. It's quite right you should go to church, and religion is a great comfort to a woman sometimes. I know that."

He nodded with an air of great sagacity.

Lily wondered whether religion would ever be a great comfort to her, should she require comfort. And why should Nicholas specify such comfort as applicable to a woman rather than to a man?

She did not consciously dwell upon the matter for very long, but gradually became accustomed to view the question in the way that her husband evidently did, as a purely temperamental one. It was not long, moreover, before Lily perceived that Nicholas was far from being

alone in his point of view. It was shared by the majority of the people belonging to the world in which she now moved with her husband.

On the whole it was a relief to feel that there were other opinions than those held by Philip Stellenthorpe, Ethel Hardinge, or Miss Melody. The friends of Nicholas, indeed, more nearly approximated in their views to the startling enunciations of Aunt Clo, whose unconventionalities of diction soon began to acquire, in the retrospect, a character of the merest commonplace.

Lily sometimes told herself, with a certain amount of secret complacency, that she really was a grown-up Person at last.

It gave her an agreeable sense of dignity to receive in her own house the people who had loomed largest upon the horizon of her childhood.

Miss Melody, allowing herself a summer holiday on the Continent, broke her journey in order to spend an hour or two with her erstwhile pupil, and was frankly captivated by the mingled courtesy and cheery good-fellowship shown towards her by Nicholas.

"He makes me think of Chaucer's 'verrye parfit gentil knyghte,'" she said to Lily. "Childe dear, I feel the better for seeing you in your happiness."

Cousin Ethel, less classically, admitted to deriving similar benefit.

"It does my heart good to see you, Lily! Such a lovely house, and such a splendid husband to take care of you. You're a lucky child."

And Philip:

"This is all very charming, my little pet. You should be very happy and—and thankful."

"Yes, Father."

It did not strike either of them, as Lily made her dutiful response, that even if she had not been happy, it never would have occurred to her to tell her father so.

The months slipped by, and it was a matter of rather pleased surprise to the *naïveté* of Nicholas Aubray's wife that she and her husband were not confronted by that picturesque episode famed in both art and literature as the First Quarrel.

Cousin Ethel had certainly warned her that there would be "ups and downs," and Lily had taken it for granted that these included occasional minor dissensions between her husband and herself.

"Do you know that Nicholas and I have never had a single quarrel?" she observed to Dorothy Hardinge.

"I shouldn't think anybody would ever dare to quarrel with him. Frank and I have had one."

There was so much of a rather melancholy pride in the announcement that Lily felt justified in enquiring further.

"Oh, it was about my dancing with other people. He wanted me to dance at least every other dance with him, and I wouldn't. He was furious, and for the matter of that, so was I."

"Dorothy! You're never furious," said Lily incredulously.

She could not remember ever to have seen Dorothy otherwise than good-humoured and easy-going and light-hearted.

"Well, I was angry that time. I *foamed*."

Dorothy paused reflectively.

"Of course, we made it up afterwards, and it was heavenly."

"I can't imagine your ever being very angry," said Lily.

"Neither could I," Dorothy admitted frankly. "I always thought I had a beautiful temper, especially compared to poor Janet. But I'm afraid I haven't, after all. Perhaps the truth is that Frank is the only person I've ever known who's really worth quarrelling with."

The explanation, with its odd, un-Hardinge-like quality of discernment, was destined to remain in Lily's memory.

She asked Dorothy to stay with her, and they purchased together the very economically-chosen outfit that Dorothy hoped to take to India with her, which Lily supplemented as often as she dared with presents from herself and Nicholas.

"Thanks awfully, Lily. The blue feather you gave me will go too beautifully with this, won't it? *Seulement je pense que je sais un shop moins cher dans le High Street. Nous pouvons disons ici que nous le penserons-over.*"

The Hardinge superstition that none but themselves could understand schoolroom French was an old one, and had served them many an ill turn with Miss Clotilde Stellingthorpe.

When Dorothy's visit was over, and the time before her marriage and departure for India seemed to be lessening very rapidly, Lily realized that, although they had little in common save youth and a year or two's companionship, she would miss her very much.

After all, it had been amusing to discuss frocks and ornaments and purchases together, to rejoice candidly in the glory of Lily's new possessions, and to laugh together

at old, foolish, trivial jokes and catchwords that had no merit at all except that of association.

Lily, rather surprised, and very much ashamed, one evening broke into involuntary tears. She did not want Nicholas to know that she had cried, but the tear-stains on her face would not be effaced, and after all, Lily thought that he would understand. There was already a sharply-marked line of division in her thoughts between the things that Nicholas would, and those that he would not, understand.

She told him why she had cried.

"Poor little dear!" Nicholas was very kind and petted her, saying that she was tired, and must take more care of herself. But the next day he was inexplicably depressed, with a tendency to monosyllables and a complete inability to smile.

Lily, only too familiar with such phenomena in her father, felt her heart sink.

"Are you worried, Nicholas?" she ventured.

"No."

He raised his eyebrows slightly, as though wishing to show her that he was surprised at the question.

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

"I could never be vexed with you, darling," he said, speaking more naturally.

Later, he returned to the subject of his own accord.

"What made my little wife think I could be vexed with her? So long as you don't feel that I'm an elderly fellow who had no business to marry a pretty little girl out of the nursery. Is that it, eh, Lily?"

He laughed as he spoke but there was a kind of nervous anxiety in the look that he turned upon her.

"Of course I don't, Nicholas!"

She raised her lips to his quickly, partly in order to hide the understanding that she felt had leapt into her face.

She saw that Nicholas was sensitive upon the subject of his age. He had found, in Lily's regret at the loss of her old playmate, an implied allusion to the years that separated him from his wife.

It had hurt his feelings.

All this Lily felt with intuitive certainty. Neither she nor Nicholas alluded further to the subject, but he retained his gravity of demeanor until some trifling whimsicality struck his sense of humour, when his habitual spontaneous gaiety returned to him, with all the suddenness of a child's transition from sulky silence to laughter.

Lily was gladdened and relieved by the restoration of her husband's good spirits, and her plastic youth received yet another impression.

She must never let Nicholas know that she was anything less than radiantly happy, or he would attribute it to the disparity of years between them, and his feelings would be hurt.

There was no calamity that it seemed to her more essential to avoid.

XVI

A YEAR after Dorothy Hardinge's marriage, her father died suddenly.

"It seems so incredible, somehow," said Lily.

"My dear, none of us can live for ever. But I know what you mean."

The face of Nicholas was abnormally grave, perhaps in decorous concealment of the indubitable fact that Charlie Hardinge's unexpected death could hardly affect him very deeply, save through concern for its effect upon Lily.

"I don't know why it's so difficult to associate some people with death. Cousin Charlie, somehow, seems part of all the things I've always known, all my life. I can't realize he isn't there any more."

Nicholas patted her hand gently.

"You'd like to come down with me for the funeral, wouldn't you? We could stay with your father for a couple of nights, no doubt, and you might be a comfort to those poor girls. They're both at home, of course?"

"Yes. Poor Dorothy, it will be dreadful for her, away in India."

"Yes, that's hard luck!"

Nicholas was very sympathetic and kind, and Lily felt grateful.

She was, as she had said, utterly unable to associate

good-natured, commonplace Cousin Charlie Hardinge with the idea of death.

Philip Stellenthorpe met his daughter and son-in-law with an air of appropriate solemnity which, however, was too near to his habitual expression to be greatly noticeable.

"This is a sad business—terribly sudden. I'm glad you've come down—very glad. They'll appreciate that very much."

"How is Cousin Ethel?" said Lily.

"I've not seen her, but the girls say she's bearing up very bravely, poor thing. I went over there at once, of course, to see if I could be of any help, and saw Janet. Very much upset, of course, poor child, but most sensible and helpful. A brother of poor Charlie's is arriving to-day with his wife, and meanwhile we've made most of the necessary arrangements."

"What time is the funeral?"

Philip gave a very slight start at the question, asked in serious, but unsubdued, tones by Nicholas, and Lily guessed instantly that her father had hitherto avoided making direct use of the word.

"Half-past two, the day after to-morrow. That gives *her* family, who are very much scattered about the world, time to get here."

"Would Janet and Sylvia like me to go and see them to-morrow, do you think, Father?"

"Yes, my little pet. Janet says that your Cousin Ethel would like to see you, too. They think it's a comfort to her to talk. It's been a terrible shock, of course."

"Very sudden."

Lily knew by the way in which Nicholas spoke that he

was making conversation, and that he would secretly have welcomed a change of subject.

"Very sudden indeed. He was apparently in his usual health, and perfectly cheerful, until Sunday evening, when he complained of a pain in his side. They none of them thought anything of it—he didn't himself—but he went upstairs early. He'd only been out of the room a few moments when they heard the sound of a fall. The maid heard it from the dining-room and went upstairs, and there she found him on the floor, unconscious. Most mercifully it wasn't your Cousin Ethel herself who found him there—the shock was terrible enough as it was. The doctor was there inside half an hour, but he couldn't do anything at all. It was all over by ten o'clock, and he never recovered consciousness at all."

"Heart, I suppose?"

"Yes."

The Hardinges themselves told Lily these details all over again, each one repeating the same things over and over again in different words.

Janet and Sylvia sat forlornly in the schoolroom, in old black serge skirts and new black blouses hastily made up by the village dressmaker. They had nothing to do.

An uncle and aunt had arrived and the aunt was upstairs with Ethel. The uncle had gone down to the church "to see about things," they said.

"Oh, Lily, if only it hadn't been so awfully, awfully sudden! We'd all had dinner together, you know, just as usual, and he only stayed in the drawing-room a few minutes, and then said he thought he'd go to bed early."

"He did say he'd a pain in his side; he told Mother so—but we never though it was anything——" said Sylvia.

"No. And then he went upstairs, and we were all sewing, just as usual, and we never heard anything. It was Emily who heard, from the dining-room, clearing away dinner. And she went upstairs and his door was open, and she saw—oh, Lily!"

Tears choked Janet's utterance.

Both girls had cried until their eyelids were swollen and discoloured and their faces white from exhaustion.

"Has there been time to hear from Dorothy?" Lily asked, for the sake of saying something.

"Not yet. The cable might come any time, now. We cabled to Frank, of course. And *he* was so pleased about Dorothy's baby and everything, and now—now he'll never see her."

They sobbed and cried.

"The baby will be a comfort to Dorothy."

"Yes, oh yes. And to Mother too, later on."

A bell rang, and Janet said:

"That might be the cable."

Waiting for the Indian cable seemed to be the nearest approach to an occupation that was possible.

"Uncle has sent up the announcement to the papers, so to-morrow I suppose there'll be telegrams and things," said Sylvia, shuddering. "But the Indian cable ought to be here to-day."

The cable came at last and Janet took it upstairs unopened to her mother's room, and Sylvia and Lily remained in the schoolroom, where the clock hands moved so slowly that they often seemed to have stopped altogether. Lily held Sylvia's hand, and spoke from time to time, trying not to think that her platitudes were utterly meaningless.

"He couldn't have felt anything at all—it would have been so much more dreadful if he'd had to suffer . . . and now he—he's so much happier . . . he'd want you to be brave. . . ."

She wondered desperately, as she spoke, whether she really believed what she said. Was Cousin Charlie happy now, with some incommunicable bliss? Was he really capable any more, of wishes and hopes concerning those left behind?

Sylvia cried on, softly and drearily, and the hands of the clock crawled slowly round.

Presently Janet came back again and said that the aunt and uncle were downstairs.

"It's so dreadful to have to think of meals and things, just the same," she said.

"Mother is staying upstairs, Lily, but she'd like you to come and see her this afternoon. I think it's a comfort to her to talk."

Cousin Ethel was very brave, and it seemed, as Janet and Sylvia had said, to comfort her to talk.

"He was so *good*, Lily—that's such a comfort to me. Twenty-five years married, and I never had a cross word from him! I like to think that the children will all be able to remember that. He was such a kind father, too, so devoted to his girls. Do you remember how he used to call them 'kiddie-widdies'?"

"After all, Lily dear, one of us had to go first—it's only a very, very few that are allowed to slip away together—and I couldn't have borne to think of him left without me. He's happy now, for ever and ever, and I don't suppose it'll seem more than a flash of time to him, where he is now, before we meet again."

Cousin Ethel cried, too, but it was evident that she found consolation in the thought of an Eternal Life holding the certain promise of ultimate reunion.

Lily went away and promised Janet and Sylvia that she would come again the following day.

"The Hannigan aunts are arriving to-night, and Uncle Bob and Aunt Mary. I think perhaps it's easier, when there are people there," Sylvia whispered.

Lily was glad to think that they would have the occupation of preparing for, and receiving, the visitors. Anything would surely be better than sitting, sick with crying, repeating over and over again all that they had said already.

She felt very tired, and full of remorse for her own inadequacy. She knew that there had been no conviction behind any of the commonplace utterances with which she had striven to convey consolation. Only her sympathy with their sorrow had been real. Even sympathy, however, seemed to fail her when Philip Stellingthorpe spoke of personal loss to himself.

"Our very nearest friend, poor Charlie," he observed sorrowfully. "There are very few left now, my little Lily, whom I know as I did your poor Cousin Charlie. We'd been friends for many years and I thought very highly of him—very highly indeed."

Lily, against her own will, knew that during Cousin Charlie's life-time Philip had not thought highly of him at all. They had not been intimate friends—Philip had no intimate friends—and it was Charlie Hardinge, not Philip, who had taken for granted that a good-fellowship, at all events, existed between them. Philip had very often resented Charlie's officious interest in his affairs, and his reiterations of unwanted advice.

"Well," said Philip with a heavy sigh, "our loss is his gain, poor fellow, no doubt."

Then he, too, believed, or affected to believe, that Cousin Charlie was now in a region of undimmed happiness, a disincarnate spirit in the presence of his Creator.

Lily deliberately tried to imagine the operation of such a transformation.

Cousin Charlie, interested in his garden, in the arrival in India of a little granddaughter, in the successful solution of a chess problem, utterly without premonition, so far as one knew, of any kind. Walking upstairs, perhaps thinking quite casually of the little pain in his side that they all knew was nothing at all, perhaps occupied with some trivial reflection about the lamp in the passage. He was always particular about the trimming of the wicks. . . .

And then in one instant, unconsciousness. They had found him on the very threshold of the dressing-room, where he must have fallen just as he entered it.

There had been no flicker of consciousness. He had been dead within one hour from the time of his seizure.

And what after that?

Cousin Charlie, awakening in a new world, a world where presumably all his old interests held little or no meaning, confronted with a Supreme Being to whom he had paid a more or less perfunctory homage on Sundays, and told that he had earned, in his comfortable, easy-going, perfectly honourable fifty-eight years upon earth, an eternity of perfect happiness.

It was only less unthinkable than was the alternative of kindly, active Cousin Charlie consigned to an eternity of misery and punishment.

Perhaps there was no afterwards at all, and Cousin Charlie's spirit had flickered out when the machinery of his physical body failed. Then there would never be any reunion, such as his wife, who loved him, looked for so confidently.

Lily could not believe it.

Love, at least, must be a thing that went on. Love was part of God.

She remembered, with a great sense of relief, the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. A place where the souls of the dead awaited. The suggestion of a place of existence upon which the spirit might learn, and be prepared gradually for transformation, seemed to Lily to carry a sense of possibility with it. The other alternatives, quite simply, appeared to her to be incredible.

Her mind was very much occupied with such thoughts, and she found it difficult to speak of other things, as Nicholas was obviously desirous of doing.

Nevertheless, she seconded the efforts of her husband when her father persisted in discussing the funeral arrangements of the following day.

"What a ghoulish sort of pleasure your father seems to take in this business," Nicholas remarked pensively when they were alone together. "I quite agree that it's sad enough, but it needn't pervade the whole conversation, surely."

"I suppose after to-morrow he'll be all right," said Lily.

She was faintly shocked at the criticism of Philip, although her reason admitted its justice.

"You do like Father, Nicholas dear, don't you?"

"My dear child, because one likes a person it needn't

make one blind and deaf and dumb to their shortcomings," said her husband cheerfully.

Lily assimilated in silence the obvious common sense of the dictum, that all the same came to her as something almost new, and entirely revolutionary.

The next day, they attended Charlie Hardinge's funeral. Lily retained confused impressions of the smell of new crape, of the sound of decorous murmuring in the church, and then of stifled sobbing as Janet and Sylvia took their places. Ethel Hardinge's thick veil fell over her face, but Lily did not think that she shed tears.

The organist struggled with unusual music, obviously beyond the capabilities of the player, and presently to familiar strains the choir sang:

"Light's abode, celestial Salem,
Visions whence true peace doth spring,
Brighter than the heart can fancy. . . .

There for ever and for ever
Alleluia is out-pour'd. . . .

All is pure and all is holy
That within thy walls is stored."

Lily knew the choice to be Ethel's.

The insistence upon abrupt translation from life on earth into a world of perfect joy and peace, where "all is pure and all is holy," again bewildered and almost distressed Lily.

Could such violent dislocation as was implied really take place?

