

The Far Horizon

Lucas Malet

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LUCAS MALET

(MRS. MARY ST. LEGER HARRISON)

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Wages of Sin

A Counsel of Perfection

Colonel Enderby's Wife

Little Peter

The Carissima

The Gateless Barrier

The History of Sir Richard Calmady

"Ask for the Old Paths, where is the Good Way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest."--JEREMIAS.

"The good man is the bad man's teacher; the bad man is the material upon which the good man works. If the one does not value his teacher, if the other does not love his material, then despite their sagacity they must go far astray. This is a mystery of great import."--FROM THE SAYINGS OF LAO-TZU.

..."Cherchons a voir les choses comme elles sont, et ne voulons pas avoir plus d'esprit que le bon Dieu! Autrefois on croyait que la canne a sucre seule donnait le sucre, on en tire a peu pres de tout maintenant. Il est de meme de la poesie. Extrayons-la de n'importe quoi, car elle git en tout et partout. Pas un atome de matiere qui ne contienne pas la poesie. Et habituons-nous a considerer le monde comme un oeuvre d'art, dont il faut reproduire les procedees dans nos oeuvres."--GUSTAVE FLAUBERT.

CHAPTER I

Dominic Iglesias stood watching while the lingering June twilight darkened into night. He was tired in body, but his mind was eminently, consciously awake, to the point of restlessness, and this was unusual with him. He had raised the lower sash of each of the three tall, narrow windows to its extreme height, since the first-floor sitting-room, though of fair proportions, appeared close. His thought refused the limits of it, and ranged outward over the expanse of Trimmer's Green, the roadway and houses bordering it, to the far northwest, that region of hurried

storm, of fierce, equinoctial passion and conflict, now paved with plaques of flat, dingy, violet cloud opening on smoky rose-red wastes of London sunset. All day thunder had threatened, but had not broken. And, even yet, the face of heaven seemed less peaceful than remonstrant, a sullenness holding it as of troops in retreat denied satisfaction of imminent battle.

Otherwise the outlook was wholly pacific, one of middle-class suburban security. The Green aforesaid is bottle-shaped, the neck of it debouching into a crowded westward-wending thoroughfare; while Cedar Lodge, from the first-floor windows of which Mr. Iglesias contemplated the oncoming of night, being situate in the left shoulder, so to speak, of the bottle, commanded, diagonally, an uninterrupted view of the whole extent of it. Who Trimmer was, how he came by a Green, and why, or what he trimmed on it, it is idle at this time of day to attempt to determine. Whether, animated by a desire for the public welfare, he bequeathed it in high charitable sort; or whether, fame taking a less enviable turn with him, he just simply was hanged there, has afforded matter of heated controversy to the curious in questions of suburban nomenclature and topography. But in this case, as in so many other and more august ones, the origins defy discovery. Suffice it, therefore, that the name remains, as does the open space--the latter forming one of those minor "lungs of London" which offer such amiable oases in the great city's less aristocratic residential districts. Formerly the Green boasted a row of fine elms, and was looked on by discreetly handsome eighteenth-century mansions and villas, set in spacious gardens. But of these, the great majority--Cedar Lodge being a happy exception--has vanished under the hand of the early Victorian speculative builder; who, in their stead, has erected full complement of the architectural platitudes common to his age and taste. Dignity has very sensibly given place to gentility. Nevertheless the timid red, or sickly yellow-grey, brick of the existing houses is pleasingly veiled by ivy and Virginia creeper, while no shop front obtrudes derogatory suggestion of retail trade. The local authorities, moreover, some ten years back girdled the Green with healthy young balsam-poplar and plane trees and enclosed the grass with iron hurdles--to rescue it from trampling into unsightly pathways--thus doing a well-intentioned, if somewhat unimaginative, best to safeguard the theatre of long ago Trimmer's beneficence or infamy from greater spoliation.

Hence it follows that, certain inherent limitations admitted, the scene upon which Dominic Iglesias' eyes rested was not without elements of attraction. And of this fact, being a person of an excellent temperance of expectation, he was gratefully aware. His surroundings, indeed, constituted, so it appeared to him, the maximum of comfort and advantage which could be expected by a middle-aged gentleman, of moderate fortune, in the capacity of a "paying guest." Not only in word but in thought--for in acknowledgment of obligation he was scrupulously courteous. He frequently tendered thanks to his neighbour and old school-fellow, Mr. George Lovegrove, first for calling his attention to Mrs. Porcher's advertisement, and subsequently for reassuring him as to its import. For, though incapable of forming so much as a thought to her concrete disparagement, Mr. Iglesias was not without a quiet sense of humour, or of that instinct of self-protection common to even the most chivalrous of mankind. He was, therefore, perfectly sensible that "the widow of a military officer," who describes herself in print as "bright, musical and thoroughly domesticated," while offering "a cheerful and refined home at the West End, within three minutes of Tube and omnibus"--"noble dining and recreation rooms, bath h. and c." thrown in--to unmarried members of

the stronger sex, must of necessity be a lady whose close acquaintance it would be foolhardy to make without a trifle of preliminary scouting.

Happily not only George Lovegrove, but his estimable wife was at hand. The latter hastened to prosecute inquiries, beginning with a visit to the Anglican vicar of the parish, the Rev. Giles Nevington. He reported Mrs. Porcher an evening communicant at the greater festivals, and a not ungenerous donor to parochial charities; adding that a former curate had resided under her roof with perfect impunity. Mrs. Lovegrove terminated her researches by an interview with the fishmonger, who assured her that "Cedar Lodge always took the best cuts," sternly refused fish or poultry which had suffered cold storage, and paid its housebooks without fail before noon on Thursday. She ascertained, further, from a source socially intermediate between clergyman and tradesman, that Mrs. Porcher's husband, some time veterinary surgeon of a crack regiment, had died in the odour of alcohol rather than in that of sanctity, leaving his widow--in addition to his numerous and heavy debts--but a fraction of the comfortable fortune to procure the enjoyment of which he had so considerately married her. The solid Georgian mansion was her freehold; and it was to secure sufficient means for continued residence in it that the poor lady started a boarding-house, or in the politer language of the present day, had decided to receive paying guests.

Encouraged by the satisfactory nature of the above information, Mr. Iglesias--shortly after his mother's death, now nearly eight years ago--had become a member of Mrs. Porcher's household. He had never, so far, had reason to regret that step. And it was with a consciousness of well-being and repose that he returned daily--after hours of strenuous work in the well-known city banking house of Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking--to this square first-floor sitting-room, to its dimly white panelled and painted walls, its nice details of carved work in chimney-piece and ceiling, and the outlook from its tall, narrow windows. A touch of old-world stateliness in its aspect satisfied his latent pride of race. To certain natures not obscurity or slender means, but the pretentious vulgarity which, in English-speaking countries, too often goes along with these constitutes the burden and the offence.

To-night, however, things were different. Material objects remained the same; but the conditions of existence had taken on a strange appearance, and with that appearance Iglesias was bound to reckon, being uncertain as yet whether it was destined to prove that of a friend or of an enemy. In furtherance of such reckoning, he had declined dining at the public table, in company with his hostess, Miss Eliza Hart, her devoted friend and companion, and the three gentlemen--Mr. de Courcy Smyth, Mr. Farge, and Mr. Worthington--who shared with him the hospitalities of Cedar Lodge. He had dined here, upstairs, solitary; and Frederick, the German-Swiss valet, had just finished clearing the table and departed. Usually under such circumstances Iglesias would have taken a favourite book from the carved Spanish mahogany bookcase containing his small library; and, reading again that which he had often read before, would have found therein the satisfaction of friendship, along with the soothing influences of familiarity. But to-night neither Gibbon's *Rome*--a handsome early edition in many volumes--*The Travels of Anacharsis*, Evelyn's *Diary*, Napier's *Peninsular War*, John Stuart Mill's *Logic*, Byron's *Poems*, nor those of Calderon, nor of that so-called "prodigy of nature," Lope de Vega, not even the dear and immortal *Don Quixote* himself, served to attract him. His own thoughts, his own life, filled his whole horizon, leaving no space for the thoughts or lives of others. He found himself a prey to a certain mental incoherence, a bewildering

activity of vision. More than once before in the course of his laborious, monotonous, and, as men go, very virtuous life had this same thing happened to him--the tides of the obvious and accustomed suddenly receding and leaving him stranded, as on some barren sand-bank, uncertain whether the ship of his individual fate would lie there wind-swept and sun-bleached till rusty rivets fell out and planks parted, disclosing the ribs of her in unsightly nakedness, or whether the kindly tide, rising, would float her off into blue water and she would sail hopefully once again.

It was inevitable that this present experience should recall these other happenings, evoking memories poignant enough. The first time the ship of his fate thus stranded was when, as a lad of seventeen, he left school. Living alone with his mother in a quaint little house in Holland Street, Kensington, eagerly ambitious to make his way in the world and to obtain, it had dawned on him that there was something strange, unhappy, and not as it was wont to be with that, to him, most beautiful and beloved of women. The mere suspicion was as a blasphemy against which his young loyalty revolted. For Dominic, with the inherent pieties of his Latin and Celtic blood, had none of that contemptuous superiority in regard of his near relations so common to male creatures of the Protestant persuasion and Anglo-Saxon race. He took his parents quite seriously; it never having occurred to him that fathers and mothers are given us merely for purposes of discipline, or as helot-like examples of what to avoid. He was simple-minded enough indeed to regard them as sacred, altogether beyond the bounds of legitimate criticism--and this, as destiny would have it, with intimate and life-long results.

Vaguely, through the mists of infancy, he could remember a hurried exodus--after sound of cannon and sight of blood--from Spain, the fierce and pious country of his birth. Since then, while his mother lived--namely, till he was a man of over forty--always and only the house in the Kensington side street, with its crooked creaking stairways, its high wainscots--behind which mice squeaked and scampered--its clinging odour of ancient woodwork, its low ceilings, and uneven floors. At the back of it was a narrow strip of garden, glorious for one brief week in early summer, with the gold of a big laburnum; and fragrant later thanks to faithful effort on the part of the white jasmine clothing its enclosing walls. In fair weather the morning sun lay warm there; while the sky showed all the bluer overhead for the dark lines of the adjacent housetops, and upstanding deformities in the matter of zinc cowls and chimney-pots. Frequented by cats, boasting in the centre a rockery of gas clinkers and chalk flints surmounted by a stumpy fluted column bearing a stone basin--in which, after rain, sparrows disported themselves with much conversation and fluttering of sooty wings--the garden was, to little Dominic, a place of wonder and delight. He peopled it with beings of his own fancy, lovely or terrific, according to his passing humour. Granted a measure of imagination, the solitary child is often the happiest child, since the social element, with its inevitable materialism, is absent, and the dear spirit of romance is unquenched by vulgar comment.

His father, grave and preoccupied, whose arrivals after long periods of absence had in them an effect of secrecy and haste, was to the small boy a being, august, but remote. During his brief sojourns at home the quiet house awoke to greater fulness of life, with much coming and going of other grave personages, strange of dress, and with a certain effect of hardly restrained violence in their aspect. A spirit of fear seemed to enter with them, demanding an unnatural darkening of windows and closing

of doors. Before Dominic they were of few words; but became eloquent enough, in sonorous foreign speech, as his ears testified when he was banished from their rather electric presence to the solitude of the nursery above. And so it came about that a sense of mystery, of large issues, of things at once strong and hidden, impenetrable to his understanding and concerning which no questions might be asked, encircled Dominic's childhood and passed into the very fabric of his thought. While through it all his mother moved, to him tender and wholly exquisite, but with the reticence of some deep-seated enthusiasm silently cherished, some far-reaching alarm silently endured, always upon her. And this resulted in an atmosphere of seriousness and responsibility which inevitably reacted on the boy, making him sober beyond his years, tempering his natural vivacity with watchfulness, and pitching even his laughter in a minor key.

Only many years later, when after his mother's death it became his duty to read letters exchanged between his parents during this period, did Dominic Iglesias touch the key to the riddle, and fully measure the public danger, the private strain and stress which had surrounded his childhood and early youth. For his father, a man of far from ignoble nature, but of narrow outlook and undying hatreds, was deeply involved in revolutionary intrigue of the most advanced type--a victim of that false passion of humanity which takes its rise not in honest desire for the welfare of mankind, but in blind rebellion against all forms of authority. His self-confidence was colossal; all rule being abominable to him--save his own--all rulers hideous, save himself. The anarchist, rightly understood, is merely the autocrat, the tyrant, turned inside out. And this man, as Dominic gathered from the perusal of those old letters, to whom the end so justified the means that red-handed crime took on the fair colours of virtue, his mother had loved, even while she feared him, with all the faithfulness and pure passion of her Irish blood. Pathetic combination, the patience and resignation of the one ever striving to temper the flaming zeal of the other, as though the spindrift of the Atlantic, sweeping inland from the dim sadness of far western coasts, should strive with relentless fierceness of sun glare outpoured on some high-lying walled city of arid central Spain! Mist is but a weak thing as against rock and fire; and what his mother must have suffered in moral and spiritual conflict, let alone all question of active dread, was to her son almost too cruel to contemplate, although it explained and justified much.

In 1860, when Dominic was a schoolboy of fourteen, his father left home on one of those sudden journeys the object and objective of which were alike concealed. For about a year letters arrived at irregular intervals, hailing from Paris, Naples, Prague, and finally Petersburg. Then followed silence, broken only by rumours furtively conveyed by a former associate, one Pascal Pelletier--an angel-faced, long-haired, hysteric creature, inspired by an impassioned enthusiasm for infernal machines and wholesale slaughter in theory, and, in practice, by a gentle doglike devotion to Mrs. Iglesias and young Dominic. He would arrive depressed and shadowy in the shadowy twilights. But, once in the presence of the beings whom he loved, he became effervescent. His belief was unlimited in the Head Centre, the Chief, in his demonic power and fertility of resource. That any evil should befall him!--Pascal snapped his thin fingers; while, with the inalienable optimism of the born fanatic, he proceeded to state hopeful conjecture as established fact, thereby doing homage to the spirit of delusion which so conspicuously ruled him even to his inmost thought. But a spell of cold weather in the winter of 1862 struck a little too shrewdly through Pascal's seedy overcoat, causing that tender-

hearted subverter of society to cough his life out, with all possible despatch, in the third-floor back of a filthy lodging-house off Tottenham Court Road.

This was the end as far as information went, whether authentic or apocryphal. But Dominic, his horizon still bounded by the world of school, greedy of distinction both in learning and in games, away all day and eagerly, if somewhat sleepily, busy over the preparation of lessons at night, was very far from realising that. Poor voluble kind-eyed Pascal he mourned with all his heart; yet the months of his father's absence accumulated into years almost unnoticed. The same thing had so often happened before; and then, at an unlooked-for moment, the wanderer had returned. Moreover, the old habit of obedience was still strong in him. It was understood that concerning his father's occupations and movements no comment might be made, no questions might be asked.

Meanwhile, the small house in Holland Street was ever more still, more unfrequented. As he grew older Dominic became increasingly sensible of this--sensible of a sort of hush falling on him as he crossed the threshold, so that instinctively he left much of his wholesome young animality outside, while his voice took on softer tones in speech, and his quick light footsteps became more scrupulously noiseless as he ran up the little crooked stairs.

"When your father comes home we must decide what profession you shall follow, my Dominic," it had been his mother's habit to declare. But, even before the time for such decision arrived the boy had begun to understand he must see to all that unaided. For his mother was ill, how deeply and in what manner he could not tell. He shrank, indeed, from all clear thought, let alone speech, on the subject, as from something indelicate, in a way irreverent. Her beauty remained to her, notwithstanding a gradual wasting as of fever. A peculiar, very individual grace of dress and of bearing remained to her likewise. But she was uncertain in mood, the victim of strange fancies, a being almost alarmingly far removed from the interests of ordinary life. Long ago, in submission to her husband's anti-clerical prejudices, she had ceased to practise her religion, so that the services of the Church no longer called her forth in beneficent routine of sacred obligation. Now she never left the house, living, since poor Pascal Pelletier's death, in complete seclusion. Little wonder then that a hush fell on Dominic crossing the threshold, since so doing he passed from the world of healthy action to that of acquiescent sickness, from vigorous hoarse-voiced realities to the intangible sadness of unrelated dreams! The effect was one of rather haunting melancholy; and it was characteristic of the lad that he did not resent it, though rejoicing in the reputation at school of being high-spirited enough, impatient of restraint or of any frustration of purpose. His mother had always been sacred. She remained so, even though her sympathies had become imperfect, and she moved in regions which his sane young imagination failed to penetrate. One thing was perfectly plain to him, though it cut at the root of ambition--namely, that he could not leave her. So, in that matter of a profession, he must find work which would permit of his continuing to live at home; and, since her income was narrow, the work in question must make no heavy demand in respect of preliminary expense.

Here was a problem more easy of statement than of solution, in face of Dominic's pride, inexperience, and the singular isolation of his position! There followed dreary months wherein his evenings were spent in studying and answerings advertisements; and his days, till late

afternoon, in walking the town from end to end for the interviewing of possible employers and the keeping of fruitless appointments. He would set forth full of hope and courage in the morning, only to return full of the dejection of failure at night. And it was then London began to reveal herself to him in her solidarity, under the cloud of dun-blue coal smoke --it was wintertime--which, at once hanging over and penetrating her immensity, adds the majesty of mystery to the majesty of mere size. He noted how, in the chill twilights, London grew strangely and feverishly alive. Lamps sprang into clearness along the pavements. A dazzling glitter of shop windows marked the great thoroughfares, while often the angry glare of a fire pulsed along the sky-line. When night comes in the country, so Dominic told himself, the land sinks into peaceful repose. But in cities it is otherwise. There the light leaves heaven for earth; and walks the streets, with much else far from celestial, until the small hours move towards the dawn and usher in the decencies of day.

Never before had he seen London thus and understood it in all its enormous variety, yet as a unit, a whole. How much he actually beheld with his bodily eyes, how much through the working of a rather exalted condition of imagination induced by loneliness and bodily fatigue, he could never subsequently determine. But the great city presented herself to him in the guise of some prodigious living creature, breathing, feeding, suffering, triumphing, above all mating and breeding, terrible in her power and vitality, age old, yet still unspent. Presented herself to him as horribly prolific, ever outpassing her own unwieldy limits, sending forth her children, year after year, all the wide world over by shipping or by rail; receiving some tithe of them back, proud with accomplished fortune to enhance her glory, or, disgraced and broken, slinking homeward to the cover of her fog and darkness merely to swell the numbers of the nameless who rot and die. He thought of those others, too--and this touched his young ardour with a quick shudder of personal fear--whom she never sends forth at all; but holds close in bondage all their lives long, enslaved to her countless and tyrant activities by their own poverty, or by their fellow-creatures' misfortune, cruelties, and sins. Was it thus she was going to deal with him, Dominic Iglesias? Was he to be among the great city's bondmen through the coming years, better acquainted with the very earthly light which walks her streets by night, than with the heavenly light which gladdens the sweet face of day in the open country and upon the open sea? And for a moment the boy's heart rebelled, hungry for pleasure, hungry for wide experience, hungry even for knowledge of those revolutionary intrigues which, as he was beginning to understand, had surrounded his childhood, and, as he was beginning to fear, had cost his mother her reason and his father both liberty and life. Thus did the ship of poor Dominic's fate appear to be stranded or ever it had fairly set sail at all.

Meanwhile, if London claimed him, she did so in very cynical fashion, mocking his willingness to labour, refusing to feed him even while she refused to let him go. Everything, he feared, was against him--his youth, his foreign name, his limited acquaintance, the impossibility of giving definite information regarding his father's past occupations or present whereabouts. Moreover, his spare young figure, his thin shapely hands and feet, his blue-black Irish eyes and black hair, his energetic colourless face, his ready yet reticent speech--all these marked him as unusual and exotic. And for the unusual and exotic the British employer of labour--of whatever sort--has, it must be conceded, but little use. He is half afraid, half contemptuous of it, instinctively disliking anything more alert and alive than his own most stolid self. But while men, distrusting the distinctness of his personality and his good looks, refused to give

Dominic work, women, relishing them, were only too ready to give him enjoyment--of a kind. The boy, in those solitary wanderings, ran the gauntlet of many temptations; and was presented--did he care to accept it--with the freedom of the city on very liberal lines. Happily, inherent cleanliness of nature saved him from much; and reverent shame at the thought of entering the hushed and silent house where his mother lived--spotless, amid pathetic memories and delicate dreams--with the soil of licence upon him, saved him from more. Crime might have come close to him in his childhood, but vice never; and the influences of vice are far more insidious, and consequently more damaging, than those of crime.

Still, one way and another, the boy came very near touching the confines of despair. Then the tide rose and the stranded ship of his fate began to lift a little. By means of a series of accidents--the illness of his former school-fellow, the already mentioned George Lovegrove, whose post he offered temporarily to fill--he drifted into connection with the banking house of Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking. There his knowledge of modern languages, his industry, and a certain discreet aloofness commended him to his superiors. A minor clerkship fell vacant; it was offered to him. And from thenceforth, for Dominic Iglesias, the monotony of fixed routine and steady labour, until the day when, as a man of past fifty, restless and somewhat distrustful both of the present and the future, he watched the dying of the sullen sunset over Trimmer's Green from the windows of the first-floor sitting-room of Cedar Lodge.

CHAPTER II

That which had in point of fact happened was not, as Iglesias felt, without a pretty sharp edge of irony. For to-day, London, so long his task-mistress and gaoler, had assumed a new attitude towards him. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she had cast him off, given him his freedom. It was amazing, a thing to take your breath away for the moment. And agitated and hurt--for his pride unquestionably had suffered in the process--Iglesias asked himself what in the world he should do with this gift of freedom, what he should do, indeed, with that which remained to him of life?

It had come about thus. Seeking an interview that morning with Sir Abel Barking, in the latter's private room at the bank, he had made certain statements regarding his own health in justification of a request for some weeks' rest and holiday now, rather than later, in September, when his yearly vacation would fall due.

"So you find yourself unequal to dealing satisfactorily with the increasing intricacy of our financial operations, become confused by the multiplicity of detail, suffer from pains in the head?" Sir Abel had commented, with a certain largeness of manner. "I own, my good friend, I was not wholly unprepared for this announcement."

"My work has not so far, I believe, suffered in any respect," Iglesias put in quietly. "Directly I had reason to fear it might suffer I----"

"Of course, of course. I make no complaint--none. I go further. I admit that the area of our undertakings is enlarged, enormously enlarged, thanks to the remarkable personal energy and strenuous transatlantic

business methods introduced by my nephew Reginald. I grant you all that----"

Sir Abel cleared his throat. Seduced by the charms of his own eloquence, he was ready to mount the platform at the shortest possible notice, even in private life. He loved exposition. He loved periods. His critics--for what public man is without these, their strictures naturally inspired by envy?--had been known to add that he also loved platitudes. Be this as it may, certain it is that he loved an audience--even of one. He had been considerably ruffled this morning by communications made to him by his good-looking and somewhat scapegrace youngest son. Those who fail to rule their own households often find solace in attempting to rule the households of others. Speech and patronage consequently tended to the restoration of self-complacency.

"No doubt this expansion, these modern methods, constitute a tax upon your capacity, my good friend, you having acquired your training under a less exacting system. I am not surprised. I confess"--he leaned back in his chair, with an indulgent smile, as one who should say, "the gods themselves do not wholly escape"--"I confess," he repeated, "it is something of a tax upon the capacity of a veteran financier such as myself. But then strain in some form or other, as I frequently remind myself, is the very master-note of our modern existence. We all experience it in our degree. And there are those men, such as myself, for instance, who from their position, their vast interests and heavy responsibilities, from the almost incalculable issues dependent on their judgment and their action, are called upon to endure this strain in its most exhausting manifestations, who are compelled to subordinate personal case, even health itself, to public obligation. In the end they pay, incontestable they pay, for their self-abnegation, for their unswerving obedience to the trumpet-call of public duty."

He paused and mused a while, his head raised, his right hand resting--it was noticeably podgy and squat--on the highly polished surface of the extensive writing-table, his left hand dropped, with a rather awkward negligence, over the arm of his chair. Meanwhile he gazed, as pensively as his caste of countenance permitted, at a portrait of himself, in the self-same attitude, which adorned the opposite wall. It had been presented to him by the electors of his late constituency. It was life-size and full-length. It had been painted by a well-known artist whose appreciation of the outward as a revelation of the inward man is slightly diabolic in its completeness. The portrait was very clever; it was also very like. Looking upon it no sane observer could stand in doubt of Sir Abel's eminent respectability or eminent wealth. His appearance exuded both. Unluckily nature had been niggardly in the bestowal of those more delicate marks of breeding which, both in man and beast, denote distinction of personality and antiquity of race. Puffy, prolific, Protestant, a commonness pervaded the worthy gentleman's aspect, causing him, as compared with his head clerk, Dominic Iglesias--standing there patiently awaiting his further utterance--to be as is a cheap oleograph to a fine sketch in pen and ink. It may be taken as an axiom that, in body and soul alike, to be deficient in outline is a sad mistake. But of all these little facts and the result of them, Sir Abel was, needless to relate, sublimely ignorant.

"With you, my good friend, it is otherwise," he remarked presently, reluctantly removing his gaze from the portrait of himself. "A beneficent Providence has devised the law of compensation. And we may remark the workings of it everywhere with instruction and encouragement. Hence

social obscurity has its compensating advantages. You, for example, are affected by none of those considerations of public obligation binding upon myself. You are so situated that you can avoid the more trying consequences of this universal overstrain. If the demands of the position you now fill are too much for you, you can retire. I congratulate you, Iglesias. For some of us it is impossible, it is forbidden to retire."

The speaker paused, as when in addressing a political or charitable meeting he paused for well-merited applause, secure of having made a telling point. Dominic Iglesias, however, had not applauded. To tell the truth, his back was stiffening a little. He had a very just appreciation of the relative social positions of himself and his employer; still it did not occur to him, somehow, that applause was necessarily in the part.

"You have the redress in your own hands," Sir Abel went on, not without a hint of annoyance. "If you need amusement, leisure, rest, they are all within your reach."

Still Iglesias did not speak.

"See now, my good friend, consider. To be practical"--Sir Abel raised his finger and wagged it, with a heavy attempt at *bonhomie*. "You have no family to provide for?"

"No," said Mr. Iglesias.

"You are, in short, not married?"

"No, Sir Abel," he said again.

"Well, then, no obstacle presents itself. But let us pause a moment, for I must guard myself against misconception. In the interests of both public and private morality I am a staunch advocate of marriage." Again he cleared his throat. The platform was conspicuous by its presence--in idea. "I hold matrimony to be among the primary duties, nay, to be the primary duty of the Christian and the citizen. We owe it to the race, we owe it to ourselves, we owe it to the opposite sex. Let us be quite clear on this point. Yet, since I deprecate all bigotry, I admit that there may be exceptional cases in which absence of the marital relation, though arguing some emotional callousness, may prove advantageous to the individual."

A queer light had come into Dominic Iglesias' eyes. The corners of his mouth worked a little. He stood quite still and rather noticeably erect.

"I do not deny this," Sir Abel continued. "I repeat, I do not deny it. And yours, my good friend, may be, I am prepared to acknowledge, a case in point. I take for granted, by the way, that you have saved, since your salary has been a liberal one?"

Iglesias inclined his head.

"Clearly we need discuss this matter no further then." The speaker became impressive, admonitory. "Indeed, it appears to me that your lot is a most favoured one. You are free of all encumbrances. You can retire in comfort--retire, moreover, with the assurance that your departure will cause no inconvenience to myself and my colleagues, since you make room for men younger and more in touch with modern methods than yourself."

Mr. Iglesias permitted himself to smile.

"Ah, yes!" he said. "Possibly I had not taken that fact sufficiently into account."

"Yet, clearly, it should augment your satisfaction," Sir Abel Barking observed, with a touch of severity. "And, by the by, you can draw your pension. You were entitled, strictly speaking, to do so some years ago--four, I believe, to be accurate. This was pointed out to you at the time by my nephew Reginald. He was not at all unwilling that you should retire then; but you preferred to remain. I had some conversation, at the time, with my nephew on the subject. I insisted upon the fact that your service had been exemplary. I finally succeeded in overruling his objection to your retaining your post."

"I am evidently under a heavy obligation to you, Sir Abel," said Iglesias.

"Don't mention it--don't mention it," the great man answered nobly. "Those in power should try to exercise it to the benefit of their subordinates. It has always been my effort not only to be just, but to be considerate of the interests and feelings of persons in my employment."

And with that he again fixed his eyes upon the ironical portrait adorning the opposite wall, wholly blind to the fact that it at once revealed his weaknesses and mocked at them, conscious only of an agreeable conviction that he had treated his head clerk with generosity and spoken to him with the utmost good-feeling and tact.

With the proud it is ever a question whether to spoil the Egyptians, or to fling back even the best-earned wages, payable by Egyptians, full in the said Egyptians' face. For the firm of Barking Brothers & Barking, in the abstract, Iglesias had the loyalty of long-established habit. It had been as the rising tide, setting the ship of his fate and fortune honourably afloat in the dismal days of that early stranding. Its service had eaten up the best years of his life, it is true. But, even in so doing, by mere force of constant association, the interests of the great banking house had come to be his own, its schemes and secrets his excitement, its successes his satisfaction. Fortunately the human mind is so constituted that it is possible to have an esteem, amounting to enthusiasm, for a body corporate, while entertaining but scanty admiration for the individuals of whom that body is composed--fortunately indeed, since otherwise what government, secular or sacred, would long continue to subsist? Hence, to Iglesias, this matter of the pension was decidedly difficult. Pride said, "This man, Abel Barking has been offensive; both he and his nephew have been ungrateful; reject it with contempt." Justice said, "You have no quarrel with the firm as a whole; accept it." Common sense, pricked up by anger, said, "Claim your own, take every brass farthing of it." While personal dignity, winding up the case, admonished, "By no means give yourself away. Make no impetuous demonstration. Go home and think it quietly over." And with the advice of personal dignity Mr. Iglesias fell in.

Yet he was still very sore, the heat of anger past, but the smart of it remaining, when he journeyed back from the city later in the day. And not only that after-smart, but a perplexity held him. For two strange faces had looked into his during the last few hours--those of Loneliness and Freedom. He had taken for granted, in a general sort of way, that such personages existed and exercised a certain jurisdiction in human affairs.

But in all the course of his laborious life they had never before come close, personally claiming him. He had had no time for them. But they are patient, they only wait. They had time for him--plenty of it. Suddenly he understood that; and it perplexed him, for his estimate of his own importance was modest. He even felt apologetic towards them, as one at whose door distinguished guests alight for whose entertainment he has made no adequate provision. He was embarrassed, his sense of hospitality reproaching him.

It so happened that, on this same return journey, he occupied the seat on the right, immediately behind that of the driver. The sky was covered, the atmosphere close. The horses, grey ones, showed a thick yellowish lather where the collar rubbed their necks and the traces their flanks. They were slack and heavy, and the omnibus hugged the curb. Within it was empty, and on the top boasted but three passengers besides Iglesias himself. It followed that, carrying insufficiency of ballast, the great red-painted vehicle lumbered, and jerked, and swayed uneasily; while the lighter traffic swept past it in a glittering stream, the dominant note of which was black as against the dirty drab of the recently watered wood-pavement. And the character of that traffic was new to Dominic Iglesias, though he had travelled the Hammersmith Road, Kensington High Street and Kensington Gore, Knightsbridge and Piccadilly, back and forth daily, these many years. For the exigencies of business demanding that the hours of his journeying should be early and late, always the same, it came about that the aspect of these actually so-familiar thoroughfares was novel, as beheld in the height of the season at three o'clock in the afternoon.

At first Iglesias saw without seeing, busy with his own uncheerful thoughts. But after a while he began to speculate idly on the scene around him, turning to the outward and material for distraction, if not for actual comfort. And so the stream of carriages and hansom, and the conspicuously well-favoured human beings occupying them, began to intrigue his attention. He questioned whom they might be and whither wending, decked forth in such brave array. They seemed to suggest something divorced from, yet native to, his experience; something he had never touched in fact, yet the right to which was resident in his blood. And with this he ceased, in instinct, to be merely the highly respected and respectable head clerk of Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking--now superannuated and laid on the shelf. A gayer, fiercer, simpler life, quick with violences of vivacious sound and vivid colour, the excitement of it heightened by clear shining southern sunshine and blue-black shadow--a life undreamed of by conventional, slow-moving, rather vulgar middle-class London--to which, on the face of it, he appeared as emphatically to belong--awoke and cried in Dominic Iglesias.

It was a surprising little experience, causing him to straighten up his lean yet shapely figure; while the burden of his years, and the long monotony of them, seemed strangely lifted off him. Then, with the air of courtly reserve--at once the joke and envy of the younger clerks, which had earned him the nickname of "the old Hidalgo"--he leaned forward and addressed the omnibus driver. The latter upraised a broad, moist and sleepy countenance.

"Polo at Ranelagh," he answered, in a voice thickened by dust and the laying of that dust by strong waters. "Club team plays 'Undred and First Lancers."

The words had been to the inquirer pretty much as phrases from the

liturgy of an unknown cult. But it was Iglesias' praiseworthy disposition not to be angry with that which he did not happen to understand, so much as angry with himself for not understanding it.

"Only an additional proof, were it needed, of the prodigious extent of my ignorance!" he reflected in stoically humorous self-contempt. His eyes dwelt, somewhat wistfully, on the glittering stream of traffic, once again those two unbidden guests, Loneliness and Freedom--for whose entertainment he had made inadequate provision--sitting, as it seemed, very close on either side of him. Then that happened which altered all the values. Dominic Iglesias suddenly saw a person whom he knew.

He had seen that same person about three hours previously in the bank in Threadneedle Street, while waiting for admittance to Sir Abel's private room. Rumour accredited this handsome young gentleman--Sir Abel's youngest son--with tastes expensive rather than profitable, liberal socially, rather than estimable ethically, declaring him to be distinctly of the nature of the proverbial thorn in the banker's otherwise very prosperous side. He had, so said rumour, the fortune or misfortune, as you chose to take it, of being at once a considerably bad boy and a distinctly charming one. Be all that as it might, the young man had certainly presented a grimly anxious countenance when, without so much as a nod of recognition, he had stalked past Mr. Iglesias in the dim light of the glass and mahogany-walled corridor. But now, as the latter noted, his expression had changed, and that very much for the better. The young man's face was flushed and eager, and his teeth showed white and even under his reddish brown moustache. If anxieties still pursued him they were in subjection to one main anxiety, the anxiety to please, which of all anxieties is the most engaging and grace-begetting.

Just then the traffic was held up, thus enabling Iglesias from his perch on the 'bustop to receive a more than fleeting impression. Two ladies were seated opposite the young man in the carriage. In them Iglesias recognised persons of very secure social standing. The elder he supposed to be Lady Sokeington--Alaric Barking's half-sister--to whom, on the occasion of her marriage, twelve or thirteen years ago, he had had the expensive honour of presenting, in his own name and that of his colleagues, a costly gift of plate. The other lady, so it appeared to him, was eminently sweet to look upon. She was very young. She leaned a little forward, and in the pose of her delicate figure and the carriage of her pretty head--under its burden of pale pink and grey feathers, flowers, and lace--he detected further example of that engaging anxiety to please. They made a delightful young couple, the fair seeming of this life and riches of it very much on their side. Mr. Iglesias' chivalrous heart went out to them in silent sympathy and benediction; while, the block being over, his gaze continued to follow them as long as the young girl's slender white-clad back and the young man's flushed and eager face remained distinguishable. Then he started, for he was aware that his unbidden companions had received unexpected reinforcement. A third guest had arrived, and looked hard and critically at him. Its name was Old Age, and he found something sardonic in its glance. With all his gentleness of soul, all his innate self-restraint, there remained fighting blood in Dominic Iglesias. Therefore, for the moment, recognising with whom he had to deal, a light anything but mild visited his eyes, and a rigidity the straight lines of his chin and lips. Old Age is a sinister visitant even to those who are moderate in demand and clean of life. For it gives to drink of the cup not of pleasure, but merely of patience, of physical loss and intellectual humiliation; and, once it has laid its spell upon you, you are past all remedy save the supreme remedy

of death. And so, at first sight, Iglesias rebelled--as do all men--turning defiant. Then, being very sane, he gave in to the relentless logic of fact. Silently, yet with all courtesy, he acknowledged the newcomer, and bade it be seated along with the rest. While, after brief pause to rally his pride, and that courage which is the noblest attribute of pride, he turned to things concrete and material once more, finally addressing himself to the omnibus driver:

"Pardon me; polo, as I understand, is a species of game?"

The broad moist countenance was again uplifted, a hint of patronage now tempering its good-natured apathy.

"Sort'er 'ockey on 'orseback."

"That must be sufficiently dangerous," Mr. Iglesias remarked.

"Bless you, yes. Players breaks their backs pretty frequent, and cuts the ponies about most cruel--"

He ceased speaking abruptly, jammed the brake down with his heel in response to the conductor's bell, and drew the sweating horses up short to permit the ingress of fresh passengers. This accomplished, the omnibus lumbered onwards while Dominic Iglesias fell into further meditation.

The explanation vouchsafed him was still far from explicit; yet this much of illumination he gained from it, namely, the assurance that all these goodly personages, Alaric Barking and his sweet companion among them, were on pleasure bent. One and all they fared forth, on this heavy summer afternoon, in search of amusement--in search of that intangible yet very powerful factor in human affairs to which it is given to lift the too great weight of seriousness from mortal life, cheating perception of relentless actualities, helping to restore the balance, helping men to hope, to laugh, and to forget. Perceiving all which, conscious moreover of the near neighbourhood of Loneliness on the right hand and Old Age on the left, Iglesias began to bestow on these votaries of pleasure a more earnest attention, recognising in them the possessors of a secret which it greatly behoved him to enter into possession of likewise. In what, he asked himself, did it actually consist, this to him practically unknown quantity, amusement? How was the spirit of it cultivated, the enjoyment of it consciously attained? How far did it reside in inward attitude, how far in outward circumstance? In a word, how did they all do it? It was very incumbent upon him to learn, and he admitted a ridiculous ignorance.

CHAPTER III

Thus had the chapter of labour ended, and that of leisure opened. And it was with the sadness of things terminated very strongly upon him that, as Frederick, the German-Swiss valet, finished clearing the dinner-table and departed, Mr. Iglesias looked forth over the neatly protected verdure of Trimmer's Green in the evening quiet. The smugly pacific aspect of the place irritated him. He was aware of a great emptiness. And very certainly the scene before him offered no solution of the problem of the filling of that emptiness. And somehow or other it had to be filled--Iglesias knew that, knew it through every fibre of him--or life would be

simply insupportable. Meanwhile from the public drawing-room below came sounds of revelry, innocent enough yet hardly calculated to soothe over-strained nerves. Little Mr. Farge--whose thin and reedy tenor carried as does a penny whistle--gave forth the refrain of a song just then popular in metropolitan music-halls.

"They're keeping latish hours at the Convalescent Home," piped Mr. Farge; while his friend and devout admirer, Albert Edward Worthington, tore at the banjo strings and the ladies tittered.

Iglesias listened in a somewhat grim spirit of endurance. On the far side of the Green he could see the gaslights in the Lovegroves' dining-room. These appeared to watch him rather uncomfortably, as with three supplicating and reproachful eyes. He debated whether he would not take his hat, step across, and tell his old friend what had happened--it would at least relieve him of the sound of little Farge's serenading. But his pride recoiled somehow. Good souls, man and wife, they would be full of solicitude and kindness; but they would say the wrong thing. They would not understand. How, indeed, should they, being wholly at one with their surroundings--unimaginative, domestic, British middle-class, with its virtues and limitations aggressively in evidence? George Lovegrove would suggest some minor municipal office, or membership of the local borough council, as a crown of consolation. His wife would skirt round the subject of matrimony. She had done so before now; and Iglesias, while presenting a dignified front to the enemy, had inwardly shuddered. She was an excellent, estimable woman; but when ponderously arch, when extensively sly! Oh, dear no! It didn't do. Her gambols were too sadly suggestive of those of a skittish hippopotamus. Dominic Iglesias was conscious that he had a skin too little to-night; he could not witness them with philosophy. The kindest intention, the best-meant words, might cause him extravagant annoyance.

He turned away from the window and took a turn the length of the room--a tall, distinct, and even stately figure in the thickening dusk. He felt rather horribly desolate. He was fairly frightened by the greatness of the emptiness, within and about him, engendered by absence of employment. He had little to reproach himself with. His record was cleaner than most men's--he could not but know that. He had sacrificed personal ambition, personal happiness, to the service of one supremely dear to him. Not for a moment did he regret it. Had it to be done all over again, without hesitation he would do it. Still there was no blinking facts. Here was the nemesis, not of ill living, but of good--namely, emptiness, loneliness, homelessness, Old Age here at his elbow, Death waiting there ahead.

"The routine has gone on too long," he said to himself bitterly. "I have lost my pliability, lost my humanity. I am a machine now, not a man. To the machine, work is life. Work over, life is over; and the machine is just so much lumber--better broken up and sent to the rag and bottle shop, where it may fetch the worth of its weight as scrap-iron."

He turned, came back to the open window again and stood there, rather carefully avoiding the three reproachful eyes of the Lovegroves' dining-room gaselier, and fixing his gaze on that sullen fierceness of sunset still hanging in the extreme northwest.

"Unluckily there is no rag and bottle shop where superannuated bank clerks of five-and-fifty have even the very modest market value of scrap-iron!" he went on. "Of all kinds of uselessness, that of we godlike human

beings is the most utterly obvious when our working day is past. Mental decay and bodily corruption as the ultimate. And, this side of it, a few years of increasing degradation, a mere senseless killing of time until the very unpleasing goal is reached--along with a growing selfishness, and narrowness of outlook; along, possibly, with some development of senile sensuality, the more detestable because it lacks the provocations of hot blood. Oh! Dominic Iglesias, Dominic Iglesias, is that the ugly road you are doomed to travel--a toothless greed for filling your belly with fly-blown dainties off the refuse-heap?"

And through the open window, in sinister accompaniment to little Mr. Farge's sophisticated and unpastoral pipings, came the voice of the great city herself in answer--low, multitudinous, raucous, without emphasis but without briefest relief of interval or of pause. And this laid hold strongly of Iglesias' imagination, reminding him of all the intimate wretchedness of that first stranding of the ship of his fate. Reminding him of his long and fruitless trappings in search of employment--good looks, energy, youth itself, seeming but an added handicap--when London revealed herself to him in her solidarity, revealed herself as a prodigious living creature, awful in her mysterious vigour, ever big with impending birth, merciless with impending death. As she showed herself to him then, with life all untried before him, so she showed herself still when, in the blackness of his present humour, all life worth the name appeared over and passed. He had changed, so he believed, to the point of nullity and final ineptitude. She remained strong, active, relentless as ever. As long ago, so now, she struck him as monstrous. Yet now, though all the conditions were changed, he had, as long ago, an instinct that from her there was no escape.

"I have served you honestly enough all these years," he said--since she had voice to speak, she had also ears to hear, mayhap--"and you have taken much and given little. To-day you have turned me off, told me to quit. But where, I ask you, can I go? I am too stiffened by work, unskilled in travel, too unadaptable to begin again elsewhere. Moreover, you hold the record of my experience, all my glad and sorrowful memories. I might try to leave you, but it's no use. I am planted and rooted in you, monstrous mother that you are. If I know myself, I should go only to come back."

For the moment the calm of long self-control was broken up within him. Dominic Iglesias dwelt, consciously and sensibly, in the horror of the Outer Darkness--which horror is known only to that small and somewhat suspect minority of human beings who are also capable, by the operation of the divine mercy, of dwelling in the glory of the Uncreated Light. The swing of the pendulum is equal to right as to left. He was staggered by the misery of his own isolation--a stranger, as he suddenly realised, by temperament and ideals, as well as by race! Then resolutely he turned his back on this, with an instinct of self-preservation directing his thought to things practical and average.

For example, that question of the pension--concerning which he now found, to his slight surprise, he was no longer the least in doubt. This money was his by right. The hard strain in his nature was dominant--to the full he would claim his rights. And since in moments of despair the human mind invariably requires a human victim, be it merely a simulacrum, a waxen image of a man to melt in the fires of its humiliation and revolt, Iglesias remembered, with much contemptuous satisfaction, the ironical portrait of Sir Abel Barking adorning the wall of the latter's private room at the bank. He hailed the diabolic talent of the artist who had

laid bare with such subtle skill the flatulence of his sitter. It was a pretty revenge, very assuaging just now to Iglesias. For the real man, as he reflected, was not the man who sat heavily self-complacent in a library chair, exuding platitudes and pride of patronage; but the man who hung upon the wall forever ridiculous while paint and canvas should last. Thus would he go down to posterity! And to Dominic Iglesias, just now, it seemed very excellent that posterity should know him for the wind-bag hypocrite he essentially was. Securely entrenched behind his own large prosperity, uxoriousness, paternity, had he not counted his, Iglesias', blessings to him; counselling amusement, rest, congratulating him on just all that which made for his present distress--namely, his obscure position, his enforced idleness, his absence of human ties, the general meagreness of his state in life? The more he thought of the incident, the more it filled him with indignation and disgust. Therefore, very certainly he would claim his pension; claim an infinitesimal but actual fraction of this man's great wealth; would live long so as to claim it as long as possible, till the paying of it, indeed, should become a weariness to the payer. And he would spend it, too, unquestionably he would. Mr. Iglesias' rare and gracious smile had an almost cruel edge to it.

"The machine shall become a man again," he said. "And the man shall amuse himself. How, I don't yet know, but I will find out. Work has made me dull and inept."

He straightened himself up, tired, yet unbroken, defiant, aware--though the horror of the Outer Darkness was yet upon him--of purpose still militant and unspent.

"Play may make me the reverse of dull and inept. I have always been diligent and methodical. I will continue to be so. This enterprise admits of no delay. I will begin at once, begin to-morrow, to amuse myself."

It is characteristic of the Latin to see things written in fire and blood, which the slower-brained Anglo-Saxon only sees written in red paint--if, indeed, he ever arrives at seeing them written at all. To-night the Latin held absolute sway in Dominic Iglesias. With freedom had come a curious reversion to type. His humour, like his smile, was a trifle cruel. He observed, criticised, judged, condemned unsparingly, all mental courtesies in abeyance. When, therefore, at this juncture the three eyes of the Lovegroves' dining-room gaselier winked slowly, and closed their lids--so to speak--ceasing to watch and to supplicate, he suffered no self-reproach. The good, simple couple were shutting up house and going to bed, he supposed. They sought repose betimes; and, unless supper had been more aggressively cold and heavy than usual, slept, till broad day, a dreamless sleep. Decidedly it was well he had not taken his hat and stepped across to visit them, for, beyond all question, they would not have understood! The voice of London, for instance, meant nothing to them. They had no notion London had a voice. Still less had they any notion she was a prodigious living creature. London was the place where they resided--that was all, and, since the streets are admittedly noisy and dusty, they had taken a house in this genteel and convenient suburb. Of the tremendous life and force of things, miscalled man-made and inanimate, they had no faintest conception. Small wonder they went to bed betimes and slept a dreamless sleep! Thinking of which--notwithstanding their kindness and affection--they became, just now, to Iglesias as truly astonishing phenomena in their line as Sir Abel Barking in his. He saw in them merely specimens, though good ones, of the great majority of the British public, a public so overlaid and permeated by

convention, so parochial in outlook, so hidebound by social tradition and insular prejudice, that it is really less in touch with everlasting fact than the animals it pets, demoralises, and eats. These at least have instinct, and so are at one with universal nature. In perception, in spontaneity of action, good Mrs. Lovegrove was as an infant compared to her parrot or her pug. So was little Mr. Farge with his sophisticated warblings--so, for that matter, were all the other persons among whom his, Iglesias', lot was cast. His sense of isolation deepened. If amusement was his object, most certainly the society of Trimmer's Green would not supply it. He must look further afield for all that.

In the far northwest the last of the sunset had faded; only the cloud remained. Yet the horizon, above the broken line of the house-roofs and chimney-pots, pulsed with light--the very earthly light which, in great cities, flares out when the light of heaven dies, to walk the streets, with much else of doubtful loveliness, till it is shamed by the cold chastity of dawn. And along with that outflaring, a certain meretricious element introduced itself into the aspect of Trimmer's Green. Across the roadway, the gaslamps showed cones of vivid yet sickly brightness, bringing at regular intervals the sharply indented leaves of the plane trees and the shivering silver of the balsam-poplars into an arresting and artificial distinctness. Between were spaces of vacancy and gloom. And from out such a space, immediately opposite, slowly emerged a shambling and ungainly figure, in which Dominic Iglesias recognised the third of his fellow-lodgers, Mr. de Courcy Smyth. His acquaintance with the said lodger was of the slightest, since the latter had but recently entered into residence and rarely appeared at meals. Mrs. Porcher habitually referred to him with a pitying respect as "a gentleman very influential in literary and professional circles, but unfortunate in his married life"; ending with a sigh and upward glance of her still fine eyes, as one who could sympathise, having herself been through that gate. Influential or not, it occurred to Iglesias that the man presented a sorry spectacle enough. For a minute or so he stood aimlessly in the full glare of a gaslamp. His thin, creasy Inverness cape was thrown back, displaying evening dress. He carried a soft grey felt hat in one hand. His whole aspect was seedy, disappointed, dejected; his face pale and puffy, his sparse reddish hair and beard but indifferently trimmed. It was borne in upon Iglesias, moreover, that the man was hungry, that he had not--and that for some time--had enough to eat. Voluntary poverty is among the most beautiful, involuntary poverty among the ugliest, sights upon earth; and to which order of poverty that of de Courcy Smyth belonged, Mr. Iglesias was in no doubt. This was a sordid sight, a sight of discouragement, adding the last touch to the melancholy which oppressed him. The seedy figure crossed the road, fumbled for a minute with a latchkey. Then nerveless footsteps ascended the stairs, passed the door, and took their joyless way up and onward to the bed-sitting-room immediately above.

Down below the music had ceased, while sounds arose suggestive of a little playfulness on the part of the two young men in bidding their hostess and Miss Eliza Hart good-night. Very soon the house became silent. But Dominic Iglesias, though tired, was in no humour for sleep. He drew forward a leather-covered armchair and sat near the open window, in at which came a breathing of night wind. This was soothing, touching his forehead as with delicate pressure of a cool and sympathetic hand; so that, without any sense of surprising transition, he found himself in the garden of the little house in Holland Street, Kensington, once again. The laburnum was in full blossom, and the breeze uplifted the light drooping branches of it, making all their golden glory dance in the sunshine.

There must have been rain in the night, too, for the stone basin was full of water, in which the sparrows were busy washing, sending up tiny iridescent jets and fountains from their swiftly fluttering wings. It was delicious to Dominic. He felt very safe, very gay. Only a heavy ill-favoured tabby cat came from nowhere. It had designs upon the sparrows. Twice it climbed stealthily up the broken bricks and gas clinkers. Twice the little boy drove it away. It was not a nice cat. It had a broad white face, deceitful little eyes, and grey whiskers. It declared it only caught sparrows for their good and for the good of the community. It assured Dominic he was guilty of a grave error of judgment in attempting to interfere. It said a great deal about moral responsibility and the heavy obligations persons of wealth and position owe to themselves.

Just then Pascal Pelletier, carrying a square Huntley Palmer's biscuit tin, containing an infernal machine, under his arm, his angelic countenance radiant in the sunshine, came down the steps from the dining-room window. And, while Dominic ran to greet him, the cat crept back again--its face was the face of Sir Abel Barking, and it made a spring at the sparrows. But the pillar broke and the basin toppled over, pinning it, across the loins, down on to the clinkers under the edge of the stone lip.

"Oh! you've spoilt my garden, you've spoilt my garden!" Dominic cried. "The basin has fallen. The sparrows will never wash in it any more."

But Pascal Pelletier patted him on the head tenderly.

"Do not weep over the fallen basin, very dear one," he said. "Rather sing aloud Te Deum in praise of the glorious goddess of Social Revolution who has delivered the enemy of the people into our hands. This is no affair of cat and bird, but of the capitalist and the proletariat on which he battens. So for a little space let the unholy creature lie there writhing. Let it understand what it is to have a back broken by the weight of an impossible burden. Let it try vainly to drag its limbs from beneath an immovable load. Observe it, let it suffer. Very soon we will finish with it, and explode the iniquitous system it represents. See, in the name of humanity, of labour, of the unknown and unnumbered millions of the martyred poor, I set a match to this good little fuse, and, with the rapidity of thought, blow blasphemous tyrant Capital into a thousand fragments of reeking flesh and splintered bone!"

But to the little boy, words and spectacle alike had become unendurably painful.

"No, no, Pascal, you cannot cure everything that way. It is not just," he cried. And running forward with all his strength he lifted the stone basin off the wounded creature--cat, man, beast of prey, modern financier, be it what it might. He stopped to gather it up in his arms, and, repulsive though it was, to comfort and protect it. But just then came a thunderous rattle and crash knocking him senseless.

Mr. Iglesias sat bolt upright in his chair, uncertain of his identity and surroundings, shaken and bewildered.

Upstairs, de Courcy Smyth--spent and stupefied by the writing of a would-be smart critique on the first-night performance of a screaming farce, for one of to-morrow's evening papers--had stumbled, upsetting the fire-irons, as he slouched across his room to bed. Iglesias heard the creak of the wire-wove mattress as the man flung himself down; and that familiar

sound restored his sense of actualities. Yet all his mood was changed and softened. The return to childhood had made a strange impression upon him, filling him with a great nostalgia for things apparently lost, but exquisite; and which, having once been, might, though he knew not by what conceivable alchemy of time or chance, once again be. Meanwhile, he must have slept long, for the wind had grown chill. The voice of London, the monstrous mother, had grown weak and intermittent. And the earthly light, pulsing along the horizon, had grown faint, humbled and chastened by the whiteness of approaching dawn.

CHAPTER IV

A quarter-mile range of high unpainted oak paling, well seasoned, well carpentered, innocent of chink or shrinkage, impervious to the human eye. Visible above it the domed heads of enormous elm trees steeped in sunshine, rising towards the ample curve of the summer sky. At intervals, with tumultuous rush and scurry, the thud of the hoofs of unseen horses, galloping for all they are worth over grass. The suck and rub of breeches against saddle-flaps, the rattle of a curb chain or the rings of a bit. A call, a challenge, smothered exclamations. The long-drawn swish of the polo stick through the air, and the whack of the wooden head of it against ball, or ground, or something unluckily softer and more sentient. A pause, broken only by distant voices, and the sound, or rather sense, of men and horses in quiet and friendly movement; followed by the tumultuous rush and scurry, and all the moving incidents of the heard, yet unwitnessed, drama over again.

For here it was that gallant and costly game beloved of Oriental princes--rather baldly described to Mr. Iglesias yesterday by the driver of the Hammersmith 'bus as a "kind of hockey on horseback"--in very full swing no doubt. Only unfortunately Iglesias found himself on the wrong side of the palings. And, since he had learned, indirectly, from the observations of the monumental police-sergeant--directing the stream of carriages at the entrance gates--to other would-be spectators, that to the polo ground, as to so much else obviously desirable in this world, there is "no admission except by ticket," on the wrong side of these same palings he recognised he was fated to stay. It was a disappointment, not to say an annoyance. For he had come forth, in accordance with his determination, to make observations and inquiries regarding that same matter of amusement. And, since the influence of that which is to be acts upon us almost, if not quite, as strongly as the influence of that which has been, the handsome, eager countenance of young Alaric Barking and the graceful figure of his fair companion, as seen from the 'bustop, occurred very forcibly in this connection to Dominic Iglesias' mind. He would go forth and behold that which they had gone forth to behold. He would witness the sports of the well-born and rich. From these he elected, somewhat proudly, to take his first lessons in the fine art of amusement. So here he was; and here, too--very much here--were the palings, spelling failure and frustration of purpose.

Fortunately unwonted exercise and the pure invigorating atmosphere tended to generate placidity, and agreeable harmony of the mental and physical being. It followed that active annoyance was short-lived. For a minute or two Mr. Iglesias loitered, listening to the moving music of the unseen game. Then, walking onward to the end of the enclosure, where the palings

turn away sharply at the left, he crossed the road and made for a wooden bench just there amiably presenting itself. It was pleasant to rest. The walk had been a long one; but it now appeared to him that the labour of it had not been wholly in vain. For around him stretched a breezy common, broken by straggling bramble and furze brakes, and dotted with hawthorn bushes, upon the topmost branches of which the crowded pinkish-white blossoms still lingered. From one to another small birds flitted with a pretty dipping flight, uttering quick detached notes as in merry question and answer. Through the rough turf the bracken pushed upward, uncurling sturdy croziers of brownish green. Away to the right, beyond the railway line, rose the densely wooded slopes of Roehampton and Sheen; while, against the purple-green gloom of them, the home signals of Barnes Station--hard white lines and angles tipped with scarlet and black--stood out in high relief like the gigantic characters of some strange alphabet. Down the wide road motors ground and snorted; and carriages moved slowly, two abreast, the menservants sitting at ease, talking and smoking while waiting to take up at the police-guarded gate, back there towards the heat and smoke of London, when the polo match should be played out.

But immediately London, the heat, and smoke, and raucous voice of it, seemed far enough away, the wholesome charm of the country very present. For a while Dominic Iglesias yielded himself up to it. Receptive, quiescent, contented, he basked in the sunshine, his mind vacant of definite thought. But for a while only. For as physical fatigue wore off, definite thought returned; and with it the sense of his own loneliness, the oppression of a future empty of work, the bitterness of this enhanced by the little disappointment he had lately suffered. He leaned forward, his hands clasped between his knees, looking at the bracken croziers pushing bravely upward through the rough turf to air and light. Even these blind and speechless things worked, in a sense, fulfilling the law of their existence. He went back on the dream of last night, on his own childhood, the happiness, yet haunting unspoken anxiety of it, his father's fanaticism, fierce revolutionary propaganda, and mysteriously uncertain fate.

"And to think that was the pit out of which I, of all men, was digged!" he said to himself. "Have I done something to restore the family balance in respect of right reason, or is the shame of incapacity upon me? Have I sacrificed myself, or cowardly have I merely shirked living? Heaven knows--I don't, only----"

But here his uncheerful meditations were broken in on by a voice, imperative in tone, yet perceptibly shaken by laughter.

"Cappadocia!" it called. "Cappadocia! Do you hear? Come here, you little reprobate."

Then Dominic Iglesias perceived that he had ceased to be sole occupant of the bench. A dog, a tiny toy spaniel, sat beside him. It sidled very close, gazing at him with foolishly prominent eyes. Its ears, black edged with tan, soft and lustrous as floss silk, hung down in long lappets on either side its minute and melancholy face. The tip of its red tongue just showed. It was abnormally self-conscious and solemn. It planted one fringed paw upon Iglesias' arm and it snored.

"Cappadocia!--well, of all the cheeky young beggars----"

This time the voice broke in unmistakable merriment, wholly spontaneous, as of relief, even of mischievous triumph; and Mr. Iglesias, looking up,

found himself confronted by a young woman. She advanced slowly, her trailing string-coloured lace skirts gathered up lazily in one hand. About her shoulders she wore a long blue-purple silk scarf, embroidered with dragons of peacock, and scarlet, and gold. These rather violent colours found repetition in the nasturtium leaves and flowers that crowned her lace hat, the wide brim of which was tied down with narrow strings of purple velvet, gipsy fashion, beneath her chin. Under her arm she carried another tiny spaniel, the creature's black morsel of a head peeping out quaintly from among the forms of the embroidered dragons, which last appeared to writhe, as in the heat of deadly conflict, as their wearer moved. Her face was in shadow owing to the breadth of the brim of her hat. Otherwise the sunshine embraced her whole figure, conferring on it a glittering yet singularly unsubstantial effect, as though a column of pale windswept dust were overlaid, here and there, with splendour of rich enamel.

And it was just this effect of something unsubstantial, in a way fictitious and out of relation to sober fact, which struck Dominic Iglesias, robbing him for the moment of his dignified courtesy. Frankly he stared at this appearance, so strangely at variance with the realities of his own melancholy thought. Meanwhile the little dog snuggled up yet closer against him.

"Yes--pray don't disturb yourself," the young lady went on volubly "It's too bad, I know, to intrude on you like this. But as Cappadocia refuses to come to me, it is clear I have to come after Cappadocia. It's simply disgraceful the way she carries on when one takes her out, making acquaintances like this, casually, all over the place. The maids flatly refuse to air her, even on a string. They say it becomes a little too compromising. But, as I explain to them, she's not a bit the modern woman. She belongs to a stage of social development when pretty people infinitely preferred being compromised to being squelched." The speaker laughed again quietly. "I'm not altogether sure they weren't right. When you are squelched, finished, done for, it matters precious little whether you've been compromised first or not. Don't you agree? Any way, Cappadocia's not going to be squelched if she can help it. She's horribly scared, or pretends to be, at motors. Let one toot and she forgets all her fine-lady manners, and just skips to anybody for protection. She'll take refuge in the most unconventional places to escape."

The part of wisdom, in face of this very forthcoming young person, would have been no doubt to arise and withdraw. But to Dominic Iglesias, just then, dogs, woman, conversation, were alike so remote and unreal, part merely of the scene which he had been contemplating, that he failed to take them seriously. Divorced from routine, he was divorced, in a way, from habitual modes of mind and conduct. He neither consented nor refused, but just let things happen, attaching little or no meaning to them. If this feminine being chose to prattle--well, let her do so. Really he did not care.

"I am not very modern myself," he said, with a shade of weariness. "So perhaps your small dog had some intuition of a kindred spirit when taking refuge with me."

"All the same, you hardly date from the social era of Charles II., I fancy," the young lady answered quickly.

As she spoke she raised her chin with a slightly impudent movement, thus bringing her countenance into the sunlight. For the first time Iglesias

clearly saw her face. It was small, the features insignificant, the skin smooth and fine in texture, but sallow. Her hair, black and very massive, was puffed out and dressed low, hiding her ears. Her lips were rather positively red, and the tinge of colour on either cheek, though slight, was not wholly convincing in tone. Even to a person of Mr. Iglesias' praiseworthy limitation of experience in such matters, her face was vaguely suggestive of the footlights--would have been distinctly so but for her eyes. These were curiously at variance with the rest of her appearance. They belonged to a quite other order of woman, so to speak--a woman of finer physique, of higher intelligence, possibly of nobler purposes. They were arrestingly large in size, thereby helping to dwarf the proportions of her face. In colour they were a rather light warm hazel, with a slight film over both iris and pupil, and a noticeably bluish shade in the whites of them. In these last particulars they were like a baby's eyes; but very unlike in the reflective intensity of their observation as she fixed them upon Dominic Iglesias.

"Cappadocia may be a fool about motors," she remarked, "but she's uncommonly shrewd in reading character. She seems to like you, to have taken you on, don't you know; and she's generally right. So I'll sit down, please. Oh! no, no, come along now"--this as Mr. Iglesias rose and made a movement to depart--"why, dear man, the very point of the whole show is that you should sit down, too."

CHAPTER V

And so it came about that the Lady of the Windswept Dust sat at one end of the flat bench and Dominic Iglesias at the other, with the two absurd and exquisite little dogs in between. And the lady chattered. Her voice was sweet and full, with plaintive tones and turns of laughter in it; and, though the vowel sounds were not wholly impeccable, having the tang in them common to the speech of the cockney bred, the aspirates happily remained inviolate. And Iglesias listened, still with a curious indifference, as, sitting in the body of the house, he might have listened to patter from the other side of the footlights. It passed the time. Presently he would get up, taking the whole of his rather sorrowful personality along with him, and go out by the main entrance, while she left by the stage door--and so vanished, little dogs and all.

"It's my habit to play fair," she announced. "If I'm going to ask personal questions at the finish, I always lead up to them by supplying personal information at the start. It's mean to induce other people to give themselves away unless you give yourself away first--also, I observe it is usually quite unsuccessful. Well, then, to begin with, his name"--she gently poked the tiny spaniel beside her, causing it to wriggle uneasily all the length of its satiny back--"is Onions. Graceful and distinguished, isn't it? But I give you my word I couldn't help myself. Cappadocia's so duchessy that I had to knock the conceit out of her somehow, or it would not have been possible to live with her. She was altogether too smart for me--used to look at me as if I was a cockroach. So I consulted a friend of mine about it; for it's a little too much to be made to feel like a black-beetle in your own house, and by a thing of that size, too! And he--my friend--said there is nothing to compare with a mesalliance for taking the stuffing out of anyone. I own I was not exactly off my head about that speech of his. In a way it was rather a

facers; but when I got cool I saw he was right. After all, he knew, and I knew--and he knew that I knew----"

The lady paused. Her voice had taken on a plaintive inflection. She looked away at the domed heads of the enormous elm trees above the range of oak palings.