A child did not, in the space of a night, become a man. Learning, even on the lowest plane, was not acquired in an

hour. Did God, then, reverse all His laws as manifested upon earth, whenever a soul left its body?

If so, the spirit now in heaven was not Cousin Charlie at all. It was somebody quite else, with understanding and aspirations that had never been his; one to whom new revelations had been made, that must of necessity transform the soul that received them.

The Charlie Hardinge loved and mourned by his wife and by their children would have been saddened and frightened by such a cleavage of himself from them. One could imagine him, clinging still to old formulæ, asking piteously for explanations, calling upon old, familiar trivialities.

But radiant in the presence of his God, every value he had known upon earth transmuted, without pause or preparation?

Lily knew that she could accept no such assurance. She remembered, as a little child, asking whether she might pray for her dead mother, and Philip's gentle teaching that those at rest with God needed no intercession. They were at peace. The child had been comforted, receiving the words with full confidence, because spoken by her father. Now, Lily found that her whole being rejected them, although she desired to believe, and was frightened of her independent judgment as of a sin. The thought of Charlie Hardinge's soul, as she imagined it to be, deprived of the familiar body and of all the homely accessories to existence, obsessed her. With a sense of furtive guilt, Lily prayed. She prayed that he might not be afraid, or lonely, that someone might be there to help him, and that he might, in some mysterious way, keep in touch with the people that he loved and that loved him, without

feeling the added pang of their tears and their sorrow.

Surely the twenty-five years with Ethel counted for something, even in eternity?

She fell again into a maze of speculation, that lasted until all was over.

As the groups of people moved away from the newly-filled grave, Lily saw Janet Hardinge beckoning to her. She went to her, and Janet said wistfully and miserably, as Sylvia had said the day before: "I think it makes it easier if there are people there, Lily. Please come up to the house with us, won't you?"

The Hardinges' house was filled with strange uncles and aunts, most of them entirely unknown to Lily. Tea was laid in the dining-room, and the house, with blinds up-drawn again, and the hall door open, had to Lily's eyes an odd look as of having been newly relieved from strain.

She sat between a Hardinge aunt and an uncle whose name she did not know.

He was a kindly, red-faced man, who shook his head, saying, "Well, well, well," very much as Charlie Hardinge himself might have said it, and then appeared to dismiss the more serious aspect of the gathering from his conversation, if not altogether from his thoughts.

"This is a very good room," he said approvingly, looking round him. "Nice aspect, nice sunny room. They ought to use this room a great deal."

On Lily's other side the Hannigan aunt murmured lugubriously:

"They must just try and begin life again, and make the best kind of a home they can. That's what I tell them. They've got to begin again, now."

And at the other end of the table Lily could hear yet another aunt telling Sylvia that she must be brave and eat some sponge-cake and drink up her tea.

Mrs. Hardinge did not appear at all.

Tea was prolonged as though nobody knew what was to be done, once it was over.

"They ought to go away, and make a thorough break," said Miss Hannigan to Lily. "Then they could come back here again, you know, and start fresh."

"Let me cut you a piece of cake, now," said her other neighbour.

She was relieved when a diversion was caused by the maid's announcement that her husband had come to fetch her.

Janet had gone upstairs to her mother, but Sylvia embraced Lily convulsively in the hall, and said:

"Oh, Lily! It's all so awful, and it goes on and on. I keep feeling that I shall wake up and find it's all a dream."

A few tears of exhaustion rolled down her little white face as she spoke, but Lily saw that she had literally cried until she could cry no more.

"Are you all going away for a little while?" she said hesitatingly. "Your aunt said something about it."

"They want us to go back to Ireland with them, but Mother thinks they couldn't really afford three visitors, and such a long journey wouldn't be worth while for less than a month."

"Cousin Ethel wouldn't go alone, or perhaps with just Janet, and let you come to me—or somewhere else, of course, if you'd rather?"

"Oh!" cried Sylvia, "we must all keep together now that there are only the three of us left."

Lily, as she left the house, violently disputed this sentiment within herself. The longer the three desolate women remained together, just so much the longer would they react upon one another emotionally. Lily wondered whether she was herself heartless in so thinking. It made her seriously uneasy to know that Philip Stellenthorpe would most certainly consider her to be so.

She felt strangely rebellious, and at the same time ashamed of it.

"Well," said Nicholas, "I'm extremely thankful it's over. I was very much afraid there was going to be an accident, weren't you?"

"What—when?"

"Didn't you notice? I suppose your little head was somewhere in the clouds again. One of the bearers wasn't fit for the job—quite unmistakably intoxicated. That's the worst of having country labourers—one can't ever be quite sure. I was on thorns, I can tell you."

He laughed a little, quite gently, but the sound jarred vaguely upon Lily.

"Has the whole thing upset you, poor child? It's the first time, I suppose, you've been to a funeral, isn't it? Well, I must say I hope nothing of that sort will ever be done over *me*. I should like to be buried at sea.

He flung back his shoulders, tapping his broad chest with the tips of his fingers.

"When this 'poor clay' is laid by, I must say that I should like to think that its only grave was to be rolling waters, eh, Lily?"

She was conscious of feeling more utterly out of tune with his mood than ever before.

"What can it matter, if it isn't oneself at all? Lots of

people say that, about being buried at sea, but it's no more and no less than being buried anywhere else. What's the difference?"

He looked surprised.

"What's happened to my holy little saint? I should have thought that the prayers and the consecrated ground and all the rest of it meant a great deal to you, Lily."

His kind, good-humoured air of interested curiosity made her regret her own exasperation, of which, however, she knew herself to be far more conscious than he was.

"Nicholas, tell me really. What do you think has happened to Cousin Charlie's soul, now?"

"My dear little girl! We know that he was very kind and good, and—and Almighty God's mercy . . ." He stopped, looking disconcerted.

"What's come over you, Lily?"

"I don't know. Only it all seemed so unreal, somehow, to think of Cousin Charlie perfectly happy in heaven and either not knowing anything at all about the people he loved best, or else, in some miraculous way, able to understand why God should let them suffer, and what good is going to come out of it all, so that he doesn't mind. It all seems so—so unlike the ordinary sort of person that he was."

"Yes," said Nicholas. "Yes."

"How could he suddenly turn into a pure spirit who would find eternal joy in the presence of God?" cried Lily recklessly. "They sang that hymn about heaven, but how *can* one imagine an ordinary, average, good person suddenly in heaven for ever and ever more, unless they've become absolutely different? Surely it's the same

essential spirit that was on earth, that goes on into the next world?"

"Heaven, eh? Harps and crowns and white robes and wings and all the rest of it, eh, Lily? No, my dear, I can't say that any of that appeals to me very much."

"Do you believe in it, Nicholas?"

"The old idea of heaven or hell, world without end, Amen? No—yes. I don't know. No, I can't say I do."

"What do you think happens after death, then?"

"One goes on, somewhere or other, of course."

"Yes."

"But I know no more than you do, my dear," said Nicholas. "I don't suppose we were ever meant to know."

Lily was intensely aware that such a conclusion shirked the question entirely, but she said nothing more.

It was from that time that she began to acknowledge to herself her own inner conflict between loyalty, that she had been taught was the supreme virtue, and the insistent demand of something within herself that claimed a right to independent judgment.

Reacting to the sense of having been deluded, Lily gradually forsook the habit of going to church, and was relieved when Nicholas made no comment.

They did not talk about religion. The subject was one which quite evidently held not the slightest interest for Nicholas.

Lily went once or twice by herself to the Brompton Oratory, but always with a sense of doing something wrong. She also purchased, almost furtively, from a green baize board erected at the bottom of the church, a penny pamphlet purporting to explain the chief difficulties

that might be supposed to confront a potential "convert" to the Catholic religion.

The little book was ungrammatical, written in slipshod English, and was far from even being explicit. But Lily understood that in the Catholic Church was to be found even less liberty of thought than in her own. The Church told her children what to believe, and beyond that they might not look.

Lily wondered whether such restriction of outlook might not be conducive to great inward peace.

She thought of it wistfully and sentimentally, but knew very well that she could never now, of her own free will, seek to suppress, unsatisfied, the new spirit of doubt that encompassed her.

With her faith in the arbitrary presentment of the religion that had been imposed upon her, Lily also lost much of her childish faith in the essential infallibility of her father.

His religious beliefs were his own, and she did not seek to question them, but she resented more and more having been brought up to suppose that such beliefs could be transmitted wholesale, to be received without question and without analysis. No such acceptance, she thought, could be of enduring value. Discontent possessed her.

She continued to take pleasure in the many enjoyments that awaited her, but she knew that she was missing happiness.

Alternately, Lily blamed and pitied herself.

XVII

NICHOLAS AUBRAY had no idea that he made certain remarks at certain hours of every day, with almost clock-work regularity.

It was left to his wife to make this discovery and others ; her critical faculty developing with every year, the years themselves still too few to prevent her from putting her discoveries into words.

"You mustn't be too sharp in your judgment of other people, my dear," Nicholas said to her from time to time, without any more direct reference to an increasing uneasiness in the atmosphere, that he would not, indeed, admit even to himself.

Lily, too, had her reticences.

The shibboleth declared any criticism of another to be uncharitable at best, disloyal at worst. Unthinkable, to criticize one's husband.

Lily sought valiantly to ignore that which certain perceptions in her registered almost automatically.

She loved Nicholas, therefore she must see Nicholas as perfect.

The effort, in the course of time, became considerable, and very wearying.

She lived in a constant searching of spirit, fond of Nicholas and grateful to him when he petted her, touched by his many thoughtfulnesses and frequent gifts, intensely

desirous of believing that she loved him, and irritated almost—although never quite—to the point of protesting aloud when he sang out of tune.

Nicholas sang very often, from exuberance of spirits, and it was almost always out of tune.

He had a singular faculty for remembering the words of popular musical-comedy songs, and no ability at all to retain the simplest of airs correctly.

"I say, Lily, that was a catchy sort of thing we heard last night."

"Oh yes, I know."

Lily spoke hurriedly, trying to escape from the conviction that she was in dread lest Nicholas should attempt to reproduce the tune that he had liked.

"The one that girl sang in the second act—very fine girl, too!"

His tone was jocosely significant, and although such humorous allusions did not really amuse her in the least, Lily eagerly caught at this one.

"I saw you look at her, Nicholas! She's rather your type, isn't she?"

"What do you mean by my type, madam, I should like to know? How do you know I've got a type, eh?"

He began to laugh spasmodically, and Lily's lips mechanically took on the curves of the amusement that she did not share.

"My type, indeed! Ha, ha!"

Lily's meaningless laughter echoed his genuine mirth. Then he began to hum:

"In Lou-is-ville—I've left my little home,
The folk I used to know
In Lou-is-ville—where—something—something—roam.

Tra-la-la-la-lah
In Lou-is-ville."

"Catchy sort of tune, that."

"Oh yes. Would you like me to get the score?"

"Not unless you want it yourself. I thought that was pretty nearly the only good thing in it, didn't you? Besides, what do you want with a score when you've got a husband who can reproduce it note for note to you next morning? Ah—hum——!"

Nicholas cleared his throat and expanded his chest in facetious burlesquing of an operatic performance.

"In Louisville! I've left my little home."

He sang it through again, with mock dramatic emphasis and gesticulation, and Lily dug her nails into the palms of her hands and stretched her mouth into a fixed smile.

She was unspeakably disgusted at herself.

Why should she mind these things? And why, minding them, should not love for Nicholas make her minding of no account?

For she still maintained to herself that she loved Nicholas.

That which perplexed her perhaps most was her own increasing tendency to dwell upon a recollection that for several years now had been almost altogether obscured——
Vonnie.

The memory of her childish championship of Vonnie, the sick despair of knowing herself to be better loved and cared for than was Vonnie, the pain that she had suffered through Vonnie's pain—all recurred to her with an odd sense of contrast.

How could one compare the two? The kindly derision of common sense sounded in her imagination, insensibly clothing itself in the accents of that embodiment of common sense, Monica Melody. "Childie, childie, think what you're saying. Why, how can you compare the two, Lily? The affection of a little child for another little child, and the love of a woman for her husband! Oh Lily, Lily!"

Miss Melody would certainly conclude with mellow, tolerant laughter.

And yet the comparison existed, and remained insistent.

She would never suffer for Nicholas as she had suffered for Vonnie.

"Perhaps I am better balanced now," Lily wistfully suggested to herself, but the suggestion carried no conviction.

She found the phrase that elucidated the question for her almost by chance:

To the limit of capacity.

Quite involuntarily, the application leaped to her mind.

She had loved Vonnie to the limit of capacity. Her feeling for Nicholas did not extend even to the first outposts of that limit.

But she loved him, nevertheless. It was a question of degree.

Lily stifled the illuminating thought, accused herself of the extreme of disloyalty, and watched eagerly for signs in herself that she did love Nicholas. That he loved her, she could not doubt, and the thought filled her with remorseful gratitude. It still surprised and touched her that her husband, unlike her father, should so seldom find fault with her either directly or by implication, and that he should share and enjoy her enjoyment of almost every form of entertainment.

He listened, with obvious pleasure and interest, to everything she said, and no subject was too trivial for discussion. He seemed never to be *blasé* or indifferent. Occasionally, only, he was out of temper or depressed, when his already long face would become indescribably elongated, and his conversation monosyllabic.

Lily found that if she asked him a direct question, on such occasions, he would gravely and curtly reply: "Why should anything be the matter?" after the manner of a sulky child that desires to draw attention to its sulks but is too proud to give a reason for them. If she said nothing, he either recovered himself quickly, or spoke, with a sort of remote, detached condemnation, of the circumstance that had annoyed him. He never admitted to a trivial disturbance of mind, but sometimes, with transparent self-satisfaction, he would lay claim to outbursts of stupendous fury.

"I'm afraid I lost my temper pretty thoroughly to-day. The fellow won't try that game on again. He got my monkey up, and I let him have it straight. Hit out straight from the shoulder. I told him exactly what I thought of him, and you should have seen his face, Lily—the poor little devil was *green*. I don't remember, word for word, exactly what I said, but I fancy I let him have it pretty straight. I don't mince matters when my blood's up. Mind you, Lily, a temper like mine's no joke. I've always been afraid of going too far, one of these days."

He looked at her as though for confirmation, and she said, knowing that it would please him:

"It's a fault on the right side, I suppose. A man who hasn't got a temper doesn't get very far, I imagine."

"You're right there, my dear. I shouldn't be where

I am now if I hadn't been able to put the fear of God into those who work for me, from time to time."

Nicholas laughed.

"You've never seen me angry, my dear, and I hope you never will."

"Only over a collar-stud," observed Lily, with defective tact.

The mild joke was not at all a successful one.

Nicholas's hatchet face lengthened immediately and grew inordinately grave.

"I'm talking about necessary anger, my dear girl, the sort of wrath that's pretty nearly indispensable when you're dealing with men and women, if you want to get the best out of them. Weaklings have got to be made to feel that they're up against strength. If a man's strong, he's got to have a temper."

"Nobody could call you weak, Nicholas," said Lily, and the remark, as she had meant it to do, restored his complacency.

"Well, I've many faults, but there are two feelings for which I don't think I shall be held to account, I must say. I'm not a weak man, Lily—and I fancy I'm a pretty shrewd judge of human nature. I think I can sum up men and women fairly correctly, even at first sight."

Lily did not like Nicholas when he boasted. In the depths of her heart, uneasily conscious of arrogance the while, she disputed his statement that he was a judge of human nature, for his judgments seldom tallied with her own, especially where women were concerned.

"I don't suppose," said Nicholas, laughing, "that the fellow I told off this morning will come near me again-

for a fortnight. I imagine he was pretty thoroughly scared."

"I daresay," smiled Lily.

She went on smiling, and Nicholas went on laughing. His laughter had long ago got upon her nerves, but she did not own to herself that this was the case.

Even when her amusement was genuine, she never found it easy to prolong her laughter to the extent of his. Very often, her amusement was not genuine at all.

Nicholas had a fund of anecdotes, quotations, and good stories, some of which he retailed over-frequently. Many of the stories were witty; one or two, to the daughter of Philip Stellingthorpe, appeared to be merely coarse. It seemed to her that Nicholas was totally unable to distinguish between wit, even if admittedly "improper," and the form of rather gross vulgarity that claims to be funny merely on the grounds of its vulgarity.

Sometimes she despised herself for making the distinction, which with her was entirely instinctive. Nicholas, however, so far as she could see, did not discover that she made any distinction at all in her appreciation of his sallies.

His perceptions, acute in some directions, appeared to Lily to be astonishingly blunt in others. Whenever he perceived in her any sign of physical weakness or fatigue, it touched her sharply and always afresh, but it always surprised her. At times, when his simplicity and enthusiasm were most in evidence, she welcomed in herself a rush of tenderness for him.

His frequent demonstrations of affection she accepted with a sort of passive pleasure, as might an affectionate

child, but she dwelt little on the subject of outer demonstrations in her own thoughts, aware that Nicholas, disappointed, had at first thought her unawakened, and then frigid.