"For the life of me I can't imagine why you're here," she exclaimed, "instead of inside there with all the rest of them! However, we haven't got as far as that yet. I was telling you about my King Charleses. So my friend brought me this one"--again she poked the little dog gently. "His pedigree's pretty fair, but of course it's not a patch on Cappadocia's. Her prizes and the puppies--you don't mind my alluding quite briefly to the puppies--are a serious source of income to me. But I believe she would have ignored the defective pedigree. He is rather nice-looking, you see, and Cappadocia is rather superficial. It is the name that worries her--Onions, Willie Onions, that's where the real trouble comes in. Not like it? I believe you. She's capable of saving up all her pocket-money to buy him a foreign title, as a rich, ugly woman I once knew did who married a man called Spittles. He was a bad lot when she married him, and he stayed so. But as the Comte d'Oppitalé it didn't matter. Vices became merely quaint little eccentricities. If he beat her it was with an umbrella with a coronet on the handle, and that made all the difference. Everything for the shop window, you see, with a nature like hers or Cappadocia's. But I don't rub it in, I assure you I don't. I only remind Cappadocia of the fact by calling her Mrs. W. O. when she's a pest and a terror. And that's better than smacking her, anyhow, isn't it?"

To this proposition Mr. Iglesias gravely assented. The lady drew her blue-purple scarf a little closer about her shoulders, causing the embroidered dragons to writhe as in the heat of conflict, while the sunlight glinted on the gold thread of their crests and claws, and glittered in their jewelled eyes. She gazed at the elm trees again.

"It's quite nice to hear you speak, you know," she remarked parenthetically. "The conversation has been a little one-sided so far. I was beginning to be afraid you might be bored. But now it's all right. I flourish on encouragement! So, to go on, my name is Poppy--Poppy St. John--Mrs. St. John. Rather good, isn't it?"

"Distinctly so," said Mr. Iglesias. Her unblushing effrontery began to entertain him somewhat. And then he had sallied forth in search of amusement. This was not the form of amusement he would have selected; but--since it presented itself?

"I'm glad you like it," she returned. "I've always thought it rather telling myself--an improvement on Mrs. Willie Onions, anyhow. Oh! yes, a vast improvement," she repeated. "My friend was quite right. I tell you it's an awful handicap to have a name which gives you away socially. The man, the husband, I mean, may be the best of the good. Still, it's difficult to forgive him for labelling you with some stupidity like that. There's no getting away from it. You feel like a bottle of pickles, or boot-polish, or a tin of insecticide whenever a servant announces you. Everybody knows where you do--and don't--come in. But, to go on, I am barely three--only I fancy you are the sort of person who is rather rough on lying, aren't you? Well, in that case, quite between ourselves--I am just turned nine-and-twenty."

She faced round on Dominic Iglesias, fixing on him those curiously

arresting eyes, which at once emphasised and redeemed the commonness of her face, as the sweetness of her voice emphasised and redeemed the commonness of her accent, and the quietude of her manner and movements mitigated the impertinence of her words and vulgarity of her diction.

"And really that's about all it is necessary for you to know at present," she asserted. "We shall see later, if we keep it up--if Cappadocia keeps it up, I mean, of course. She is fearfully gone on you now, that's clear; and she may be capable of a serious attachment. I can't tell. An unfortunate marriage has been known to turn that way before now. Anyhow, we'll give her the benefit of the doubt."

Poppy laughed softly, leaning forward and still looking at Mr. Iglesias from under the shadow of her wide-brimmed hat.

"Now," she said, "come along. I've shown you I play fair all round, even to a stuck-up little monkey of a thing like Cappadocia. It's your turn to stand and deliver. I had been watching you and speculating for ever so long before our introduction. Tell me, who on earth are you?"

Iglesias' figure stiffened a little; but it was impossible to be annoyed with her. To begin with, she was too unreal, too unsubstantial a being. And, to go on with, invincible good-temper is so very disarming.

"Who am I? Nobody," he answered gravely.

"Bless us, here's a find!" Poppy cried, apparently addressing the little dogs. "Hasn't he so much of a name even as Willie Onions? Where's it gone to? It must be nearly as awkward for him as it was for the man who had no shadow. Come, though," she added in tones of remonstrance, "you must play fair. Cards on the table and no humbugging. To put it another way, what do you do?"

"Since yesterday, nothing," he answered.

The young lady regarded him with increasing interest.

"But, my gentle lunatic," she said, "you didn't exactly begin your acquaintance with this planetary sphere yesterday--couldn't, you know, though you are very beautiful to look at. So, if you don't very particularly much mind, we'll hark back to before yesterday."

Dominic Iglesias' gravity gave way slightly. He smiled in spite of his natural pride and reticence.

"For over thirty-five years I was a clerk in a city bank."

"Pshaw!" Poppy cried hotly. "And pray what variety of congenital idiot do you take me for? If you are going to decline upon fiction, please let it be of a higher order than that. I tell you it's unworthy of you!"

She pursed up her lips and moved her head slowly from side to side in high disgust.

"Don't be childish," she said. "Don't be transparently silly. If you want to gas, do put a little more intelligence into it. You--you--out of sight the most distinguished-looking man I've ever met except Lord--well, we won't name names, it sounds showy--you a clerk in a city bank! There, excuse me, but simply--" Poppy snapped her fingers like a pair of

castanets, making the little dogs start and whimper. "Fiddle!" she cried; "tell it to a bed-ridden spinster in a blind asylum!--Fiddle-de-dee!"

And for the life of him Dominic Iglesias could not help laughing. It was a new sensation. It occurred to him that he had not laughed for years--hardly since the days of poor Pascal Pelletier and the little garden in Holland Street, Kensington.

Poppy watched him, her eyes dancing. Her expression was very charming, wholly unselfconscious, in a way maternal, just then. But Iglesias was hardly sensible of it.

"That's good," she said. "Now you'll feel a lot better. I saw there was something wrong with you from the start which needed breaking up. Now, suppose you quit inadequate inventions and just tell the truth."

"Unfortunately, I have done so already," Mr. Iglesias said.

The lady paused a moment, her face full of inquiry and doubt.

"Honest injun?"

The term was not familiar to her hearer, but he judged it to be of the nature of an asseveration, and assented.

"And do you mean to tell me that for all those years you went through that drudgery every day?"

"I had my Sundays," Iglesias answered; "and, since their invention, my bank holidays. Latterly I got three weeks' holiday in the summer, formerly a fortnight."

Laughter had speedily evaporated; and, his harsher mood returning upon him, Iglesias found a certain bitter enjoyment in setting forth the extreme meagreness of his life before this light-hearted, unsubstantial piece of womanhood. Again he classed her with the absurd and exquisite little dogs as something superfluous, out of relation to sad and sober realities.

"And yet you manage to look as you do! It beats me," Poppy declared. "I tell you it knocks me out of time completely. For, if you'll excuse my being personal, there is an air about you not usually generated by an office stool--at least, in my experience. Where do you get it from? You can't be English?"

"I am a Spaniard by extraction," Mr. Iglesias said, with a slight lift of the head.

"There now, my dear man, don't you go and freeze up again. We were just beginning to get along so nicely," Poppy put in quickly. "I am having a capital good time, and you're not having an altogether bad one, are you? But, tell me, how long ago were you extracted?"

"Very long ago. I was brought to England as a baby child."

"Oh! I didn't mean it that way," she returned. "I was not touching on the unpardonable subject of age; not that it would matter much in your case, for you are one of the lucky sort with whom age does not count. I only meant are you an all-round foreigner?"

"Practically--my mother was partly Irish."

Dominic Iglesias looked away to those densely wooded slopes of Sheen and Roehampton, against the purple-green gloom of which the home signals of Barnes Station--hard white lines and angles tipped with scarlet and black--stood out like the gigantic characters of some strange alphabet. The air was sweet with the scent of new-mown hay. The birds flirted up and down the hawthorn bushes and furze brakes. It was all very charming; yet that same emptiness and distrust of the future were very present to Iglesias. He forgot all about his companion, aware only that those two unbidden guests, Old Age and Loneliness, stood close beside him, claiming harbourage and entertainment.

"Ah! your mother," Poppy said slowly, with the slightest perceptible inflection of mockery. "And she is alive still?"

Dominic Iglesias turned upon the poor Lady of the Windswept Dust fiercely. She had come too close, come from her proper place--were not her lips painted?--behind the footlights, and laid her hands upon that which was holy. He was filled with unreasoning anger towards her--anger towards himself, too, that he should have departed from his habitual silence and reticence, submitted to be cross-questioned, and listened to her feather-headed patter so long. He rose to his feet, for the moment young, alert, full of a pride at once militant and protective.

"God forbid!" he said sternly. "Dear saint and martyr, she is safe from all misreading at last. She is dead."

He stood a moment trying to choke down his anger before addressing her again.

"It is time I should go," he said presently. "I think we have talked enough."

But Poppy St. John presented a singular appearance. All the audacity had departed from her. She sat huddled together, looking very small and desolate; her eyes--the one noble feature of her face--swimming with tears.

"No, no; don't go," she cried in tones of childlike entreaty. "Why should you go? I like you, and I meant no harm. I've had the beastliest day, and meeting you was a let-up. You did me good somehow. Cappadocia was quite right in taking to you. I only wanted to know about you because--well, you are different. Pshaw, don't tell me. I know what I am talking about. You're straight. You're good right through."

The words were poured forth so rapidly that Iglesias hardly gathered the exact purport of them. But one thing was clear to him--namely, that this frivolous and meretricious being must be human after all, since she could suffer.

"Don't go," she repeated. "I'm miserable. I'll explain. I'll tell you. Just sit down again. It would be awfully kind. You see, I've been expecting a friend. It was all-important I should see him to-day, because there were things to be said. I've been awake half the night screwing up my courage to saying them. And then he never turned up. I got nerves waiting hour after hour--anybody would, waiting like that. And I began to imagine every kind of pestilent disaster."

Poppy swallowed a little and dabbed her pocket-handkerchief against her eyes.

"I shall be all right in a minute," she went on. "Do sit down, please. You say you're nobody and have nothing to do, so you can't very well be in a hurry. I am like this sometimes. It's awfully silly, but I can't help it. Some rotten trifle sets me off, and then I can't stop myself. I begin to go over all my worst luck.--Doesn't it occur to you there's no earthly good in standing? It obliges me to talk loud, and it's stupid to take all Barnes Common into our confidence. Thanks; that's very nice of you.--Well, you see when I'm like his, the flood-gates of memory are opened--which sounds pretty enough, but the prettiness is strictly limited to the sound for most of us, at least as far as my experience goes. The water is generally a bit dirty, and there are too many dead things floating about in it; and, when they reel by, as the current takes them, they turn and seem to struggle and come half alive."

She paused, hitching the embroidered dragons up about her shoulders.

"That is why I put on this scarf to-day. It was given me by a man who was awfully fond of me before--I married. He bought it in the bazaar at Peshawur, and sent it home to me just as he was starting on one of those little frontier wars the accounts of which they keep out of the English papers. And he was killed, poor dear old boy, in some footy little skirmish. And this is all I've got left of him."

Poppy spread out the ends of the scarf for Mr. Iglesias' inspection.

"It must have cost a lot of money. The stones are real, you see; and that gold thread is tremendously heavy. Just feel the weight. It was all his people's doing. They didn't consider me smart enough for him--or rather for themselves. They weren't anybody in particular, but they were climbing. The society microbe had bitten them badly. So they bundled him off to India. What another pair of shoes it would have been for me if he'd lived! At least it seems so to me when I'm down on my luck, as I am to-day. But after all, I don't know." Poppy began to be impudent, to laugh again, though somewhat brokenly. "Sometimes I don't believe one can count on any of you men till you are well dead, and then you're not much use, you know, faithful or unfaithful."

She dabbed her eyes once more and looked at Mr. Iglesias, smiling ruefully.

"Life's a pretty rotten business, at times, all round, isn't it?" she said. "You must have found it so with that thirty years' drudgery in a city bank. By the way, what bank was it?"

And Dominic Iglesias, touched by that very human story, attracted, in spite of himself, by the frankness of his companion, a little shaken by the novelty of the whole situation, answered mechanically:

"The bank? Oh, yes! Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking of Threadneedle Street."

For a moment Poppy sat silent, her mouth round as an O. Then she drew her open hand down sharply behind poor Willie Onions, and shot the small dog, in a sitting position, off the bench on to the rough grass. His fringed legs stuck out stiff as sticks, while his enormous lappets of ears flew

up and back, giving him the most wildly demented appearance during this brief inglorious flight through space.

"Catch birds!" she cried, "catch birds, I tell you! Think of your figure. My good child, take exercise or you'll be as round as a tub!"

She clapped her hands encouragingly, but the little animal, half-scared, half-offended, came closer, fawning upon her trailing string-coloured skirts. Poppy leaned down, resting her elbows upon her knees, and napped at the unhappy Onions with her handkerchief.

"Go away, you silly billy. Have a little decent pride, can't you? Don't bestow attentions when they're unwelcome." Then she addressed herself to Mr. Iglesias, but without looking up. "I beg your pardon, all this must seem rather abrupt. But sometimes one's duty to one's family takes one on the jump, as you may say; and one repairs neglect right away also on the jump. But--but--there's one thing I should like to know--when I told you my name just now--Poppy St. John, Mrs. St. John--you remember?"

"I remember," he said.

"Well, didn't it convey--didn't it mean anything special to you?"

"I am afraid not," Iglesias answered. "You must pardon my ignorance, since I have lived very much out of the world. I know nothing of society."

"So much the better. The world is a vastly overrated place, and society is about the biggest fraud going." She left off teasing the little dog, sat bolt upright, and looked full at Dominic Iglesias, her eyes serious, redeeming all the insignificance of her features and those little doubtful details of the general effect of her. "Don't make any mistake about either of them," she said. "Let the world and society alone as you value your peace of mind and independence. They're dead sea fruit to all outsiders such as--well--you and me. I hate them; only they've got me, and will have me in some form or other till the end, I suppose. But you are different, and I warn you"--Poppy's voice took on an odd inflection of mingled bitterness and tenderness--"they are not a bit adapted for a beautiful, innocent, uncrowned king like you."

She got up as she spoke, gathering her trailing skirts about her, and called sharply to the little dogs.

"The dew is rising," she said, "and Cappadocia's a regular cry-baby if she gets her feet wet. I must take her home. There's my card. You see the address? You can come when you like, only let me know the day beforehand, because I should be sorry to have people with me or to be out. Cappadocia 'll want you. So shall I. You do me good. I'll play quite fair, I promise you. Good-night."

The sun stood in a triumph of crimson and gold, which passed into the fine blue of a belt of earth mist. Eastward the sky blushed, too, but with brazen blushes, tarnished by the breath of the great city--the pure blue of the earth mist exchanged for the murk of coal smoke and the thousand and one exhalations of steaming streets, public-houses and restaurants. Poppy St. John walked slowly along the footpath, her figure dyed by the effulgence of the skies to the crimson and gold of her name. About her shoulders the embroidered dragons glittered as she moved, while the two tiny spaniels trotted humbly at her heels. For a brief space she

showed absolutely resplendent. Then suddenly an interposing terrace of smart much-be-balconied and beflowered little houses shut off the sunset; and in their rather vulgar shadow Dominic Iglesias, watching, beheld her transformed into the unsubstantial, in a way fictitious, Lady of the Windswept Dust and of the footlights once again.

CHAPTER VI

That weekly ceremony--well known to Trimmer's Green--Mrs. Lovegrove's afternoon at-home, was in progress. She wore her black satin gown, and her white Maltese lace fichu, just to give it a touch of summer lightness. It must be added that she was warm and uncomfortable, having conscientiously superintended preparations in respect of commissariat in the overheated atmosphere of the basement; hurried upstairs--the imagined tinkle of the front-door bell perpetually in her ears--to pull her stays in at the waist and project herself into the aforementioned official garments--a very trying process on a June day to a person of ample contours and what may be described as the fluidic temperament. Later she had cooled off, or tried so to cool--for on such occasions there is invariably some window-blind, ornament, or piece of furniture actively in need of straightening--sitting in her somewhat fog-stained and sun-faded drawing-room during that evil period of waiting in which the intending hostess first suffers acute mortification because she is "quite sure nobody will come," and then gets hot all over from the equally agitating certainty that everybody she has ever known will appear simultaneously, and that there will be neither cakes nor conversation enough to go round.

But this disquieting and oft-repeated preface to the afternoon's festivity was now happily over. And the good lady, oblivious of discomfort and a slightly disorganised complexion, sat purring with satisfaction upon her best Chesterfield sofa, Dr. Giles Nevington beside her. "Pleasure, not business, to-day, Mrs. Lovegrove. For once I am going to make no demands on my faithful and able coadjutor. This call is a purely friendly one--no subscription lists of any sort or description in my pocket," the clergyman had said in his resonant bass when clasping her hand.--A large, dark, clean-shaven man of forty, a studied effect of geniality and benevolence about him, slightly tempered, perhaps, by cold and watchful blue-grey eyes, fixed--so said his detractors--with unswerving determination upon the shovel-hat, apron, and gaiters of the Anglican episcopate.

Rhoda Lovegrove, however, was very far from being among the detractors. She relished this gracious speech enormously. She also approved the attitude of her husband at this juncture; since, with praiseworthy tact, he engaged the attention of her two other guests, a Mrs. Ballard and her daughter. These ladies were rich, the younger had pretensions both to beauty and fashion; but their present was, alas! stained by Nonconformity, their past contaminated by association with retail trade. At the entrance of the vicar, remembering these sad defects, George Lovegrove rose to the occasion. Gently, but firmly, he pranced round them heading them towards the doorway.

"Who are those?" Dr. Nevington inquired, with some interest. "Not parishioners, I fancy."

"Not in any true sense," Mrs. Lovegrove replied. "Dissenters, and I am sorry to say rather spiteful against the Church."

The clergyman leaned back and crossed his legs comfortably.

"Ah! well, poor human nature! A touch of jealousy perhaps," he remarked.

Mrs. Lovegrove beamed.

"Very likely--still I should be just as well pleased not to continue their acquaintance. I don't like to hear things that are disrespectful. I should have ceased to call, but relatives of theirs are old friends of Mr. Lovegrove's mother's family."

"Quite so, quite so," the other returned. Even when silent the sound of him seemed to encompass him, as the roll of a drum seems to salute you when merely beholding that instrument. His speech filled all the room, flowing forth into every corner, sweeping upward in waves to the very cornice. The feminine members of his congregation found this most beautiful; having, indeed, been known to declare that did he preach in Chinese, they would still receive edification and spiritual benefit.--

"Quite so," he repeated, "the breaking of old family ties is certainly to be avoided. And then, moreover, we should always guard against any appearance of harshness or illiberality in dealing with Christians from whom we have reason to differ in minor questions of doctrine or practice. We must never forget that the Nonconformists, though they went out from us, do remain the brethren of all right-minded Churchmen in a very special sense, since they have the great lessons of the Reformation at heart. I could wish that certain parties within the Church were animated by the same manly and intelligent intolerance of idolatry and superstition as the majority of the dissenters whom I meet. Personally I should welcome greater freedom of intercourse, and a frequent interchange of pulpits."

"We know who'd be the gainers," Mrs. Lovegrove put in gracefully.

"Ah! well, I am prepared to believe that the gain might not be exclusively on one side."

Mrs. Lovegrove folded her fat hands, purring almost audibly. He seemed to her so very wise and good.

"That's so like you, Dr. Nevington," she said. "As I always tell Mr. Lovegrove, we have a great responsibility in having you for our pastor and friend. You are a standing rebuke to many of us, being so wide-minded yourself."

"Hardly that, hardly that," he answered with becoming modesty. "In my humble way I do strive towards unity, that is all. Even towards the Church of Rome I would extend a friendly and helpful hand. We cannot, of course, go to her, yet she should never be discouraged from coming to us.--But here is your good husband back again--ceased to be unevenly yoked with the unbeliever, eh, Lovegrove?"

"I was glad you took them away, Georgie," Mrs. Lovegrove put in. "Still I'm sorry for you, for the vicar's been talking so nobly. You've missed such a lot."

"Ah, hardly that. I have merely been giving your dear good wife a little

lecture on Christian charity. How is Mrs. Nevington? Thank you, wonderfull well, earnest and energetic as ever. I do not know how I could meet the demands of this large parish without her."

"A true helpmeet," purred Mrs. Lovegrove.

"Truly so--and specially in all questions of organisation. She is altogether my superior in administrative capacity. Indeed, it is an understood thing between us that I relieve her of what may be called the bad third of her marriage vow. If she will love and honour, I assure her I am ready to obey. A capital working rule for husbands--eh, Lovegrove?--always supposing they have found the right woman, as you and I have."

In the midst of this delicious badinage the hostess had to rise to receive further guests. Conflicting emotions struggled within her ample bosom--namely, regret at leaving that thrice happy sofa, and satisfaction that others should behold the glory thereon so visibly enthroned.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Porcher? How d'ye do, Miss Hart?" she said. "Very kind of you to come and call. Only a few friends as yet, but perhaps that's just as pleasant this warm afternoon. Dr. Nevington, as you see, and at his very best"--she lowered her voice discreetly. "So at home, so full of great thoughts, and yet so comical--quite a privilege for all to hear him talk."

Encouraged by recent commendation, George Lovegrove again rose with praiseworthy tact to the occasion. It may be stated in passing that, in person, he was below the middle height, a thick oblong man, his figure, indeed, not unsuggestive of a large carapace, from the four corners of which sprouted short arms and legs. His face was round, fresh-coloured, and clean to the point of polish. His yellowish grey hair, well flattened and shining, grew far back on his forehead. And this, combined with small blue eyes, clear as a child's, a slight inward squint to them, produced an effect of permanent and innocent surprise not devoid of pathos. In character he was guileless and humble-minded. The spectacle of cruelty or injustice would, however, rouse him to the belligerent attitude of the proverbial *_brebis enrage_*. He believed himself to be very happy--an added touch of pathos perhaps--and was pained and surprised if it was brought home to him that others found life a less comfortable and kindly invention than he himself did. Hence reports of suicides worried him sadly. He would always have returned a verdict of temporary insanity, this being to him the only explanation conceivable of a voluntary exit from our so excellent present form of existence. Yet George Lovegrove was not without his little secret sorrow--who indeed is? A deep-seated regret for nonexistent small Lovegroves possessed him, the instinct of paternity being strong in him. He loved children, and, when alone, often lingered beside perambulators in Kensington Gardens fondly observing their contents. Yet not for ten thousand pounds sterling would he have admitted this weakness, lest in doing so he should hurt "the wife's feelings." And it was in obedience to consideration for the said feelings that he now threw himself gallantly into the breach. For, after acting as appreciative chorus to an interlude of sonorous trifling on the part of the clergyman with the newcomers, he adroitly--under promise of showing her recent additions to his collection of picture postcards--detached Miss Eliza Hart from the neighbourhood of the sofa and conveyed her to the farther side of the room. Mrs. Porcher, neat, pensive, and sentimental, could be trusted to play the part of attentive listener; but the great Eliza, as he knew by experience, was liable to develop

dangerous energy, to get a little above herself, shake her leonine mane of upstanding sandy hair, and become altogether too talkative, not to say loud, for such distinguished company. Personally he had a soft spot in his heart for Eliza. But, if she put herself forward, he feared for "the wife's feelings," therefore did he skilfully detach her.

And he had reason to congratulate himself on this manoeuvre, for Eliza undoubtedly was in a frolicsome humour.

"Yes," she remarked, contemplating the portrait of a celebrated actress. "That is very taking and stylish; and it is just what I should like to have done with my Peachie." This graceful sobriquet was generally understood to bear testimony to the excellence of Mrs. Porcher's complexion. "Now, if we wanted a gentleman guest or two more at any time, a picture postcard of her like this, just slightly tinted, in answer to inquiries?"

Miss Hart, her head on one side, looked playfully at Mr. Lovegrove.

"What about a subsequent summons for over-crowding?" he chuckled. The whole breadth of the room, well understood, was between him and the wife's feelings, not to mention the august presence beside her upon the sofa.

"No doubt that has to be thought of!" Eliza nodded sagely. "But is she not looking sweeter than ever to-day? Do not pretend you have not noticed it, Mr. Lovegrove. There's no deceiving me! I know you."

Like all mild and moral men, Lovegrove flushed with delight at any suggestion that he was a gay dog, a dashing blade. His good, honest face took on a higher polish than ever.

"You are too clever by half, Miss Hart."

"Well, somebody has to keep their wits about them, with such a love as Peachie to care for. I dressed her myself to-day. 'The pearl-grey gown if you like,' I said, 'but not a scrap of black with it. Just a touch of colour at the throat, please.' 'No, dear Liz,' she said, 'it would call for remark, since I have never done so since I lost Major Porcher.' But there, Mr. Lovegrove, I insisted. For why she should go on wearing complimentary mourning all her life for a wretch that nearly broke her heart and ruined her, passes me. 'Forget the serpent,' I said, 'and put on a little turquoise tulle pompom.' Now just look at her!"

"Rather dangerous for some people, is it not?" Lovegrove inquired quite slyly.

"Hard on our gentlemen, you mean? Well, perhaps it is. But then they always have the sight of me to put up with.--No compliments, thank you. I have my eyesight and my toilet-glass, and they have let me know I was no Venus ever since I can remember. It would not do to depress our gentlemen too much. They might leave, and then wherever would Cedar Lodge be?"

Miss Hart became suddenly serious and confidential. "And that reminds me," she went on. "I wanted to have a private word with you to-day about a certain gentleman."

"Who may be?" the good George inquired.

"You can guess, can't you? Your own candidate."

"Mr. Iglesias?"

The lady nodded.

"Peachie must be spared anxiety, therefore I speak, Mr. Lovegrove. Something is going on, and she is getting worried. You cannot approach the person to whom we are alluding as you can either of our others. Rather stand-offish, even now after nearly eight years that he has been with us. Between you and me and the bedpost, Mr. Lovegrove, I am just a wee bit nervous of that person. So if you could hint, quite in confidence, what his plans may be for the future it would' be really friendly."

"Dear me, dear me! Plans? I do not quite follow you, Miss Hart. Nothing wrong with him, I trust?"

"That is just what we cannot find out. No spying, of course, Mr. Lovegrove. Neither Peachie nor I would descend to such meanness. Our gentlemen have perfect liberty. We would scorn to put questions. But it is close on a week now since the person we are alluding to has been to the City."

"Bless me! You surprise me. He cannot have left Barking Brothers & Barking?"

The great Eliza shook her leonine mane.

"I believe that is just exactly what he has done."

"You do surprise me. I can hardly credit it. Nearly a week, and he as punctual and regular as clockwork! I must run over this evening and catch him. Something must be wrong. And yet why has he not been here? Dear me. Miss Hart, you----"

But the end of the sentence was lost in the bass notes issuing from the presence upon the sofa.

"Truly, the prosperity of the nation," Dr. Nevington was saying, "of this dear old England of ours that we so love, is wholly bound up with the prosperity of her national Church. I use the word prosperity in a plain, manly, straightforward sense. Personally I should rejoice to see the bonds of Church and State drawn closer. It could not fail to make for the welfare of both. Then, among other benefits, we should see the poverty of many members of my cloth, which is now a crying scandal--"

"You do hear very sad tales from the country districts, certainly," sighed Mrs. Lovegrove.

"The state of affairs is more than sad, it is iniquitous. And therefore the Church must assert herself. The individual minister must assert himself, and claim a higher scale of remuneration. Help yourself, show push and principle, cultivate practical aims--that is what I preach to young men reading for Holy Orders. We have no place in these days for visionaries and dreamers. We want men who march with the times, who are interested in politics, and can make themselves felt."

So did the great voice roll on and outward. Very beautiful to the

listeners in sound--though, in sense, it may be questioned whether it conveyed very definite ideas to them--but highly embarrassing to the house-parlourmaid, whose feminine tones quite failed to make headway against the volume of it. With the consequence that Dominic Iglesias was left standing in the shadow of the doorway unheeded.

He was aware, and that not without surprise, how much these few days of freedom and leisure had quickened his perceptions. His mental attitude had changed. His demand had ceased to be moderate. Hence he suffered a hundred offences to taste and sensibility hitherto unknown, or at least unregistered. He knew when a woman was plain, when a conversation was vapid or vulgar, a manner pretentious, a speech lacking in sincerity. Consciously he stood aside, no longer out of humility or indifference, but critically observant, challenging things however familiar, and passing judgment upon them. For example, the unlovely character of Mrs. Lovegrove's drawing-room engrossed his attention--the dirty-browns and tentative watery blues of it, the multiplicity of flimsy, worthless, little ornaments revealing a most lamentable absence of artistic perception. In that fine booming clerical voice he detected a kindred absence of delicate perception, a showiness born of very inadequate conception of relative values. Indeed, the voice and the sentiments given forth by it, in as far as he caught the drift of them, raised a definite spirit of antagonism in him. The voice seemed to trample. Dominic Iglesias was taken with an inclination--very novel in him--to trample, too. He crossed the room, an added touch of gravity and dignity in his aspect and manner.

The clergyman gazed at him with some curiosity, while Mrs. Lovegrove surged up off the sofa.

"Mr. Iglesias! Well, of all people! Whoever would have expected to see you at this early hour of the day?"

"Talk of a certain gentleman and that gentleman appears," Miss Eliza Hart whispered. Then wagging her finger at her host, "Now don't you forget that little question of mine. Find out his intentions, just, as you may say, under the rose. But there's Peachie signalling to go."

In the ensuing interval of farewells, which were slightly protracted owing to friskiness on the part of the fair Eliza, Iglesias found himself standing beside the clergyman. The latter still regarded him with curiosity. But, whatever his faults, not his worst enemy could accuse Dr. Nevington of being a respecter of persons unless he was well assured beforehand whom such persons might be. He therefore turned to Iglesias with the easy air of patronage not uncommon to his cloth, as one who should say: "My good sir, don't be afraid. I am a man of the world as well as a Christian. I will handle you gently. I won't hurt you."

"I think I caught a foreign name," he remarked. "You are paying a visit to London? I hope our capital makes an agreeable impression upon you."

"The visit has been of such long duration," Iglesias answered, "that impressions have, I am afraid, become slightly blurred by usage."

"Ah! indeed--no doubt that happens in some measure to all of us. I am to understand that you are a resident?"

Iglesias assented.

"In this district?"

Again he assented.

"Indeed. Really, I wish I had known it sooner. It always gives me pleasure to meet persons of another nationality than my own. Intercourse with them makes for liberality of view. It often dispels anti-English prejudice. I am always glad to be helpful to strangers."

"You are very kind," Iglesias said with gravity.

"Not at all--not at all. I hold very practical views not only regarding the duties of the Englishman to the alien, but of the pastor towards his flock. But I find it almost impossible, I regret to say, to become personally acquainted with all my parishioners. My curates are capital young fellows--earnest, active, go-ahead. But in a large area such as this there is always a shifting population with which the clergy, however energetic, find it difficult to keep in touch. We are obliged to discriminate between dwellers and sojourners. As soon as any person is proved to be a bona fide dweller my curates pass his or her name on to me, and either I or my wife call in due course."

Dominic Iglesias permitted himself to smile.

"An excellent system, no doubt," he remarked.

"I find it works very well on the whole. But no system is infallible. There must be occasional oversights, and you have been the victim of one. I mention this to disabuse your mind of the idea of any intentional neglect. Well, Mrs. Lovegrove, and so our good friends Mrs. Porcher and Miss Hart have gone--estimable women both of them in their own line. I ought to be running away, too, and I have just been having a word with your other guest here, Mr.----"

"Iglesias," Dominic put in coldly. He was in a state of pretty high displeasure. To hear his name mispronounced might, he felt, precipitate a catastrophe.

"Iglesias?--ah! yes, thank you--I have been explaining to Mr. Iglesias our system of parochial visiting and quoting our well-known joke about the dwellers and sojourners. You remember it? He has, I regret to find, been counted among the latter, while he has qualified as one of the former. The mistake must be remedied. Well, good-bye to you, Mrs. Lovegrove; I shall see your good husband on my way downstairs. Good-day to you, Mr. Iglesias. I shall hope to meet you again."

And with that he, and the encompassing sound of him, moved towards the door. Mrs. Lovegrove subsided upon the sofa. The supreme glory had departed, yet an afterglow from the effulgence of it remained in her beaming face as she looked up at Mr. Iglesias.

"It was a good fairy that brought you in so early to-day," she said.
"Really, I am pleased you should have had the chance to meet Dr. Nevington. And I could see he was quite taken with you, by the way he began to talk before I had the chance to introduce you. But that's the vicar all over! He never is one to stand upon ceremony."

"So I can believe," Dominic said.

"You saw it? Ah, part of his thoughtfulness, wanting to put everybody at their ease. And I'm sure if there's one thing more disheartening than another, it is to have two of your friends standing up side by side, as stiff as a couple of pokers, without so much as a word. I know I am too ready to enter into conversation with strangers; but if there is a thing I cannot bear, it's any appearance of coolness."

She passed her handkerchief round her forehead and across her lips. She was marshalling her energies for a daring effort.

"Very warm, is it not?" she remarked, perhaps superfluously. Then she came to the point. "I know you are not very much of a churchgoer, Mr. Iglesias."

"I am afraid not"--he paused a moment. "You see, I was born and brought up in another faith."

"Yes--so George has told me. But I am sure none of us would ever be so illiberal as to throw that up against you. The vicar has been talking so beautifully about Christian charity; and we all know it was a thing you could not help. It was your misfortune, anybody would understand that, not your fault. Too, it's all over long ago and forgotten."

Dominic looked rather hard at her; but it was clear her words were innocent of any intention of offence.

"I suppose it is," he said sadly, Old Age and Loneliness laying their hands upon him, for some reason, very sensibly once again.

"Not that that's anything to be otherwise than thankful for," she added, with a slightly misplaced effort at consolation. "Of course anyone must feel how providential it is to be saved from all those terrible false doctrines and practices--not that I know anything about them. There's so much, don't you think, it is so much better not to know anything about. Then one feels more at liberty to speak."

Mr. Iglesias smiled.

"I am not sure that the matter had occurred from exactly that point of view before."

"Really now, and a clever person like you!" Mrs. Lovegrove passed her handkerchief across her forehead again. "George has a wonderful opinion of your cleverness, you know. And that is why I have always wished you and the vicar could be brought together. I have--yes, I own to it--I have been afraid sometimes you were a little unsettled about religion, and that it might unsettle Georgie, too. But I knew if you once met the vicar that would all be set right. As I often say to George, let anybody just _see_ Dr. Nevington and then they will begin to have an inkling of all they miss in not hearing him in the pulpit."

But here, perhaps fortunately, the master of the house trotted back. He, too, beamed. He was filled with innocent rejoicing. Had he not successfully protected the wife's feelings, and was not Iglesias--who remained to him a wonderful being, stirring whatever element of romance might be resident in his guileless nature--present in person?

"Why, what's the meaning of this, Dominic?" he chuckled. "You've turned over a new leaf, gadding round to at-home days! Where's Threadneedle

Street? What's come over you?"

"Threadneedle Street and I have agreed to part company."

"What, for good? Never?" this from both husband and wife.

"Yes, for good," Iglesias said.

Mr. Lovegrove ceased to beam. He became anxious again, and consequently solemn.

"Well, you do surprise me," he said. "Nothing gone wrong, I trust? Not any unpleasantness happened?"

"None," Iglesias answered. In breaking the news to these kindly but rudimentary souls he had determined to treat it very lightly. "I have come to the conclusion that I have worked long enough. It is a mistake to risk dying in harness. You retired, Lovegrove, three years ago. I am going to look about me a little and see what the rest of the world is doing."

"You'll miss the bank, and feel a little strange at first. Georgie did, though he had his home to interest him," Mrs. Lovegrove remarked.

"Undoubtedly George was more fortunate than I am," Iglesias replied, in his most courtly manner.

"Not but that all that could be easily remedied," she added, with a touch of archness. Then Mr. Iglesias thought it time to depart. In the hall his host held him, literally by the buttonhole, looking up with squinting blue eyes into his face.

"It's all rather sudden, Dominic," he said. "I do not want to intrude upon your confidence; but if there is anything behind, anything in which I can help?"

Mr. Iglesias shook his head.

"Nothing, my good old friend," he said.

"The wife's right, you know. You'll miss the bank, the regular hours, and the occupation. She's quite right. I did at first."

"I know. But already I have pretty well got through that phase, I think."

"Ah, you have a bigger mind than mine. You can rise to a wider view. Change affects a commonplace man like myself most. I was dreadfully lost at first--more than the wife knew. Females are very sensitive, and it would have hurt her to know all I felt. If the Almighty is good enough to give a man a faithful woman to look after him, he can't be too scrupulous in sparing her pain--at least, so I think." Suddenly his tone changed. "But you are not going to leave us, Dominic?--you are not going to move, I do hope?"

He was mindful of his promise to Eliza Hart, but he was also mindful of himself. It had occurred to him for how very much in the interest and pleasure of his life Dominic Iglesias really stood.

"Why, should you regret my going? Should you miss me?" the other asked,

struck by his tone.

"Miss you," he said, "and after a friendship covering forty years! I know you are my superior in every way. I know I am not on your level. All the advantage is on my side in our friendship, always has been. But that is just where it is. Why, you know, Dominic--next to the wife of course--all along you have been the best thing I had."

Then it came to Iglesias, looking down at him, that among the many millions of his fellow-mortals, this whimsical childlike being stood nearest to him in sympathy and in love. The thought moved him strangely, at once deepening his sense of isolation and lessening the load of it.

"In that case I will not move. I will stay here, at Trimmer's Green," he said.

When Mr. Lovegrove reentered the sun-faded drawing-room his wife greeted him in these words:

"Well, I have been thinking it all over, Georgie, and we shall only be doing our duty by Mr. Iglesias if we send for your cousin Serena. For my part, I don't trust Mrs. Porcher. Did you see that fly-away blue bow? Those who seem so soft are often the deepest. And widows have all sorts of little cunning ways with them." She rose from the thrice happy sofa. "I was gratified to have Dr. Nevington and Mr. Iglesias meet. But we certainly will have to send for Serena," she said.

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Iglesias crossed Trimmer's Green in the dusty sunshine. He had engaged to stay; and, indeed, he asked himself what person, what objects or interests there were to take him else-whither? Nevertheless, the promise seemed, somehow, a limiting of possibility and of hope. It was destiny. London, very evidently, having got him, did not mean to let him go. And London was not attractive this evening, but blouzy and jaded from the heat. He passed on into the great thoroughfare and turned eastward, absorbed in thought. Children cried. A pungent scent of over-ripe fruit came from barrows in the roadway and open doors of green-grocers' shops. Tempers appeared to be on edge. Workmen, pouring out from a big block of flats under construction on the left, jostled him in passing, not in insolence, but simply in inattention. Their language was starred with sanguinary adjectives. The noise of the traffic was loud. Iglesias turned up one of the side streets leading on to Campden Hill. It was quieter here and the air was a trifle purer. Halfway up the hill he hesitated. There was a shrine to be visited in these regions--in it stood an altar of the dead. And above that altar, in Iglesias' imagination, hung the picture of a woman, beautiful, and, to him, infinitely sad.

He turned eastward again and made his way into Holland Street. He rarely had the courage to go back there. He had never reentered the house. But this evening he was taken by the desire to look on it all once again. For he was still pursued by the disquieting question as to whether he had shirked the possibilities of his life, or had sacrificed them to a higher duty than any duty of personal development. If the latter, however barren of active happiness both past and present, he would be in his own eyes

justified, and desolation would cease to have in it any flavour of self-contempt. Perhaps this dwelling-place of his childhood, youth, and what should have been the best of his manhood, might help to answer the question and set his doubts at rest.

A board--"To Let"--was up on the narrow iron balcony of the dining-room. Iglesias rang, and after brief parley with the caretaker--a neat bald-headed little old man, in carpet slippers and a well-brushed once-smart brown check suit, altogether too capacious for his attenuated person--was admitted.

"The place is quite empty save for my bits of sticks in the basement, sir," he said. "You are at liberty to go where you please. I am afflicted with the asthma and am glad to avoid mounting the stairs." He ended up with a husky little cough. So Iglesias passed through the vacant house unattended.

He received a pathetic yet agitating impression. The rooms were even smaller than he had supposed. They were gloomy, too, from the worn paint of the high wainscots and discoloration of the low ceilings. All the windows were shut and the atmosphere was close and faint. The corners were thick with crouching shadows, merely awaiting the cover of night, as it seemed to Iglesias, to take definite shape, stand upright, and come forth to possess and people all the house. Even now it belonged so sensibly to them that his own reverent footsteps sounded to him harshly intrusive upon the bare, uneven floors. At intervals, downstairs in the basement, he could hear the little old caretaker's husky cough.

And it was strange to him to consider what those crouching shadows might represent. Not the ghosts of human beings--in such he had small belief--but an aftermath of human emotions, purposes, and passions, formulated or endured in this apparently so innocent place. To his knowledge the origins of revolution had seethed here. The walls had listened to details of political intrigue, of projected assassination, to vehement declarations of undying hate. Of the men who had plotted and dreamed here, uplifted in spirit by the magic of terrible ideas, none were left. One by one they had gone out into the silence to meet death, swift-handed or heartlessly lingering, as the case might be. And what had they actually accomplished? he asked himself. Had their death, often as must be surmised of a sufficiently hideous sort, really advanced the cause of humanity and helped on the birth of that Golden Age, in which Justice shall reign alongside Peace? Or had these men merely wasted themselves, adding to the sum total of human confusion and wrong; and wasted the hearts and happiness of those allied to them by ties of friendship and of blood, leaving the second generation to repair, in so far as it might, the ruin which their violence had worked? Dominic Iglesias could not say. But this at least, though it savoured of reproach, he could not disguise from himself--namely, that out of the intemperate heat and fierceness of these men's thought and action had come, as a necessary consequence, the narrow opportunities and cold isolation of his own.

"As physically, so morally, spiritually, socially," he said to himself, "the younger generation pays the debts contracted by the generation immediately preceding it. Justice, indeed, reigns already, always has done so--. justice of a rather tremendous sort. But peace?--Peace is still very much to seek, both for the individual and the race."

Iglesias visited his mother's bed-chamber. He visited his former nursery. Then he visited the drawing-room, the heart of this very pathetic shrine

where the altar of his dead was, almost visibly set up. To this room, during the many years of his mother's mental illness, he had come back daily after work; and had ministered to her, suiting his speech to her passing humour, trying to distract her brooding melancholy, and to soothe and amuse her as though she was an ailing child. Thank God, there was nothing ugly to remember regarding her. She had never been harsh or unlovely in her ways. Still, the strain of constant intercourse with her had been very great--how great Iglesias had hardly realised until now, as he stood in the centre of the room reconstructing its former appearance in thought and replacing its familiar furnishings.

There to the left of the further window, overlooking the garden, she had always sat, so that the light might fall upon her needlework--very fine Irish lace, in the making of which nearly all her waking hours were spent. She had learned the beautiful art as a young girl in her convent school; and her skill in it was great. In those sad later years when her mind was clouded the intricate designs and endless variety of delicate and ingenious stitches had come to have symbolic meanings for her full of mystic significance. In them she poured forth her soul, as another might pour it forth in music, finding there an imaginative language far surpassing, in its subtlety of suggestion, articulate speech. There were deserts of net, of spider's web fineness, to be laboriously traversed; hills of difficulty to be climbed, whence far horizons disclosed themselves; dainty flower-gardens, crossed by open paths, and hedged about with curves, sinuous and full of pretty impediments. And there were, to her, vaguely agitating and even fearful things in this lacework also--confusions of outline, broken purposes, multiplicity of opposing intentions, struggle of good and evil powers in the intricacies of some rich arabesque; or monotonous repetitions of design which distressed her as with the terrors of imprisonment and of unescapable fate. She was filled with feverish anxiety until such portions of her self-imposed task were completed. Then she would be very glad. And Iglesias, glancing up silently from the pages of his newspaper or book, would see the sorrow pass out of her face as she leaned back in her chair and softly laughed. And he would perceive that, in the achievement of those countless but carefully ordered stitches, she had also achieved some mysterious victory of the spirit which, for a time at least, would give her freedom of soul and content. As a boy he had been rather jealous of her lacemaking, declaring that it was dearer to her than he himself was. But as he grew more experienced, more chastened, and, it must be added, more sad, he had come to understand that it veritably was as speech to her--though speech which he could but rarely interpret--expressing all that she could not, or dared not, otherwise express, all the poetry of her sweet, broken nature, its denied aspirations in religion, its tortured memories of danger and of love.

Now, standing in the centre of the empty room, and looking at the place beside the window where she habitually sat, Iglesias seemed to see once more, as he had so often seen in the past, her fine-drawn profile and softly waved upturned hair, her head and shoulders draped in a black mantilla, the lines of which followed those of her figure as she bent over her work. He could see the long delicate white hands moving rhythmically, with the assurance of perfected skill, over the web in its varying degrees of whiteness from the filmy transparency of the net foundation to the opacity of the closely wrought pattern. Those hands, in their ceaseless and exquisite industry, had troubled his imagination at times. For too often it had seemed as though they alone were really alive, intelligent, sentient, the rest of the woman dead. The impression was so vivid even yet--though Iglesias knew it to be subjective only,

projected by the vividness of remembrance--that instinctively he crossed the room, laid his left hand upon the moulding of the high wainscot, leaned over the vacant space which appeared to hold her image, and spoke gently to her, so that the moving hands might find rest for a moment, while she recognised and greeted him, looking up.

There had always been a pause before the words of greeting came, while her consciousness travelled back, hesitatingly, to the actual and material world around her from the world of emotion and phantasy in which her spirit lived. There was a pause now, a prolonged silence, broken at last by the husky cough of the little old caretaker downstairs. The vacant space remained vacant. Nevertheless Dominic Iglesias received both recognition and greeting, and from these derived inward assurance that all was well--that he was justified of his past action, that he had not shirked the possibilities of his life, but sacrificed them to a higher duty than any individual and private one. The present might be empty of purpose and pleasure, the future lacking in promise and in hope; yet to him one perfect thing had been granted--namely, a human relationship of unsullied beauty, notwithstanding all its sadness, from first to last.

"And in the strength of that meat, one should surely be able to go many days!" he said, as he straightened himself up. "Thank God, I never failed her. How far she realised it or not, is but a small matter. I am obscure, perhaps as things now stand wholly superfluous, still I have, at all events, never grasped personal advantage at the expense of a fellow-creature's heart."

Yet, even so, the longing for sympathy and companionship oppressed him as never before. The sight of this place had stirred his affections and his spiritual sense. His soul cried out for some language in which to express itself--even though it were a language of symbol only, such as his mother had found in her lacemaking. How barren and vapid a thing was the exterior life, as all those whom he knew understood and lived it--his co-lodgers, his fellow-clerks, the good Lovegroves, his late employer, Sir Abel Barking, even, as he divined, that sonorous Protestant clergyman whom he had met this afternoon--as against the interior life, suggestion of which this vacant shadow-haunted house of innumerable memories presented to his mind! Was there any method by which the interior and exterior life could be brought into sane and fruitful relation, so that the former might sensibly permeate and dignify the latter?

The comfortable inward conviction, just vouchsafed him, that he was justified of his own past action, merely emphasised his consciousness that he was still very much adrift, with no definite port to steer for. He had, perhaps unwisely, promised George Lovegrove that he would stay on at Trimmer's Green, but what, after all, did that amount to? Even the exterior life was second-hand enough there; the interior life, as he judged, practically non-existent. And so his staying must be ennobled by some purpose beyond that of stepping across to smoke an after-dinner pipe with the good, affectionate Lovegrove man, or attending his estimable wife's "at homes." During the last ten days Mr. Iglesias had striven, with rare, pathetic diligence, to cultivate amusement. True, the oak palings had shut him out from Ranelagh; but, with that and a few other exceptions, amusement, as practised in great cities, is merely a matter of cash. Therefore he had dined at smart restaurants, had sampled theatres and music halls, had sat in the Park and watched the world and--in their more decent manifestations--the flesh and the devil drive by. He had to admit that unfortunately all this left him cold, had bored rather than entertained him. He had not felt out of place socially. His natural

dignity and detachment of mind were alike too strong for that; but he had arrived at the conclusion that you must have learned the rudiments of the art of amusement in early youth if you are to practise it with satisfaction to yourself in middle-age. And he very certainly had not learned the rudiments--not, anyhow, according to the English fashion. He had been aware, during these social excursions, that he was a good deal stared at and even commented on. At first he supposed this arose from some peculiarity of his dress or manner. Then he understood that the cause of this unsolicited attention bore a more flattering character, and in this connection certain remarks made by the Lady of the Windswept Dust occurred to his mind. But, Mr. Iglesias' pride being greatly in excess of his vanity--when the first moment of half-humorous surprise was passed--he found that these tributes to his personal appearance afforded him more displeasure than pleasure. He turned from them with a movement of annoyance, and turned from those places in which they were liable to manifest themselves likewise. No, indeed, it was something other than this he had to find, something lying far deeper in the needs of human nature, if the emptiness of his days was to be filled and the hunger of his heart and spirit satisfied!

Pondering which things he went down the creaking stairs of the house in Holland Street, Kensington, leaving the empty and, to him, sacred rooms to the crouching shadows. He had had his answer from the one person whom he had perfectly loved. And surely, in justifying the past, that answer gave promise of hope for the future? The way would be made clear, the method would declare itself. Let him have patience, only patience, as she, his mother, had had when traversing deserts and climbing Difficulty Hill in her lacework; and to him, also, should far horizons be disclosed.

In the narrow hall the neat little old caretaker met him, huskily coughing.

"The rent is low, sir," he said, "and the landlord is asking no premium. If you should wish further particulars, or to inspect the offices----"

But Mr. Iglesias put a couple of half-crowns into his hand.

"No," he answered, "I do not propose to take the house. Persons who were dear to me lived here once; and so I wanted to see it. As long as it is unlet I may come back from time to time."

The old man shuffled his slippered feet upon the bare boards, looking with mild ecstasy at the coins.

"And you will be most welcome, sir," he said. "Your generosity happens to be of great assistance to me--not that I wish it repeated. I am not grasping, sir, but I am grateful. I have a taste in literature which my reduced circumstances do not allow me to gratify. I see the prospect of many hours' enjoyment before me. I thank you."

CHAPTER VIII

And so it came about that a more tranquil spirit, touched with sober gladness, possessed Dominic Iglesias as, leaving that house of many memories, he pursued his way down Church Street and, passing into

Kensington High Street opposite St. Mary Abbot's Church, turned eastward once again. A few doors short of the gateway leading into Palace Gardens was an unpretentious Italian restaurant where he proposed to dine. For it grew late. He had spent longer than he had supposed in wordless prayer before the altar of his dead. The remembrance of the book-loving little caretaker's gratitude remained by him pleasantly, softening his humour towards all his fellow-men. Simple kindness has great virtue, uplifting to the heart. To Iglesias it seemed those five shillings had been eminently well invested.

The streets were clearer now; and he walked slowly, enjoying the cooler air born of the sunset, and drawing from the leafy spaces of Kensington Gardens and the park. Presently he became aware of a figure, not altogether unfamiliar, threading its way among the intermittent stream of pedestrians along the pavement a few paces ahead. His eyes followed it reluctantly. In his present peaceful humour its aspect struck a jarring note. Soiled white flannel trousers, a short blue boating coat, a soft grey felt hat, tennis shoes, a shambling and uncertain gait as of one who neither knows nor cares whither he is going or why he goes--the whole effect purposeless, slovenly, inept.

Then followed a little scene which caused Iglesias to further slacken his pace. For the seedy figure, reaching the open door of the restaurant, hesitated, standing between the clipped bay trees set in green tubs which flanked the entrance on either hand. Stepped aside, craning upward to see over the yellow silk curtains drawn across the lower half of the windows. Moved back to the door and stood there undecided. Finally, as a smiling waiter, napkin on arm, came forward, the man crushed his hat down on his forehead, forced his hands deep into his trouser pockets and turned away with an audible oath. This brought him face to face with Mr. Iglesias, who recognised in him his fellow-lodger, Mr. de Courcy Smyth.

"What, you!" he exclaimed snarlingly, while his pasty face flamed. "There seems no escape from our dear Cedar Lodge to-night."

Then with an uneasy laugh he made an effort to recover himself.

"Really, I beg your pardon, Mr. Iglesias," he continued, "but my nerves are villainously on edge. I have just met those two young idiots, Farge and Worthington, waltzing home arm in arm like a pair of demented turtle-doves. Having to associate with such third-rate commercial fellows and witness their ebullitions of mutual admiration makes a man of education, like myself, utterly sick. I came out this evening to get free of the whole Cedar Lodge lot. You did the same, I suppose. Pray don't let me frustrate your purpose. I sympathise with it. I will remove myself."

The splotchy red had died out of the speaker's face. Notwithstanding the warmth of the evening he stood with his shoulders raised and his knees a little bent, as a poorly clad man stands in a chill wind on a wintry day. Iglesias observed his attitude, and in his present mood it influenced him more than the surly greeting had done.

"I intended to dine here," he said quietly. "So, I fancy, did you."

"Oh! I have changed my mind, thank you," Smyth answered.

"In consequence of my arrival, I am afraid?"

"No, I had other reasons."

"In any case I should be very glad if you would reconsider your decision and remain," Dominic said. "I am, as you see, alone, and I have not often the pleasure of meeting you. I shall be very happy if you will stay and dine with me, as my guest."

Smyth gave an odd, furtive look at the open door of the restaurant and the row of white tables within. A light had come into his pale blue eyes, making them uncomfortably like those of some half-starved animal.

"I am at a loss to know why I should accept hospitality from you," he remarked, at once cringing and insolently.

"Simply because you would give me pleasure by doing so. I should value your society."

"I am not in evening dress."

"Nor am I," Dominic answered, with admirable seriousness. There was something pitiful to him in the conflict, obviously going forward in the other's mind, between hunger and reluctance to incur an obligation. He cut it short with gentle authority. "There is a vacant table in the corner where we can talk free from interruption. Let us go in and secure it."

At the beginning of the meal the conversation was intermittent, the burden of supporting it lying with Mr. Iglesias. But, as course followed course, hot and succulent, while the _chianti_ at once steadied his circulation and stimulated his brain, de Courcy Smyth became talkative, not to say garrulous. Finally he began to assert himself, to swagger, thereby laying bare the waste places of his own nature.

"You may think I was hard on Farge and Worthington just now, Mr. Iglesias," he said. "I own they disgust me; not only in themselves, but as examples of certain modern tendencies which are choking the life out of me and such men as me. You business people are on the up grade just now, and you know it. Whoever goes under, you are safe to do yourselves most uncommonly well. I don't mean anything personal, of course. I am just stating a self-evident fact. Commerce is in the air--you all reek of success. And so even shopwalkers, like Worthington, and that thrice odious puppy Farge, grow sleek, and venture to spread themselves in the presence of their betters--in the presence of a scholar and a gentleman, who is well connected and has received a classical education, like myself."

Smyth paused, turning sideways to the table, leaning his elbow on it, crossing his legs and staring gloomily down the long room.

"But what do they know or care about scholarship?" he continued. "What they do know is that the spirit of this unspeakably vulgar age is with them and their miserable huckstering. They know that well enough and act upon it, though they are too illiterate to put it into words--know that trade is in process of exploding learning, of exploiting literature and art to its own low purposes, in process of scaling Olympus, in short, and ignominiously chucking out the gods."

Dominic Iglesias had listened to this astonishing tirade in silence. The man was evidently suffering from feelings of bitter injury, also he was his--Iglesias'--guest. Both pity and hospitality engaged him to

endurance. But there are limits. And at this point professional dignity and a lingering loyalty towards the house of Barking Brothers & Barking enjoined protest.

"No doubt we live in times of commerce, rather than in those of chivalry," he remarked. "Still, I venture to think your condemnation is too sweeping. One should discriminate surely between trade and finance."

"Only as one discriminates between a little dog and a big one. The little dog is the easier to kick. I can't get at the Rothschilds and Rockefellers; and so I go for the Farges and Worthingtons," Smyth answered. "In principle I am right. Trade, commerce, finance, juggle with the names as you like, it all comes back to the same thing in the end, namely, the murder of intellect by money. Comes back to the worship of Mammon, chosen ruler of this contemptible _fin de siecle_, and safe to be even more tyrannously the ruler of the coming century. What hope, I ask you, is left for us poor devils of literary men? None, absolutely none. Just in proportion as we honour our calling and refuse to prostitute our talents we are at a discount. The powers that be have no earthly use for us. We have not the ghost of a chance."

He altered his position, looking quickly and nervously at his host.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "For the moment I forgot you were on the other side, among the conquerors, not the conquered. Probably this conversation does not interest you in the least."

"On the contrary, it interests me very deeply," Dominic replied gravely.

"All the same, out of self-respect I ought to hold my tongue about it, I suppose. For I have accepted the position, Mr. Iglesias. I have learned to do that. Only on each fresh occasion that it is brought home to me--and it has been brought home abominably clearly to-night--my gorge rises at it. And it ought to be so. For it is an outrage--you yourself must admit--that a man who started with excellent prospects and with the consciousness of unusual talents--of genius, perhaps--should be ruined and broken, while every miserable little counter-jumper----"

He leaned his elbows on the table, hiding his face in his hands, and his shoulders shook.

"For I have talent," he cried, in a curiously thin voice. "Before God I have. They may refuse to publish me, refuse to play me, force me to pick up scraps of hack-work on fourth-rate papers to earn a bare subsistence--at times hardly that. Yet all the same, no supercilious beast of an editor or actor-manager--curse the whole stinking lot--shall rob me of my faith in myself--of my belief that I am great--if I had justice, nothing less than that, I tell you, nothing less than great."

Dominic Iglesias drew himself up, sitting very still, his lips rigid, not from defect, but from excess of sympathy. The restaurant was empty now, save for a man, four tables down, safely ensconced behind the pink pages of an evening paper, and for a couple, at the far end, in the window--a young Frenchwoman, whose coquettish hat and trim rounded figure were silhouetted against the yellow silk curtain, and a precocious black-haired youth, with a skin like pale, pink satin, round eyeglasses and an incipient moustache. His attention was entirely occupied with the young woman; hers entirely occupied with herself. And of this Dominic Iglesias was glad. For the matter immediately in hand was best conducted without

witnesses. He found it strangely engrossing, strangely moving. However vain, however madly exaggerated even, de Courcy Smyth's estimate of himself, there could be no question but that his present emotion was as actual and genuine as his past hunger had been. The man was utterly spent in body and in spirit. Offensive in speech, slovenly in person, yet these distasteful things added to, rather than detracted from, Iglesias' going out of sympathy towards him. He had rarely been in contact with a fellow-creature in such abandonment of distress. It was terrible to witness; yet it gave him a sense of fellowship, of nearness, even of power, which had in it an element of deep-seated satisfaction. While he waited for the moment when it should become clear to him how to act, his thought travelled back to the Lady of the Windswept Dust. He saw, not her over-red lips, but her serious eyes; saw her tearful and in a way broken, for all her light speech, her fanciful garments, and her antics with her absurd little dogs amid the sweetness of sunshine and summer breeze on Barnes Common. She was far enough away, so he judged, in sentiment and circumstance from the embittered and poverty-haunted man sitting opposite to him. Yet though superficially so dissimilar, they were alike in this, that both had dared to reveal themselves, passing beyond conventional limits in intercourse with him, Iglesias. Both had cried out to him in their distress. And then, thinking of that recently visited altar of the dead, thinking of the one perfect relationship he had known--his relationship to his mother--it came to him as a revelation that not participation in the pride of life and the splendour of it--still less association in mere pleasure and amusement--forms the cement which binds together the units of humanity in stable and consoling relationship; but association in sorrow, the cry for help and the response to that cry, whether it be help to the staying of the hunger of the heart and of the intellect, or simply to the staying of that baser yet very searching hunger of overstrained nerves and an empty stomach. The revelation was partial. Iglesias groped, so to speak, in the light of it uncertain and dazzled. But he received it as real--an idea the magnitude of which, in inspiration and application, he was as yet by no means equal to measure. Still he believed that could he but yield himself to it, and, in yielding, master it, it would carry him very far, teaching him that language of the spirit which he desired to acquire; and hence placing in his hand that earnestly coveted key to an adjustment between the exterior and interior life, the life of the senses and the life of the spirit, which must needs eventuate, manward and godward alike, in triumphant harmony.

Meanwhile there sat de Courcy Smyth, blear-eyed, sandy-red bearded, unsavoury, trying, poor wretch, to rally whatever of manhood was left in him and swagger himself out of his fit of hysteria. The Latin, however dignified, is instinctively more demonstrative than the Anglo-Saxon. Iglesias leaned across the table and laid his hand on the other man's shoulder.

"Wait a little," he said. "Drink your coffee and smoke. We need not hurry to move."

There was a pause, during which Smyth obediently swallowed his coffee, swallowed his chasse of cognac.

"I have made an egregious ass of myself," he said sullenly.

"No, no," Iglesias answered. "You have honoured me by taking me into your confidence. It rests with me to see that you never have cause to regret having done so."

"I believe you mean that."

"Certainly I mean it," Iglesias answered.

Smyth's hands trembled as he took a cigar and held a match to it.

"I am unaccustomed to meeting with kindness," he said in a low voice. Then recovering himself somewhat, he began to speak volubly again. "Of course I understand it all well enough. They are simply afraid of my work, those beasts of editors and playwrights. It is too big for them, they dare not face it and the consequences of it. It is strong stuff, Mr. Iglesias, strong stuff with plenty of red blood in it, and with scholarship, too. And so they pigeon-hole my stories and drames in self-defence, knowing that if these once reached the public, either in print or in action, their own fly-blown anaemic productions would be hissed off the stage or would ruin the circulation of the periodical which inserted them. It is all jealousy, I tell you, Mr. Iglesias, rank, snakish jealousy, bred by self-interest out of fear--a truly exalted parentage!"

He shifted his position restlessly, again setting his elbows upon the table and fingering the broken bread upon the cloth.

"At times, when I can rise above the immediate injustice and cruelty which pursue me," he went on, "I glory in my martyrdom. I range myself alongside those heroes of literature and art, who, because they were ahead of the age in which they lived, were scorned and repudiated by their contemporaries; but they found their revenge in the worship of succeeding generations. My time will come just as theirs did. It must--I tell you it must. I know that. I am safe of eventual recognition; but I want it now, while I am alive, while I can glut myself with the joy of it. I want to see the men who lord it over me, just because they have influence and money, who affect to despise me because they are green with envy and fear of me, brought to their knees, flattened so that I can wipe my boots on them. And--and"--he looked full at Dominic Iglesias, spreading out both hands across the narrow table, his pale prominent eyes blood-shot, his face working--"I want to see someone else--a woman--brought to her knees also. I want to make her feel what she has lost--curse her!--and have her come back whining."

"And if she did come back," Iglesias asked, almost sternly, "what would you do? Forgive her?"

De Courcy Smyth's hands dropped with a queer little thud on the table.

"I don't know. I suppose so. If she wanted to she could always get round me." Then he turned on Iglesias with hysterical violence. "But what do you know? Why do you ask that? Are you among her patrons? I trusted you. I believed you were a gentleman in feeling--and it is a dirty trick to get me in here and fill me up with food and liquor, when you must have seen my nerves were all to pieces, and then spring this upon me. Oh! hell!" he cried, "is there no comfort anywhere? Is everyone a traitor?"

And seeing his utter abjectness, Iglesias' heart went out to the unhappy man in immense and unqualified pity.

"I am grieved," he said gently, "if I have pained you unnecessarily. But truly I have sprung nothing upon you. How could I do so? I know nothing whatever of your circumstances save that which you yourself have told me

during the last hour."

"Then why did you ask that question about--about her?"

"Because," Dominic answered, "I am ready to fight for you, in as far as you will allow me to do so; but I do not fight against women."

"You must have had uncommonly little experience of them then," Smyth answered with a sneer.

To this observation Mr. Iglesias deemed it superfluous to make any answer. A silence followed. The restaurant was empty, but for the waiters, who stood in a little knot about the door amusing themselves by watching the movement of the street. Looking round to make sure no one was within hearing, Smyth rose unsteadily to his feet.