There were many thoughts, indeed, upon which she lacked courage to dwell in her resolute suppression of the lurking consciousness of an irrevocable mistake.

She hoped that she might have a child, and then, forlornly, that repeated disappointment and anxiety might not alienate Nicholas's love for her, which she knew subconsciously, to be the thing in him that she cared for most.

Nearly four years after her marriage she had a long illness, and once more the hope of motherhood was taken from her.

"Poor child!" said Nicholas, much harassed.

He was very busy, and it distressed him to think of the many hours that he was out of the house.

"That nurse is no companion for you—stupid, uneducated woman. I wish we could get hold of a younger one. Or is there anyone whom you'd like to have, little girl? What about one of the Hardinges?"

"No, thank you," said Lily wearily. She did not want Janet or Sylvia with her. "I think I'd rather be alone. I'm so tired—and nurse is really very kind."

But Nicholas was not satisfied. To please him, Lily made pretence that she would like to invite Miss Stellenhorpe to stay with her, and was secretly relieved when Aunt Clo, in the minute handwriting described by herself as "scholarly," wrote and lamented that she could not leave Italy for another six weeks.

"Alas, *Bambina mia*, that I should not be able to fly to

you! But there is one here who needs me—a sick, broken creature, whose bruised soul requires patience and tenderness. Yours, my Lily, is a sickness of the body. This other has been deeply, cruelly, wounded in the spirit. Can I, who have plumbed the very depths, refuse to give of my healing, such as it may be?

“But courage, little one! I will fly to you when once this frail craft has been piloted into safe harbour. Ah, these conflicting claims! Are they the penalty exacted of Strength, I ask myself? I smiled with a great tenderness, my Lily, at your enclosure, and the many words in which you wrapped the offering. These things matter so little! Nevertheless, you know that I have denuded myself of much, and I accept, with willing and gracious thanks, your so charming thought. It matters little to me how I travel to you, but an you will it to be in the luxury of a *wagon-lit*, so be it!

“In six weeks, then, my beloved child.”

There was never any formal beginning to Aunt Clo's letters, and her signature, launched abruptly onto the page with no conventional valedictory phrase, was a complicated hieroglyphic of initials, understood to be characteristic.

“What a splendid person she is,” Nicholas remarked, as he did with punctuality whenever Miss Stellenthorpe was mentioned, “always helping somebody. Helping lame dogs over stiles, eh?”

Lily did not answer, and he repeated: “Eh, Lily?”

It was one of the tiring things about Nicholas that he always required a reply to everything that he said, however obvious.

"Yes."

"But all the same, charity begins at home. Shall we write and tell her so, eh?"

"She'll come in six weeks," said Lily, smiling without any mirth, conscious only of overpowering fatigue.

"Six weeks! I should like to think of something for you before that, my dear."

Two days later, Nicholas came to her exultant. "The very thing! I've got the very thing for you—splendid!"

Lily tried not to look dismayed.

"Somehow, I thought I shouldn't be defeated. Once I set out to do something, it generally gets done, I fancy!" He paused to laugh.

"Do you remember old Dickenson, Lily? Nice old boy, with a long family. I met him yesterday and he was telling me about his eldest girl—quite a handsome girl too, I remember her as a flapper. It seems she went off and trained as a hospital nurse. Plucky of her, wasn't it? There were half a dozen of them at home, and no money, and this girl didn't get on particularly well with the rest of them, for some reason, so off she goes. Dickenson was telling me, they thought she'd never get through her training—they give them a very stiff time, I fancy, but she stuck it and came through splendidly. She's at home now, I don't quite know what happened, but she was going to be married, and then it was broken off. I didn't ask for details, naturally. But there she is, a handsome wench, and fully trained, and she must be a plucky girl, too. Dickenson says she's eager for a job. You'd like her, Lily, and she'd be more of a companion for you than old Stick-in-the-mud. What about having her here?"

"As a nurse?"

"The doctor's all for it. Stick-in-the-mud's time is up in about a week anyway, isn't it? and he says you don't really want very much done for you now—only someone at hand. No night-nursing. How'd it do to get Miss Dickenson here till your aunt comes? She'd stay with us as a sort of friend, you know."

The eagerness of Nicholas for his plan was very evident.

"Have you seen her, Nicholas?"

"Not since she was a flapper. I remember her as a very attractive child. I think she must be a plucky girl, too, to have gone off like that," said Nicholas, dwelling reflectively upon his catchword. "Plucky thing for a girl to do."

He reiterated the verdict again, with greater emphasis, after seeking an interview with Miss Dickenson.

"By George, Lily, you'll like that girl. She's a girl of spirit, quite good-looking, too. I know you'll get on together."

The complete conviction of his tone was almost infectious, especially as Lily thought it disloyal to let herself remember how frequently her estimate of other people had failed to coincide with that of her husband.

Nicholas rather elaborately urged his case.

"You mustn't think I want to force this idea of mine upon you, on any account. But it would ease my mind about you, when I have to be away all day. She's a lively sort of girl, full of spirit, and I don't fancy she has much of a time at home. They're shockingly badly off, too, and no doubt it would be a relief—however, that's not the point. But I think you'd like a girl of your

own kind about the house, wouldn't you? Less professional than a regular nurse, and yet just as useful. She was most eager about doing anything for you—there'd be no nonsense about her."

"It would be more amusing for you in the evenings, after dinner," said Lily reflectively.

He looked vexed.

"That has nothing whatever to do with it, my dear. If you think I'm urging this idea with a view to my own——"

"No, no," cried Lily hastily.

In her weakness, she felt the tears rising to her throat at the mere apprehension of having offended him, or appeared to be ungrateful.

"I should really like it for my own sake, Nicholas. She sounds very nice indeed. Why shouldn't she come next week and stay till Aunt Clo comes?"

"That's entirely as you wish. It's for you to decide."

He still spoke with the ultra-gravity of tone that denoted that his curiously childish susceptibilities had been touched.

"It's a splendid idea," said Lily with a trembling lip. "I'd like to have her very much. It was very clever of you to think of it, Nicholas."

With disproportionate relief, she saw his expression relax.

"That's good, then. I'll arrange it to-morrow. I thought I'd find something for you, poor old girl! I generally hit on something when I've made up my mind to it, eh? You'll like Doris Dickenson, Lily, she's a plucky girl, and I don't fancy she's had too easy a time of it. I know pretty well whom you'll cotton to by this time, eh?"

"Yes, indeed," said Lily.

She was no more conscious of hypocrisy than if she had been humouring the boast that a child standing on a table, might make of being taller than a grown man.

The susceptibility of her husband to feminine beauty was to Lily so much of a commonplace that her first sight of the object of his new enthusiasm surprised her quite unexpectedly.

Doris Dickenson belonged to the type of woman whose unflinching attraction for men remains forever incomprehensible to her own sex.

Lily did not think her colourless, freckled, and rather heavy face in the least good-looking, her blue-green eyes were almost without lashes, her plump hands, with fingers broad at the base and tapering sharply to a point, were over-manicured. She was both tall and heavily made, although she moved well, and the only claim to beauty that Lily could allow her was the flaming colour of her coarse, abundant red hair.

"It makes a difference having her, eh?" said Nicholas contentedly.

It made a great difference.

Lily wondered very much whether anyone had ever considered Doris Dickenson to be a good nurse. She had the typical faults of the professional, and but little of her conscientiousness and enthusiasm for her work.

Lily, more than ever deficient in self-confidence through physical weakness, wondered despairingly whether it was entirely her own fault that she sometimes found Miss Dickenson almost unbearable. Was she, as Nicholas often said, hypercritical?

Things unimportant in themselves assumed monstrous

proportions and took possession of her mind. Amongst them were small characteristics of Doris Dickenson.

Her flow of incessant talk, concerned almost exclusively with herself, her experiences, her relations, and her love-affairs.

The recurrence in her conversation of the particular adverb or adjective that momentarily obsessed her, regardless of its applicability.

"How devastating!" she would drawl, of a broken wine-glass, a thunderstorm, a new novel. Even a bunch of flowers was "devastatingly pretty." But the following week, the events of the hour were all "preposterous," and the word was introduced into her conversation in every impossible connection, until a fresh adjective appeared to replace it.

She also possessed to perfection the trick of the meaningless tag—of all others perhaps the most characteristic of the second-rate mind.

"Here's your medicine. I say, why do you look like that?"

And, very frequently:

"Don't say it in such a tragic voice! What makes you say it like that?"

Lily at first made futile efforts to find a reasonable answer to the bewildering senselessness of such enquiries.

But she found that Doris never listened to an answer, never appeared to expect one.

Lily came to the conclusion that "Why do you look like that?" was merely meant as a concession to the conventionalities, a hasty passing assumption of an interest in her welfare, that could not even carry its pretence through to the end.

Lily grew more and more weary, and wondered why she lacked moral courage to tell Nicholas that his experiment was not proving successful. That he would never perceive it without being told, she took for granted.

Nicholas lacked neither generosity nor tenderness towards his wife, and she took herself bitterly to task for the involuntary disappointment that possessed her in her constant perception of his lack of intuition.

XVIII

"I SAY, Mrs. Aubray, do you think I leave you too long alone in the evenings, after dinner?"

"Not at all," said Lily, trying not to make her voice over-emphatic.

"Do you really mean that? I'm sure you really think I neglect you appallingly."

Lily knew very well that Miss Dickenson was not really sure of anything of the kind, and would have been both astonished and indignant had her self-indictment been endorsed by her patient.

"I mean, do tell me really. I should hate it if you thought that I stayed away after dinner when I ought to be cheering you up. But you would tell me if you did, wouldn't you?"

"I'm very glad that you should keep my husband company at dinner when he's by himself, and of course he always comes up to me after dinner when he's in, so naturally——"

"Oh, good gracious! You don't suppose I meant that I wanted to stay with you while he's here? I wouldn't do such an appalling thing for the world; why, it's an appalling idea. You didn't think that was what I meant, did you? I mean, I'd rather be told if you did, of course, but you didn't, did you? Do say if you did, though."

For all the incessant string of tiresome appeals on

Miss Dickenson's lips, her roving eyes betrayed the utter lack of any purpose or meaning behind her words.

"Don't look like that! Why do you look like that?"

"Like *what?*" said Lily, crossly and childishly, although experience had taught her that the question never provoked a reasonable answer.

"Like that. Sort of appalled, aren't you? But I'd always rather know things—that's why I ask."

"Like Rosa Dartle." The words seemed to drop, in spite of deadly weariness, from Lily.

"Like who?"

Doris very often gave one the trouble of repeating a thing, when Lily felt certain that she had heard it the first time.

She now said nothing at all.

"Like *who*, did you say?"

Lily shut her eyes, and her impulses at the moment were little short of murderous.

"I say, what's up? Tired? Who's Rosa Dartle?"

"A character in Dickens—'David Copperfield.'"

"How appalling! Dickens' people always are appalling, aren't they? What makes you think I'm like Rosa Dartle, whoever she may be?"

"She used to ask questions."

"I say, I like that! D'you think I ask questions? It's supposed to be a sign of an enquiring nature, isn't it?"

Lily, her despair untinged by any humour, gazed into an abyss of such utter futility as silenced her with sheer amazement.

"Isn't it?"

"I daresay it is."

She adjusted her unwilling part in the sorry dialogue

to the level of her companion; lacking both physical energy and moral courage to put an end to it.

"You've got an appalling number of books in this house, haven't you? I always mean to read some day when I've got time, but I've always been too busy. They say it's never too late to mend. Of course in hospital there simply wasn't a hope, and my off-time was always so taken up. Of course we were never allowed to speak to the doctors—far less go out with them—but there was one perfectly mad fellow who used simply to follow me about. Appalling wasn't the word for it. I say, I believe I'm shocking you! Are you shocked? I'd rather you said if you are. I mean really——"

It went on *da capo*, and Lily was disgusted with herself for her utter inability to silence the elder woman by any of the pungent sentences that she constantly formulated in her own mind, but could never bring herself to utter aloud.

She did not really believe that Doris Dickenson was in the least sensitive, in spite of her touchiness, but the girl's footing in the house as semi-guest, semi-professional attendant, as well as Nicholas Aubray's friendship for her, made it seem extraordinarily difficult to rebuke her self-sufficiency in terms trenchant enough to penetrate her singular obtuseness of mind.

"You get on with her all right, don't you?" said Nicholas, with the simple satisfaction of one stating a fact rather than asking a question.

"Yes," said Lily hesitatingly. The teaching inculcated in her childhood always made it an effort to her to speak the truth, when the truth might possibly distress or disappoint her hearer.

But she added after a moment :

"She does talk rather too much, I think."

"Does she?" said Nicholas, in a surprised voice. "I must say I haven't noticed that. I always think she's rather shy."

It was quite true that Doris was nearly always rather silent when Nicholas was with Lily, although Lily did not believe that she was at all shy. She seemed, indeed, to be more nearly sulky than shy, at such times.

But she always listened attentively to what Nicholas said, and glanced at him from time to time out of the corners of her small, blue-green eyes.

One evening when Nicholas was alone with Lily he told her that Doris had been telling him something about her life, during their *tête-à-tête* dinner.

"She's had a very hard time, Lily, mind you. I think it's wonderful it hasn't made her in the least bitter, poor child."

Lily saw that Nicholas's rather facile sympathies had been roused. She felt vaguely surprised.

"Did she tell you about her engagement, and why it was broken off?"

"She did. I suppose she's confided it all to you, long ago?"

"No. She's mentioned several times that she was once engaged, but she's never told me why she didn't get married."

"I daresay she's very reserved," said Nicholas. His tone betrayed a slight sense of flattery at having received a unique confidence. "I don't know quite why she told me about it, but I suppose she saw that I was interested. I suppose that was it."

Lily smiled a very little.

Nicholas never made it difficult for any woman to see when he was interested.

"The man must have been a bit of a brute, I should fancy. He got engaged to her while she was at this hospital place and they were to be married almost directly, so of course she resigned from the hospital. I fancy, though she must have worked hard there, that the surroundings were never particularly congenial. In fact, she as good as told me that she only went to work so as to give her younger sisters a better time at home. Rather plucky, eh? But of course she left when she thought she was going to be married. And then what does this wretched fellow do but get insanely jealous over some pal or other of hers, lose his head completely, and say things that no girl could possibly overlook. She couldn't forgive him, of course, and I don't blame her. Life with a jealous husband—and for a girl like that—Good Lord!"

"It's odd she should be so attractive," said Lily. "She isn't pretty."

"No—no, I suppose not. But she's taking, don't you think? Something very arresting about her, altogether. I must say, I can't help admiring her spirit. She's told you how they worked them at that place, I suppose?"

"The hospital? Yes."

"For a girl brought up, I suppose, very much as you were yourself," said Nicholas, "it must have taken some spirit to stick it out. She was telling me that there wasn't a soul there of her own class, practically, for her to speak to, and she used to cry from sheer loneliness, sometimes. I can't imagine her crying, somehow."

"Neither can I," said Lily drily.

Something in the quality of the silence that followed did not please her, and she went on speaking hastily:

"But she seems to have made a few friends all the same, Nicholas. At least she's always telling me of the young men who ran after her."

"I daresay," said Nicholas curtly.

The lengthening of his face indicated that his enthusiasm had been somewhat dashed, and Lily, characteristically, at once sought to efface the unsympathetic colouring that she had purposely given to her words. "I rather wonder she hasn't married. She could have done so easily, I should think."

"Oh, of course she could."

The tone in which he spoke was once more confident and enthusiastic.

"Old Dickenson told me something about that. He said she was the sort of girl men used to look at while she was still in the nursery—although both her sisters are prettier—in fact, as you say, this one isn't exactly good-looking, I suppose. I don't know what it is about her—magnetism, I suppose. Certainly she's attractive. Don't you think so?"

"She's more so to men than to women, I should imagine."

"Perhaps. You women have odd ideas about one another's merits, eh?" He laughed heartily and was still laughing when Doris came into the room.

Nicholas rose and placed a chair for her.

"We were just talking about you. I was telling my wife something about the stiff upper lip you've shown all along. I can tell you," said Nicholas significantly, "she admires pluck as much as I do. Eh, Lily?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Doris.

She was taciturn in the presence of Nicholas and his warm, friendly admiration.

"We both want you to feel that you've got real pals in us—people that you can always turn to, you know. I don't want to think of your going through any more of those lonely times that you were telling me about——"

"It's awfully sweet of you both," said Doris slowly. She looked at Nicholas as she spoke.

His small, tawny eyes expressed all the candid, un-subtle simplicity of his spirit. A hundred times he had looked at Lily herself with just such open, uncritical admiration.

"I think you've a great deal to be proud of, you know," said Nicholas. "There must have been times when you felt pretty nearly down and out, eh?" And Doris again replied:

"Oh, I don't know."

"But I do," said Nicholas, nodding triumphantly.

Lily wondered, with a certain impatience, why Doris did not indulge in one of those lengthy expositions of her own grievances against life, and the hospital, and her father, with which she had so often wearied her patient.

Was she really sufficiently intelligent to realize how very much more effective was this uneloquent refusal to dwell upon the hardships that Nicholas was so evidently ready to accept at her own valuation?