"You meant what you said just now, Mr. Iglesias--that you were ready to fight for me?" he asked ungentle yet cringingly.

"Certainly I meant it," Dominic replied, "the proviso I have made being respected."

"Yes, yes, of course--but what do you understand by fighting for me? Money?"

Dominic had risen, too. He remained for a moment in thought.

"Within reasonable relation to my means, yes," he said.

"I only want my chance," the other asserted. "The rest will follow as a matter of course. You would risk nothing, Mr. Iglesias. It would be an investment, simply an investment. The play is not finished yet--I have been too disheartened and disgusted recently to be able to work at it. But it is great, I tell you, great. When it is done will you give me my chance, and take a theatre for me and finance a couple of _matinees?_"

Again Dominic Iglesias thought for a moment, and again, driven by that strange necessity of fellowship--though knowing all the while he was putting his hand to a very questionable adventure--he replied in the affirmative.

CHAPTER IX

On that same evening, and at the same hour at which Dominic Iglesias bound himself to the practical assistance of a personally unsavoury and professionally unsuccessful playwright, a conversation was in progress between two persons of more exalted social station in the drawing-room of a pleasant house in Chester Square. The said drawing-room, mid-Victorian in aspect, was decorated in white and gold and unaggressive green. The ground of the chintz was very white, sprinkled over with bunches of shaded mauve roses unknown to horticulture. Lady Constance Decies' tea-grown was white and mauve also. For she was still in half-mourning for her father, the late Lord Fallowfeild, who had died some eighteen months previously at a very venerable age, and with a touching modesty as though his advent in another world might savour of intrusion. He had always been

a humble-minded man. He remained so to the last.

The windows stood open to the balcony. And the effect of the woman, and of the soft lights and colours surrounding her, was reposeful. For at the age of fifty Lady Constance, though stately, was a mild and very gentle person upon whom the push of the modern world had laid no hand. All the active drama of her life had been crowded into a few weeks of the early summer of her eighteenth year; since which, now remote, period she had enjoyed a tranquil existence, happy in the love of her husband and the care of her children. Her pretty brown hair was beginning to turn grey upon the temples. Her eyes, set remarkably far apart, had a certain vagueness and a great innocence of expression. She was naturally timid, and cared but little for any society beyond that of her near relations. To-night she was particularly content, mildly radiant even, thanks to the presence of her favourite brother, the present Lord Fallowfeild, and his avowed admiration of her younger daughter--a maiden of nineteen, who stood before her, with shining eyes, in all the delicate splendour of a spotless ball-dress.

"Yes, darling, you look very sweet," she said. "Just lean down--the lace has got caught in the flowers on your _berthe_. That's right. Don't keep your father too late."

"And in all things be discreet"--this from Lord Fallowfeild. "It's been my motto through life, as your mother knows. And you couldn't have a brighter example of the excellent results of it than myself. Good-night, my dear. Enjoy yourself," and he patted her on the cheek, avoiding the kiss which she in all innocence proffered him. "Pretty child, Kathleen, uncommonly pretty," he continued as the door closed behind the graceful figure. "It strikes me, Con, your girls have all the good looks of the family in the younger generation, with the exception of Violet Aldham. But she's getting pinched, a bit pinched and witch-like. Then she makes up too much. I have no prejudice against a woman's improving upon nature where nature's been niggardly. But it is among the things that'll keep. It's a mistake to begin it too early. In my opinion Violet has begun it too early--might quite well have given herself another ten years' grace.--Maggie's girls are gawky, you know; and, between ourselves, so terribly flat, poor things, both fore and aft. Upon my word, I'm not surprised they don't marry."

"I am afraid Maggie feels it a good deal," said Lady Constance. Satisfaction mingled with pity in her soul. The disabilities of other women's children are never wholly distressing to a tender mother's heart. "You see, she's so anxious the girls should not marry the bishop's chaplains; and yet really they hardly see any other young men. I think it is a very difficult position, that of a bishop's wife."

Lord Fallowfeild smiled, settling himself back in the corner of the wide sofa and crossing his long legs. He had thought more deeply on a good many subjects than the majority of his acquaintance supposed; with the consequence that he occasionally surprised his fellow-peers by the acuteness of his observations in debate. Lord Fallowfeild, it may be added, took his recently acquired office of hereditary legislator with a commendable mixture of humour and seriousness.

"Their position is an anomalous one," he said; "and an anomalous position is inevitably a difficult one--ought to be SO; in my opinion. But that's not to the point. We were talking, not about the episcopal ladies, but about this little business of Kathleen's. So you believe Lady Sokeington

has views and intentions?"

"I know that she has. But you see, Shotover," Lady Constance went on, returning to the name which that gentleman had rendered somewhat notorious in earlier years by a record in sport, in debts, in amours, and in irresistible sweetness of temper--"I want to be quite sure he is really good. Because the affair has not gone very far yet and it might be put a stop to--at least I hope and think it might--without making darling Kathleen too dreadfully unhappy. You do believe he really is good?"

Lord Fallowfeild leaned forward and rubbed a hardly perceptible atom of fluff off his left trouser leg just above the ankle.

"My dear Con," he answered, "you are very charming, but you are a trifle embarrassing, too, you know. Haven't you learned, even at this time of day, that very few men in our world are good in a good woman's sense of the word?"

Lady Constance's smooth forehead puckered into fine little lines.

"Shotover, dear," she said, "you're not getting embittered, I hope?"

"Me? Bless you, no, never in life!" he returned, smiling very reassuringly at her. "Don't worry yourself under that head. I quarrel with nobody and nothing, not even the consequences of my past iniquities. It is a very just world, take it all round, and has been kinder to me than I deserve."

"Oh! but you do nothing, you--you are what--you won't think me rude, Shotover?--what the boys call 'very decent' now."

Lady Constance spoke hurriedly, her colour rising in the most engaging manner.

"As decent as I know how, you dear soul," he said, taking her hand in his. "But that makes no difference to one's knowledge of one's own ways, in the past, or of the ways of other men."

"But Alaric Barking?"

"Neither better nor worse than the rest."

Then Lord Fallowfeild shut his small and beautiful mouth very tight, as though he would be glad to avoid further cross-questioning. Lady Constance's forehead remained puckered.

"It's dreadfully difficult when one's girls grow up," she said plaintively. "One can be comfortable about them, poor darlings, and enjoy them when they are in the nursery--even in the schoolroom, though governesses are worrying. They know so much about quantities of subjects which seem to me not to matter. One never refers to them in ordinary conversation; and if one should be obliged to it is so easy to ask somebody to tell one. And yet they manage to make me feel dreadfully uncomfortable and ignorant because I know nothing about them. But when they grow up----"

"Who, the governesses?" Lord Fallowfeild inquired. "I never supposed they stood in need of that process--thought they started out of the egg all finished, as you might say, and ran about at once like chickens."

"No, no, the girls, poor darlings," Lady Constance replied. "One does get dreadfully anxious about them, Shotover, really one does--specially if one has escaped something very frightening oneself and has been very happy--lest they should fall in love with the wrong people, or lest they should be anything which one did not know beforehand and then everything should turn out dreadful. I should be so miserable. I don't think I could bear it. I know it is wrong to say that, because if one was really good, one would accept whatever God sent without murmuring. So I could for myself, I think. In any case I should earnestly try to. But for the children it is so much harder. If they were unhappy I should feel ashamed of having had them--as if I'd done something horribly selfish; because, you see, there can be nothing so delightful as having children."

She looked at Lord Fallowfeild in the most pathetic manner, the corners of her mouth a-shake. And he took her hand and held it again, touched by the sincerity of her confused utterance, and the great mother-love resident in her. Touched, perhaps, by the age-old problem of man and maid, also.

"Dear little Con, dear little Con," he said, "I'm awfully sorry you should be worried, but I'm afraid we've got to look facts in the face. And it's no kindness for me to lie to you about these matters. I don't pretend to say what's right or what's wrong; I only say what it is. We can't make society, and the ways of it, all over again even to save Kathleen a heartache. I don't want to seem a brute, but she must just take her chance along with the rest of you. Marriage always has been a confounded uncertain business, and will always remain so, I suppose. The sort of remedies excited persons suggest to mitigate the dangers of it are a good deal worse than the disease, in my opinion. Every woman has to take her chance. Every man has to take his, too, you know--and the chance strikes some of us as such an uncommonly poor one, that, upon my honour, it seems safest to wash one's hands of it altogether."

"But you're not unhappy, Shotover, dear? You're not lonely?" Lady Constance inquired anxiously.

"Abominably so sometimes, Con. But I manage, oh! I manage. I have my consolations"--he smiled at her, perhaps a trifle shamefacedly. "But now about Kathleen," he went on, "as I say, she must take her chance along with the rest of you, poor little dear. After all, you took your chance when you married Decies, and it has not turned out so badly, you know."

Lady Constance became radiant once more, as some mild-shining summer moon emerging from behind temporarily obscuring clouds.

"Oh! but then," she said, "of course that was so entirely different."

Lord Fallowfeild patted her hand, his head bent, looking at her somewhat merrily.

"Was it, my dear, was it?--I wonder," he said.

She withdrew her head with a certain dignity. Notwithstanding her softness and tenderness, there were occasions--even with those she loved best--when Lady Constance could delicately mark her displeasure.

"I think you are a little embittered, Shotover," she asserted.

He leaned back, still smiling, and shaking his head at her.

"Old and wise--unpleasantly old, and not quite such a fool as I used to be, that's all," he answered.

For a time there was silence, both brother and sister thinking their own thoughts. Then the latter spoke. Like many gentle persons, she was persistent. She always had been so.

"I should be so grateful if you would tell me, because I think I ought to know, and then I should try to turn the course of darling Kathleen's affections before it all becomes too pronounced. Is there any entanglement, anything amounting to what one calls an impediment, in--well--you understand--against Alaric Barking?"

Lord Fallowfeild got up, took a turn across the room, came back, and stood in front of her.

"I wish you wouldn't, Con," he said. "Upon my soul, I wish you wouldn't. It's a nasty thing for an old man, who has gone the pace in his day pretty thoroughly, to give away a lad who may have made a slip just at the start, and who is doing his best to get his feet again and run straight. Alaric Barking's a good fellow. I like him. I never have been and never shall be partial to that family. Your sister Louisa cried up their virtues and their confounded solvency, in the old days, till she made them a positive nuisance. She's not a happy way of inculcating a moral economic lesson, hasn't Louisa. But I own I'm fond of this boy. He's far the best of the whole lot--gentlemanlike, and a sportsman, and good-looking--unusually so for one of that family--and, my dear, he's downright honestly in love with Kathleen. I've watched him--did so when he was down at Ranelagh one day last month with her and Victoria Sokeington--and I know the real thing when I see it."

"But--but, I am afraid, Shotover, you mean me to understand there is some impediment?" Lady Constance repeated.

"Oh! well, hang it all, I'm awfully sorry, but if you are determined to have it, Connie, perhaps there is. Only for heaven's sake don't be in too much of a hurry. Between ourselves, I happen to know the boy's doing his best to shake himself free in an honourable manner. So don't rush the business. Like the dear tender-hearted creature you are, have a little mercy on the poor beggar. Let the whole affair drift a little. It may straighten out."

Lady Constance meditated for a minute or so.

"It's very dreadful that there should be any impediment," she said.

"I'll back Alaric to agree with you there," Lord Fallowfeild answered.

"You'll do what you can, Shotover, won't you, to help Kathleen? I never forget how you helped me once!"

Lord Fallowfeild's handsome face expressed rather broad amusement.

"I'm afraid the two cases are hardly parallel, my dear," he said.

CHAPTER X

"The play's on the other side, the crowd's on the other side, all the fun's on the other side, and I am on this side with nothing more lively than you, you little shivering idiot, for company."

Poppy St. John drew the spaniel's long silky ears through her fingers slowly.

"I am bored, Cappadocia," she said, with a yawn which she made not the slightest effort to stifle, "bored right through to my very marrow. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, how I do wish something would happen!"

Poppy sat, propped up with scarlet silk cushions, in a cane deck-chair, on the white-railed balcony upon which the first-floor bedroom windows opened. Around her were strewn illustrated magazines and ladies' papers; but unfortunately the stories in the former appeared to her every bit as silly as the fashion-plates in the latter. Both had equally little to do with life as the ordinary flesh and blood human being lives it. She was filled with a rebellious sense of the banality of her surroundings this afternoon. Even from her coign of vantage upon the balcony, whence wide prospects disclosed themselves, everything looked foolish, pointless, of the nature of an unpardonably stale joke.

The said balcony, divided into separate compartments by the interposition of wooden barriers, extended the whole length of the terrace of twenty-seven houses. And these were all precisely alike, with white wood and stucco "enrichments," as the technical phrase has it. Cheap stained and leaded glass adorned the upper panels of the twenty-seven front doors, which were approached by twenty-seven flights of steps--thus securing a measure of light and air to the twenty-seven basements. The front doors were set in couples, alternating with couples of bay windows. There was a determination of cheap smartness, a smirking self-consciousness about the little houses, a suggestion of having put on their best frocks and high-heeled shoes and standing very much on tiptoe to attract attention. The balconies, narrow where the upper bays encroached on them, wide where the house fronts were recessed above the twin front doors, broke forth into a garland of flower-boxes. Cascades of pink ivy-leaf geranium, creeping-jenny, and nasturtiums backed by white or yellow Paris daisies, flowed outward between the white ballusters and masked the edge of the woodwork. The effect, though pretty, was not quite satisfactory--being suggestive of millinery, of an over-trimmed summer hat.

Immediately below was the roadway, bordered by an asphalt pavement on either side, then the high impenetrable oak paling, which had baffled Dominic Iglesias' maiden effort at participation in the amusements of the rich. From Poppy's balcony, however, the palings offered no impediment to observation. All the green expanse of the smaller polo-ground was visible. So was the whole height of the grove of majestic elms on the right and the back of the club house; and, and the left, between _massifs_ of shrubbery, a vista of lawns sloping towards the river peopled by a sauntering crowd.

It was upon this last that Poppy directed her gaze. To the naked eye the units composing it showed as vertical lines of grey, brown, and black, blotted with bright delicate colour, and splashed here and there with

white, the whole mingling, uniting, breaking into fresh combinations kaleidoscope fashion. Through the opera-glasses figures of men, women, and horses detached themselves, becoming quaintly distinct, neat as toys, an assemblage of elegant highly finished marionnettes. There was a fascination in watching the movement of these brilliant, clear-cut silent little things upon that amazingly verdant carpet of grass. But it was a fascination which, for Poppy, had by now worn somewhat thin. The interest proved too far away, too impersonal. Indeed it may be questioned whether any who have not within themselves large store of resignation, or of hope, can look on at gaiety, in which they have no share, without first sadness and then pretty lively irritation. And of those two most precious commodities, resignation and hope, Poppy had but limited reserve stock at present. So she pulled the little dog's ears rather hard and lamented:

"Oh! my good gracious me, if only something would happen!"

Then, the words hardly out of her mouth, she shot the much-enduring Cappadocia off her lap and, restoring her elbows on the rails, leaned right out over the balcony.

"Come here, dear beautiful lunatic, come here," she cried. "For pity's sake don't pass by!"

Perhaps fortunately this very unconventional invitation was lost upon Dominic Iglesias, soberly crossing the road with due observance of the eccentricities of the drivers of motor-cars and riders of bicycles. Looking up, he was aware of a vision quite sufficiently indicative of welcome, without added indiscretion of words.--The white balustrade, the trailing fringe of nasturtiums, succulent leaves and orange-scarlet blossoms; the woman's bust and shoulders in her string-coloured lace gown, her small face, curiously vivid in effect, capped by the heavy masses of her black hair, her singular eyes full of light, the red of her lips and tinge of stationary pink in her cheeks supplemented by a glow of quick excitement. A few weeks ago the ascetic in Iglesias might have taken alarm. Now it was different. He had his idea, and, walking in the strength of it, dared adventure himself in neighbourhoods otherwise slightly questionable.

Five minutes later Poppy advanced across the little drawing-room to meet him.

"Well," she said, "of course you might have come sooner. But, equally of course, you might never have come at all, so I won't quarrel with you about the delay, though I would like you to know it has worried me a good deal."

"Has it? I am sorry for that," Dominic answered gravely.

"Yes, be sorry, be sorry," she repeated. "It is comfortable to hear you say so."

She looked at him with the utmost frankness, took his hand and led him to a settee filling in the right angle between the fireplace and the double doors at the back of the room.

"Sit down," she said, "and let us talk. Have another cushion--so--and if you're good I'll give you tea presently. And understand, you needn't be careful of yourself. I'll play perfectly fair with you. I've been thinking it all out during this time you didn't come; and I never go back

on my word once given. So, look here, you needn't account for yourself in any way. I don't even want to know your name--specially I don't want to know that. It might localise you, and I don't want to have you localised. Directly a person is localised it takes away their restfulness to one. One begins to see just all the places where they belong to somebody else, notice-boards struck up everywhere warning one to keep off the grass. And that's a nuisance. It raises Old Nick in one, and makes one long to commit all manner of wickedness which would never have entered one's head otherwise."

Poppy held her hands palm to palm between her knees, glancing at Dominic Iglesias now and again sideways as she spoke. The bodice of her dress, cut slightly *en coeur*, showed the nape of her neck, and the whole of her throat, which was smooth and rounded though rather long. Her make altogether was that not uncommon to London girls of the lower middle-class: small-boned and possibly anaemic, but prettily moulded, and with an attraction of over-civilisation as of hot-house-grown plants. Just now her head seemed bowed down by the weight of her dark hair, as she sat gathered together, making herself small as a child will when concentrating its mind to the statement of some serious purpose.

"I've knocked about a lot," she went on. "It's right you should know that. And there's not very much left to tell me about a number of things not usually set down in conversation books designed for *debutants*. But just on that account I may be rather useful to you in some ways.--Don't go and be offended now, there's a dear, good man," she added coaxingly. "Because judging by what you told me the other day, there's no doubt that, under some heads, you are very much of a *debutant*."

"I suppose I am," Iglesias said slowly. It was very strange to him to find himself in so sudden and close an intimacy with this at once so wise and so artificial woman creature. But he had his idea. Moreover, increasingly he trusted her.

"Of course you are," she asserted. "That's just where the beauty of it all comes in. You're the veriest infant. One has only to look into your face to see that.--Don't go and freeze up now. You belong to another order of doctrine and practice to that current in contemporary society."

Poppy gazed at the floor, still making herself small, the palms of her hands pressed together between her knees.

"And that's just why you can be useful to me, awfully useful, if you choose--I don't mean money, business, anything of the kind. I'm perfectly competent to manage my own affairs, thank you. But you're good for me, somehow. You rest me."

She began to rock herself gently backwards and forwards, but without taking the heels of her shoes off the ground.

"Yes, you rest me, you rest me," she repeated.

"I am glad," Iglesias said. He felt soberly pleased, thankful almost.

Again Poppy glanced at him sideways.

"Yes, I believe you are," she said. "And that shows things have happened to you--in you, more likely--since we last met. You have come on a great piece."

"I doubt if I have come on, so much as gone back, to influences of long ago," he answered; "to things which had been overlaid by the dust of my working years almost to the point of obliteration."

"Was it pleasant to go back?" Poppy asked.

"Not at all. The going was painful. It required some courage to brush off the dust."

"It usually does require courage--at least that's my experience--to brush off the dust."

Dominic Iglesias made no immediate answer. He was a little startled at his companion's acute reading of him, a little touched by her confidence. Her words seemed to suggest the possibility of a relationship which fitted in admirably with the development of his idea. He sat looking away across the room, and, doing so, became aware that the said room possessed unexpected characteristics, calculated to elucidate his impressions of its owner's character. It was a man's room rather than a woman's, innocent of furbelows and frills. Two low, wide settees, well furnished with cushions and upholstered in dark yellowish-red tapestry, fitted into the corners on either side the double doors. A couple of large armchairs and a revolving book-table occupied the centre of the room. An upright piano, in an ebonised case, draped across the back with an Indian phulkari--discs of looking-glass set in coarsely worked yellow eyelet holes forming the border of it--stood at right angles to the wall just short of the bay window. In the window, placed slant-wise, was a carved black oak writing-table, a long row of photographs stuck up against the back shelf of it. The walls were hung with a set of William Nicolson's prints, strong, dark, distinct, slightly sinister in effect; a fine etching of Jean Francois Millet's *Gleaners*; and, in noticeable contrast to this last, a mezzotint of Romney's picture of Lady Hamilton spinning. Upon the book-table were a silver ash-tray and cigarette-box. The air was unquestionably impregnated with the odour of tobacco, which the burning of scent-sticks quite failed to dissemble.

While Mr. Iglesias thus noted the details of his surroundings, his companion observed him, closely, intently. Suddenly she flung herself back against the piled-up cushions.

"Let the dust lie, let it lie," she cried, almost shrilly. And as Dominic turned to her, surprised at her vehemence, she added, "Yes, it's safest so. Let it lie till it grows thick, carpeting all the surface, so that, treading on it, one's footsteps are muffled, making no sound!"

Poppy jumped up, crossed swiftly to the writing-table, swept the long row of photographs together and pushed them into a drawer.

"There you go, face downwards, every man Jack of you," she said. "And, for all I care, there you may stay."

Then she turned round, confronting Dominic Iglesias, who had risen also, her head carried high, her teeth set.

"You may not grasp the connection of ideas--I don't the very least see how you should, and I've no extra special wish that you should. But you must just take my word for it that's one way of thickening the dust, in my particular case, and not half a bad way either!"

She pushed the heavy masses of her hair up from her forehead, crossed the little room again and stood before Iglesias smiling, her hands clasped behind her back.

"Yes, you rest me," she said, "you do, even more than I expected. I wanted awfully to see you; and yet I was half afraid if I did we mightn't pull the thing off. But we are going to pull it off, aren't we?"

This direct appeal demanded a direct answer; and Iglesias, looking down at her, felt nerved to a certain steadiness of resolve.

"Yes, we are," he said gravely. "That, at least, is my purpose. I have very few friends. I should value a new one." Then he added, with a certain hesitancy, "I am glad you are not disappointed."

"Ah! you have come on--not a question about it," Poppy cried. "Sit down again. You needn't go yet. And we are through with disturbances for this afternoon anyhow. An anti-cyclone, as the weather reports put it, is extending over all our coasts. I feel quite happy. Let me enjoy the anti-cyclone while it lasts--and I'll give you your tea."

But of that tea Dominic Iglesias was fated not to drink. A ring at the bell, a parley at the front door, followed by the advent of an elderly parlourmaid bearing a card on a small lacquer tray.

"His lordship says if you're engaged he could wait a little, ma'am. But he wants particularly to see you to-day."

Poppy took the card, glanced at it, and then at Dominic Iglesias.

"I'm afraid, I'm awfully afraid I shall have to let you go," she said. She took both his hands, and holding them, without pressure but with a great friendliness, went on: "Don't be offended, or you'll make me miserable. But he's an old friend; and he's been a perfect brick to me--stood by me through all my worst luck. I can't send him away. You won't be off ended?"

"No," Iglesias said.

"And you will come again? You make me feel all smooth and good. You promise you'll come?"

"Yes," Iglesias said.

In the narrow passage a tall, eminently well-dressed middle-aged gentleman stood aside to let him pass. Dominic Iglesias received the impression of a very handsome person, whose possible insolence of bearing received agreeable modification, thanks to the expression of kindly humorous eyes and a notably beautiful mouth.

Upon the centre table of the square first-floor sitting-room at Cedar Lodge a note awaited Mr. Iglesias, addressed in George Lovegrove's neat business hand.

"Dear old friend," it ran--"the wife asks you to take supper with us to-morrow night. Step across as early as you like. My cousin, Miss Serena Lovegrove, is paying us a visit. Yours faithfully, G. L.--N. B. Come as you are: no ceremony. G. L."

CHAPTER XI

"Hullo, girlie," called the red and green parrot, as it helped itself up the side of its zinc cage with beak as well as claws.

Serena Lovegrove had opened the door suddenly. Then, seeing that Mr. Iglesias alone occupied the room, neither her host nor hostess being present, she paused in the doorway, a large floppy yellow silk work-bag in her hands, undecided whether to retreat or to proceed. And it was thus that the bird, discovering her advent, announced it, while the pupils of his hard, round yellowish grey eyes dilated and contracted--"snapped," as Serena would have said--maliciously.

Serena was a tall, elegant, faded woman, dressed in black, her little upright head balanced upon a long thin stalk of neck. Though undeniably faded, there was, as now seen in the quiet evening light, a suggestion of youthfulness about her. Her brown eyes, pretty though rather small, snapped even as did those of the parrot. Excitement--to-night she was very much excited--invariably produced in Serena an effect of clutching at her long-departed girlhood, an effect sufficiently pathetic in the case of a woman well on in the forties. And it was precisely this ineffectual throw-back to a Serena of seventeen or eighteen which lent a sharp edge of irony to the strident salutations of the parrot, as it called out again:

"Hullo, girlie! Polly's own pet girlie," then with a prolonged and ear-piercing whistle:--"Hi, four-wheeler! girlie's going out." And hoarsely, with a growl in its throat: "Move on there, stoopid, can't yer? Shut the door."

During the delivery of these final admonitions Mr. Iglesias had recognised the shadowy figure standing on the threshold and advanced. This decided Serena. Still twisting the ribbons of the yellow work-bag round her thin fingers, she drifted into the room.

"I think I have had the pleasure of meeting you once or twice before, Miss Lovegrove," Dominic said. His manner was specially gentle and courtly, for he could not but feel the poor lady was at a disadvantage, owing to the very articulate indiscretions of the parrot.

"Oh! yes," Serena answered. "Certainly we have met. But you are wrong as to the number of times. It is more than once or twice. Five times, I think; or it may have been six. No, it is five, because I remember you were expected, in the evening, the day before I went home the winter before last; and at the last moment you were unable to come. That would have made six. Now it is only five."

"You have an excellent memory," Iglesias said. "It is kind of you to remember so clearly."

"I wonder if it is--I mean, I wonder whether it is kind," Serena rejoined.

She was quite innocent of any intention of sarcasm. But her mind, like

those of so many unoccupied, and consequently self-occupied persons, was addicted to speculation of a minor and vacuous sort. She was also liable --as such persons often are--to mistake cavilling for spirit and wit--a most tedious error!

"Still you are right in saying I have a good memory," she added. "People generally observe that. But then I was always taught it was rude to forget. Forgetfulness is the result of inattention. At school I never had any difficulty in learning by heart."

"You must have found that both a useful and pleasant talent."

"Perhaps," Serena replied negligently. She was determined not to commit herself, having arrived at the conclusion that Mr. Iglesias' address was too civil. "It was bad manners of him not to remember how often we had met," she said to herself, "and now he is trying to pass it off. But that won't do!" Serena had many and distinct views on the subject of manner and manners. She was never certain that civility did not argue a defect of sincerity. She agreed with herself to think that over again later. Meanwhile she would carefully remark Mr. Iglesias. "If he is insincere, as I fear he is, he is sure to betray it in other ways. Then I shall be on my guard." Forewarned is, of course, forarmed, and Serena felt very acute. Though against exactly what she was taking such elaborate precautions, it would have been difficult for her, or for anyone else, to have stated. However, just now it was incumbent upon her to make conversation. As is the way with persons not very fertile in ideas, she had recourse to the simple expedient of asking a leading question.

"Are you fond of animals?" she inquired.

"I am afraid I have very little knowledge of animals," Iglesias replied.

Serena laughed dryly. This was so transparent a subterfuge.

"What a very odd answer!" she said. "Because everybody must really know whether they like animals or not."

"I am afraid I stand by myself then, a solitary exception. I have had little or nothing to do with animals, and have therefore had no opportunity of discovering whether they attract me or not."

"How very odd!" Serena repeated.

She moved across to the centre-table where Mr. Lovegrove's books of picture postcards, the miscellaneous consequences of many charity bazaars, and kindred aesthetic treasures reposed, and deposited her work-bag in their company. Her movement revived the attention of the parrot, who had been nodding on its perch.

"Poor old girly, take a brandy and soda? Kiss and be friends. Good-night, all," it murmured hoarsely, half asleep.

"If your question bore reference to that particular animal, I stand in no doubt as to my sentiments," Dominic remarked. "I am anything but fond of it. I think it an odious bird."

"Ah! you see you do know," Serena exclaimed. "I was sure you did." She felt justified in her suspicion of his sincerity. "But nobody would agree with you, Mr. Iglesias, because of course it is really a very clever

parrot. They very seldom learn to say so many things."

"How fortunate!" Dominic permitted himself to ejaculate.

"I don't see why you should say it is fortunate."

"Do not its remarks strike you as somewhat impertinent and intrusive?"

"I wonder if an animal can be impertinent," Serena said reflectively.

But here to her vexation, for it appeared to her that she had just started a really interesting subject of discussion, Mrs. Lovegrove bustled into the room.

"Well, Mr. Iglesias," she began, "I am sure I am very delighted to see you, and so will Georgie be. He was remarking only yesterday we don't seem to see so much of you as we used to do. He's just a little behind time, is Georgie, having been kept by the dear vicar at a meeting about the Church Workers' Social Evenings Guild at the Mission Room in Little Bethesda Street. You wouldn't know where that is, Mr. Iglesias--though I can't help hoping you will some day--but Serena knows, don't you, Serena? It's where Susan--her elder sister, Miss Lovegrove"--this aside to Dominic--"gave an address once to the members of the Society for the Conversion of the Jews."

"No doubt I remember; but Susan is always giving addresses somewhere," Serena said loftily.

"And very good and kind of her it is to give addresses," Mrs. Lovegrove rejoined. "Even the dear vicar says what a remarkable gift she has as a speaker, and there's no question as to the worth of his praise."

"I wonder if it is--I mean I wonder if it is good and kind of Susan to give addresses," Serena remarked. "Because of course she enjoys giving them. Susan likes to have a number of people listening to her."

"But if the object is a noble one?"--this from Mrs. Lovegrove, a little nonplussed and put about.

"Still, if you enjoy doing anything, how can it be good and kind to do it?" Serena said argumentatively. "Susan is very fond of publicity. I think people very often deceive themselves about their own motives."

She looked meaningly at Dominic Iglesias as she spoke. And he looked back at her gravely and kindly, though with a slightly amused smile. His thoughts had travelled away--they had done so pretty frequently during the last twenty-four hours--to the smirking self-conscious little house on the verge of Barnes Common. Unpromising though it had appeared outwardly, yet within it he believed he had found a friend--a friend who was also an enigma. Perhaps, as he now reflected, all women are enigmas. Certainly they are amazingly different. He thought of Poppy. He looked at Serena. Yes, doubtless they all are enigmas; only--might Heaven forgive him the discourtesy--all are not enigmas equally well worth finding out.

George Lovegrove arrived. Supper, a somewhat heavy and hybrid meal, followed--"all comfortable and friendly," as Mrs. Lovegrove described it, "no ceremony and fal-lals, but everything put down on the table so that you could see it and please yourself."

Serena, however, was difficult to please. She picked daintily at the food on her plate. Her host observed her with solicitude.

"Do take a little more," he said, in an anxious aside, Mrs. Lovegrove being safely engaged in conversation with Mr. Iglesias, "or I shall begin to be nervous lest we aren't offering you quite what you like."

But Serena was obdurate.

"Pray don't mind, George," she said. "You know I never eat much. I am quite different from Susan, for instance. She always has a large appetite, and so have all her friends. Low Church people always have, I think. But I never care to eat a great deal, especially in hot weather."

Serena was really very glad indeed to come to London just now. Still, there were self-respecting decencies to be observed, specially in the presence of another guest. Relationship does not necessarily imply social equality; and, as Serena reminded herself, the family always had felt that poor George had married beneath him. Therefore it was well to keep the fact of her own superior refinement well in view. In the case of good George Lovegrove this was, however, a work of supererogation. For he had a, to himself, positively embarrassing respect for Serena's gentility--embarrassing because at moments it came painfully near endangering the completeness of his consideration for "the wife's feelings." The two ladies frequently differed upon matters of taste and etiquette, with the result that the good man's guileless breast was torn by conflicting emotions. For had not Serena's father been a General Officer of the Indian army? And had not Serena herself and her elder sister Susan--a person of definite views and commanding character--long been resident at Slowby in Midlandshire, an inland watering-place of acknowledged fashion? It followed that her pronouncements on social questions were necessarily final. Yet to uphold her judgment, as against that of the wife, was to risk mortifying the latter. And to mortify the wife would be to act as a heartless scoundrel. Hence situations, for George Lovegrove, difficult to the point of producing profuse perspiration.

That night Serena prepared for rest with remarkable deliberation. Clad in a blue and white striped cotton dressing-gown, she sat long at her toilet-table. And all the time she wondered--a far-reaching, mazelike, elaborately intricate and wholly inconclusive wonder. Hers was a nature which suffered perpetual sollicitation from possible alternatives, hearing warning voices from the vague, delusive regions of the might-be or might-have-been. She had never grasped the rudimentary but very important truth that only that which actually is in the least matters. And so to arrive at what is, with all possible despatch--in so far as such arriving is practicable--and then to go forward, comprises the whole duty of the sane human being. Far from this, Serena's mind forever fitted batlike in the half-darkness of innumerable small prejudices and ignorances. She moved, as do so many women of her class, in a twilight, embryonic world, untouched alike by the splendour and terror of living.

Nevertheless, on this particular occasion, as she brushed her hair and inserted the tortoise-shell curling-pins which should secure to-morrow's decorative effects, she felt almost daring and dangerous. She wondered whether she had really enjoyed the evening or not; whether she had held her own and shown independence and spirit. She laboured under the quaint early-Victorian notion that, in the presence of members of the opposite sex, a woman is called upon always to play something of a part. She should advance, so to speak, and then retreat; provoke interest by a

studied indifference; yield a little, only to become more elegantly fugitive. It may be doubted whether these wiles have even been a very successful adjunct to feminine charms. But in the case of so negative and colourless a creature as Serena, they were pathetically devoid of result. Play a part industriously as she might, the majority of her audience was wholly unaware that she was, in point of fact, playing anything at all! They might think her a little capricious, a little foolish, but that there was intention or purpose in her pallid flightiness passed the bounds of imagination. Never mind, if the audience had no sense of the position, Serena had, and she enjoyed it. Excitement possessed her, and her eyes snapped even yet as, thinking it all over, she fastened the curlers in her hair.

She wondered whether George and Rhoda--how intensely she disliked the name Rhoda!--had any special reason for asking her just now, and talking so much about Mr. Iglesias, or whether it was a coincidence.

"Of course it is not of the slightest importance to me whether they have or not," she reflected. "I think it would be rather an impertinence if they had. Still, I think I had better find out; but without letting Rhoda suspect, of course. If you give her any encouragement Rhoda is inclined to go too far and say what is rather indelicate. I always have thought Rhoda had a rather vulgar mind. I wonder if poor George feels that? I believe he does, before me. Once or twice to-night he was very nervous. How dreadfully coarse poor Rhoda's skin is getting! I wonder if Rhoda has given Susan a hint, and if that was what made Susan so gracious about my leaving home? But I don't believe she did--I mean that Susan suspected that George and Rhoda had any particular reason for inviting me. I wonder if I shall ever make Susan see that I am not a cipher? Of course if George and Rhoda really have any particular reason, and Susan comes to know it, that will show her that other people do not consider me a cipher. I wonder what most people would think of Mr. Iglesias? Of course he has only been a bank clerk; but then so has George. Only then he is a foreigner, and that makes a difference. I wonder whether, if anything came of it, Susan would make his being a foreigner an objection?"

But this was growing altogether too definite and concrete. With a sort of mental squeak Serena's thought flitted into twilight and embryonic regions.

"I think if they have any particular reason, it is rather scheming of George and Rhoda. I wonder if it is nice of them? If they have, I think it is rather deceitful. I wonder if they have said anything to Mr. Iglesias?"

Serena, with the aid of a curling-pin, was controlling the short fuzzy little hairs just at the nape of her neck; and this last wonder proved so absorbing a one that she remained, head bent and fingers aimlessly fiddling with the bars of the curler, till it suddenly occurred to her that she was getting quite stiff.

"If they have, I think it is very presuming of them," she continued wrathfully, stretching her arms, for they ached--"very presuming. How glad I am I was on my guard. I wonder if they saw I was on my guard? I believe George did. I wonder if that helped to make him nervous?"

Serena fastened in the last of the curlers. There was no excuse for sitting up any longer; yet she lingered.

"I must be more on my guard than ever," she said.

Meanwhile Dominic Iglesias, after sitting in the dining-room with his old friend while the latter smoked a last pipe, made his way across the Green in the deepening mystery of the summer night. The sky was moonless; and at the zenith, untouched by the upward streaming light of the great city,

the stars showed fair and bright. A nostalgia of wide untenanted spaces, of far horizons, of emotions at once intimate and rooted in things eternal, was upon him. But of Serena Lovegrove, it must be admitted, he thought not one little bit.

CHAPTER XII

Only one of the trees from which Cedar Lodge derives its name was still standing. This lonely giant, sombre exile from Libanus, overshadowed all that remained of the formerly extensive garden and sensibly darkened the back of the house. Its foliage, spread like a deep pile carpet upon the wide horizontal branches, was worn and sparse, showing small promise of self-renewal. Yet though starved by the exhausted soil, and clogged by soots from innumerable chimneys, it remained majestic, finely decorative as some tree of metal, of age-old bronze roughened by a greenness of deep-eating rust. From the first moment of his acquaintance with Cedar Lodge it had been to Dominic Iglesias an object of attraction, even of sympathy. For he recognised in it something stoical, an unmoved dignity and lofty indifference to the sordid commonplace of its surroundings. It made no concessions to adverse circumstances, but remained proudly itself, owning for sole comrade the Wind--that most mysterious of all created things, unseen, untamed, mateless, incalculable. The wind gave it voice, gave it even a measure of mobility, as it swept through the labyrinth of dry unfruitful branches and awoke a husky music telling of far-distant times and places, making a shuddering and stirring as of the resurgence of long-forgotten hope and passion.

When Dominic entered into residence at Cedar Lodge, a pair of stout mauve-brown wood-pigeons--migrants from the pleasant elms of Holland Park--had haunted the tree. But they being, for all their dolorous cooings, birds of a lusty, not to say truculent, habit, grew weary of its persistent solemnity of aspect. So, at least, Dominic judged. He had been an interested spectator of the love-makings, quarrels, and reconciliations of these comely neighbours from his bedroom window daily while dressing. But one fine spring morning he saw them fly away and never saw them fly back again. Clearly they had removed themselves to less solemn quarters, leaving the great tree, save for fugitive visitations from its comrade the wind, to solitary meditation within the borders of its narrow prison-place.

Besides presenting in itself an object altogether majestic, the cedar performed a practical office whereby it earned Iglesias' gratitude. For its dark interposing bulk effectually shut off the view of an aggressively new rawly red steam laundry, with shiny slate roofs and a huge smoke-belching chimney to it, which, to the convulsive disgust of the gentility of the eastern side of Trimmer's Green, had had the unpardonable impertinence to get itself erected in an adjacent street. It followed that when, one wet evening, yellow-headed little Mr. Farge had

advised himself to speak slightly of the cedar tree, Iglesias was prepared to defend it, if necessary, with some warmth.

The conversation had ranged round the subject of the hour, namely, the possibility--as yet in the estimation of most persons an incredible one--of war with the Boer Republics, when the young man indulged in a playful aside addressed to Miss Hart, at whose right hand he was seated.

"If I could find fault with anything belonging to the lady at the head of the table," he said, "it would be the gloomy old party looking in at these back windows."

"What, the dear old cedar tree! Never, Mr. Farge!" protested Eliza.

"Yes, it would, though," he insisted, "when, as tonight, it is drip, drip, dripping all over the shop. No touch of Sunny Jim about him, is these now, Bert?"--this to the devoted Worthington sitting immediately opposite to him on Miss Hart's left.

"Truly there is not, if I may venture so far," the other young gentleman responded, playing up obediently. "And if anything could give me and Charlie a fit of the blues, I believe that old fellow would in rainy weather."

"Makes you think of the cemetery, does it not now, Bert?"

"You have hit it. Paddington--not the station though, Charlie, just starting for a cosey little trip with your best girl up the river."

"For shame, Mr. Worthington," Eliza protested again, giggling.

"Suggestive of the end of all week-ends, in short," de Courcy Smyth, who contrary to his custom was present at dinner that evening, put in snarlingly. "One last trip up the River of Death for you, with a ticket marked not transferrable, eh, Farge? Then an oblong hole in the reeking blue clay, silence and worms."

His tone was spiteful to the point of commanding attention. A hush fell on the company, broken only by the drifting sob of the rain through the branches of the great cedar. Mr. Farge went perceptibly pale. Mrs. Porcher sighed and turned her fine eyes up to the ceiling. Iglesias looked curiously at the speaker. Eliza Hart was the first to find voice.

"Pray, Mr. Smyth," she said, "don't be so very unpleasant. You're enough to give one the goose-skin all over."

"I am sorry I have offended," he answered sullenly. "But I beg leave to call attention to the fact that I did not start this subject. I was rather interested in the previous discussion, which gave an opportunity of intelligent conversation not habitual among us. Farge is responsible for the interruption, and for the cemeteries, and consequently for my comment. Still, I am sorry I have offended."

He shifted his position, glancing uneasily first at his hostess, and then at Dominic Iglesias, who sat opposite him in the place of honour at that lady's right hand.

"You have not offended, Mr. Smyth," Mrs. Porcher declared graciously. "And no doubt it is well for us all to be reminded of death and burial at

times. Though some of us hardly need reminding"--again she sighed. "We carry the thought of them about with us always." And she turned her fine eyes languidly upon Mr. Iglesias.

"My poor sweet Peachie," the kind-hearted Eliza murmured, under her breath.

"But at meals, perhaps, a lighter vein is more suitable, Mr. Smyth," Mrs. Porcher continued. "At table the thought of death does seem rather disheartening, does it not? But about our poor old cedar tree now, Mr. Farge? You were not seriously proposing to have it removed?"

"Well, strictly between ourselves, I am really half afraid I actually was."

"You forget it sheltered my childhood. It is associated with all my past."

"Can a rosebud have a past?" Farge cried, coming up to the surface again with a bounce, so to speak.

Mrs. Porcher smiled, shook her head in graceful reproof, and turned once more to Dominic.

"I think we should all like to know how you feel about it, Mr. Iglesias," she said. "Do you wish the poor old tree removed?"

"On the contrary, I should greatly regret it's being cut down," he answered. "It would be a loss to me personally, for I have always taken a pleasure both in the sound and the sight of it. But that is a minor consideration."

"You must allow me to differ from that opinion," Mrs. Porcher remarked, with gentle emphasis. "We can never forget, can we, Eliza, who is our oldest guest? Mr. Iglesias' opinion must ever carry weight in all which concerns Cedar Lodge."

Here Farge and Worthington made round eyes at one another, while de Courcy Smyth shuffled his feet under the table. He had received a disquieting impression.

"Oh! of course, Peachie, dear," Miss Hart responded. She hugged herself with satisfaction. "The darling looks more bonny than ever," she reflected. "To-night what animation! What tact! She seems to have come out so lately, since that Serena Lovegrove has been stopping over the way. Not that there could be any rivalry between her and that poor thread-paper of a thing!"

Dominic Iglesias, however, received his hostess' pretty speeches with a calm which turned the current of the ardent Eliza's thoughts, causing her to refer, mentally, to the degree of emotion which might be predicated of monuments, mountains, stone elephants, and kindred objects.

"You are very kind," he said. "But on grounds far more important than those of any private sentiment the cutting down of the cedar calls for careful consideration. I am afraid you would find it a serious loss to the beauty of your property. What the house loses in light, it certainly gains in distinction and interest from the presence of the tree."

"Yes," Mrs. Porcher returned, folding her plump pink hands upon the edge of the table and looking down modestly. "It does speak of family perhaps."

"And in your case, dear, it speaks nothing more than the truth," Eliza declared. "Just as well a certain gentleman should reckon with Peachie's real position," she said to herself--"specially with that stuck-up Serena Lovegrove cat-and-mousing about on the other side of the Green. It does not take a Solomon to see what she's after!"

"I am afraid the verdict is given against you, Mr. Farge. The cedar tree will remain." Mrs. Porcher rose as she spoke.

The young man playfully rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, feigning tears. Then a scrimmage ensued between him and Worthington as to which should reach the dining-room door first and throw it open before the ladies. At this exhibition of high spirits de Courcy Smyth groaned audibly, while Mrs. Porcher, linking her arm within that of Miss Hart, lingered.

"You will join our little circle in the drawing-room to-night, will you not, Mr. Iglesias?" she pleaded.

Again the young men made round eyes at one another. De Courcy Smyth had come forward. He stood close to Iglesias and, before the latter could answer, spoke hurriedly:

"Can you give me ten minutes in private? I don't want to press myself upon you, but this is imperative."

Iglesias proceeded to excuse himself to his hostess, thereby causing Miss Hart to refer mentally to monuments and mountains once again.

"Thank you," Smyth gasped. His face was twitching and he swayed a little, steadying himself with one hand on the corner of the dinner-table.

"I loathe asking," he continued, "I loathe pressing my society upon you, since you do not seek it. It has taken days for me to make up my mind to this; but it is necessary. And, after all, you made the original offer yourself."

"I am quite ready to listen, and to renew any offer which I may have made," Iglesias answered quietly.

"We can't talk here, though," Smyth said. "That blundering ass of a waiter will be coming in directly; and whatever he overhears is sure to go the round of the house. All servants are spies."

"We can go up to my sitting-room and talk there," Iglesias replied.

Yet he was conscious of making the proposal with reluctance, pity struggling against repulsion. For not only was the man's appearance very unkempt, but his manner and bearing were eloquent of a certain desperation. Of anything approaching physical fear Dominic Iglesias was happily incapable. But his sitting-room had always been a peaceful place, refuge alike from the strain and monotony of his working life. It held relics, moreover, wholly dear to him, and to introduce into it this inharmonious and, in a sense, degraded presence savoured of desecration. Therefore, not without foreboding, as of one who risks the sacrifice of

earnestly cherished security, he ushered his guest into the quiet room.

The gas, the small heart-shaped flames of which showed white against the dying daylight coming in through the windows, was turned low in the bracket-lamps on either side the high mantelpiece. Dominic Iglesias moved across and drew down the blinds, catching sight as he did so--between the tossing foliage of the balsam-poplars which glistened in the driving wet--of the unwinking gaselier in the Lovegroves' dining-room, on the other side of the Green. He remembered that he ought to have called on Mrs. Lovegrove and Miss Serena, and that he had been guilty of a lapse of etiquette in not having done so. But he reflected poor Miss Serena was a person whose existence it seemed so curiously difficult to bear actively in mind. Then he grew penitent, as having added discourtesy to discourtesy in permitting himself this reflection. He came back from the window, turned up the lights, drew forward an armchair and motioned Smyth to be seated; fetched a cut-glass spirit decanter, tumblers, and a syphon of soda from the sideboard and set them at his guest's elbow.

"Pray help yourself," he said. "And here, will you not smoke while we talk?"

Smyth's pale, prominent eyes had followed these preparations for his comfort with avidity, but now, the handsome character of his surroundings being fully disclosed to him, he was filled with uncontrollable envy. Silently he filled his glass, by no means stinting the amount of alcohol, gulped down half the contents of the tumbler, paused a moment, leaning his elbow on the table, and said:

"We were treated to a public exhibition of feminine cajolery in your direction, Mr. Iglesias, at the end of dinner. It occurs to me we might have been spared that. I have never had the honour of penetrating into your apartments before; but the aspect of them is quite sufficient indication as to who is the favoured member of Mrs. Porcher's establishment."

Dominic had remained standing. Hospitality demanded that he should do all in his power to secure his guest's material comfort; but there, in his opinion, immediate obligation ceased. In thus remaining standing he had a quaint sense of safeguarding the sanctities of the place. The man's tone was curiously offensive. Involuntarily Mr. Iglesias' back stiffened a little.

"I took these rooms unfurnished," he said. And then added: "May I ask what your business with me may be?"

Smyth had recourse to his tumbler again. His hand shook so that his teeth chattered against the edge of the glass.

"I am a fool," he said sullenly. "But my nerves are all to pieces. I cannot control myself. I have come here to ask a favour of you, and yet some devil prompts me to insult you. I hate you because I am driven to make use of you. And this room, in its sober luxury, emphasises the indignity of the position, offering as it does so glaring a contrast to my own quarters--here under the same roof, only one flight of stairs above--that I can hardly endure it. Life is hideously unjust. For what have you done--you, a mere Canaanite, hewer of wood and drawer of water to some grossly Philistine firm of city bankers--to deserve this immunity from anxiety and distress; while I, with my superior culture, my ambition and talents, am condemned to that beastly squeaking wire-wove mattress

upstairs, and a job-lot of furniture which some previous German waiter has ejected in disgust from his bedroom in the basement? But there--I beg your pardon. I ought to be accustomed to injustice. I have served a long enough apprenticeship to it. Only--partly, thanks to you, I own that--I have seemed to see the dawning of hope again--hope of success, hope of recognition, hope of revenge; and just on that account it becomes intolerable to run one's head against this paralysing, stultifying dead wall of poverty and debt."--He bowed himself together, and his voice broke.--"I owe Mrs. Porcher money for my miserable bed-sitting-room and my board, and I am so horribly afraid she will turn me out. The place is detestable; unworthy of me--of course it is--but I am accustomed to it. And I am not myself. I am terrified at the prospect of any change. In short, I am worn out. And they see that, those beasts of editors. The Evening Daily Bulletin has given me my conge. I have lost the last of my hack-work. It was miserable work, wholly beneath a man of my capacity; still it brought me in a pittance. Now it is gone. Practically I am a pauper, and I owe money in this house."

"I am sorry, very sorry," Iglesias said. "You should have spoken sooner. I could not force myself into your confidence; but, believe me, I have not been unmindful of my engagement. I have merely waited for you to speak."

His manner was gentle, yet he remained standing, still possessed by an instinct to thus safeguard the sanctities of the place. He paused, giving the other man time to recover a measure of composure: then he asked kindly, anxious to conduct the conversation into a happier channel: "Meanwhile, how is the play advancing? Well, I hope--so that you find solace and satisfaction in the prosecution of it."

Smyth moved uneasily, looking up furtively at his questioner.

"Oh! it is grand," he said, "unquestionable it is grand. You need have no anxiety under that head. Pray understand that anything that you may do for me in the interim, before the play is produced, is simply an investment. You need not be in the least alarmed. You will see all your money back--see it doubled, certainly doubled, probably trebled."

"I was not thinking of investments," Iglesias put in quietly.

"But I am," Smyth asserted. "Naturally I am. You do not suppose that I should accept, still less ask, your help, unless I was certain that in the end I should prove to be conferring, rather than incurring, a favour? You humiliate me by assuming this attitude of disinterested generosity. Let me warn you it does not ring true. Moreover, in assuming it you do not treat me as an equal; and that I resent. It is mean to take advantage of my sorrows and my poverty, and exalt yourself thus at my expense. Of course I understand your point of view. From your associations and occupations you must inevitably worship the god of wealth. One cannot expect anything else from a business man. You gauge every one's intellectual capacity by his power of making money. Well, wait then--just wait; and when that play appears, see if I do not compel you to rate my intellectual capacity very highly. For there are thousands in that play, I tell you--tens of thousands. It is only in the interim that I am reduced to this detestable position of dependence. I know the worth of my work, if----"

But Iglesias' patience was beginning to wear rather thin. He interposed calmly, yet with authority.

"Pardon me," he said, "but it is irrelevant to discuss my attitude of mind or my past occupations. It will be more agreeable for us, both now and in the future, to treat any matters that arise between us as impersonally as possible. Therefore, I will ask you to tell me, simply and clearly, how much you require to clear you from immediate difficulty; and I will tell you, in return, whether I am in a position to meet your wishes or not."

For a moment Smyth sat silent, his hands working nervously along the arms of the chair.

"You understand it is merely a temporary accommodation?"

"Yes," Iglesias answered. "I understand. And consequently it is superfluous to indulge in further discussion."

"You want to get rid of me," Smyth snarled. "Everyone wants to get rid of me; I am unwelcome. The poor and unsuccessful always are so, I suppose. But some day the tables will be turned--if I can only last."

And Dominic Iglesias found himself called upon to rally all his humanity, all his faith in merciful dealing and the reward which goes along with it. For it was hard to give, hard to befriend, so thankless and ungracious a being. Yet, having put his hand to the plough, he refused to look back. He had inherited a strain of fanaticism which took the form of unswerving loyalty to his own word once given. So he spoke gravely and kindly, as one speaks to the sick who are beyond the obligation of showing courtesy for very suffering. And truly, as he reminded himself, this man was grievously sick; not only physically from insufficient food, but morally from disappointment and that most fruitful source of disease, inordinate and unsatisfied vanity.

"I do not wish to get rid of you; I merely wish to take the shortest and simplest way to relieve you of your more pressing anxieties, and so enable you to give yourself unreservedly to your work. Want may be a wholesome spur to effort at times; but it is difficult to suppose any really sane and well-proportioned work of art can be produced without a sense of security and of leisure."

"How do you come to know that? It is not your province," Smyth said sharply.

Mr. Iglesias permitted himself to smile and raise his shoulders slightly.

"I come of a race which, in the past, has given evidence of no small literary and artistic ability. The experience of former generations affects the thought of their descendants, I imagine, and illuminates it, even when these are not gifted individually with any executive talent."

For some minutes Smyth sat staring moodily in front of him. At last he rose slowly from his chair.

"I am an ass," he said, "a jealous, suspicious, ungrateful ass. It is more than ever hateful to me to ask a favour of you, just because you are forbearing and generous. I wish to goodness I could do without your help; but I can't. So let me have twenty-five pounds. Less would not be of use to me. I should only have to draw on you again, and I do not care to do that. Look here, can I have it in notes?"

"Yes," said Mr. Iglesias.

"I prefer it so. There might have been difficulties in cashing a cheque. Moreover, it is unpleasant to me that your name, that any name, should appear. It is only fair to save my self-respect as far as you can."

Then, as Dominic put the notes into his hand, he added, and his voice was aggressive again and quarrelsome in tone: "I don't apologise. I don't

explain. I do not even thank you. Why should I, since I simply take it as a temporary accommodation until my play is finished--my great play, which is going--I swear before God it is going--not only to cancel this paltry debt, but a far more important one, the debt I owe to my own genius, and justify me once and forever in the eyes of the whole English-speaking world."

With that he shambled out of the room, letting the handle of the door slip so that it banged noisily behind him.

For a while Dominic Iglesias remained standing before the fireplace. He was sad at heart. He had given generously, lavishly, out of proportion, as most persons reckon charitable givings, to his means. But, though the act was in itself good, he was sensible of no responsive warmth, no glow of satisfaction. The transaction left him cold; left him, indeed, a prey to disgust. Not only were the man's faults evident, but they were of so unpleasant a nature as to neutralise all gladness in relieving his distress. Mechanically Iglesias straightened the chair which his guest had so lately occupied, put away tumbler and spirit decanter, pulled up the blind and opened one of the tall narrow windows, set the door giving access to his bed-chamber wide, and opened a window there, too, so creating a draught right through the apartment from end to end. He desired to clean it both of a physical and a moral atmosphere which were displeasing to him. And, in so doing, he let in, not only the roar of London, borne in a fierce crescendo on the breath of the wind, but a strange multitudinous rustling from the sombre foliage and stiff branches of the lonely cedar tree. Two limbs, crossing, sawed upon one another as the wind took them, uttering at intervals a long-drawn complaint--not weakly, but rather with virility, as of a strong man chained and groaning against his fetters.

The sound affected Dominic Iglesias deeply, begetting in him an almost hopeless sense of isolation. The vapid talk at dinner, poor little Mrs. Porcher's misplaced advances--the fact of which it appeared to him equally idle to deny and fatuous to admit--the dreary scene with his unhappy fellow-lodger, the good deed done which just now appeared fruitless--all these contributed to make the complaint of the exiled cedar's tormented branches an echo of the complaint of his own heart. For a long while he listened to these voices of the night, the great city, the great tree, the wind and the wet; and listening, by degrees he rallied his patience in that he humbled himself.

"After all, I have been little else but self-seeking," he said, half aloud. "For I gave not to the man, but to myself. I clutched at a personal reward, if not of spoken gratitude yet of subjective content. It has not come. I suppose I did not deserve it."

And then, somehow, his thoughts turned to that other human creature who, though in a very different fashion to de Courcy Smyth the unsavoury, had

claimed his help. He thought not of her over-red lips, but of her wise eyes; not of her irrepressible effervescence and patter, but of her serious moments and of the honesty and courage which at such moments appeared to animate her. About a fortnight ago he had called at the little flower-bedecked house on the confines of Barnes Common, but had obtained no response to his ringing. He supposed she was engaged, or possibly away. With a certain proud modesty he had abstained from renewing his visit. But now, listening to the roar of London and the complaint of the cedar tree, he turned to the thought of her as to something of promise, of possible comfort, of equal friendship, in which there should be not only help given, but help received.

CHAPTER XIII

Dominic Iglesias stood on Hammersmith Bridge looking upstream. The temperature was low for the time of year, the sky packed with heavy-bosomed indigo-grey clouds in the south and west, whence came a gusty wind chill with impending rain. The light was diffused and cold, all objects having a certain bareness of effect, deficient in shadow. The weather had broken in the storm of the preceding night; and, though it was but early September, summer was gone, autumn and the melancholy of it already present--witness the elms in Chiswick Mall splotched with raw umber and faded yellow. The tide had still about an hour to flow. The river was dull and leaden, save where, near Chiswick Eyot, the wind meeting the tide lashed the surface of it into mimic waves, the crests of which, flung upward, showed against the gloomy stretch of water beyond, like pale hands raised heavenward in despairing protest. Steam-tugs, taking advantage of the tide, laboured up-stream in the teeth of the wind, towing processions of dark floats and barges. Long banners of smoke, ragged and fleeting, swept wildly away from the mouths of the tall chimneys of Thorneycroft's Works, which rose black into the low, wet sky. The roadway of the huge suspension bridge quivered under the grind of the ceaseless traffic, while the wind cried in the massive pea-green painted iron-gearing above. There was a sense of hardly restrained tumult, of conflict between nature and the multiple machinery of modern civilisation, the two in opposition, alike victims of an angry mood. And Iglesias stood watching that conflict among the crowd of children, and loafers, and decrepit, who to-day--as every day--thronged the foot-way of the bridge.

Poppy St. John stood on the foot-way, too. She had crossed from the southern side. But, though by no means insensible to the spirit or the details of the scene around her, she was less engaged in watching the drama of the stormy afternoon than in watching Dominic Iglesias--as yet unconscious of her presence. His tall, spare, shapely figure, grave, clean-shaven face, and calm, self-recollected manner--which removed him so singularly from the purposeless neutral-tinted human beings close about him--delighted her artistic sense.

"If one had caught him young," she said to herself, "if one had only caught him young, heavenly powers, what a time one might have had, and yet stayed good--oh! very quite good indeed!"

Then she made her way between much undeveloped and derelict humanity.

"Look at me, dear man," she said, "look at me--really I am worth it. I got home late last night and I was possessed by a great longing to see you.--Excuse my shouting, but things in general are making such an infernal clatter.--I was determined to see you. I set my whole mind to making you come. And I felt so sure you must come that this afternoon I have journeyed thus far to meet you. And here you are, and here I am."

Poppy stood before him bracing her back against the hand-rail of the bridge.

"Tell me, are you glad?" she said.

And Dominic Iglesias, surprised, yet finding the incident curiously natural, answered simply:

"Yes, I am, very glad."

"That's all right," she rejoined; "because, after all, coming was a pretty lively act of faith on my part. I have superstitious turns at times; and the weather, and things that had happened, had made me feel pretty cheap somehow. I don't mind telling you as you are here that if you'd failed me there would have been the devil to pay. I should have been awfully cut up."

Iglesias still smiled upon her. Poppy presented herself under a new aspect to-day, and that aspect found favour in his sight. She was no longer the Lady of the Windswept Dust, arrayed in fantastic flowery hat and trailing skirts, but was clothed in trim black workman-like garments, which revealed the delicate contours of her figure and gave her an unexpected air of distinction. Yet, though charmed, the caution of pride--which, in his case, was also the caution of modesty--made him a trifle shy in addressing her. He paused before speaking, and then said, with a certain hesitancy:

"I fancy my attitude of mind last night was the complement of your own. I, too, had fallen on rather evil days. I wanted to see you. I came out this afternoon to find you. If I had failed to do so, it would have gone a little hard with me, too, I think."

Poppy looked at him questioningly, intently, for a minute, her teeth set. Then she whirled round, leaned her elbows on the hand-rail, pulled her handkerchief out of the breast pocket of her smartly fitting coat and dabbed her eyes with it, finely indifferent to possible comment or observation.

Iglesias remained immediately behind her, but a little to the right, so as to save her from being jostled by the passers-by. He had a sense of being only the more alone with her because of the traffic and the crowd; a sense, moreover, of dependence on her part and protection on his; a sense, in a way, of her belonging to him and he to her. And this was very sweet to him, solemnly sweet, as are all things of beauty and moment holding in them the promise of enduring result. Old Age ceased to threaten and Loneliness to haunt. Over Iglesias' soul passed a wave of thankful content.

Suddenly Poppy straightened herself up and faced him. Her lips laughed, but her eyes were wet.

"I'll play fair," she said; "by the honour of the mother that bore you, I'll play fair."

Then she laid her hand on his arm and pointed London-wards.

"Now, come along, dear man, for I have got to pull myself together somehow. Let us walk. Take me somewhere I've never been before, somewhere quiet--only let us walk."

Therefore, desiring to meet her wishes, a little way up the broad straggling street Dominic Iglesias turned off to the left into the narrow old-world lanes and alleys which lie between the river frontage and King Street West. The district is a singular one, suggestive of some sleepy little dead-alive seaport town rather than of London. Quaint water-ways, crossed by foot-bridges, burrow in between small low cottages and warehouses. Some of these have overhanging upper stories to them, are half-timbered or yellow-washed. Some are built wholly of wood. There is an all-pervading odour of tar and hempen rope. Small industries abound, though without any self-advertisement of plate-glass shop fronts. Chimney-sweeps and cobblers give notice of their presence by swinging signs. Newsvendors make irruption of flaring boards upon the pavement. Little ground-floor windows exhibit attenuated stores of tinware, string, and sweets. Modest tobacconists mount the image of a black boy scantily clothed or of a Highlander in the fullest of tartans above their doors. Cats prowl along walls and sparrows rise in flights from off the ill-paved roadways. But of human occupants there appear to be but few, and those with an unusual stamp of individuality upon them; figures a trifle strange and obsolete--as of persons by choice hidden away, voluntarily self-removed from the levelling rush and grind of the monster city. The small heavy-browed houses are very secretive, seeming to shelter fallen fortunes, obscure and furtive sins, sorrows which resist alleviation and inquiry. Seen, as to-day, under the low-hanging sky big with rain, in the diffused afternoon light, the place and its inhabitants conveyed an impression low-toned, yet distinct, finished in detail, rich though mournful in effect as some eighteenth-century Dutch picture. A linnet twittered, flitting from perch to perch of its cage at an open window. A boy, clad in an old mouse-brown corduroy coat, passed slowly, crying "Sweet lavender" shrilly yet in a plaintive cadence. Occasionally the siren of a steam-tug tore the air with a long-drawn wavering scream. Otherwise all was very silent.

And, as they threaded their way through the maze of crooked streets, Dominic Iglesias and Poppy St. John were silent also; but with the silence of intimacy and good faith, rather than with that of embarrassment or indifference. Each was very fully aware of the presence of the other. So fully aware, indeed, that, for the moment, speech seemed superfluous as a vehicle for interchange of thought. Then, as they emerged on to the open gravelled space of the Upper Mall with its low red-brick wall and stately elm trees, Poppy held out her hand to Mr. Iglesias.

"You are beautifully clever," she said. "You give me just what I wanted. I'm as steady as old Time now. But what a queer rabbit-warren of a place it is! How did you find your way?"

"I came here often, in the past," he said, "at a time when I was suffering grave anxiety. I could not leave home, after my office work was over, for more than an hour together. And in the dusk or at night,

with its twinkling and evasive lights, the place used to please me, leading as it does to the river bank, the mystery of the ebbing and flowing tide, the ceaseless effort seaward of the stream, and those low-lying spaces on the Surrey side. It was the nearest bit of nature, unharnessed, irresponsible nature, which I could get to; and it symbolised emancipation from monotonous labour and everlasting bricks and mortar. I could watch the dying of the sunset, and the outcoming of the stars, the tossing of the pale willows--there on the eyot--in the windy dusk, undisturbed. And so I have come to entertain a great fondness for it, since it tranquillised me and helped me to see life calmly and to bring myself in line with fact, to endure and to forgive."