Next morning, however, when the two were again alone together, Doris was quite as voluble as ever and Lily quite as profoundly fatigued by her.

"I shall soon be strong enough to get up," said Lily. "I don't want to lie here longer than I need."

"You're like me," Miss Dickenson retorted. She pos-

essed a wonderful power of extracting a personal application from apparently anything in the world. "That's just like me. I never can bear to give in. You know, sometimes I've really been on my last legs, as the saying is, and the Sister or someone has noticed it, and told me to slack off a bit. But I simply can't take things easily. I have to go on till I drop. That's absolutely me all over."

She leant back comfortably in an armchair as she spoke and began to polish her finger-nails with the palm of her hand—a favourite exercise.

"I was so awfully surprised at your not manicuring, Mrs. Aubray. It was one of the first things I noticed about you. You know, I'm afraid I always notice people's hands. It's the first thing I look at, almost. I suppose I sort of judge people by that. I sort of can't help it. I always look first of all at their hands."

Lily wondered, with the acrimony born of weariness, why this well-worn boast should almost invariably emanate from those least capable of any intelligent observation whatsoever.

She ignored Miss Dickenson's claim to perspicacity altogether, and replied to her earlier remark.

"I hope you don't feel that you have to go on till you drop, here. It's the last thing I should wish, and besides there's nothing but weakness the matter with me. I shall be getting up very soon—I hope before my aunt comes."

"Oh, yes, your aunt is coming. Now, when I'm ill, I never have any of my relations near me—not my sisters or anyone. It isn't that I don't think they'd come, you know, but I simply couldn't ask them. A weird sort of

pride, I suppose. I really am a weird sort of person altogether, you know."

Lily closed her eyes.

"What makes you put that face on—it makes you look so weird. What were you asking about—oh, yes—me when I'm ill. It's too funny, you know. I go on and on long after other people would have let themselves collapse, and then, when I do have to give in, of course I'm most frightfully bad. I'm a fearfully bad patient, too, because I'm always down on the nurse. I suppose it's because I know so well how nursing ought to be done."

"Oh," said Lily.

She remained speechless, even after Miss Dickenson had three times asked what made her say it like that.

"It sounded so weird," remarked Doris distrustfully, in conclusion.

But the sense of irony that occasionally sustained Lily was not always at her command. She regained her strength very slowly, and had no great desire to be well again.

Her relations with Nicholas were in a curiously fluid state. His presence, after enduring that of Doris Dickenson all day, always brought to her a rush of relief and pleasure, and often his companionship appeared to her as almost a perfect thing. The revulsion of feeling was proportionately painful when words of his, casually and kindly spoken, from time to time forced upon her an unwelcome realization of the gulf that mentally separated them.

They would never agree about people.

Lily, shamefacedly admitting the immense importance to herself of the personal equation in life, yet tried to blame herself for regarding the difference between them

as being an important one. Sometimes, even, in her weakness and youthfulness, she tried to deny its existence.

Her husband's cult for Doris Dickenson, however, Lily unaffectedly welcomed. Incomprehensible though it seemed to her that Miss Dickenson's company should afford aught but weariness to anybody, she was glad that Nicholas should not have a solitary breakfast and dinner.

He always disliked being alone, unless when he was busy, and Lily felt vaguely that her prolonged stay upstairs would be partly compensated for if she could provide other companionship for him.

She was glad to remember that Nicholas had always liked Aunt Clo.

When Miss Stellingthorpe's visit became due, Lily said to her husband:

"Am I to say anything to Miss Dickenson about going away?"

"Why?" said Nicholas, looking astounded.

"I thought she was only staying till Aunt Clo arrived; and Aunt Clo will be here to-morrow."

"Oh well—it isn't a sort of Box and Cox arrangement, is it? There's plenty of room for them both. Just as you like, my dear, of course—but your aunt might feel freer if you still had your regular nurse at your beck and call. Besides, she's a nice girl—a nice girl, and a plucky one. You'd be sorry to lose her."

To the daughter of Philip and Eleanor Stellingthorpe it was almost an impossibility to cut across that kind, well-pleased statement with a wounding contradiction.

Lily's spirit sought the familiar refuge of the weak, a feeble and unconvinced optimism. "Perhaps Doris will go of herself, when Aunt Clo is here."

To a certain extent, the half-hearted prediction was verified, although the eventual departure of Doris Dickenson was not, perhaps, entirely a matter of free will.

"*Bambina!*" said Miss Stellenthorpe, less than a week after her arrival, with even more than her habitual emphasis of diction. "*Bambina mia!* How can this be?"

"What?"

"This *canaglia!*" said Miss Stellenthorpe, snapping her finger and thumb and becoming several degrees more cosmopolitan than usual.

"But who—what—*je vous le demande—who* is this Dickenson . . . *que vient-elle-faire dans cette galère? Ecco!* My Lily! *Mais c'est rigolo, voyons!*"

It was always a little difficult to be adequate when replying to Aunt Clo.

"She is looking after me professionally—she's been properly trained."

"*Ahimé!*" Aunt Clo sighed gustily, her eyes upturned to Heaven.

"I don't like her," Lily confessed. "She tires me very much; she talks such a lot, and really what she says is never worth hearing."

There was actual relief in putting into words the thoughts that she had so often suppressed in her own mind.

"*Basta!* I understand, my child. Enough. You lie there, like a trampled flower, with this thing—this inferior, third-rate machine—rattling above you! But of what is Nicholas, *ce bon Nicholas*—of what is he thinking?"

"He arranged it on purpose for me—he was thinking of me," said Lily eagerly. "He thought she would be more of a companion than just an ordinary nurse. We know

her family, and she was to be here more or less as a friend."

"*Et patati et patata*," said Miss Stellenthorpe scornfully. "Leave this to me, little one. I understand the Dickenson type very well."

It appeared indeed that she did.

Sitting in Lily's room, her large and shapely legs crossed beneath the astonishingly brief serge skirt that had temporarily replaced the blue knickerbockers of Genazzano, Miss Stellenthorpe elegantly smoked a number of cigarettes, and eyed the while, with critical penetration, Miss Doris Dickenson.

"You're like me, Miss Stellenthorpe. I'm afraid I smoke like a chimney—you know, my nerves sort of want it, somehow. I always inhale, too. Everyone always says I smoke too much."

"And who is 'everyone'?" negligently enquired Miss Stellenthorpe.

Doris stared at her.

"Everyone is everyone, I suppose," she said shortly.

Aunt Clo smiled with irrepressible superiority, turning to her niece.

"But how typical, is it not, of young England? The art of definition: everyone is everyone, she supposes! Ha, ha!"

"One talks carelessly, sometimes," Lily said, strongly inclined to laugh.

"But not at all," graciously exclaimed her aunt; "if by 'one' you allude to yourself, *carina*, I can assure you that it is not so. Your vocabulary, your originality, the extent of your reading, all combine to render your conversation stimulating. How I revel in the clash of wits! My niece

and I between us must teach you the use of words, my little Dickenson."

Aunt Clo's little Dickenson appeared to be far from delighted at the proposition.

"How d'you mean, the use of words?" she asked curtly.

"Your vocabulary," Aunt Clo explained in a kind voice, "is that of a child, or a savage. It is, I believe, a statistical fact that certain savage tribes use a language of only two hundred words. It suffices for their need of self-expression. The vocabulary of the average English man or woman comprises little over fifteen hundred words, in daily use. People like myself, on the other hand, sooner or later have recourse to the most recondite expressions available, in the instinctive desire to avoid the *banale*. Words from other languages creep in—classical quotations—conversation becomes an art——"

Miss Stellenthorpe waved her cigarette gracefully round her head.

"How devastating!" said Doris Dickenson in the pause that followed.

Her voice was charged with the rather laboured sneer that in the English middle-classes is described as "sarcasm."

"Unhappy one!" said Aunt Clo, and groaned aloud. "What is this 'devastating' that you employ *à tort et à travers*? A senseless and meaningless *cliché*!"

She fixed a large and gleaming eye, that held undisguised horror in it, upon Doris.

Lily was conscious of a fearful joy in listening, as the many scathing criticisms that had thronged into her own mind were thus eloquently and unrestrainedly put into words by her aunt.

The sulky face of Miss Dickenson was darkly flushed.

"I speak thus for your own good, my Dickenson," said Aunt Clo, shaking a long forefinger. "You render yourself intolerable to the well-educated, and it is but a kindness to tell you so. Not only are you inexperienced, and therefore crude of outlook, but you are ignorant, self-assertive, stupidly bombastic, and talkative to a degree that——"

"Really, Miss Stellenthorpe, if you think I'm going to sit down under such rudeness——"

Doris's voice had risen instantly to the true virago's pitch of shrillness.

"Silence!" said Aunt Clo. "You disturb my niece. Perform the material duties, my Dickenson, for which I remark that you have been well trained, but cease to weary us with the trivialities of your conversation. *En voilà assez, n'est-ce pas?*"

"I don't understand gibberish."

It was evident that Doris, after the manner of her kind, was recklessly seeking after rudeness for the sake of rudeness, regardless of wit or point. Miss Stellenthorpe raised her handsome eyebrows in an expression of patient despair.

"You percieve, my Lily? This girl—*ma!* *educata* indeed, as my beloved Italians say—knows neither her own language nor any other. What can you expect of such? Deplorable, oh deplorable!"

Aunt Clo looked at Miss Dickenson and shook her head repeatedly.

"Wretched one, have you never been taught that until you have learned the art of listening, you are unfit to talk? *L'art d'ennuyer c'est de tout dire.* That art, my unhappy

Dickenson, you possess to the full. It is your only one. I come to this house—straight, I may tell you, from unravelling the many tangled threads of another's destiny—I come, and what do I find? What, I ask you, do I find? I find my niece, broken in body and spirit, needing the utmost cherishing, the greatest delicacy of handling, the reticence of true sympathy—and compelled instead to submit to your ministrations. You ask me, perhaps, to tell you fully and freely of what those ministrations consist."

"I don't ask you," cried Doris passionately. "I don't want to know what you think."

"*Non far niente!* I shall tell you just the same," declared Miss Stellenthorpe with unabated spirit. "*Pour moi il n'y a que la vérité.* The day will yet come when you will remember my frankness with gratitude and admiration. But even should that day *not* come, my Dickenson, it matters little. The time has come for me to speak, and I shall speak. I have sat here in silence," said Aunt Clo, not altogether truthfully, "and I have been filled with amazement that my niece should not, long ago, have said what I am saying now. Instead, with a supineness for which, candidly, I blame her, she has allowed herself to be overwhelmed. Overwhelmed, you ask me, by what? By a ceaseless torrent of meaningless, ill-chosen, unmelodious *words*, my Dickenson, strung together without rhyme or reason. You have but one topic—the supremely uninteresting one of yourself. You are reminded of yourself *à tout bout de champ*—worse, you insist upon reminding us of yourself. But we do not want to know about you. You are not interesting. *A-t-on jamais vu un toupet pareil!* You tell us of your views, your habits, your trivial little experiences, as though they were of cosmic importance.

Could futility go further, I ask you? You reply at once: No, undoubtedly not. There is yet hope for you, then."

On this optimistic pronouncement Aunt Clo met at last with the interruption that her niece, fascinated by so much candour, had been unable to offer.

Nicholas Aubray entered.

"Well, well," said he cheerily, "the Female Parliament sitting?"

The trivial pleasantry was received in perfect silence, and Nicholas cast a sudden, shrewd glance round the room.

"What on earth——?"

"*Niente!*" said Aunt Clo vivaciously. "A few words, *amico mio*, of counsel to the young—the very young, I may say."

"Is that Lily?" asked her husband, with a rather puzzled smile.

"But no! Our Lily may be young in years, but in wit, in understanding, she is delightfully mature. But the little Dickenson there—*sans rancune, hein*, my Dickenson?"

Miss Dickenson's heavy face, from red, had become white.

She looked at Miss Stellenthorpe, with the concentrated hatred that only embittered vanity can engender.

"I am going to leave the house," she said thickly. "I shan't stay in a house where I've been insulted."

"Who has insulted you in this house?" demanded Nicholas, half smiling.

Doris made a dumb gesture indicating Miss Stellenthorpe.

"Nonsense!" said Nicholas brusquely. He put his hand on the girl's arm.

"What's all this about? You've misunderstood something. What is it?"

"*Rien de rien!*" declared Aunt Clo contemptuously. "For the little Dickenson's own good, *mon ami*, I take it upon myself to point out certain wearisome tricks that our Lily has borne far too long, and hence comes this talk insult. *Enfantillage!*"

Aunt Clo's cigarette described a parabola that dismissed the subject as being one of no further importance. Nicholas turned to his wife.

"Lily—of course Miss Dickenson mustn't dream of leaving us. We should be most distressed——"

Lily looked at Doris.

She had neither the courage to persuade her to stay, nor to encourage her to go.

"I shan't stay," said Doris obstinately.

Nicholas frowned, looked at his wife appealingly and then at Miss Dickenson with evident concern.

It came to Lily, with a slight sense of shock, that Nicholas could not be depended upon in a crisis. He was uncertain.

Doris was staring at him with smouldering eyes, and both were silent.

It was Aunt Clotilde, high-handed to the last, who carried off the situation.

She uncrossed her amazing length of limb, rose to her feet with a swinging movement, and flicked the ash off her cigarette with considerable elegance of gesture.

"You have said well, my Dickenson," observed Aunt Clo. "You will remain here no longer. Go, then; and on no account forget what I have said to you. Speak less, eschew slang, learn to place your words correctly, avoid

clichés that mean nothing, and above all, cast from your mind for ever the delusion that the art of conversation consists in the dropping of detached pieces of information concerning yourself."

XIX

"I'M very sorry you're going, very sorry indeed," said Nicholas.

He was purposely speaking with restraint of manner.

"I couldn't stay after a row like that," said Doris candidly. "I couldn't possibly."

The word vexed him.

"I hope there are no such things as 'rows' in my house," he said, deliberately repressive.

"Of course, I wasn't going to say anything upstairs with Mrs. Aubray still weak as she is, but if I don't say anything, it isn't because I don't feel. Miss Stellenthorpe was most insulting."

They stared at one another.

"I'm very sorry," said Nicholas uncomfortably.

"Please don't think that I think it's anything to do with you," said Doris, with some formality. "You and—and Mrs. Aubray, of course—have always been very kind, and of course, I have done my best, and I can't help knowing I'm a good nurse." She paused.

"Of course you are. It's made all the difference having you here."

Nicholas spoke eagerly, both from sincere conviction and from the desire to gratify her.

"Miss Stellenthorpe didn't seem to think so. I don't know what she knows about nursing, I'm sure, but from

the way she spoke you'd think she was matron-in-chief and all."

Nicholas wished that Miss Dickenson had contrived to pass through her hospital training without incorporating into her being quite so many slightly common turns of speech. The matter of Aunt Clo's accusations, whatever the manner of them, might not have been altogether without justification.

"She's very artistic and highly strung, you know," he urged in extenuation of Aunt Clotilde. "She—she really is a very splendid person, you know. I'm sorry you and she haven't hit it off."

"I'd better go upstairs and pack, I suppose," said Doris.

"Don't be in a hurry, please don't. Anyhow, one of the maids will see to all that for you, if it's really necessary. Won't you have a talk with Lily first?"

"I don't want to worry her. Besides, she could have stopped Miss Stellenthorpe saying all she did, if she'd wanted to. I don't know what I shall do now, I'm sure."

Nicholas began to walk up and down, very much perturbed, and Doris dropped into a chair.

"I oughtn't to be bothering you, I suppose," she said presently. "My rotten affairs don't really matter to anybody but myself."

"Please don't say that—please don't. I simply hate to hear you say a thing like that. I thought it was agreed that you were to look on us as real pals."

His kind-heartedness seriously perturbed, he stopped in front of her.

"Don't you remember the agreement?"

"Did you really mean it? I'd be awfully glad to have

you for a pal. You always strike me as being so awfully dependable and—and strong.”

Nicholas, unconsciously accepting her transition from the first person plural to the third person singular, threw out his chest with the old, satisfied gesture.

“It’s very nice of you to feel that. I think I am to be depended on, Miss Dickenson, where my friends are concerned, and I’m very glad you feel that. Very glad. As for strength—well, I’m certainly not a weak man.”

He laughed a little, very much pleased, as is a man who meets with reassurance upon a point about which he is sometimes secretly dubious.

“My shoulders are quite broad enough to bear your troubles as well as my own, I think, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. *Rather*. But it seems a shame——”

“Why? You know I’m interested in anything that concerns you. Of course I am.”

His candid, solicitous eyes were fixed upon her opaque, unrevealing gaze.

“Thank you, awfully,” said Miss Dickenson slowly. “I get a sort of devastating feeling, sometimes, you know.”

“Tell me what you mean,” Nicholas sympathetically invited her.

“Oh well, things are a bit difficult all round, you know. I can’t live at home, I simply can’t. It’s too devastating. That’s what really made me take up nursing—to get away from home.”