While he spoke Poppy's hand continued to rest passively in his.

"You are a poet," she said, "and you are very good."

Dominic Iglesias smiled and shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I am neither a poet nor am I very good. Far from that. I only tried to keep faith with the one clear duty which I saw."

Poppy moved forward across the Mall and stood by the river wall, looking out over the flowing tide. It was high now, and washed and gurgled against the masonry.

"You did and suffered all that for some woman," she said. "A man like you always breaks himself for some woman. I hope she was worth it--often they aren't. Who was she? The woman you loved? Your wife?"

"The woman I loved," Iglesias answered, "but not my wife."

Poppy looked at him sharply, her eyes full of question and of fear, as though she dreaded to hear very evil tidings.

"Not your mistress?" she said. "Don't tell me that. The Lord knows I've no right to mind. But I should mind. It would be like switching off all the lights. I couldn't stand it. So, if it's that, just let us part company at once. I've no more use for you.--I know where I am now. If I go up into St. Peter's Square I can pick up a hansom and drive back home--I suppose I may as well call it home, as I have no other. And as for you, if you've any mercy in you, never let me see you again. Never come near me. I have no use for you, I tell you. So leave me to my own devices--what those devices are is no earthly concern of yours."

She paused breathless, her eyes blazing, her face very white. She seemed to have grown tall, and there was a tremendous force in her of bitterness, repudiation, and regret.

"After all," she cried, "I don't so much as know your name; and so, thank heaven, it can't be so very difficult to forget you."

Her aspect moved Iglesias strangely, seeming as it did to embody the very spirit of the angry sky, of the gloomy river, all the sorrow of the dead summer and stormy autumn light. For a moment he watched her in silence. Then he took both her hands in his and held them, smiling at her again very gently.

"No, dear friend," he said, "the woman was not my mistress. She was my mother." His voice shook a little. "I never talk of her. But I think of her always. She was very perfect and very lovely. And she suffered greatly, so greatly that it unhinged her reason. Now do you understand? For years she was mad."

CHAPTER XIV

In the month of October immediately following two events took place which, though of apparently very different magnitude and importance, intimately and almost equally--as it proved in the sequel--affected Dominic Iglesias' life. The first was the declaration of war by the South African Republics. The second was the return of Miss Serena Lovegrove to town.

Now war is, unquestionably, not a little staggering to the modern civilised conscience; and this particular war possessed the additional unpleasantness of having in it, at first sight, an element of the grotesque. It is not too much to say that it struck the majority of the British public as being of the nature of a very bad joke. For it was as though a very small and very cheeky boy, after making offensive signs, had spat in the nation's face. Clearly the boy deserved sharp chastisement for his impudence. Nevertheless, the position remained an undignified and slightly ridiculous one; and the British public proceeded to safeguard its proper pride by treating the matter as lightly as possible. It assured itself--and others--that, given a reasonable parade of strength, the small boy, blubbing, his fists in his eyes, would speedily and humbly beg pardon and promise to mind his manners in future. A few persons, it is true, remembered Majuba Hill, and doubted the small boy's immediate reduction to obedience. A few others dared to suspect that English society was suffering from wealth apoplexy and the many unlovely symptoms which, in all ages of history, have accompanied that form of seizure, and to doubt whether blood-letting might not prove salutary. Dominic Iglesias was among these. His recent observations upon and excursions into the world of fashion, stray words let drop by Poppy St. John on the one hand, and by unhappy de Courcy Smyth on the other, had begotten in him the suspicion that the sobering and sorrowful influences of war might be healthful for the body politic, just as a surgical operation may be healthful for the individual body. Next to the Jew, the Dutchman is the most stubbornly tenacious of human creatures. He is a fighting man into the bargain. Iglesias could not flatter himself that the campaign would result in an easy walk-over for so much of the British army as a supine and annoyed Government condescended to place in the field. The whole affair lay heavy on his soul. It lay there all the heavier that a few days subsequent to the declaration of war Mr. Iglesias' thought was unexpectedly swept back into the arena of speculative finance.

In the portion of his morning paper allotted to business subjects, he had lighted on a long and evidently inspired article dealing with the flotation of a company just now in process of acquiring control over extensive areas in Southeast Africa. The prospects held out to investors were of the most golden sort. The land was declared to be not only remarkably rich in precious stones and precious metals, but also adapted for corn-growing on a vast scale--thus, both above and

below the surface, promising prodigious wealth were its resources adequately developed.

Iglesias did not dispute the truth of these statements. The data quoted appeared trustworthy enough. Moreover, he was already fairly conversant with the enterprise, since Mr. Reginald Barking--that junior member of the great banking firm whose name has been mentioned in connection with strenuous modern business methods--was, to his knowledge, deeply interested in the promotion of it. That which troubled him, striking him as unsound and misleading, was the fact that the profits, as set forth in the newspaper article, were calculated--so at least it was evident to Iglesias--on the results of such development when completed, irrespective of the lapse of time required for such development; irrespective of possible and arresting accident; irrespective, too, of immediate and even protracted loss by the tying-up of huge sums of money which could yield but little or no return until the said process of development was an accomplished fact. To Iglesias' clear-seeing and logical mind the enterprise, therefore, presented itself as one of those gigantic modern gambles of which the incidental risks are emphatically too heavy, since they more often than not make rich men poor, and poor men paupers, before they come through--if, indeed, they even come through at all.

Reginald, in virtue of his youth, his energy, and relentless concentration of purpose, had rapidly become the ruling spirit of the house of Barking Brothers & Barking. Iglesias had no cause to love him, since to him he owed his dismissal. But that fact failed to colour his present meditations. Under the influence of his cherished and new-found charity, Dominic had little time or inclination for personal resentment. Too, the habits of the best part of a lifetime cannot be thrown aside in a day. Directly he touched business on the large scale, it became to him serious and imposing. And so the future of the firm and the issue of its operations, in face of current events, concerned him deeply, all the more that he gauged Reginald Barking's temper of mind and proclivities.

The young man's father--now happily deceased--had offered an instructive example of social and religious survival--survival, to be explicit, of the once famous Clapham Sect, and that in its least agreeable aspect. His theology was that of obstinately narrow misinterpretation of the Scriptures; his piety that of self-invented obligations; his virtue that of unsparing condemnation of the sins of others. His domestic morality was Hebraic--death kindly playing into his hands in regard of it. He married four times--Reginald, the only child of his fourth marriage, having the further privilege of being his only son. The boy was delicate and of a strumous habit. This fact, combined with his parents' ingrained conviction that a public school is synonymous, morally speaking, with a common sewer, caused his education to be conducted at home by a series of tutors as undistinguished by birth as by scholarship--tentative apologetic young men, the goal of whose ambitions was a wife and a curacy, failing which they resigned themselves to the post of usher in some ultra-Protestant school. Sport in all its forms, art and literature, being alike forbidden, the boy's hungry energy had found no reasonable outlet. He had been miserable, peevish, ailing, until at barely eighteen--after a discreditable episode with a scullery-maid--he had been shipped off to New York to learn business in the house of certain brokers and bill-discounters with whom Messrs. Barking Brothers had extensive financial relations. Life in the land of the Puritans was

not, even at that time of day, inevitably immaculate. Freedom from parental supervision and the American climate went to the lad's head. He passed through a phase of commonplace but secret vice, emerging there-from with an unblemished social reputation; a blank scepticism in matters religious, combined with bitter animosity against the Deity whom he declared non-existent; and a fiercely driving ambition, not so much for wealth in itself, as for that control over the destinies of men, and even of nations, with which wealth under modern conditions endows its possessor. He was a pale, dry, lizard-like young man, suggesting light without heat, and excitement without emotion. Early in his career he recognised that the great sources of wealth and power lie with the younger countries, in the development of their natural and industrial resources, of their railways and other forms of transport. The phenomenal advance of America, for example, was due to her enormous territory and the opportunities of expansion, with the bounds of nationality, which this afforded her people. But he also recognised that America was essentially for the Americans, and that it was useless for an outsider, however skilful, however even unscrupulous, to pit his business capacity against that of the native born. His dreams of power and speculative activity directed themselves, consequently, to the British Colonies, and to those as yet unappropriated spaces of the earth's surface where British influence is still only tentatively present.

Meanwhile he had espoused Miss Nancy Van Reenan, daughter of a famous transatlantic merchant prince, first cousin, it may be added, to the beautiful Virginia Van Reenan whose marriage with Lawrence Rivers, of Stoke Rivers in the county of Sussex, so fluttered the smartest section of New York society a few years ago. He returned to England in the spring of 1897, convinced that America had taught him, commercially speaking, all there was to know. This knowledge he prepared to apply to waking up the venerable establishment in Threadneedle Street, while employing the unimpeachable respectability and solvency of the said establishment as a lever towards the realisation of his own far-reaching ambitions. He brought with him from the United States, in addition to his elegant wife, two dry, pale children, whose contours were less Raphaelesque than gnat-like, and the acuteness of whose critical faculty was very much more in evidence than that of their affections. These bright little results of modernity and applied science--in the shape of the incubator--took their place in the social movement, at the ages of three and five respectively, with the hard and chilling assurance of a world-weary man and woman. They never exhibited surprise. They rarely exhibited amusement. They were radically disillusioned. They frequently referred to their nerves and their digestions, in the interests of which they consistently repudiated every form of excess.

With these rather terrible little gentry Dominic Iglesias was, happily for himself, unacquainted; but with their father he was very well acquainted, as has already been stated. Hence his fears. Folding his newspaper together, he laid it on the table and proceeded to walk meditatively up and down his sitting-room. The morning was keen with sunshine, the leaves of the planes and balsam-poplars fell in brown and yellow showers upon the Green, on the further side of which the details of the red and yellowish grey houses stood out in high relief of sharp-edged light and shadow. Mr. Iglesias had risen in a hopeful frame of mind. Of late it had become his habit to call weekly on Poppy St. John. Today was the one appointed for his visit. Since he had spoken to her about his mother his friendship with Poppy St. John had

entered upon a new phase. It was no longer experimental, but absolute, the more so that she had in no way presumed upon his confidence. He felt very safe with her--safe to tell or safe to withhold as inclination should move him. And in this there was a strange and delicate lessening of the burden of his loneliness, without any encroachment on his pride. He had found, moreover, that behind her patter lay an unexpected acquaintance with public affairs and the tendencies of current events, so that it was possible to talk on subjects other than personal with her. He was coming to have much faith in her judgment as well as in her sincerity of heart. And, so, with the prospect of seeing her before him, Dominic had risen in the happiest disposition, had so remained till the newspaper article disturbed his mind. For what, as he asked himself, did it portend, this extravagant puff of the company's lad and the company's prospects, at this particular juncture? Why was it so urgently and eloquently forced upon the market just now? Was it but another proof of the contemptuous attitude adopted by Englishmen of all classes towards the Boer Republics? Or did it take its origin very much elsewhere--namely, in the fact that Reginald Barking had so deeply involved the capital and pledged the credit of the firm that it became necessary to make violent and doubtfully honest bid for popular support before the position of the said firm, through difficulty and accident induced by war, became desperate?

This last solution of the perplexing question aroused all Mr. Iglesias' loyalty towards his old employers. He saw before them the ugly possibility of failure and disgrace. The mere phantom of the thing hurt him as unseemly, as a shame and dishonour to those who in their corporate capacity had benefited him, and therefore as a shame and dishonour, at least indirectly, to himself. The thought agitated him. He needed to take council with someone; and so, pushed by a necessity of immediate action uncommon to him, he laid hands on hat and coat and set forth to talk matters over with his old friend and former colleague, George Lovegrove.

Out of doors the air was stimulating. The voice of London had a tone of urgency in it, as the voice of the young and strong who court the coming of stirring events.

"The moods of the monstrous mother are inexhaustible," Iglesias said to himself. "She is changeful as the great ocean. To-day she is virile, and shouts for battle--. well, it may be she will get her fill of that before many months are out!"

Then the thought of his afternoon visit returned upon him. If the air would remain as exhilarating, the sunshine as daring as now, these would heighten enjoyment.

Mr. Iglesias smiled to himself, an emotion of tenderness mingling with his anxiety. He felt very much alive, very ready to meet any demand which the future might make on him--battle for him, too, perhaps, and at this moment he welcomed the thought of it! Thus, a little exalted in spirit, Dominic walked on rapidly across the Green between the iron railings, conscious of colour, of light, and of sound; but unobservant of the details of his immediate surroundings, until a drifting female figure barred his path, undulating uncertainly before him. He moved to the right to let it pass. It moved to the right also. He moved to the left, it did so, too.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Oh!" cried Serena Lovegrove.

"I beg your pardon," Iglesias repeated, raising his hat. "Excuse me, I did not see who it was."

"How very odd!" Serena remarked. She stood still in the middle of the path. Her eyes snapped. Her silk petticoat rustled. Serena was very particular about her petticoats. It gave her great moral and social support to hear them rustle. "How very odd!" she said again. "Did you not know that I had come back?"

Dominic might truthfully have replied that he did not know that she had ever gone away; but he abstained.

"It must be a great pleasure to your cousins to have you with them," he said courteously.

Serena looked at the falling leaves.

"I wonder whether it is--I mean I wonder whether it is a pleasure to them, or whether they ask me out of a sense of duty." She paused, gazing at Mr. Iglesias. "Of course, I know George has a strong regard for me, and for Susan. It is only natural, as we are first cousins. But I am not sure about Rhoda. Of course we never heard of Rhoda until she married George."

"She has made him an excellent wife," Iglesias put in.

"I suppose she has," Serena said reflectively. "But I sometimes wonder whether, if George had married somebody else, it might not have been more satisfactory in some ways."

Serena felt very proud in making this remark. It elicited no reply, however, from Mr. Iglesias.

"I wonder if he really sees that Rhoda is on a different level from us, and won't admit it; or whether he doesn't see. If he doesn't see, of course that means a good deal."

"Do you usually go out walking in the morning?" Dominic inquired. The silence was becoming protracted. Courtesy demanded that he should break it.

Serena looked at him with heightened intelligence.

"We were always brought up to take a walk twice a day. Mamma was very particular about it. She believed that health had so much to do with regular exercise. Sometimes I wonder whether she did not carry that too far. But, of course, Susan is very strong, much stronger than I am. I believe she would have been strong in any case, even if mamma had not insisted on our taking so much exercise." Serena paused. "But I did not know you went out in the morning. That is, I mean I have never seen you go out before."

"Indeed," Iglesias exclaimed, a little startled at the close observation of his habits implied by this remark.

"No," she said; "of course one can see Cedar Lodge very plainly from George's house, and I often look out of window. I think it among the pleasures of London to look out of window. I have never seen you go out in the morning before." Again she paused, adding reflectively: "It really seems rather odd that neither George nor Rhoda should have told you that I had come back."

To this remark no suitable answer suggested itself. Moreover, Mr. Iglesias was growing slightly impatient. He wished she would see fit to move aside and let him pass.

"You will get cold standing here," he said. "You must not let me detain you any longer."

Serena's eyes snapped. She was excited. She was also slightly offended. "He is very abrupt," she said to herself; but she did not move aside and let him pass. "Yes, he is abrupt," she repeated; "still, he has a very good manner. If one didn't know that he had been a bank clerk, I wonder if one would detect it. I don't think it would be a thing that need be mentioned, for instance, at Slowby. Only Susan would be sure to make a point of mentioning it. Susan has an idea she owes it to herself to be truthful. Of course, it would be wrong to deny that anyone had been a bank clerk; but that is different from telling everybody. I wonder if Susan would feel obliged to tell everybody."

When she reached the near side of the Green, Serena looked back. Mr. Iglesias was in the act of entering the Lovegroves' front door, which the worthy George held open for him. Serena stood transfixed.

"So he was going there!" she said to herself. "How extraordinary not to mention it to me. What could have been his object in not mentioning it? I wonder if he has only gone to see George, or to see Rhoda as well. If he has gone to see Rhoda, then I think he has been exceedingly rude to me. And he has been very short-sighted, too, if he didn't want me to know, for he might have taken it for granted that of course I should look back. Unless he did do it on purpose, meaning to be rude. But--"

Serena resumed her walk. She was very much excited.

"Of course he may have done it on purpose that I should see, and understand that he meant something special--that he was going to speak to George and Rhoda about something in particular, which he could not say before me. He may have wanted to sound them. But then it is so very odd that he should have said that George had never told him I had come back. But I don't believe he ever did say that." Serena was growing more and more excited. She drifted along the pavement, in her rustling petticoats, with the most unusually animated expression of countenance.

"I remember--of course he did not say it. He avoided the question each time. How very extraordinary! I think he must mean me to understand something by that. I wonder if George will refer to it at luncheon. If he does I must find out from Rhoda, but without letting her suspect that I observed anything, of course."

Serena had quite ceased to be offended. Her fancy, indeed, had taken a most wildly ingenious flight. She felt very remarkable, very acute,

quite dangerous, in short--and these sensations, however limited their justification by fact, were highly agreeable to her.

CHAPTER XV

The heavens remained clear, the air exhilarating, and Iglesias set forth on his weekly pilgrimage in a serene frame of mind. George Lovegrove's view had been reassuring.

"I know you are much more far-sighted than I am," he had said, his honest face beaming with combined cleanliness and affection, "so I always hesitate to set up my opinion against yours. It would be presumptuous. Still, you do surprise me. I never had an inkling of anything of the sort; and between ourselves--for I should never hint at the subject before the wife, you know--it might upset her, females are so sensitive--but between ourselves it would fairly unman me to think there could be any unsoundness in Barking Brothers & Barking. You know the phrase current in the city about them--'as safe as the Bank of England'? And I have always believed that. I know I left before Mr. Reginald had any active share in the business, and I never have cared about American speculation. It is all beyond me. Still I cannot suppose the senior partners would let him have too much his own way. Depend upon it, Sir Abel keeps an eye on him. And then as to this war, of course you have studied it all more deeply than I have the power to do; still I cannot help thinking you distress yourself unnecessarily. As I said to the wife when I first heard of it, it's suicidal. One can only feel pity for such poor ignorant creatures, rushing headlong on their ruin. Depend upon it, they will very soon come to their senses and deplore their own rash action. A very few weeks will see the finish of it all. I only hope there will not be much bloodshed first, for of course they couldn't stand up against English troops for an hour, poor things."

Encouraged by which cheerful optimism Dominic Iglesias began to think his fears exaggerated, as he descended from an omnibus top at Hammersmith Bridge that afternoon, crossed the river, and walked on down the long suburban road. The sky was sharply blue. Multicoloured leaves danced down from the trees in the villa gardens. Gaily clad children, pursued by anxious mothers and nursemaids, ran and shouted, the sunshine and fresh air having gone to their heads. Perched on the brick pier of an entrance gate, a robin uplifted its voice in piercingly sweet song. Autumn wore her fairest face, speaking of promise rather than of decay. It was good to be alive. Even to Mr. Iglesias' sober and chastened spirit horror of war, disgrace of financial failure, seemed remote and inconsiderable things, morbid delusions such as sane men brush aside scorning to give them harbourage so much as of thought.

Poppy was mirthful, too, in her greeting of him.

"My dear man," she cried, "the house is out of windows! You find us in the throes of a great domestic event. Cappadocia has done her duty by posterity. She has been brought to bed, if you'll excuse my mentioning it, of four puppies. Perfect little lambs, not a white hair among them. And she shows true maternal feeling, does Cappadocia. Whenever

you go near her she tries to bite."

Poppy spoke very fast, holding his hand, looking him full in the face, her singular eyes very gentle in expression, yet all alight.

"Ah! it's good to see you. My stars, but it is good to see you," she said.

And Dominic, moved beyond his wont, stood silent for a space.

"You're not offended? Surely, at this time of the day, you're not going to stiffen up?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No, no, dear friend," he said; "but this greeting is a little wonderful to me. Except my mother, years ago, nobody has ever cared whether I came or went."

"More fools they," Poppy answered, with a fine disregard of grammar. "But all that's over now. You know it's over. All the same I can't be altogether sorry it was so, because it gives me my chance.--Sit down; I'll expound to you. Let us talk.--You see, my beautiful innocent, with most men worth knowing--I am not talking about boys running about with the shell still on their heads and more affections to place than they can find a market for, but men. Well then, with most all of them, when one comes to discuss matters, one finds one's had such an awful lot of predecessors. At best one comes in a bad third--more often a bad three-and-twentieth--I mean nothing risky. Don't be nervous. But they have romantic memories of half-a-dozen women. And so, though they are no end nice and kind to one, play up and give one a good time and have a jolly good one themselves--trust 'em to take care of that--one knows all the while, if one knows anything, that the whole show's merely a rechauffe. Visions of Clara and Gladys, and dear little Emily, and Rosina, and Beatrice, and the lovely Lucinda--angels, every one of them, if you haven't seen them for ten years, and wouldn't know them again if you met them in the street--haunt the background of every man's mind by the time he's five-and-thirty, and cut entrancing capers against the sky-line, so that--when one comes to thrash the matter out--one finds the actually present woman, here in the foreground, hasn't really any look-in at all."

Poppy threw her head back against the yellowish red cushions of the settee, her teeth showing white as she laughed.

"Boys aren't worth having. They're too crude, too callow. Moreover, it isn't playing the game. One doesn't want to make a mess of their futures, poor little chaps. And grown men, except as I say of the very preengaged sort, are not to be had. So don't you understand, most delightful lunatic, how it comes to pass that you and your friendship are precious to me beyond words? When you go I could cry. When you come I could dance."

Her tone changed, becoming defiant, almost fierce.

"And it is all right," she said, "thank heaven, right,--right, clean, and honest, and good for one's soul. Now I've done. Only we are very happy in our own quaint way, aren't we? And we can leave it at that. Oh, yes, we can very well leave it at that if"--she looked sideways at

Mr. Iglesias, her expression half-humorous, half-pathetic--"if only it will stay at that and not play the mischief and scuttle off into something quite else."

She got up quickly, with a little air of daring and bravado.

"I must move about. I must do something--there, I'll make up the fire. No, sit still, dear man"--as Dominic prepared to rise also--"I like doing little odd jobs with you here. It takes off the company feeling, and makes it seem as if you belonged, and like the bicycle, had 'come to stay.'"

Poppy threw a couple of driftwood logs upon the smouldering fire. Around them sharp tongues of flame--rose and saffron, amber, sea-green, and heliotrope, glories as of a tropic sunset--leaped upward. She stood watching these, her left hand resting on the edge of the mantelpiece, her right holding up the front of her black skirt. Her right foot rested on the fender curb, thereby displaying a discreet interval of openwork silk stocking and a neatly cut steel-buckled shoe. The many-hued firelight flickered over her dark figure; over the soft lace jabot at her throat and ruffles at her wrists; over her pale profile; and glinted in the heavy masses of her hair. The room, facing east, was cold with shadow, which the thin fantastic colours of the flames appeared to emphasise rather than to relieve. And Iglesias, obedient to her entreaty, sat quietly waiting until it should again please her to speak. For he had begun to accept her many changes of mood as an integral element of her personality--a personality rich in rapid and subtle contradictions. Often he had no clue to the meaning of these many changes. But he did not mind that. Not absence of vulgar curiosity alone, but an unwilling sub-conscious shrinking from any too close acquaintance with the details of her life contributed to render him passive. He had a conviction, though he had never formulated it even in thought, that ignorance in relation to her made for security and content. And there was a refined charm in this--namely, that each to the other, even while friendship deepened, should remain something of an undiscovered country. Moreover, had she not told him that he rested her? To ask questions, however sympathetic, to volunteer consolation, however delicately worded, is to risk being officious; and to be officious, in however mild a degree, is to drive away the shy and illusive spirit of rest. And so Dominic Iglesias was coming, in the good nautical reading of that phrase, simply "to stand by" and wait where this woman was concerned. After all, it was but the reapplication of a lesson learned long ago for the support and solace of another woman, by him supremely loved. To act thus was, therefore, not only natural but poignantly sweet to him, as a new and gentle offering laid upon the dear altar of his dead. It rejoiced him to find that now, as of old, the demand created a supply of silent but sustaining moral force, ready to pass into the sphere of active help should necessity arise.

Nevertheless as the minutes passed, while daylight and firelight alike began to fade, Dominic Iglesias grew somewhat troubled and sad. And it was with a distinct movement of relief that he, at last, saw Poppy draw herself up, push the soft masses of her hair back from her forehead with a petulant gesture, and turn towards him. As she did so she let her hands drop at her sides, as though she had finished with and dismissed some unwelcome form of thought, while her face showed wan, and her eyes large and vague, as though they saw beyond and through all that which they actually looked on.

"There, there," she said harshly, with an angry lift of her head, "what a silly fool I am, wasting time like this when you are here. But my soul went out of my body; and I could afford to let it go, just because you were here, and I felt safe." Her tone softened. "Sure I don't bore you?" she asked.

Dominic shook his head, smiling.

"Very sure," he said.

"Bless you, then that's all right." Poppy strolled back and sat down languidly. "I've gone confoundedly tired," she said. "You see, I sat up half the night acting Gamp to Cappadocia--if you excuse my again alluding to the domestic event.--Oh! my being tired doesn't matter. My dear man, I'm never ill. I'm as strong as a horse. Let's talk of something more interesting--let's review the topics of the hour--only for the life of me I can't remember what the topics of the hour are! Yes, I know though--the management of the Twentieth Century Theatre has given Dot Parris a leading part. Does that leave you cold? Impossible! Why, in theatrical circles it's a world-shaking event. I own I'm curious to see how she does in legitimate drama, after her career in musical comedy and at the halls, myself. I'm really very fond of her, poor little Dot. She's going to call herself Miss Charlotte Colthurst in the future, I understand. Did you ever hear such cheek? But then she always had the cheek of the old gentleman himself, and that makes for success. Cheek does go an awfully long way towards bringing you through, don't you think so?"

"Probably," Dominic said. "My opportunities of exercising that particular form of virtue have been so limited that I am quite prepared to accept your ruling on the point."

Poppy laughed softly, looking at him with a great friendliness.

"Ah! but it wouldn't have been cheek in your case, anyhow. It would merely have been that you stepped into your right place, ascended any throne that happened to be right divine. I can see you doing it, so statelily and yet so innocently. It would be a perfectly delicious sight. I believe you will do it yet, some day, somehow, and make a lot of people sit up. But that reminds me, joking apart, there is a topic of the hour I wanted to ask you about. Tell me what you think of this war."

And Dominic Iglesias, once more obedient to her changing mood, replied with quiet sincerity:

"I am told I am an alarmist. I hope I may prove to be so, for in this matter I should much prefer the optimists to be in the right. But I confess I do not like the outlook. Both on public and private grounds this war makes me anxious."

Poppy's languor had vanished. She had grown very much alive again. Now she leaned forward, pressing her hands together, palm to palm, between her knees, and making herself small, as a child does when it is deeply in earnest and wants to think.

"You're right," she assented. "I'm perfectly certain all this cocksure Johnny-head-in-air business, 'sail to-day and see you again at tea

tomorrow, so it's not worth while saying good-by'--you know the style?--is fatuous and idiotic. It is not bluff, because the English officer-man doesn't bluff. He hasn't the brains, to begin with, and then he is a very sound sort of an animal. He doesn't need to hide his fright for the simple reason that he's not frightened. A friend of mine was talking about it all yesterday. He thinks as you do, and he's no silly, though he is a member of the House of Lords.--After all, he can't help that, poor dear old chap," she added apologetically, looking sideways at Mr. Iglesias. "But there, you've seen him, I believe. You met him the first time you came here. Don't you remember, I had to turn you out because I had to see him on business, and you ran across him in the hall as you were going?"

"I remember meeting someone," Dominic said, rather loftily. He did not want to hear any more. The conversation had become displeasing to him, though he could have given no reason for his displeasure. But Poppy suddenly turned mischievous and naughty. She patted her hands gently together between her knees and swayed with rather impish merriment.

"Ah, of course you were much too grand to take any particular notice of him, poor brute. But he wasn't a bit too grand to take a lot of notice of you. He was fearfully impressed. Yes, I tell you he was. Don't be cross. I am speaking the veracious truth. I give you my word I'm not gassing. He was awfully keen to know who you were, and where you came from, and how I met you. And it was the sweetest thing out to be able to reply that I'd been introduced to you on a bench--a mighty uncomfortable one, too, with no back to it!--on Barnes Common by Cappadocia; and that as to your name and local habitation I hadn't the faintest ghost of a notion what they were. Are you cross? Don't be cross," Poppy pleaded.

"No, no, of course not," Mr. Iglesias answered, goaded from his habitual calm and speaking almost sharply.

Poppy patted her palms together again, swaying backwards and forwards. Her eyes were dancing.

"Oh! but you are, though," she cried. "You're just a wee bit jealous. You are--you know you are, and I'm not a scrap sorry. On the contrary, I'm enchanted. For it shows that you are human after all, and must have a name and address tucked away somewhere about you. I don't want to know what they are, but it's comfortable to be assured of their existence. It shows you don't drop straight down from heaven--as I was beginning to be afraid you did--once a week, into the Mortlake Road, and then go straight up again. It shows that I could get on to you by post, or telephone, or other means of communication common to mortals, if I was in a tight place and really wanted you, without walking as far as Hammersmith Bridge and waiting in the wind and the wet on the bare chance you might take it into your august head to materialise, and break out of paradise, and take a little stroll round our sublunary sphere."

For a moment Poppy laid her hand lightly on Mr. Iglesias' shoulder.

"Yes, be cross," she repeated. "Just as cross as ever you like, so long as you don't keep it up too protractedly. It's the most engaging piece of flattery I've come across for a month of Sundays. Only you needn't worry in this particular instance, dear man, I give you my word you needn't. It's a sheer waste of feeling. For Fallowfeild's

always been perfectly decent with me. I know people think him an awfully risky lot, but they're noodles. He's racketed in his day--of course he has. But if he'd been more of a hypocrite, people would have talked less. As the man says in the play, it's not the sin but the being found out which makes the scandal. And Fallowfeild was too honest. He never pretended to be better than he was. He is a man of good nature who has done wrong things, which is quite different to being a man of bad nature who does wrong things, and still more different to being a man of weak nature who pretends to do right things. That last is the sort I hate most, and I speak out of beastly intimate experience."

She made a most expressive grimace, as though she had a remarkably disagreeable taste in her mouth.

"No salvation for that sort, I believe," she went on, "either here or hereafter. Now, are you better? You do believe it has always been perfectly square and above-board between Fallowfeild and me, don't you?"

"Unquestionably, I believe it," Dominic answered. He spoke slowly.

Poppy turned her head sharply and looked hard at him.

"Ah! but I don't quite like that," she said. "I've muddled it somehow --I see I have. I've hurt and offended you. You're farther off than you were ten minutes ago. In spirit you've got up and gone away. I have muddled it. I have made you distrust me."

"No," Dominic answered, "you have not made me distrust you; but you have perplexed me. It is the result of my own dulness, no doubt. My imagination is not agile enough to follow you, and so--"

He hesitated. That which he had in his mind was not easy to put into words without discourtesy. He would far rather have left it unsaid; but to do so would have been, in truth, to stand farther off, to erect a barrier which might prove insuperable to happy companionship in the future.

"Yes?" Poppy queried. Her voice shook just perceptibly. In the deepening dusk neither could see the other distinctly, and this contributed to Dominic's decision to speak.

"It pains me," he said at last, "if you will pardon my frankness, that you should think it necessary to account for yourself and justify yourself as you often appear to do."

"Yes?" Poppy queried again.

"That you should do so distresses and disturbs me."

"Yes," Poppy murmured.

"I am afraid I grow selfish," Iglesias went on gently; "but you have been good enough to tell me that my poor friendship is of value to you. Does it not occur to you that yours is of far greater value to me? And that for many and obvious reasons--these among others, that while you are young, and have a wide circle of acquaintances, and in a future to which, brilliant as you are, you may look forward with hope

and assurance, I am absolutely alone in the world. Save for one old school-fellow, who has been very faithful to me, there is no one to whom it matters, except in the most superficial degree, whether I live or die."

"Ah!" Poppy said softly.