“But your father is so proud of you—you should have heard him speaking of you, as I did the other day. I can assure you he quite appreciates your pluck and—and spirit.”

“Oh, I daresay. It really isn’t so much Father as my

aunts and people, and my married sister, and even the two girls. They're always sort of talking at me."

Her voice grew angry.

"I can't have a friend, or go anywhere, or do anything, without them interfering. My aunts are always hinting that I don't know how to take care of myself."

"But I'm sure you do," Nicholas said gently.

"Of course! It's all old-fashioned, devastating nonsense, that's what it is. Because men like talking to me. There isn't anything in it—I'm not even pretty."

She scarcely made a pause, but it was not in Nicholas to refrain from a meditative interpolation: "I don't know so much about that!"

"It's quite true I've got a lot of men friends, or at least I *had*. I've given up men now, since the one I was engaged to treated me so badly. You know, I told you about him. . . . When that happened I said, Thank you, that's enough for me, I said. I know what men are now, and I shan't have anything more to do with them."

"But it's not like you to be bitter," Nicholas said, in a gentle, puzzled way.

His ear and his trained mind alike noted the futility of her speech, but his masculinity was all the while increasingly aware of that in her which, for want of a better word, he could only describe as animal magnetism.

In her, it was extraordinarily powerful.

"Sometimes," declared Doris inconsistently, "I just think I'll marry the next man that asks me."

The suggestion, for reasons that he did not attempt to analyze, somehow affected Nicholas disagreeably.

"Oh, I don't think I should do that if I were you," he gravely objected.

"Why not? Men are all rotten, anyway—it doesn't make much odds which of them one takes in the end."

Her cheap cynicism made Nicholas vaguely uncomfortable. He looked at her without speaking.

As though Doris, by means of some odd intuition of her own, had guessed his disapproval, she changed her tone suddenly.

"Of course I don't really mean half I say—you mustn't think I mean it all, really you mustn't. I've known some awfully nice men—men who really were nice, I mean. Most of my pals have been men—not flirting, I don't mean, or anything like that. Just friends."

"I hope you're going to add another to their number," said Nicholas, smiling suddenly.

"Really?"

Her blue-green eyes, neither large nor lustrous, fixed themselves upon his face with a sudden intensity that was somehow alluring.

"Of course, really," Nicholas declared readily.

She sketched a movement that yet was not actually one, and Nicholas found himself ratifying his avowal of friendship with a handclasp.

"I don't want you to feel that all this makes a bit of difference," he said earnestly. "If you ever want a friend—well, here I am, very much at your service. And don't you go and do anything impetuous with your life. I should be very, very sorry to see you make a mistake."

"Thank you," said Doris.

She added after a moment, in the low, half-sullen tone that she sometimes adopted:

"I must say, it's nice to know that somebody cares."

"Of course I care," Nicholas vigorously replied.

He released her hand with a final hearty pressure. "Now

supposing I have a little chat with Miss Stellenthorpe, don't you think we could put this right? I can't bear you to go away from our house like this."

"Oh, it's all right. Mrs. Aubray really is awfully much better now. I don't think she needs me any longer. Her maid can quite well give her all the help she needs now and—I expect I've been here long enough, anyway."

From this attitude Nicholas could not move her, and indeed he had no very urgent desire to do so. It did not need Aunt Clotilde's eloquence to inform him that Lily shared Miss Dickenson's own estimate of her visit, and thought that she had been there long enough.

"You ought to have told me, my dear child, if you found that she was getting on your nerves," said Nicholas frowningly to Lily.

He was vexed that Lily had not told him, vexed that he had not perceived it for himself, vexed, indefinitely, that Miss Dickenson should have been found wanting, and vexed that she should leave the house under the weight of a grievance.

"I'm sorry you and Miss Dickenson didn't quite hit it off together," he said to Miss Stellenthorpe, with a hint of rebuke in his voice.

Aunt Clo was quite impenitent.

"The day will come," she remarked with an air of detached omniscience, "the day will come, when the little Dickenson will remember my words with gratitude. But at present she has a skin like a rhinoceros hide. I assure you, *cher ami*, that it was necessary for me to put dots upon my i's with her."

"That you certainly did," said Nicholas, with a certain grimness.

"*Et alors?*" said Miss Stellenthorpe coldly.

Nicholas had a perfectly genuine admiration for her, and would not pursue the point.

He bade Doris Dickenson farewell with renewed assurances of friendship, and on the day she left, his lantern-jawed face unconsciously grew lengthier than ever, and his voice very grave. If, subconsciously, Nicholas waited to receive comment upon these phenomena, he was destined to disappointment.

Miss Stellenthorpe's concern was wholly for her niece.

"The little one requires distraction," she authoritatively informed Nicholas. "She is regaining strength just now, and we do not want her to brood. Encourage her to go out, to see her friends, *de se distraire, enfin!*"

Nicholas begged Lily to follow Aunt Clo's advice, and was delighted when Aunt Clo herself, with her usual ceremoniousness, enquired whether he would permit the Marchese della Torre to call upon them.

"But of course! Splendid fellow, della Torre! He'll remind us of our courting days, eh, Lily? What on earth does he want to ask permission for? Why doesn't the fellow drop in one day? I didn't even know he was in England."

"Nor I," admitted Aunt Clotilde. "We met by chance, entirely."

"'We met 'twas in a crowd,' eh?" said Nicholas. "Well, Lily, will you write and ask him to dinner? I should like to do something for him."

In the weeks that followed, it might have been said with truth that Nicholas did a good deal for the Marchese della Torre. Always hospitable, he was whole-heartedly grateful to the young man who had rendered his long-ago stay

in Rome agreeable, and he had conceived one of those innocent admirations for the Italian's range of erudition that made up part of his child-like singleness of vision.

The Marchese, more exquisitely dressed than ever, was as full of urbanity, as well informed and as imperturbable as of old, and only one change was to be remarked in him. A true Italian, the merely perfunctory admiration accorded by him to Lily Stellingthorpe as a young and pretty English girl, and a Protestant, became lively and acute directly he met her as the wife of another man.

He kept his dark eyes reverently fixed upon her face, and did not venture upon personalities until he had many times seen both Lily and her husband. Then one evening at the theatre he said to her, "You have changed a great deal, in these few years. Although your face is as young as ever, the soul that looks out of your eyes is that of a woman—no longer that of a child."

Lily was startled, but she was too young and too disconsolate to reject the subtle flattery.

"I feel very old, sometimes."

She felt afraid for a moment that he might laugh at her, kindly, as Nicholas would have done, from the height of the years that separated them. But della Torre said quickly:

"I know. People laugh a little, sometimes, when one says that, but it is only because they themselves have either never grown up at all, or have done so insensibly. They do not know anything about the short cut to knowledge that is traversed by some of us."

"What is that short cut?" said Lily.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid, generally—suffering. But why do you ask? You know it as well as I do—perhaps better. You are a woman, and highly strung."

"Sometimes I've wondered whether I mind things more than other people do," said Lily, divided between the yearning for self-expression and the old, inculcated idea that only impersonal channels can be altogether safe ones in conversation between a man and a woman.

The Italian raised his eyebrows.

"Of course! How can you wonder? Your capacity for emotion of every kind is written on your face. Not for all to read, certainly: but for those who know, to recognize. You are not happy."

"Yes, I am," said Lily quickly.

"Forgive me. You say that because you think I have no right to speak so—and perhaps I deserve it. I am sorry."

The humility in his voice caused her a moment of compunction.

"Don't be sorry," she said, smiling. "I suppose no one is exactly happy, once the happiness of childhood has been left behind."

"Childhood!" exclaimed the Italian scornfully. "The happiness of childhood! What does childhood know beyond the happiness of eating too many sweets, the happiness of a little animal? It is only men and women who experience real happiness, and real suffering. You—you have never yet been happy, and you are beginning to realize it. Is that true?"

"Yes," said Lily very low.

He betrayed no least quiver of triumph at having won the admission from her.

"You are eternally seeking something—perhaps you hardly know what . . . desires and vague wishes within yourself frighten and disturb you sometimes—then you think that you are ungrateful and discontented, and you blame yourself. *Non é vero?*"

"Yes, it's true," said Lily. She felt a thrill of wonder that anyone should understand so well. The lights in the theatre were lowered again and the orchestra playing the opening bars of the Intermezzo of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, with its eternal appeal.

All the emotionalism in Lily responded to the age-old lure of the music.

She turned her head and looked at the Italian. His dark eyes were bent upon her, with a look so tender, so concerned for her sadness, that her own eyes suddenly filled with tears.

"*Poverina!*" he said with great simplicity. "And you English women have no religion! In Italy the sad ones go to the church, they burn little candles and think that their wishes will come true, or they find comfort in their own virtues and resignation to the will of God. But you? What have you?"

He answered his own question with an eloquent gesture of negation, and Lily said nothing.

But later in the evening she turned to him again, and although she was still silent, she knew that it needed only that slight movement to tell his acute perceptions of her mute, half-ashamed desire for sympathy.

"You are like me. Music—poetry—but especially music," he said, watching her face; "they speak too much of the unattainable, beautiful, intimate things—the Blue Rose one dreams about."

"Is it always unattainable?" she asked wistfully.

"There is only one Blue Rose," said della Torre, and shrugged his shoulders, smiling. Then he added: "There are other roses, though. Beautiful, dark-red ones, and flame-coloured ones. I have found many roses, even if never the Blue one."

The next day he sent her roses, and wrote upon the card which accompanied them: "They are only make-believe, but I cannot find the One that I want you to have."

Thus was established between them the language of allusion.

The Marchese made no secret to Lily of the fact that women interested him supremely. She thought that he was not making love to her when he told her frankly that he had loved often.

"Love is the only thing that matters," della Torre remarked. "It has often been said before, it remains none the less true. A man is young just as long as he retains his capacity for falling in love. What does it matter if he loves successfully or unsuccessfully? It is the hope, the fears, the despairs, that count—the meetings and partings, the misunderstandings, the beautiful pretence that the most ephemeral of emotions will endure for ever."

"You don't think that love is lasting?"

Lily was smiling a little, but there was disappointment in her heart.

"The Blue Rose is the only one that never fades," said Giulio della Torre.

Lily found herself wondering very often just how much she liked him.

His intuition seemed to her to be very wonderful, and

his tact unfailing. He never jarred upon her varying moods, and she knew, with inward compunction, that they varied often. She could hardly herself tell when it first became a ting of accepted implication between them, that he loved her. Divided between the conventionality that told her she should be shocked, the common-sense conviction that his passion would be as brief as it was likely to be fruitless, and the unavowed gratification that she derived from it, Lily, as usual, refused to envisage the direct question.

She continued passive.

Nicholas liked the Marchese, and meaning merely a mild facetiousness, referred to him when he was not present as "our friend Spaghetti."

Miss Clotilde Stellenthorpe returned to Italy, and mysteriously expressed her parting counsel to Lily.

"*Aha, bambina!* You will have courage, will you not? There is much to be done, much to be suffered, by those who steer slender craft down the rapids."

Lily did not seek to interpret her aunt's metaphor. It seemed to her, indeed, that she sought nothing, did nothing, said nothing. Everything within herself was negative, torpid and unresisting.

"You are asleep," said Giulio della Torre half wistfully, half reproachfully.

"Perhaps."

"Do you never mean to wake up, Princess?"

"I can't," said Lily.

She was unable to resist the temptation of interpreting herself to so sympathetic an observer. "When I was a little girl, I cared about things so dreadfully. I had a younger sister whom I loved . . . in those days

everything seemed to matter so much. Now, I hardly feel anything at all. I seem to have grown indifferent."

"Because there is nothing for you to care about." He looked at her boldly.

"I think one might break through the thorn-hedge, Princess, and waken you."

"No," said Lily sharply.

She thought of Nicholas.

"You forget I'm married," she said, with a childish mixture of dignity and simplicity.

The Marchese shrugged his shoulders.

"Not at all. He is very good, very kind, the husband—but so much older! And you were never in love with him—of that I am very certain."

"I thought I was—everyone told me I was——" she began, and added belatedly. "I can't discuss it with you. You must see that. Please don't say any more."

But he said a great deal more, and Lily, with a certain sense of fascination, felt quite unable to help listening to him.

"It was never an Englishman that you needed at all—you do not belong to the Northern races, whatever your birth may be. In temperament you are of the South. You need infinitely more than anyone here will ever give you. To the English, sentiment is ridiculous—poetry is for the inside of the poetry books only—passion is improper—and love means merely the domestic affections. But you—what you need, what you must have, if you are ever to express yourself, fulfil yourself—it is romance."

He spoke with so much simplicity that Lily, answering nothing, merely looked up at him with amazed recognition of the truth in his words. He understood, as Nicholas would never understand, but she knew that she did not want him to make love to her. When the things that he said to her made her heart beat faster she wondered why she was all the time so certain that she did not love him.

He made love openly to her, with a suddenness and a fervour that totally disconcerted her.

"But may I not tell you that I adore you?" he asked piteously. "You have never been loved as you should be loved, most Beautiful. Let me show you."

Lily's sense of her own invulnerability was strong, even if it was also unconsciously wistful. She let Giulio della Torre "show her" in the words that came to him so readily and so eloquently, but when he took her hand, or rather, snatched at it with his own slender, olive fingers, she had a sudden and purely instinctive movement of recoil.

"Oh, don't!"

He flushed angrily. "What is the matter? Why may I not touch your hand?"

"I don't like it," said Lily simply.

He stared at her for a moment, amazement and mortified vanity struggling together in his face. Suddenly, a true Latin, he burst into a rueful laugh at his own discomforture.

"I believe you mean it! But then you really are as cold—as white—as your own name-flower! You don't know what it is—to care?"

"But," said Lily, herself confused, "you always said that I didn't—that I never——"

"One says these things! But I did not know it was so literally true——"

"Forgive me," he added very gently. "You are still only a child, after all."

Lily justified his words better than she realized, by flushing deeply with vexation. She had thought that he understood her, but his understanding had been only the first move in the game, and she realized, with something nearly allied to disappointment, that the Italian was not the man to rouse her to any appreciation of subsequent moves.

"It's just—not," she thought, and involuntarily the words added themselves—"like Nicholas. He's—just not."

She was slightly relieved, upon the whole, when della Torre bade her a whimsical farewell.

"I still think that I could have taught you something, had you been willing to learn—but you are afraid. You will learn not to be afraid of life, some day, and then——"

He made an expressive gesture.

"Am I afraid of life?" she said, rather surprised. "Yes, I think perhaps I am. I think I have always been taught to be afraid of it."

"And I, I wanted to teach you to forget everything that you have been taught! But it is never the teaching that matters—only the teacher. You know what they say?"

He paused a moment dramatically, looking at her and smiling.

"C'est le ton qui fait la musique."

Lily remembered the words very often, after Giulio della Torre had gone.

"Did you give our friend Spaghetti his marching orders?" Nicholas made enquiry of her, his eyebrows raised in a significantly humorous expression.

"I don't know that I did, exactly. He gave them to himself, I think."

"I thought he seemed a bit infatuated," said Nicholas complacently.

"Would you be angry if I told you that I—I did encourage him a little bit?"

Nicholas roared with laughter.

His mirth was so spontaneous and so ludicrously inapposite to Lily's own half-formed intention of making as sensational a confession as the mildness of the facts allowed, that she could not help laughing with him.

"But, Nicholas, I really am ashamed."

"Why, darling?"

He put his arm round her waist.

"Because one evening he—he told me I wasn't happy and I said it was true."

It was that which had weighed upon her, with its implication of her husband's inadequacy. The fact that she had allowed the Marchese to tell her that he loved her, appeared to her to be relatively of no importance.

"You shouldn't tell fibs," said Nicholas serenely.

Lily was silent from sheer disconcertment.

"What are you downcast about?" he asked affectionately. "I've been so disgustingly busy lately, I haven't had any talks with my little wife. That fellow didn't worry you, did he?"

"Not in himself," Lily said confusedly, making an effort to give her real thoughts to her husband.

She was not surprised when he failed to follow her bungling attempt.

"Not in himself, eh? Well, he's a splendid fellow, della Torre, full of brains, and I don't blame him if he got a little bit above his boots, eh?"

She had scarcely ever hear Nicholas say a word in condemnation of anyone, and although the thought touched her, she was also impatient of his lack of discrimination.

"Nicholas, it was partly my own fault, that the Marchese thought that I should like him to make love to me a little bit."

"Was it, by Jove!" Nicholas refused to take the matter at all seriously.

"You know, you're a very fascinating little person, my dear. You mustn't be surprised if inflammable young foreigners lose their heads from time to time. And you mustn't let it distress you, either. I can't have you looking worried."

It was so evident that his whole solicitude was for herself alone, that Lily felt a sudden rush of passionate gratitude and affection towards him.

"Oh, Nicholas, how good you are to me!"

She raised her lips to his.

The disappointment that marriage had brought to her receded at such moments.

She ceased to try to wrench from her relation with Nicholas a supreme meaning which it could never hold.

She was content to feel his love for her, momentarily forgetting to rebel at the poverty of the response that it awakened in herself, content to know that he was content, and curiously relieved because she could sincerely assure herself that she loved her husband.

XX

No dramatic crisis came to break down the endless monotony of Lily's dissatisfaction as time went on. But she envisaged the possibility of one.

"Supposing I meet the man I could have loved—supposing I *do* love him?"

The specious echo of words that might have been spoken by her father, by Miss Melody, by any of those who had stood for wisdom to her childhood, followed on the thought.

"Why meet trouble halfway? . . . How weak to torture oneself about something which may never happen . . . crossing bridges before one comes to them . . ."

Something in the last phrase awoke a long-dormant memory.

They had said that to her, long ago—the new metaphor leaving a little picture on her plastic, childish mind—in the old days when she had been afraid, because the east wind would give Vonnie earache.

They had said that it was naughty and ungrateful to run and meet trouble halfway. Of course Vonnie wouldn't get earache. And Vonnie had gone out into the east wind, and had got earache. The agony of those nights of silent strain was upon Lily once more as she remembered.

Illumination came to her.

They had bluffed her into accepting those old catch-words then, but was she of her own free will to be bound by them now?

"Don't put things into words—don't let imagination run away with you. Beware of imagination. It's morbid to dwell upon what may never happen."

Shove it all out of sight! Bury it without looking at it! Embark upon adventure by the line of least resistance!

And then, when that which was buried rises to confront you, in stark, unescapable reality, then, realize that your defences are not ready, that an emergency is upon you with which you have deliberately unfitted yourself to cope, that Truth, your only weapon, you have long ago cast from you at the bidding of those who read its name Morbidity.

But she was dimly aware that, as submission had blinded her once, so bitterness obscured her vision now.

The old, inculcated instinct for seeking advice beset her often, but she derided it in the realization that no glib outside verdict could now carry weight with her.

Half enviously, half mockingly, she thought of the old literary convention that, in a time of mental crisis, some chance encounter, some wisdom met almost at random, should provide the unforgettable word holding the key of solution.

"She never saw the lame cobbler again, but his words had made all life look different henceforward . . ."

There were no such fortuitous sign-posts in real life, Lily decided.

More than one adviser, nevertheless, sought her unasked.

"All is not well with you, my Lily."

Aunt Clo's penetrating gaze had underlined her words.

"Shall I tell you, little one, that I foresaw this some time ago? *Moi aussi, j'ai passé par là.* There comes a day, is it not so?"

"What?" asked Lily, mildly bewildered.

"*Jcunesse, jeunesse!*" said Aunt Clo, quite in her old way. "Youth calls to youth, my Lily, as well I know. And watching you, I have re-lived my own past. You know something of the story of my past. Do not, I beseech you, little one—do not let me live to see tragedy repeat itself."

"Tell me what you mean, Aunt Clo."

"Lily, Lily! Fencing is unworthy of you—utterly unworthy of us both."

"I want to know what you think," said Lily wearily.

"Think!" repeated Aunt Clo solemnly. "What *can* I think?"

Her niece was utterly unable to find a reply to the portentous conundrum.

Miss Stellingthorpe put one hand upon Lily's shoulder and plunged a long, deep look into her eyes.

Then she sank into a seat and allowed the saddest of smiles to dawn upon her lips. She shook her head slowly from side to side. "Who am I, that you should turn to me, my dear? I, who made such a shipwreck of my youth? But O, little one! How lightly I should count the cost, if it is to save you from the same folly, from the same life-time of regret!"

Had Aunt Clotilde really some message to interpret?

Lily looked at her with a faint stirring of hope. Miss Stellingthorpe's fine eyes were glowing.

"Lose all, and you shall find all!" she declared. "The old Prophets knew much, my Lily. Listen, child. It will cost you, to break through the old traditions—who knows it better than I? But you must have courage. You must break free. Your soul asks it of you. And that other—your rightful mate—how can he fulfil himself without you?"

Lily was paralyzed. How difficult, how impossible to stop Aunt Clo in mid-career with the startling commonplace: "There is no other."

"But it's not—there's no one who——"

"*Bambina*—ah, how readily the old name comes! Leave subterfuges to smaller souls. *Leave* them, I say!"

Aunt Clo's voice rose in a crescendo of impassioned admonishment.

"I do not ask for names—for details. I may perhaps have hoped for a fuller, freer response from you—but I understand. *Je comprends tout—je ne suis pas comme les autres, moi qui vous parle.* But whatever the circumstances, whatever the difficulties, you must find courage to disregard them. It is your soul that is at stake, my Lily. And after all—what are you risking? The good opinion of conventional moralists!"

Aunt Clo's middle finger met her thumb in a resonant snap of utter contempt for all conventional moralists.

"What do they know of such needs as ours? I say ours advisedly, my Lily. You know the outline of my life's story. There was only one man—though many have desired me—but only one man who supremely mattered. And he was bound, even as you are. And she to whom he was bound—she who had called herself my friend—she betrayed us both. She refused him his freedom."

Aunt Clo bowed her head, as though unwilling to face Lily's reception of such a climax.

"You ask me," said Miss Stellingthorpe, after a slight silence which neither had broken, "you ask me why, swept off our feet as we were, he and I did not take the law into our own hands. My reply to you is that I had to suffer the double bitterness of *her* betrayal, and of *his*. For he failed me—his courage was less than mine. Although I urged him to take the strong way, the high line, he did not do so. He was afraid. I cast pride to the winds, my Lily—I held back nothing. But that other—she tempted him with specious pleadings of her 'rights,' and he was weak. I do not seek to deny it now. He took the coward's refuge."

Miss Stellingthorpe gazed sombrely at her niece.

"Flight. With her."

There was a solemn silence.

"But it was not to speak of myself that I came, *carina*, but of you. Do not wreck your life, little one, for a scruple. You have courage, *n'est-ce-pas?* It needs but one mighty effort to shake off the old superstitions—and after that Love, Freedom, Self-expression! Are these not worth a sacrifice?"

"Yes—if——"

"Go to your lover!" said Aunt Clo with a clarion call. "I am not afraid to say it," and indeed she was not. "*Go to your lover.*"

It was more than difficult to undeceive Aunt Clo. Nor, when she finally took her departure, did Lily feel certain that Miss Stellingthorpe had relinquished all hope of her niece's ultimate defiance of the seventh commandment.

It gave her a faint sense of ironical amusement to dis-

cover that her father's thoughts had taken the same direction as had Aunt Clo's, inspiring in him diametrically opposite emotions.

Lily went to stay with him, and was glad that she looked ill enough to justify her leaving London whilst Nicholas was obliged to remain there.

"I'm sorry Nicholas couldn't get away," said Philip rather nervously. "It's very good of him to spare you. You're not looking quite as well as you generally do, my child."

This was Philip's nearest approach to an uncomplimentary statement.

"I'm tired," Lily said.

"Come, come, come," said Philip.

The bracing admonition was marred by his uncertain tone, and the anxious glances that he kept casting towards his daughter.

At last he said to her:

"My little pet, you're not fretting about anything, are you? I'm sorry to see you so—so pale."

Something in the kind, familiar, anxious tone stirred Lily suddenly. She began to cry.

"Poor little child!" said Philip.

He seemed less surprised than Lily had expected him to be, at her sudden weakness, and stroked her hair with hands that trembled a little.

"Tell me all about it," he suggested.

Lily had never thought it possible that she should put her vague disappointment and weariness into words, least of all to her father. Nevertheless she found herself trying to do so.

"It isn't anything—that's the worst of it. Nothing

definite. Only Nicholas—Nicholas and I—I wish I loved him more than I do—he's disappointed in me."

"No, no," protested Philip. "That great deprivation is worse for you than for him—besides, my poor dear child, you're still young——"

"It isn't that," said Lily. "He was kinder than I can ever say about that—after all, it isn't my fault, and besides, I *might* have a child, even yet—they didn't say it was impossible. It's just ourselves—Nicholas and me."

"My child!"

Philip Stellingthorpe looked thoroughly frightened. "I know there's a great disparity of years—but you were fully aware of that when you married him. You were in love with him, Lily."

She made no answer.

"And he with you," said her father hurriedly. "I was deeply touched, at the time, by the way in which he spoke of you. But, my little darling, you know that being in love, as people call it, isn't a thing that lasts for ever. Something better comes to take its place. And there are bound to be little frictions, in even the happiest marriages. You mustn't let yourself exaggerate. There's been no misunderstanding between you, has there?"

Lily knew that by the word "misunderstanding" he meant dispute, and she said that there had been none.

"There, then, you see! What is there to fret about? Nicholas is devoted to you."

"I know."

"And he's your husband, my dear child. You love him."

"I am very fond of him," said Lily slowly. Then she added, speaking more for the relief of words, than with

any recollection of her hearer, "It's just because I'm fond of him that I'm so unhappy. I can't give him anything real—I've tried and tried to think that I could, and it's no use—I'm sorry because of him, and I'm sorry because of myself—I've missed the best there is, somehow, and I'm realizing it more and more as I go on, and now I just feel as though I couldn't go on any more. If I wasn't fond of Nicholas, I think I should leave him."

"Don't talk like that—don't say terrible things like that. You don't know what they mean," Philip exclaimed in great agitation. "Don't you know that it's a mortal sin?"

"What is?"

"To let your thoughts turn for a moment, after your solemn marriage vows, to—to any thought of—'for better for worse—till death us do part,' and cleaving to him *only*——"

"But I shan't go away. I *am* fond of Nicholas. It would be much easier for me if I weren't," said Lily.

"What do you mean?"

Lily did not seek to explain what she meant. It was scarcely clear even to herself, save that her affection for Nicholas was real of its kind, and therefore must debar her from the drastic and impetuous measures for which her whole undisciplined youth craved.

She remained away on one excuse after another.

Her old schoolmate, Dorothy, came home from India, and although Lily admired Dorothy's healthy, fair-headed, unbeautiful babies, and went almost daily to play with them, she would not admit that her own childlessness roused in her any regret.

Nor did it.

But she watched with sick envy Dorothy's eagerness for her Indian mail letters, and the tears that clouded her frank, unsentimental gaze, as she spoke of "poor Frank"—who would not be able to afford leave for a long while.

"You are lucky, Lily, to live in England with no dreadful complications about having to go up to the hills, for the sake of the babies, and leave your man, sweltering away in the awful heat. And now I've got to leave Dolly behind, and go back with only Aileen, and I shan't have her after our next leave at home, I don't suppose. Frank is so good he'd let me stay at home with them altogether, like some wives do—but of course I wouldn't."

"Do you think he needs you more than the children do?"

"Well, I do, but apart from that," said Dorothy, "I know I jolly well can't do without *him!*"

She laughed as she spoke, and Lily knew that she did so because she was so much in earnest.

"I've got to finish my mail letter," said Dorothy, who had always hated writing letters.

Lily watched her pull out the perennial block of thin ruled paper to which every day she added a fresh, scrawled contribution.

She herself wrote every few days to Nicholas, and in reply received short letters, indited upon Club notepaper, informing her that he was very busy, or that he had gone past their house, that the exterior painting seemed to be getting on well, that he hoped she was feeling stronger, and would not hurry back to town just yet, the more especially as workmen were still in the house. He was always her devoted husband.

Lily divined haste in the notes, as well as the affectionate feeling that was part of Nicholas. She wrote and told him that Kenneth was to come home in a week's time, and that she should like to await his arrival. Her husband's answer was one of cordial acquiescence, and then he wrote no more for several days.

Lily, as usual, found Kenneth everything that she herself had never dared to be.

He had spent most of his holidays with friends, about whom he vouchsafed the scantiest particulars to his family.

"A fellow I know," or "One of the chaps at the place where I've just been staying," said Kenneth, or, more non-committally still, "Somebody or other that one came across somewhere or other."

"I should like to hear something about this visit of yours, my boy," said Philip, in tones that unwittingly suggested a strong sense of suspiciousness.

"Oh, it was all right."

"So I suppose—so I suppose," Philip laughed rather nervously. "Had it not been 'all right,' as you express it, no doubt I should have been informed. But we've not been told very much about your amusements, or about your young friends themselves. Your school-fellow's father is—or rather was, a good many years ago—an acquaintance of mine, as you know. Besides, my dear boy, I like to know something about the sort of people with whom you're friendly."

Philip's voice had become rebukeful.

"Oh, they're all right," said Kenneth.

"How many brothers and sisters has Graham got?" enquired Lily hastily.

"There were two or three kids knocking about, and a girl with her hair up. She's the eldest."

"Oh, Jean Graham. I think I met her in the Park one day—rather pretty, with fair curly hair."

"Oh," said Kenneth indifferently. But the thought appeared to awaken some association. "I say, Lily, who do you know with carrotty hair?"

"I don't know. Heaps of people. Nobody in particular. What do you mean, exactly?"

"Somebody who's a friend of your old man's. At least——"

"That's not at all a nice way of talking, Kenneth," said his father gravely. "Apologize to your sister."

"No, never mind, Father," Lily interposed.

She remembered, with curious detachment, the two little girls, Vonnie and Lily—who had always been so gentle and respectful in their speech, knowing quite well that anything else would offend the susceptibilities of Father and Mother most terribly.

"It's most disloyal to speak in that rude, foolish way of a near relation—and one who has been so kind to you, too," Philip told the boy.

"Sorry."

Kenneth's tone was so cheerfully unconcerned that Lily hurriedly broke across the light-hearted echo of it that seemed to linger, inappropriately, in the atmosphere diffused by Philip's deep vexation.

"What were you going to tell us about? Somebody with red hair whom Nicholas knows?"

"M'm."

Philip raised his eyebrows at the unceremonious mutter, and sighed, but he uttered no spoken rebuke. Lily won-

dered whether he gauged the full imperviousness of Kenneth to those silent tokens of disapproval that had been so potent with Philip's elder children.

"A fattish girl, with red hair."

Philip looked up sharply.

"I don't know whether you mean Doris Dickenson," said Lily. "She has red hair. She's a hospital nurse."

"That's it. I knew I'd seen her before. She looked after you when you were ill."

"Yes, she did, but when——"

"I saw her, and old—I mean, Nicholas, too—the other day, when I was coming through London."

"Nonsense, my dear boy," said Philip curtly. "You must have made a mistake. Your brother-in-law would have told me if he'd seen you."

"He didn't see me."

"Then where were you?"

"Just going along down the street. It's all on the way to Victoria station."

"I never gave you leave to hang about London by yourself. I told you to come straight through, in a four-wheeled cab."

"I missed that train——"

"You never told me," exclaimed Philip in horrified tones. "Besides, what do you mean? I met you at the station here at seven o'clock myself. How can you have missed the train?"

"I missed that slow one you wrote about, but I found there was a much better one that got to the junction in time for the connection. At least, it really arrived five minutes after my train was supposed to start, but I knew it would be late, just as it always is. I had heaps of time."

"You had no business to alter the arrangements that Father had made for you, my boy."

"Sorry," said Kenneth in exactly the same cheerful, impersonal accents that he had used before.

"And besides, what would have happened supposing the train hadn't been late? You might have had to spend the night there."

Philip's tone was that of one who points out some terrible danger barely escaped.

Lily felt conscious of a spasm of sharp impatience. No wonder that Kenneth was reticent, even as she herself, as a child, had frequently been deceitful, in the endeavour to evade Philip's portentous anxieties and distrusts.

He was beginning now a serious exposition of the utter inability of "very young people" ever to judge what was best, and Lily felt that she must stop him before her own exasperation made itself felt.

"But what about Nicholas, Kenneth? Why didn't you speak to him?"

Kenneth turned to her, obviously rendered loquacious by his desire to follow her lead.

"Well, I'd really half thought of looking him up, only then I saw scaffolding and stuff outside, and I thought he wouldn't be there. But I looked up at the windows and saw him, as it happened, staring out. And I was just going to cross the street when a taxi drew up at the door, and the carrotty-haired one got out, and ran up the steps like blazes and let herself in. So then I bunked off."

"Let herself in," repeated Philip slowly, "How could she do that?"

"With a key," said Kenneth matter-of-factly. "I sup-

pose old Nicholas didn't want the fag of going down to answer the door, and the servants were all away, or out, or something."

"Yes," said Lily, "the servants are all away; there's only a caretaker."

She spoke quite automatically, but her mind had instantly registered and accepted the new situation unconsciously disclosed by Kenneth, almost without surprise. She suddenly felt as though she had found a clue to some evasive conviction that had been eluding her.

"That's why he hasn't written to me lately," she reflected calmly.

Then she became aware of her father.

"Kenneth is talking nonsense, my little Lily," he said tremulously. "It's all quite—quite—quite unimportant, of course, but you mustn't let yourself——"

She recognized that he was torn between a terrified desire to reassure her, his own sense of shock and outrage, and the old, pathetic instinct to conceal, at all costs, from Kenneth any significance in what Kenneth had just said.

"It's all right," she said, smiling at him without any effort at all.

"What's up?" Kenneth demanded, glancing from one to the other.

"Nothing, my boy, nothing at all. Why should there be anything up, as you call it?" said Philip, grey-faced and shaking. "Only I don't like you to—to tell foolish stories like that."

"But why——"

"Don't argue, now, Kenneth. You know Father will never allow arguing. Now that will do, we needn't say any more about it."

Lily saw on Kenneth's young face exactly that slow awakening to an uncomfortable sense of mystery, that would presently give way to concealed surmisings and surreptitious attempts at trapping down the truth, that had made life a thing of perpetual furtiveness to her own childhood.

She felt so strong a nervous impulse to speak the rending, shattering truth aloud that it came as a sharp relief to see Kenneth, after a suspicious stare at his father, get up and leave the room.

Lily gave Philip no time for the evasions that he was obviously and piteously seeking in his own mind.

"It's all right." She strangely found the words of reassurance on her lips again.

"I know Nicholas. I think he probably has been—unfaithful—with this girl. But it's a sort of passing madness—you mustn't think he's like that really."

"Lily—Lily, my poor child. But we mustn't rush at conclusions, my poor darling. I can question Kenneth quietly, later on—without letting him realize anything, of course."

"No, no. I'm going partly on intuition, Father."

"But had you suspected before, then?"

"Oh no. I knew the girl was—well, a flirt, to put it mildly, and of course I knew that Nicholas admired her. But he's never even seen her since my illness, ages ago."

"How can you tell that, my poor child—what do you know of these things? This business must be tackled by a man. Shall I go up to town at once?"

"I don't think so."

Hard-won certainties, that Lily had scarcely known herself to possess, rallied round her. Her own inner con-

victions crystallised into decisive speech, gained strength every moment.

"No. It isn't a question for that sort of thing at all—I mean scenes and interviews and recriminations. I shall have to tell Nicholas that I know, and then—then I suppose we shall talk it all over, and see what ought to be done—if anything."

"You don't realize," groaned Philip. "My poor little inexperienced child, you must be guided by me. It may not be as bad as we think."

Lily thought for a moment and then found herself speaking with a decision that surprised herself.

"This is something that I must decide for myself. You can't help me. Nobody can, except Nicholas himself. I should like him to come down here, please."

"You would rather that than let me take you up to London? But are you sure that he will come?"

"Quite sure," said Lily.

In her own mind, she was thinking that very likely Nicholas would write and ask her to come home, before she had even time to send her summons to him. He wasn't deceiving her, "leading a double life," as the conventions of fiction and the drama.

It had all been a sort of accident, probably, Lily reflected. Almost certainly Nicholas, like all weak natures, would feel the instant need of salving his own sense of degradation by making a confession.

Philip was groaning.

"If you had only been more open with me the other day! I had no idea things had gone so far—I thought it was a vague, passing discontent, that meant nothing. But you must have realized even then that he was wrong-

ing you in some such terrible way. I could never have believed it, never. However, we mustn't meet trouble halfway, I suppose."

He sighed heavily.

"My poor child, there is at least a remedy open to you, if things are as we fear—though God forbid it should ever come to that."

"What?" asked Lily.

"You can claim your freedom," said her father very low. "There is *one* cause for which the marriage tie may be dissolved, in the eyes of God."

Lily realized with a shock of astonishment that here was an aspect of the case which actually had not presented itself to her mind.

Divorce.

A second chance! The words flashed through her mind, opening up an illimitable vista of freedom, a sudden, unlooked-for way of escape from that which had appeared unescapable. She had longed wildly and hopelessly for a miracle that would obliterate the years that had elapsed since her marriage to Nicholas Aubray.

Against her own sense of conventional decorum, against her father's shocked unhappiness, relief sprang to life within her at the thought that the miracle might yet take place, the writing of the years might be erased, the irrevocable revoked.

XXI

A CERTAIN grave, curt manner and lengthening of face had always been half unconsciously displayed by Nicholas when perturbed or out of temper.

Lily, latterly sharply critical, had interpreted such signs into a desire to be questioned. She half expected to see them now, and at the anticipation a most inappropriately trivial irritation possessed her.

Instead, Nicholas faced her with pitiful, tired eyes and a haggard face.

"Do you know, Lily, or have I got to tell you?" he asked her instantly.

And, also instantly, she replied:

"I know already."

"Thank God for that. I thought perhaps you did, when I got your telegram asking me to come."

"Should you have told me?"

"Yes. I couldn't have met you again and not told you. It was only a question of when." He looked at her piteously. "But, Lily, are you sure you understand? How do you know—what is it you've heard?"

"Kenneth saw her—Doris—let herself into the house, and he saw you at one of the windows. He told me almost by chance—without understanding. Father was there. But it wasn't so much what he said—that didn't amount to much. It was just that I knew it was true—I wasn't exactly surprised."

"But it all happened within the last week. Darling, I've been a hound, and God knows how I hate myself, but I've not been deceiving you. It's over, already—was over before your telegram ever reached me."

"It was a sort of passing madness, I suppose," Lily said, using the words that she had used to Philip.

Nicholas seized upon them eagerly.

"That's exactly what it was. And look here, Lily—at the cost of sounding like a cad, I'm going to tell you straight; it hasn't hurt Doris. You're not to think of her as a girl that I've betrayed. I've been a brute—but it's to you, not to her. Doris is—well, I wasn't the first—not by a long way."

"I didn't know—I didn't like her—but I didn't think she was that sort."

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders.

"Then you aren't in love with her?"

"Good God, no!"

He came and knelt beside her.

"Lily, it's you I love, my darling, my little wife. I don't know if a woman can understand how these things happen. . . . We haven't been happy together lately and I was lonely and down on my luck. I met her by chance, and she asked me to take her to tea somewhere, and she's attractive, you know, in her way. I took her to a theatre the same night—but I swear to you that I never thought of anything but having a cheery evening at a deadly dull time of year in London. But then—well, then I suppose I saw that she was for it, and I lost my head. I drove her home in a taxi, and when we got to her place she—she didn't want to get out. She said she'd see me to the Club, instead—I suppose I knew what she was up to,

then. She's living at some Mansions or other, and she knew our place was more or less shut up. Anyway, we went there, and not to the Club. The old woman had left the drinks and things out, as she did every night before going off home, and the house was empty. It seemed safe enough, from the point of view of discovery. Heaven knows how she got the latch-key—I suppose she took it. She telephoned me next day at the Club that she was coming to bring it back to me—she hadn't the wit to know that I hated her like hell by that time and never wanted to go near her again. Though it was myself I ought to have hated—and did, too. Well, I thought if she was bent on coming, I'd let her come, and show her that it was all over, and that I knew I'd been a cad. I never thought of the little fool letting herself in like that with the wretched key—though I'd have laid a thousand to one against the chance of anyone spotting her who knew either of us. It was the most extraordinary chance——”

“You didn't see Kenneth?”

“No.”

“What made you ask if I knew?”

“I'd a sort of feeling you must know. In fact, I rather felt as if everybody must know—sort of branded. I couldn't write to you, or do anything. I knew I should have to tell you. Lily, do you think you can ever forgive me?”

“Oh, yes,” said Lily, surprised.

“You angel! You little saint!” With an exuberant gesture he put his arm round her, and she made an instinctive movement of recoil.

“But Nicholas, wait. I never thought of forgiving or not forgiving, because I don't feel angry, but you know, we—we could——”

He stared at her incredulously.

"Father said that I could divorce you, and I suppose it's true. It could be arranged somehow."

"Your father! But this is a matter that concerns only our two selves. Besides, Lily, you don't know what you're saying. Divorce is not a thing to be spoken of like that—lightly. It's a frightful thing to think of."

For a moment the old inclination to accept the values of another beset her. Then she spoke steadily.

"Divorce would set us free to begin again. You've given me adequate grounds, Nicholas, after all. Tell me honestly—would a divorce, undefended—I suppose you wouldn't defend the case?—would it hurt your career?"

Nicholas stood up again and looked down at her very grimly.

"It would do you quite as much harm as it would me, my dear. A woman who's been through the Divorce Court, even if she's perfectly innocent, is looked upon askance by many people. But I don't believe you know what you're talking about. It's an insane suggestion. It could be done, no doubt with a certain amount of collusion, but you've no idea of all that it would entail."

"Perhaps," Lily said slowly, "perhaps, Nicholas, I think that it would be worth while, if it would give us both a chance of beginning again."

Nicholas looked at her with eyes that, from incredulous, became slowly agonized.

"We can," he said, "I suppose it would be possible. But I—I thought you loved me."

Quite suddenly, he was crying like a child that is forced to realize the infliction of some bitter, almost incredible disappointment.

"Don't you care for me at all, Lily? Has it made you

hate me? Don't you realize that I was mad and wicked and a fool; but it was you I cared for, all the time? I thought you understood."

"Nicholas!"

She was touched by him as she had never been before. "Don't—don't! I do understand, I think."

"You were away—and things between us haven't been very happy lately. I don't want to make excuses, Lily, but can't you see a little how it happened?"

"Yes. Oh, Nicholas, the way these things happen—the way everything happens—always out of something else——"

She stopped, unable to express the fullness of her crowding thoughts.

"This—in itself," she said at last timidly, "is only an episode. But all the things that have been leading up to it, Nicholas—the disappointment I've been to you——"

"Never, my darling."

Confronted by his loyally-meant denial of fact, Lily felt helpless.

"Nicholas," she said at last. "If I spoke just now of a desperate remedy, it's because I've been feeling desperate. I really mean it, quite literally. It's not just a word."

His mouth twitched a little.

"My dearest child, you've only known that there was anything to be desperate *about* for the last twenty-four hours. Heaven knows I don't want to minimize the unspeakable thing I've done, but still—desperation—when you say yourself that it's an episode, merely——"

"You don't understand, Nicholas. I've been in despair for longer than I can tell you. This affair is nothing—a sin of the body. If it's a wrong done to me, and I suppose in a way it is—then I forgive you—of course I do.

Honestly, it doesn't seem to me to matter much—and as you said just now, I'd left you alone, and we hadn't been of much use to one another. I think it was partly my fault, that it happened at all."

"My darling child, you can talk generously and frankly like that, and yet you speak of divorce!"

There was the impatience in his voice that had so often led her hastily to disavow her own views.

"Don't you see how utterly illogical you're being?"

She shook her head.

"You haven't understood. You think I just used the word divorce as a sort of threat, to show that I knew what a serious wrong you'd done me—that I didn't mean it, or didn't understand what such a step really means. But Nicholas, I'll be honest with you—at last, I'll be honest. I've thought of divorce before—I've thought of death—of running away—of *anything* that would enable us to begin again. This thing that's happened may provide the means."

"But then you've hated me?"

His voice held utter bewilderment and incredulity.

"No!" cried Lily passionately.

She found that she was crying.

"I don't hate you, Nicholas. How could I? I'm fond of you, that's just it. I ought never to have married you—it wasn't fair. But oh, Nicholas, I *am* fond of you!"

The hard lucidity of utterance with which she had confronted him a moment earlier had deserted her. She was crying uncontrollably.

"Whichever way we turn, it all seems hopeless. I can't help making you unhappy—I *am* fond of you, Nicholas; oh, Nicholas—can't you understand?"

They clung together, and both were weeping.

"Forgive me, my poor darling," he reiterated helplessly.

"No, no—it's for you to forgive me, Nicholas. This thing—this little thing that's happened between you and Doris—it's nothing, I don't care what anybody says—it's not a real thing, and it doesn't matter. It's only pretence if I say it does."

"Lily, don't leave me. I can't do without you. Forgive me! Don't—don't fail me!"

Her pity and affection tore at her. She wanted to cry to him that she would never fail him, that no forgiveness was needed between them, that they would begin life together again. The impulse of reckless generosity rose to blot out the relentless unalterability of truth.

Every carefully inculcated falsity of upbringing strove against her, every easy sentimentality sought to stifle sincerity of thought.

"Let me wait—don't make me say anything now," she besought him. "I ought to think—I want to think, before we settle anything. Give me time, Nicholas."

He was obviously puzzled and she knew that he thought her forgiveness of him to be still in the balance.

"But you'll tell me soon, Lily?" he said wistfully. "Of course you have a right morally to claim this—this terrible penalty, and I would make it as easy as I could for you, dear—you know I'd do that. But you won't—you couldn't. Talk to your father, darling. He'll help you."

But Lily talked to no one.

She had taken advice once before. This time, she sought to confront her own issues alone.

Freedom. This might mean freedom.

She had longed, with the frantic desire of hopelessness, to begin again. And Nicholas himself had provided her with a door of escape. A legitimate exit.

Her thoughts roamed free and disconnected.

Freedom to begin again! Who knew what life might yet hold, with the gain of bitter and profound experience behind her, and the potent, incalculable fact of a freed spirit before her?

She had learnt honesty at last, and at last the gaze of her soul was steady.

"The very beginning of it all, when they made me believe myself in love with Nicholas, and I hadn't the courage to own to myself that I wasn't! Or perhaps it goes further back even than that, back to the time when Vonnie and I were little. Vonnie, my Vonnie, shall I ever love anyone again? Vonnie knew the truth about values; she knew what mattered to her and what didn't. Perhaps I did too—I think I did when we were little, but afterwards I took my values ready-made. One can't do that. Humbug brings its own penalty—my life since I've grown up here has been just that—*Humbug*. Yes, and long before I was grown-up, too."

Wandering from the bewilderment of her own life, Lily thought of the problem of education.

Wherein lay the failure of one generation to render enduring help to another?

"It isn't love—the lack of it. They do love—so do we. Is it the old, possessive idea? Children belonging to their parents? They don't belong. Each soul belongs to itself—I'm certain of that. The parents have responsibility, at first, yes—they brought one into the world for their own pleasure, or because they thought it right, or because they

couldn't help it. They have to keep their children alive—to do the best they can for them—to tell them the truth as far as they know it. And that's what they don't do. They tell the children what they think is good for them to know . . . They arrogate to themselves the right of claiming infallibility. And they're not infallible—they know they're not. But they won't let the children know it. And so they evade, and deceive, and suppress, and the children grow up and find that there is no infallibility—but by that time they have learnt to evade, and deceive, and suppress, themselves."

Her heart smote her.

"Even now, it hurts me to think what I know is true. My instinct is to take refuge in the old idea of loyalty. Yet I know that it's only another word for sentimentality—for a wilful obscuring of facts."

Words came unsought into her mind.

"The truth shall make you free." Truth leading to Freedom. The two gifts that were withheld.

Loving their children, sacrificing often and much for them, yearning over them, parents, fearing loss to themselves, barred the road to freedom.

They wanted the children to belong to them.

"And one can't. The gulf is always there, between the generations. To own its existence might be to bridge it. But they won't own to it—they try and teach us not to own to it. They call it by other names—disloyalty, and ingratitude, and the arrogance of youth. And it's none of those things, until we're taught to consider it so."

"Honour thy father and mother." Yes, but they want one to do more than that—to go on belonging, to take on

trust the vital things that matter most, that only personal experience can teach. That old idea that parents can choose the religion of their children—it's wrong, wrong all along the line. They ought to be free.

Will it ever come to that? Is it an impossibility that parents should exist who will one day say to a child: 'We profess such-and-such a faith. We hold it to be true, we hope that you, in time to come, will hold it to be true. But you are free. You are bound by no promises made on your behalf in your babyhood, you are at liberty to exercise the gift of free-will of which we have never robbed you.'

"Would a child, so taught, trust the more fully for the lack of all claim to blind obedience?"

"Obedience." She stopped upon the word. Not obedience—"because I am the dispenser of rewards and punishments. Not 'because I am I, and to be obeyed.' Not the appeal to the emotions: 'To please me—because it will grieve and disappoint me if you disobey——' Least of all, 'because I say it is right to obey, and pleasing to God, and wrong to disobey, and displeasing to Him.' But perhaps, 'because the logical consequences of disobedience will lead to harm. Let reason and experience, so far as you have either, help you to understand.'"

That was not the old way. Was it a better one? The difficulty of it—the incalculable importance of it! She thought of the many who had striven, and of the far greater number who saw no need to strive, and held unthinkingly to the old shibboleths.

A faint echo of Miss Melody's kind, complacent tones came to her from the past.

"Lily, Lily, what are all these fancies? Are children

never to learn obedience without question, pray? According to you, dearie, then, must a baby cut himself with a sharp knife so as to learn by experience why he was forbidden to touch it? Come, come—that would never do.”

Ghost of Miss Melody’s laugh, floating on the air! Lily smiled, herself, very faintly.

The *reductio ad absurdum* is not an argument.

“Should I have the courage, if I had children? The courage never to grudge them the experience of suffering, to let them say ‘Yes’ to Life? To realize, and let them realize, from the very beginning, that no created soul belongs to another—that each must stand alone?”

She dropped her face into her hands, shuddering—realizing something of that ultimate abnegation that imposes nothing, but holds all in reserve.

Would Nicholas have helped her?

She knew that he would not. Their ideals, again and again, differed.

All, all irrelevant. There were no children of his and hers, thank God!

Other thoughts of Nicholas crowded to her mind. His love for her, his uncritical enjoyment of life, a certain child-like spirit of joviality that had harmonized with her own youth.

“But I ought never to have married him.”

She was putting hard facts into hard words at last.

“I knew just enough, even then, to know that nothing but the best of all would satisfy me—and for me Nicholas could never be anything but the second-best. Everything—except the one thing needful. Even then, if I’d been honest with myself, and admitted that it *was* a

second-best . . . But I wasn't—all this time I've tried to put into our relationship a value that it hasn't got. This infidelity of his . . ." She remembered it with a shock of surprise. "It doesn't matter, in itself. But it can set me free—free to begin again, to possess myself, to eliminate pretences. My life with Nicholas is all held together by pretences."

There came another thought and for an instant she was tempted to sheer away, with a tag on her lips of conventional optimism, "What's the use of thinking about what may never happen?"

Then she faced it, and deliberately recalled words spoken to her by Guilio della Torre, wise in his own generation.

"What you need—what you must have, if you are ever to fulfil yourself—it is romance. . . . You will learn not to be afraid of life, some day." And at the end, when he had spoken of all that she had need to be taught:

"C'est le ton qui fait la musique."

It was the teacher, not the teaching, that mattered.

"Some day, I shall love," thought Lily.

And she reflected coldly: "It is at least possible, if not probable. Am I to pretend to myself that such a thing is out of the question, because I am married? Why, I don't even know what I should do—whether I might not leave Nicholas altogether. And break his heart—oh, *Nicholas!*"

She was fond of him, she knew that she would always be fond of him. It would be impossible to her to be ruthless where Nicholas was concerned, she thought, and next moment she told herself fiercely that her opportunity had

come, that she would divorce him, and find herself free to begin life again, alone.

It was just. Nicholas had given her just cause.

For a little while Lily thought that the conflict lay, as so often, between sincerity and sentiment.

Then illumination came to her, searing and vivid.

Was the freedom for which she looked to be based upon yet another artificial value? Was she to exact from Nicholas a supreme penalty for that which had been powerless to hurt her?

Philip Stellenthorpe might say that there was one reason for which the tie of marriage might be set aside. Nicholas himself, piteously bewildered, might admit technical justification for such penalization, the world might condemn Nicholas and be right in so doing by the letter of the law, but the wife of Nicholas knew that in the spirit he had not sinned against her, and that she had no right to turn against himself his sin of the body for her own ends.

"If I loved him I should forgive him. Not loving him, there is no real question of forgiveness at all. It's the old test—the applying of a general law to a particular case—taking one's values ready-made—the old, old humbug."

The last, comforting falsity fell from her, and she saw the ultimate presentment of all the truth that she would ever know, in stark finality.

She could build for herself no freedom upon a foundation of pretence.

XXII

THE unendurable circumstance remains unaltered. The alteration is in the soul that suffers.

Lily's relation with Nicholas was largely founded, as she had told herself, upon pretence, and the rapture of complete sincerity could never be hers. But she told him, again and again, in reply to his impassioned protestations of gratitude, that she felt herself entitled to assume no attitude of forgiveness.

"It wasn't for the—the sin," she said painfully, "that I thought of divorce. It would only have been a pretext——"

Nicholas gazed at her as tenderly as uncomprehendingly.

"Poor darling, you've been more generous than words can say. And you do understand a little, Lily? It would never, never have happened if my little wife hadn't been away from me for such a long while."

"You do need me, Nicholas?"

"Need you? By Jove, I should think I do," cried Nicholas, in the old buoyant, explosive way. She knew it to be true.

Nicholas had given her his love, and it would be hers always. He depended upon her, he trusted her. She had given him herself, cheated of her right to know the possibilities in herself, the possibilities in life; cheated into accepting her values ready-made. But the gift had been made.

Lily knew that never, to gratify her aching longing for the freedom that only Truth can give, could she see herself justified in seeking to force upon Nicholas a vision of the facts as she saw them.

By degrees that to herself were imperceptible, she put behind her the old, childish visions that had typified themselves to her under the names of Flames and Carnations. Only her faith in that to which she personally relinquished all claim, remained unimpaired, and destined to endure.

For a long while bitterness tinged her thoughts of Philip.

It was he to whom the utter faith of her impressionable childhood had been given, he who, thinking it love, had again and again deceived her.

It was out of the hard, smiling revolt behind which Kenneth entrenched himself more and more securely and triumphantly against their father, that Lily's softening came at last.

He had failed his children, but had they not failed him? Vonnie, who had died, was the child that had hurt and perplexed Philip Stellingthorpe least; the child that he had loved least. When Lily knew that she might herself be about to have a child, the last resentment against her father was slowly eliminated from her heart.

A strange certainty possessed her that this time the blossom would come to maturity.

Of later years, she had hoped never to have a child, asking herself:

"Why should I want to bring a child into the world, for it to suffer as I suffer?"

Slowly Time had transmuted that cry into a dawning hope that because she had suffered, her child might suffer less.

The little, normal, everyday things of life slipped past, and bore away with them the sense of crisis from Lily and Nicholas.

It was all but incredible that there had ever been a crisis.

The figures that for a little while had seemed to be only shades, peopling a dream world, became real once more.

Aunt Clo, after her fashion, reappeared abruptly from some labyrinthine tangle of lives unknown, from which her hand, and seemingly hers only, could evolve a clue.

"*Ecco!* my little one," said she. "I hardly thought that we should meet again thus. *Eheu fugaces!*"

Her tone was not free from reproach.

"I am very glad that you have come," said Lily.

Her aunt's head was graciously bent in acknowledgment towards her.

"I also. There was a time, my Lily, when I thought that you might wish to claim my help—such help as my knowledge of Life enables me to give. You know, perhaps better than most, whether I grudge the spending of myself upon others."

Aunt Clo gave a melancholy smile at the mere supposition of anything so far removed from fact.

"Why, you ask me, did I not come forward, did I not speak freely and frankly, as is ever my wont? *Ah! la vérité, pour moi, c'est tout!* Why did I not cast the bulwark of my strength before so frail a fortress, one so near capitulation? I reply, Because I am proud. Yes! *c'est moi qui vous le dit*, child. I am deeply, intimately, passionately proud."

Aunt Clo's head sank upon her breast at the admission, but very soon she raised it again and once more faced the world.

Her handsome face expressed a sort of joyous determination.

"Can I regret it, you ask me? No, little one! *J'ai l'âme fière*, it is all too true, but mine is not an ignoble pride. Rather is it a pride of race, a pride of character, that has upborne me through seas far rougher than you, I trust, will ever know. It is true, I cannot deny, that it has made me suffer, but it is through suffering that I have learnt to be strong."

Aunt Clo paused again, and looked very strong indeed.

"Many have turned to me in their need, as you know. I do not think that I have failed any. Indeed, no. But where confidence is not given, I cannot seek it. For I am proud, Lily. Proud and intensely reserved."

It was, as ever, a little difficult to rise to Aunt Clo's level.

"I am happier than I was last time you came, Aunt Clo. And I think Nicholas is very happy; especially now."

"Especially?"

"I am going to have a child," said Lily.

Aunt Clo gazed at her niece for a full moment before raising her eyebrows and emphasizing her appreciation of the facts by a slow series of words that had a curious air of well-weighed significance.

"Aha! The domesticities have claimed you."

"I wanted you to know. I knew you would be glad, really, for my sake."

Miss Stellenthorpe rose, erect and very tall, placed a hand upon either of Lily's shoulders, and kissed her brow with solemnity.

She made no further reference to Lily's confidence until the moment of her departure.

"Child," she then said, turning upon the threshold in

farewell. "Child! Let me know, in the midst of the sad task to which I go—a tangled skein to be unravelled, my Lily—let me hear that you have given a man-child to the world."

There were others also who, possibly for less altruistic motives than Miss Stellenthorpe's, hoped that Lily's child would be a son.

Ethel Hardinge delivered herself of many prudent and matronly exhortations.

"And I do hope you'll have a boy, dear. I was dreadfully disappointed when all my three were girls, and so was poor dear Charlie, though he was much too kind to say so. And then Dorothy's first two, dear little darling things, though I wouldn't change them for the world—still, you know how delighted she was when little Charles appeared. There is something about having a son, you know, Lily."

Lily, thoroughly understanding this cryptic statement, agreed to it, but she said also:

"Nicholas doesn't mind which it is, if only we really have a child, and I don't think I could be disappointed, so long as it lived."

"Ah, poor little thing. But you'll see, Lily dear, everything is going to be all right this time. Only you must take great care of yourself. You've no mother, and you won't mind a little advice from me, will you? . . . dear, do you . . ."

Cousin Ethel was very kind, and intense full of counsels that related to the physiology of the situation.

Philip Stellenthorpe did not like his grandson, and he was sadly that his own son . . . log him gr . . . Lily

"He sometimes almost seems to be growing up a heartless little boy."

"You know, Father, Kenneth isn't really a little boy at all, now."

"He will always be a little boy to me," returned her father with simplicity. "When, please God, you have your own child, Lily, you'll know that's one of the sad and beautiful things about the parents of a child. To them, he never really grows up. They always see him as the dear little baby they took care of, and petted, and loved."

"Kenneth wouldn't like that, you know, Father. He doesn't really want to be taken care of, now. I think, in fact, that he resents being treated as though he were still a child."

"It's very ungrateful," said Philip, shaking his head. "Ungrateful and heartless. You were not like that, my little Lily."

"I was a girl, not a boy."

She hesitated, and then the thought of Kenneth made her speak.

"But, Father, sometimes I've wished that I was rather more like Kenneth. He's honest, anyway. He wants to develop into an individual with characteristics and opinions and beliefs of his own. I know Kenneth is often conceited and—and tiresome, but I don't really think he's heartless."

"Then what is he, pray? What is his persistent refusal to confide in me, to follow the advice that I'm only too ready to give him, to trust me?"

"I suppose he wants to feel that he belongs to himself."

"What not?" Philip was roused to the extent of making use of colloquialism. "A child, in one sense,

farewell. "Child! Let me know, in the midst of the sad task to which I go—a tangled skein to be unravelled, my Lily—let me hear that you have given a man-child to the world."

There were others also who, possibly for less altruistic motives than Miss Stellingthorpe's, hoped that Lily's child would be a son.

Ethel Hardinge delivered herself of many prudent and matronly exhortations.

"And I do hope you'll have a boy, dear. I was dreadfully disappointed when all my three were girls, and so was poor dear Charlie, though he was much too kind to say so. And then Dorothy's first two, dear little darling things, though I wouldn't change them for the world—still, you know how delighted she was when little Charles appeared. There is something about having a son, you know, Lily."

Lily, thoroughly understanding this cryptic statement, agreed to it, but she said also:

"Nicholas doesn't mind which it is, if only we really have a child, and I don't think I could be disappointed, so long as it lived."

"Ah, poor little thing. But you'll see, Lily dear, everything is going to be all right this time. Only you must take great care of yourself. You've no mother, and you won't mind a little advice from me, will you? Tell me, dear, do you . . ."

Cousin Ethel was very kind, and intensely interested, full of counsels that related to the physiological aspect of the situation.

Philip Stellingthorpe desired a grandson. He told Lily sadly that his own son was causing him great anxiety.

"He sometimes almost seems to be growing up a heartless little boy."

"You know, Father, Kenneth isn't really a little boy at all, now."

"He will always be a little boy to me," returned her father with simplicity. "When, please God, you have your own child, Lily, you'll know that's one of the sad and beautiful things about the parents of a child. To them, he never really grows up. They always see him as the dear little baby they took care of, and petted, and loved."

"Kenneth wouldn't like that, you know, Father. He doesn't really want to be taken care of, now. I think, in fact, that he resents being treated as though he were still a child."

"It's very ungrateful," said Philip, shaking his head. "Ungrateful and heartless. You were not like that, my little Lily."

"I was a girl, not a boy."

She hesitated, and then the thought of Kenneth made her speak.

"But, Father, sometimes I've wished that I was rather more like Kenneth. He's honest, anyway. He wants to develop into an individual with characteristics and opinions and beliefs of his own. I know Kenneth is often conceited and—and tiresome, but I don't really think he's heartless."

"Then what is he, pray? What is his persistent refusal to confide in me, to follow the advice that I'm only too ready to give him, to trust me?"

"I suppose he wants to feel that he belongs to himself."

"What nonsense!" Philip was roused to the extent of making use of a colloquialism. "A child, in one sense,

must always belong to the parents who brought him into the world. Why, he owes them everything—life itself. The opinions and beliefs that you talk about, can only come to him through the things they teach him or cause him to be taught.”

“That,” said Lily, “is why it seems to me that so many of us, of his generation, are handicapped. I mean that we were taught along certain grooves, and never told to look beyond. Never told that Truth is not to be handed on, ready-made, but must be won at individual cost. And never told, either, that free-will is the right of every human soul, and that all teaching is only preliminary to the exercise of that free will.” She stopped, deeply in earnest, and gazed at her father.

“I should like my child,” she said timidly, “to feel always that he belongs to himself. That we, Nicholas and I, can only tell him that we ourselves have learnt such and such things, and then leave him also to learn them by his own experience. I shouldn’t want him to take his beliefs on trust from us—or from anybody. We are not omniscient. How can we tell the aspect that the Truth is to wear for him? Only he can find that out, perhaps at the cost of many mistakes. But it seems to me that the knowledge we have won for ourselves must be a more real and lasting thing than the ready-made standards of other people.”

Philip shook his grey head, and Lily saw that his worn face looked more deeply lined.

“My poor little girl, you will see it all very differently when you have your child.”

With all the intensity that was in her, Lily inwardly resolved that never, through weakness or faltering of hers,

should that prophecy be realized. Never, so long as the clarity of vision won at long last still remained to her, would she let sentimentality, however disguised, blind her to the rights of her child's individual soul.

To Philip she said nothing more.

He looked at her sorrowfully and pitifully, but after a little while he found, as he had always found, a fiction with which to drape the hard reality that he disliked.

"You're not yourself at present, you know, my little pet. It's very natural. Your condition . . . You'll look at it all very different by-and-by."

Thus Philip, deriving such comfort as he could from a fictitious optimism.

Lily left it to him, and sought no further to speak of the many things that were in her mind. She had once come very near to hating her father in the bitterness of her youth, and now, with the faint dawn of a better wisdom, she was glad to let the past rest, to know that the future was not in his hands.

Sometimes, but very seldom, Lily reflected upon the possibility of her own death in child-birth.

Rather to her own surprise, she did not want to die. She wanted to see her child, and to remain with it.

"Of course you won't die, my darling," said Nicholas tenderly. "You must stay and look after me, eh, Lily? And you couldn't let the poor little thing be motherless, whichever it is."

"Which do you want, Nicholas?"

"Of course, every man wants a son." Nicholas threw back his shoulders in the old, characteristic way. "But I should love a little girl, Lily, with pretty hair like yours."

He touched her brown hair very softly. Often, now,

his caresses were tinged with diffidence, and he was less prodigal of them.

"If you have a girl, Lily, you'll be able to have her always with you. A girl needn't go to school. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes. Only, Nicholas——"

She slipped her hand into his, doubtful whether he would agree with what she was about to say, and instinctively and half unconsciously seeking to propitiate him, as she would have to do for all the days of their married life, if she was to act upon the convictions that were hers, but were indifferent to him.

"You wouldn't always want to have her at home if she wanted to go away? They have the right to develop along their own lines—the children."

Nicholas gave her a shrewd glance.

"You didn't get much of a chance that way, did you? I shall leave it to you, my dear. It's the mother's job to bring up her daughters, isn't it, and her son, too, for that matter, till he goes to school. Do you know what Ignatius Loyola used to say?"

"I don't think so. Tell me."

"/: "Give me a child until he is seven years old. After that any one may have him who wills," quoted Nicholas. "So you see that according to that, it's the early years that count."

"I believe it's true," she exclaimed.

"So do I. Those are the impressions that remain longest. I've lived a good many more years in this funny old world than you have, my dear, and I flatter myself that my memory is as good as that of most people——" he paused.

"Eh, Lily?"

"Your memory is a very good one, Nicholas."

"Well, be that as it may, I've certainly come to the conclusion that it's those early impressions that make one's after-life. Somehow, they're ineradicable."

Lily believed it utterly. Searching her own lesser experience, and greater perceptions, she knew that so it had been with herself.

So would it be with her child.

"It's for me to make those early impressions true ones," she thought. "Not just ideas of blind loyalty and unreasoning trust, that later years are bound to destroy, but of self-reliance, and honesty of mind, and courage in facing things as they are."

Nicholas had said that she should bring up the child herself, and she knew that he meant it.

It was the best that she could hope for now. The perfect union of minds to whom an identical vision has been vouchsafed could never be hers and his. The marriage of body, soul and spirit, that she had once dreamed of dimly, and called by its true name of Love, she had forfeited through her marriage with Nicholas.

She had long sought to comfort herself with illusions, but she had found no strength until she had put facts into words, and stripped the truth of sentimental accessories.

In her final acceptance, she felt nearer to her husband than ever before.

It was not the fault of Nicholas that their relations to one another had been founded upon a falsity. The one wrong for which he might reproach himself had been powerless to hurt her.

They only spoke of it once again.

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