"Do not misunderstand me, I do not complain," Iglesias added. "I entertain no doubt but that the circumstances in which I find myself are the right and profitable ones for me, if I only lay to heart the lessons they teach, and use the opportunities which they afford me."

"I don't know about that--I doubt that," Poppy put in hastily.

"You doubt it because you are young," he answered, "and your circumstances are capable of alteration and development. Except under very exceptional conditions, resignation is no virtue in the young. It is more often an excuse for cowardice and sloth. But at my age the world changes its complexion. My circumstances are incapable of alteration and development. They are final. Therefore I do well to accept them unreservedly. The work of my life is done. I do not say that it has been a failure, for I fulfilled the main object I had in view. But it has certainly been obscure and inglorious. The sun will sink dimly enough into a bank of fog. My present is meagre in interest and activity. My future, a brief enough one in all probability, must of necessity be meagre likewise. Therefore your friendship is of supreme importance to me."

Iglesias paused. His voice was grave, distinct, weighted with feeling. He did not look at his companion; he could not trust himself to do so, for he had discovered in himself unexpected depths of emotion.

"And just on that account," he went on, "I grow childishly nervous, childishly apprehensive if anything arises which seems to cloud or, in however small a measure, to endanger the serenity of our intercourse."

He turned and looked at her.

"This constitutes no slight to you, dear friend."

"No," she said, "very certainly it is no slight. On the contrary, it is very beautiful; but it's an awful responsibility, too."

She sat quite still, her head carried high, her hands clasped in her lap.

"I've underrated the position, I see. I've only thought of myself so far and how you pleased me. But though I'm pretty cheeky, too--almost as cheeky as little Dot--I never had the presumption to put the affair the other way about."

Poppy began to sway slightly again and pat the palms of her hands together between her knees.

"It's been a game, the finest game I've ever played; and I swore by all my gods to play fair. But, as you look at it, our friendship amounts to a good deal more than a game. It goes very deep. And I'm not sure--no, I'm not--whether I'm equal to it."

She glanced at Iglesias strangely through the clinging grey of the dusk.

"Dear unknown," she said, "I give you my word I'm frightened--I who've never been frightened at any man yet. In my own little way I've played pitch and toss with their hearts and made footballs of them--except that poor young fellow--I told you about him the first time we met--who gave me the scarf, and whose people wouldn't let him marry me. But this affair with you is different. It goes very far, it means--it means nothing short of revolution for me, of putting away and renouncing very much."

Poppy got up, stood pushing her hair back with both hands from her forehead. Then she moved across to the further side of the fireplace. Dominic had risen also. He stood on the near side of the hearth. He was penetrated with the conviction that a crisis was upon them both, involving all the happiness of their future relation to one another.

"You don't understand," Poppy cried passionately. "And I don't want you to understand--that's half the trouble. I want to keep you. Your friendship's the loveliest thing I've ever had. And yet I don't know. For I'm not one woman--I'm half-a-dozen women, and they all pull all sorts of ways so that I daren't trust myself. I want to keep you, I tell you, I want horribly to keep you. Yet I'm ghastly afraid I'm not equal to it. The price is too big."

As she spoke Poppy dashed her hand against the push of the electric bell, and held it there, ringing a prolonged alarum, in quick response to which Phillimore, the respectable elderly parlour maid, appeared, bearing two rose-shaded lamps. Noiselessly and deftly--as one accustomed to agitations, whose eyes did not see or ears hear if it should be unadvisable to permit them to do so--she drew the curtains, made up the fire, set out the tea-table. And with that change of scene and shutting out of the dusk, Poppy seemed to change also; gravity and strength of purpose departing from her, and leaving her--notwithstanding her sober dress--unreal, fictitious, artificial, the red-lipped carmine-tinted lady of the footlights, of the windswept dust and embroidered dragons again. She chattered, moreover, ceaselessly, careless of interruption, and of criticism alike.

"Here, let's hark back to the ordinary conduct of material existence," she said. "Tea? Won't you sit down? No--well, just as you like best. Take it standing. Let me see, what were we discussing when we got switched on to unexpectedly personal lines of conversation? The war--yes, I remember. I was just going to tell you that Fallowfeild believes it's going to be a nasty dragging unsatisfactory business. Everyone gasses about the Boers being a simple pastoral people. But Fallowfeild says their simplicity is just another name for guile, and that he anyway can't conceive a more disconcerting job than fighting a nation of farmers and huntsmen and gamekeepers in their own country, every inch of which they know. People say they've no military science. But so jolly much the better for them. They can be unfettered opportunists, with nothing to think of but outwitting the enemy and saving their property and their skins. The poor British Tommy will be no match for them; nor will the British officer-man either, till he's unlearned his parade-ground etiquette, and his haw-haw red-tape methods and manner, and learned their very primitive but very cute and foxy ones. By which time, Fallowfeild says, the mourning warehouses here at home will have made a record turnover, and there will be

altogether too many new graveyards for comfort in South Africa."

Poppy paused in her harangue, for Dominic Iglesias had set down his cup, its contents untasted. He was sad at heart.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "It grows late. It's time I went, I think."

"Perhaps it is." Poppy's eyes had become inscrutable. "I really ought to attend to my Gamping, and pass the time of day with Cappadocia. Her snappishness has scared the maids. They refuse to go within a measured furlong of her."

Poppy bent down over the tea-table, arranging the teacups with elaborate neatness.

"Good-by," she said. "I don't quite know when we shall meet again."

"Why?" Iglesias asked. The muscles of his throat were rigid. He had much ado to speak plainly and naturally. "Are you leaving home?"

"Home?" she answered. "Yes, I'm leaving it. Good-by again. Don't let me keep you. Certainly I'm leaving home. Indeed, I believe I have left it already--for good."

And she threw back her head and laughed.

Upon the doorstep a cold rush of air met Mr. Iglesias. Above, the sky was blue-black and very clear. The road was vacant and grey with frost. The flame of the gaslamps quivered, giving off a sharp brightness in the keen atmosphere. Mr. Iglesias turned up the collar of his coat and descended the steps. Just then a hansom emerged from the distance and drew up with a rattle and grind against the curb some twenty paces ahead. The occupant, a young man, flung back the doors with a thud, and stood a moment on the footboard paying the driver, who raised himself, leaning forward with outstretched hand across the glistening black roof of the cab. Then the young man turned round, swung himself down on to the asphalt pavement, and came forward as rapidly as a long motor-coat, reaching to his heels, would permit. He was tall and fair, well-favoured, preoccupied, not to say morose. He did not vouchsafe Mr. Iglesias so much as a glance as he brushed past him. The road was still vacant, and in the frosty air sounds carried. Mr. Iglesias distinctly heard him race up a neighbouring flight of steps, heard the click and turn of a latchkey in a lock, heard the slam of a front door pulled to violently. And so doing Dominic turned cold and a little faint. He would not condescend to look back; but he had recognised Alaric Barking, and was in no doubt which house he had entered.

"Keb, sir? 'Ere yer are, sir," the cabby called cheerily. "Very cold night. Just set one gentleman down, and 'appy to tike another up. Want to get back to my comfy little West End shelter, so I'll tike yer for 'alf fares, sir, though we are outside the blooming radius."

But Iglesias shook his head. The horse stood limply in a cloud of steam. Alaric Barking had evidently pushed the pace. But even had the animal been in better condition, Iglesias had no desire to drive in that particular cab. He would rather have walked the whole way to

Cedar Lodge.

Opposite the Bell Inn, where the roads fork--one turning away through Mortlake, the other leading to Barnes Common, Roehampton, and Sheen--the row of smart little houses degenerates into shops. By the time he reached these Mr. Iglesias discovered that he was unaccountably tired. The keen air oppressed his chest, making his breath come short. It was useless to attempt to go home on foot. Then, with a sense of relief, he saw that on the far side of the road a couple of omnibuses stood, the horses' heads turned Londonwards. He crossed, climbed the stairway of the leading vehicle slowly, and sank into a seat. The 'bustop was unoccupied, yet Dominic was not by himself. Two companions had climbed the winding stairway with him and taken their places beside him, Old Age on his left hand, Loneliness on his right. All up the long suburban road, while the omnibus bumped and jolted and the fallen leaves whirled and scurried before the searching breath of the night wind Iglesias' two companions seemed to lean across him, talking. There were tones of mockery in their talk, while behind and through it, as some discordant refrain, he heard the ring of a young man's eager footsteps, the click and turn of a latchkey, and the slam of a door as it shut. On nearing the river the cold grew intense. Crossing the bridge, the waterside lights were reflected in the surface of the stream, which ran full and strong from the autumn rains, swirling seaward with an ebbing tide. To Iglesias' eyes the reflections converted themselves into fiery dragons, writhing in the heat of deadly conflict, as upon Poppy St. John's oriental scarf. A glare hung over London, palpitating as with multitudinous and angry life; and when the omnibus slowed up in Hammersmith Broadway the voice of the streets grew loud--the monstrous city, so it seemed to Dominic Iglesias, shouting defiance to the majestic calm and solemnity of the eternal stars.

CHAPTER XVI

"He says it is nothing serious, only a slight chill; and sends kind regards and many thanks for kind inquiries, and hopes to be out in a day or two, when he will call and thank you in person."

This from George Lovegrove to his wife, the latter arrayed in garments of ceremony and seated upon the Chesterfield sofa awaiting guests. It was her afternoon at-home.

"Well, I'm sure I hope it is no more than that, Georgie," she answered comfortably. "Chills are always going about in November, and very often gentlemen encourage them--especially bachelors--by not changing into their winter vests and pants early enough. A great deal of illness is contracted that way."

Here Serena rustled audibly. She stood by the window, holding the lace curtain just sufficiently aside to get a narrow and attenuated view of the fog-enshrouded Green. The outlook was far from inspiring, and Serena was keenly interested in the conversation going forward between her host and hostess. But it was not in her programme to let this appear. She, while straining her ears to listen, therefore maintained an air of detachment. The word "pants" was, however, too much for her

fortitude, and she rustled. "Really, Rhoda does use the most dreadfully unladylike expressions sometimes," she commented inwardly. "She never seems to remember that everyone is not married, though even if they were I should hope they would not mention those sort of things. Rhoda is wanting in refinement. I wonder if George notices that and feels it. If he does notice it, I think he ought to tell her about it, because--"

But here she fell to listening again, since she said George took up his parable once more.

"Still, I own I don't like his looks somehow. His face is so thin and drawn. It reminds me of the time his mother, poor Mrs. Iglesias, died. I told him, just jocularly, that his appearance surprised me, but he put it all aside--you know he has a very high aristocratic manner at times that makes you feel you have been intrusive--and then talked of other things."

"He has lived too solitary," Mrs. Lovegrove said judicially, "too solitary, and that tells on any one in middle life. I should never forgive myself if we left him to mope. You must just try to coax him over here to stay, Georgie, and I'll nurse him up and humour him, and fortunately Serena's here, you see, for pleasant company."

Mrs. Lovegrove looked meaningfully at her spouse, while the figure at the window again rustled.

"I am sure you would exert yourself to help cheer poor Mr. Iglesias up, if he came over to stay, would you not now, Serena?" she inquired insinuatingly.

"Are you speaking to me, Rhoda?"

"Yes, about Mr. Iglesias coming here to stay."

Serena turned her head and answered over her shoulder.

"Of course you and George are quite at liberty to ask anyone here whom you like. And if Mrs. Iglesias came I should be perfectly civil to him. But I should not care, Rhoda, to bind myself to anything more than that, because I do not find him an easy person to get on with."

She turned to her contemplation of the fog with a renewed assumption of indifference. George Lovegrove's shiny forehead puckered into little lines. He looked anxiously at his wife. The good lady, however, laid a fat forefinger upon her lips and nodded her head at him in the most archly reassuring manner.

"That's funny," she said, "because Mr. Iglesias is quite the cleverest of all Georgie's gentlemen friends--except, of course, the dear vicar--and so I always took for granted anyone like yourself was sure to get on nicely with him, Serena. Even I hardly ever find him difficult to talk with."

"I never talk easily to strangers," Serena put in loftily.

"Oh! but you'd hardly call Mr. Iglesias a stranger."

"Yes, I should," Serena declared with emphasis. "I should certainly

call him a stranger. I always call everyone a stranger till I know them intimately. It is much safer to do so. And it would be absurd to pretend that I know Mr. Iglesias intimately. You, of course, do, but I do not. You and George may have seen him frequently since I have been here, but I have really seen him very seldom, four or five times at the outside. He has generally appeared to call when I was likely to be out. I could not help observing that. It may be a coincidence, of course. But I cannot pretend that I have not thought it rather marked."

Serena had advanced into the centre of the room. She held herself erect. She enjoyed making a demonstration. "Rhoda may think I am a cipher," she said to herself, "but she is mistaken. She may think I can be hoodwinked and used as a mere tool, but I will let her see that I cannot." She felt daring and dangerous, and her eyes snapped. The rustling of her skirts and the emphatic tones of her voice aroused the parrot, which had been dosing on its perch, its head sunk between its shoulders and its breast-feathers fluffed out into a little green apron over its grey claws.

"Pollie's own pet girlie," it murmured drowsily, with dry clickings of its tongue against its beak, the words jolting out in foolish twos and threes. "Hi! p'liceman--murder! fire! thieves!--there's another jolly row downstairs."

Poor George Lovegrove gazed in bewilderment from Serena to the parrot, from the parrot to his wife, and then back to Serena again.

"You do surprise me! And I am more mortified than I can say that you should have the most distant reason, Serena--or Susan either--ever to feel the least slighted in this house. You do surprise me--I can't believe it has been the least intentional on Iglesias' part. But I would not have had anything of the kind happen for twenty pounds."

"Pray don't apologise, George," Serena cried, "or I shall feel quite annoyed. Of course everyone has a right to their own preferences; but I had been led to expect something different. As I say, it may only be a coincidence. Nothing may have really been meant. Only it has seemed rather marked. But in any case it has not been your fault, George."

"I am very glad you allow that, Serena," the good creature said humbly.

"Oh! yes. I quite excuse you of any intentional slight, George. I quite trust you. Still, nothing could be more unpleasant than for me to feel that my being here put any restriction upon your friends coming to the house. Of course I know Susan and I move in rather different society from Rhoda and yourself."

"Yes," he assented hurriedly, agonised as to the wife's feelings--
"yes, yes."

"And so it is quite possible that I may not suit some of your acquaintances."

"Excuse me," he panted--"no, Serena, I cannot think that."

"I am not sure," she returned argumentatively. "Not at all sure, George. And nothing could be more unpleasant to me than to feel I was

the least in the way. Of course, I should never have come back if I had supposed I should be in the way; but Rhoda made such a point of it."

Here the parrot broke forth into prolonged and earpiercing shriekings, flapping its wings violently and nearly tumbled backwards off its perch.

"Throw a handkerchief over the poor bird's cage, Georgie dear," cried Mrs. Lovegrove from the sofa. Her face was red. She had become distressingly hot and flustered.--"And just as I was flattering myself it was all turning out so nicely, too," she said to herself.--"No, not your own, Georgie dear"--this aloud--"you may need it later. The red bandana out of the right-hand corner of the top drawer of the work-table."

"I think it would be much simpler for me to go," Serena continued, her voice pitched in a high key to combat the cries of the parrot and the rattle of the table drawer, which George Lovegrove in his present state of agitation found it impossible to shut with accuracy and despatch.

"Of course, it may inconvenience Susan to have me return sooner than she expected. She is away speaking at a number of missionary meetings in the North. And the maids will be on board wages, and the drawing-room furniture will have been put into holland covers. She counted on my staying here till I go to my cousin, Lady Samuelson, in Ladbroke Square, the third week in December. But, of course, all that must be arranged. I can give up my visit. Lady Samuelson will be annoyed, and I don't know what excuse I can make to her. Still, I think I had really much better go; and then you can have Mr. Iglesias, or any other of your and Rhoda's friends, to stop here without my feeling that I am in the way. Nothing could be more odious to me than feeling I was encroaching or forcing myself upon you. Mamma would never have countenanced such behaviour. It is the sort of thing we were always brought up to have the greatest horror of. It is a thing I never have done and never could do. I hope you understand that, George. Nothing could be further from my thoughts when I accepted Rhoda's invitation to----"

"Miss Hart, please, ma'am," the little house-parlour-maid trumpeted, her face very pink from the exertion of attracting her mistress's attention and making herself heard. Mrs. Lovegrove bounced up from the sofa. Usually, it must be allowed, the great Eliza was rather at a discount. Now she was astonishingly welcome. Her hostess's greeting, though silent, was effusively cordial. She clutched at her guest's hand as one in imminent risk of drowning at a lifebelt. The said guest was in her sprightliest humour. She was also in a scarlet flannel blouse thickly powdered with gradated black discs. This, in conjunction with purple chrysanthemums in a black hat, her tawny hair and freckled complexion, did not constitute a wholly delicious scheme of colour; but to this fact Mrs. Lovegrove was supremely indifferent.

"Good-afternoon," Miss Hart said in a stage whisper, glancing towards Serena, still bright-eyed and erect. "Don't let me interrupt, pray. My conversation will keep. I will just sit and listen."

"Listen to what?" Serena cried, almost inarticulate with indignation.

"Why, to your recitation. Our gentlemen often treat us to a little in that line of an evening, Mrs. Lovegrove, after dinner. I dote on recitation. Pieces of a comic nature specially, when well delivered."

"I should never dream of reciting," Serena declared heatedly.

"No, really now," Miss Hart returned. "That seems quite a pity. It is such a pleasant occupation for a dull afternoon like this, do you not think so, Miss Lovegrove? I declare I was quite sure, from the moment I came into the hall--while I was taking off my waterproof--that your cousin was giving you a little entertainment of that kind, Mr. Lovegrove. Her voice was running up and down in such a very telling manner."

If glances could scorch, Miss Hart would unquestionably have been reduced to a cinder, for rage possessed Serena. She had worked herself up into a fine fume of anger over purely imaginary injuries. And now, that Eliza Hart, of all people in the world, should intervene with suggestions of comic recitations!

"Detestable person!" Serena said to herself. "Her conduct is positively outrageous. Of course she knew perfectly well I was doing nothing of the kind. Really, I believe anybody would feel her manner quite insulting. I wonder how George and Rhoda can tolerate her. It shows George has deteriorated much that he should tolerate her. I am not so surprised at Rhoda. Of course she never had good taste. I think I ought to go to my room. That would mark my displeasure. But then she may have come on purpose to say something particular. I wonder if she has done so? Of course if she has, she wants to get rid of me. That is her object. But she is mistaken if she thinks that I shall gratify her. I think I owe it to myself to make sure exactly what is going on. I will certainly stay. That will show her I am on the watch."

During this protracted, though silent, colloquy, Serena had remained standing in the middle of the room. Now she rustled back to the window, held aside the lace curtain and resumed her contemplation of the fog-enshrouded Green. Good George Lovegrove gazed after her in deep dejection and perplexity. Somebody, it appeared to him, had been extremely unreasonable and disagreeable; but who that somebody was for the very life of him he could not tell. The wife was out of the question; while to suppose it Serena approached high treason. Still he was very sure it could not be that most scrupulously courteous personage Dominic Iglesias. There remained himself--"Yet I wouldn't knowingly vex a fly," he thought, "and as to vexing Serena! Sometimes ones does wish females were not quite so sensitive."

Miss Hart, meanwhile, had taken the unaccustomed post of honour beside her hostess upon the sofa. She was enjoying herself immensely. She had a conviction of marching to victory.

"Yes," she said, "Mrs. Lovegrove, dear Peachie Porcher asked me just to run across as she has missed your last two afternoons, lest you should think her neglectful. I am well aware I am but a poor substitute for Peachie--no compliments now, Mr. Lovegrove, if you please!"

"Mrs. Porcher is in good health, I trust"--this from Rhoda.

"At present, yes, I am happy to say, thank you. But how long it will

continue," Miss Hart spoke impressively--"at this rate I am sure I cannot tell."

"Indeed," George Lovegrove inquired anxiously. "You don't tell me so? Nothing wrong, I trust."

"Well, as I always tell her, her sense of duty amounts almost to a fault--so unselfish, so conscientious, it brings tears to my eyes often at times. I hope it is appreciated in the right quarter--I do hope that, Mr. Lovegrove."

Here Rhoda's bosom heaved with a generous sigh.

"There is much ingratitude in the world, Miss Hart, I fear," she said pensively.

Her husband looked at her in an anguish of apology--whether for his own sins or those of others he knew not exactly.

"So there is, Mrs. Lovegrove," Eliza responded warmly. "And nobody is a more speaking example of that truth than Peachie Porcher. When I think of all she went through during her married life, and yet so unsuspecting, so trusting--it is enough to melt an iceberg, that it is, Mrs. Lovegrove. Now, as I was saying to her only this morning, 'You must study yourself a little, get out in the air, take a peep at the shops, and have some amusement.' But her reply is always the same.--'No, Liz, dear,' she says, 'not at the present time, thank you. I know the duties of my position as mistress of Cedar Lodge. When any one of our gentlemen is ailing, my place is at home. I must remain in the house in case of a sudden emergency. I should not have an easy moment away from the place,' she says."

Miss Hart looked around upon her hearers demanding approbation and sympathy.

"Very affecting, is it not?" she inquired.

After a moment's embarrassed silence, George Lovegrove murmured a suitable, if timid, assent. His wife assumed a bolder attitude. Goaded by provocations recently received, she went over--temporarily--to the side of the enemy.

"I always have maintained Mrs. Porcher was full of heart," she declared, throwing the assertion across the room, much as though it was a stone, in the direction of the figure at the window.

Serena drew herself up with a rustle.

"I wonder exactly what Rhoda means by that?" she commented inwardly. "I think it very odd. Of course, she must have some meaning, and I wonder what it is. She seems to be changing her line. I am glad I stayed. I am afraid Rhoda is rather deceitful. I excuse George of deceit. I believe George to be true; but he is sadly influenced by Rhoda. I am rather sorry for George."

"So she is, Mrs. Lovegrove," Eliza Hart resumed--"Peachie's too full of heart, as I tell her. She is forever thinking of others and their comforts. She grudges neither time nor money, does not Peachie. There is nothing calculating or cheese-paring about her--not enough, I often

think. Fish, sweetbreads, game, poultry, and all of the very best--where the profits are to come from with a bill of fare like that passes my powers of arithmetic, and so I point out to her. I hope it is appreciated--yes, I do hope that, Mr. Lovegrove"--there the speaker became extremely coy and playful. "A little bird sometimes seems to twitter to me that it is. And yet I am sure I don't know. The members of your sex are very misleading, Mr. Lovegrove. Do not perjure yourself now. You cannot take me in. And a certain gentleman is very close, you know, and stand-offish. It is not easy to get at his real sentiments, is it, now?"

Serena laid back her ears, so to speak. "I was quite right to stay," she reflected wrathfully.

"I think Mr. Iglesias is unusually considerate, Miss Hart," George Lovegrove said tentatively. "He is quite sensible of Mrs. Porcher's kind attentions. But naturally he is very tenacious of upsetting her household arrangements and giving additional trouble."

"And then the position of a bachelor is delicate, Miss Hart, you must admit," Mrs. Lovegrove chimed in. "That's what I always tell Georgie. It may do all very well in their younger days to be unattached, but as gentlemen get on in life they do need their own private establishments. I am sure I am sorry for them in chambers, or even in good rooms like those at Cedar Lodge. For it is not the same as a home, Miss Hart, and never can be. There must be awkwardnesses on both sides at times, especially when, it comes to illness."

Then the great Eliza gathered herself together, for it appeared to her her forecast had been just and that she was indeed marching to victory.

"Yes, there is no denying all that," she said, "and I am more than glad you see it in that light, Mrs. Lovegrove. Between ourselves, I have more and more ever since a certain gentleman gave up work in the City. It would be premature to speak freely; but, just between friends and under the rose, you being interested in one party and I in the other, there can be no harm in dropping a hint and ascertaining how the land lies. Of course if it came to pass, it would be to my own disadvantage, for I do not know how I should ever bear to part with Peachie Porcher. Still, I could put myself aside, if I felt it was for her happiness."

"You do surprise me," George Lovegrove exclaimed. He was filled with consternation, his hair nearly rising on his head. "I had no notion. Dear me, you fairly take away my breath." He could almost have wept. "To think of it!" he repeated. "Only to think of it! Miss Hart, you do surprise me."

"Oh! you must not run away with the notion anything is really settled yet," she replied. "And I could not say Mrs. Porcher really would, when it came to the point, after the experiences she had in her first marriage. She is very reserved, is Peachie. Still, she might. And very fortunate a certain gentleman would be if she did--it does not take more than half an eye to see that."

"Dr. Nevington, please, ma'am," announced the parlour-maid, and the fine clerical voice and clerical presence filled all the room. Thereupon Serena graciously joined the circle. She was unusually self-

possessed and definite. She embarked in a quite spirited conversation with the newcomer. And when Eliza Hart, after a few pleasantries of a parochial tendency with the said newcomer--in whose favour she had vacated the place of honour upon the sofa--rose to depart, Serena bowed to her in the most royally distant and superior manner. Her amiability remained a constant quantity during the rest of the evening; and when an opportunity occurred of speaking in private to her cousin, she did so with the utmost cordiality.

"I do hope, George," she said, "you will not think any more of our little unpleasantness. I can truly say I never bear malice. I own I was annoyed, for I felt I had not been quite fairly treated by Rhoda. But, of course, I may have been mistaken. I am quite willing to believe so and to let bygones be bygones, and stay, as Rhoda pressed me to do, until I go to my cousin, Lady Samuelson, in December. Of course it would be more convenient to me in some ways. But I am not thinking of that. I am thinking of you and Rhoda. I should not like to disappoint her by leaving her when she wants me to help entertain your friend, Mr. Iglesias. Of course, I cannot pretend I take easily to strangers. Mamma was very particular whom we associated with, and so I have always been unaccustomed to strangers, and I cannot pretend I am partial to making new acquaintances. Still, I should be very sorry to seem unaccommodating, or to hurt you and Rhoda by refusing to stay and assist you."

"Thank you truly, Serena; I am sure you are very kind," the good man answered. And the best, or the worst, of it was he actually believed he was speaking the truth!

CHAPTER XVII

The easterly wind blew strong and shattering, bleak and dreary, against the windows of the bedchamber at the back of the house. The complaint of the cedar tree, as the branches sawed upon one another, was long-drawn and loud. These sounds reached Iglesias in the sitting-room, where he sat, alone and unoccupied, before the fire. For more than a week now he had been confined to the house. He had set the door of communication between the two rooms open, so as to gain a greater sense of space and that he might take a little exercise by walking the whole length of them. The cry of the wind and the moan of the sawing branches was very comfortless, yet he made no effort to shut it out. To begin with, he was so weak that it was too much trouble to move. To go on with, the melancholy sounds were not ill-suited to his present humour. For a great depression was upon him, a weariness of spirit which might be felt. Out of doors London shivered, houses and sky and the expanse of Trimmer's Green, with its leafless trees and iron railings, livid, a greyness upon them as of fear. Dominic had no quarrel with this either. Indeed it gave him a certain bitter satisfaction, as offering a not inharmonious setting to his own thought.

Though not robust he was tough and wiry, so that illness of such a nature as to necessitate his remaining within doors was a new and trying experience. Crossing Hammersmith Bridge on the 'bustop ten days previously, the chill of the river had struck through him. Yet this,

in all reasonable probability, would merely have resulted in passing physical discomfort, but for the moral and spiritual hurt immediately preceding it. How far the mind has power to cure the body is still an open question. But that the mind can actively predispose the body to sickness is indubitable. To realise and analyse, in their several bearings, the causes and consequences of that same moral hurt Iglesias' pride and loyalty alike refused. In respect of them he set his jaw and sternly averted his eyes. Yet, though the will may be steady to resist and to abstain, the tides of feeling ebb and flow, contemptuous of control as those of some unquiet sea. They defy volition, notably in illness when vitality is low. Refuse as he might to go behind the fact, it remained indisputable that the Lady of the Windswept Dust had given him his dismissal. Out of his daily life a joy had gone, a constant object of thought and interest. Out of his heart a living presence had gone, leaving a void more harsh than death. And all this had happened in a connection peculiarly painful and distasteful to him; so that it was as though a foul miasma had arisen, and, drifting across the face of his fair friendship, distorted its proportions, rendering all his memories of it suspect. Further, in this discrediting of friendship his hope of the discovery of that language of the soul which can alone effect a true adjustment between the exterior and interior life had suffered violent eclipse. He had been thrown back into the prison-house of the obvious and the material. The world had lost its poetry, had grown narrow, sordid, dim, and gross. His own life had grown more than ever barren of opportunity and inept. In short, Dominic Iglesias had lost sight of the far horizon which is touched by the glory of the Uncreated Light; and, so doing, dwelt in outer darkness once again, infinitely desolate.

On the afternoon in question he had reached the nadir of disillusion and distrust. He leaned back in the red-covered chair, his shapely hands lying, palms downward, along the two arms of it, his vision of the room and its familiar contents blurred by unshed tears. It was an hour of supreme discouragement.

"Nothing is left," he said, half aloud, "nothing. The future is as blank as the present. If this is to grow old, then indeed those whom the gods love have need enough to die young."

For a space he listened to the shattering wind as it cried in the window-sashes, to the branches of the cedar sawing upon one another and moaning as in self-inflicted pain. Newsboys were calling early specials. The coarse cockney voices, strangled by the easterly blast, met and crossed one another, died away in a side street, to emerge again and again encounter. Such words as were distinguishable seemed of sinister import, agitating to the imagination. Then de Courcy Smyth's shuffling footsteps crossed the floor of the room overhead. The wire-wove mattress of his bed creaked as he sat on the edge of it, kicking off his slippers and putting on walking boots, as might be gathered from floppings followed by an equally nerveless but heavier tread. A door opened, closed, and the footsteps descended the stairs. On the landing without they paused for an appreciable time; but, to Mr. Iglesias's great relief, deciding against attempt of entry, continued their cheerless progress down to the hall below. Yet, just now Iglesias could have found it in his heart to envy the man, notwithstanding his unsavouriness of attitude and aspect. For in him ambition still stirred. He had still definite work to do, and the hope of eventual fame to support him during the doing of it; had the

triumph of the theatre, the applause of an audience in the white heat of enthusiasm to dream of and strive after.

"But, for me, nothing," Iglesias repeated, "whether vital as of those far-away southern battle-fields, or fictitious and close at hand as of the stage. Not even the sting of poverty to whet appetite and give an edge to bodily hunger. Nothing, either of fear or of hope. The measure of my obscurity is the measure of my immunity from change of fortune, bad or good. I am worthless even as food for powder. Danger herself will have none of me, and passes me by."

With that he raised his hands and let them drop despairingly along the arms of the chair again, while the unbidden tears overflowed. For a minute or more he remained thus, weeping silently with bowed head. Then, a movement of self-contempt taking him, he regained his calm, sat upright, brushing away the tears.

And it was as though, in thus regaining a clearer physical vision, he regained a clearer mental vision likewise. Purpose asserted itself as against mere blind acquiescence. Iglesias looked up, demanding as of right some measure of consolation, some object promising help. So doing, his eyes sought a certain carved oak panel set in an ebony frame. From his earliest childhood he remembered it, for it had hung in his mother's bedchamber; and in those far-away years, while she still had sufficient force to disregard opposition and make an open practice of prayer, she had kneeled before it when engaged in her devotions. Waking at night--when as a baby-child, during his father's long absences, he slept in her room--Dominic had often seen the delicate kneeling figure, wrapped in some loose-flowing garment, the hands outstretched in supplication. Even then, in the first push of conscious intelligence, the carved picture had spoken to him as something masterful, for all its rigidity and sadness, and very strong to help. It had given him a sense of protection and security, so that his little soul was satisfied; and he could go to sleep again in peace, sure that his mother was in safe keeping while--as he said--she "talked to it." In the long interval which had elapsed since then he had lost touch with the spirit of it, though preserving it as among the most cherished of his family relics. His appreciation of it had become aesthetic rather than religious. But now, as it hung on the dimly white wall above his writing-table on the window side of the fireplace, the dreary London afternoon light took the surface of it, bringing all the details of the scene into prominence. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the old power declared itself. The picture came alive as to the intention and meaning of it. It spoke to him once again, and that with no uncertain voice.

Three tall narrow crosses uplifted against a cloudless sky. Below, a multitude of men, women, and horses, carved in varying degrees of relief. Some starting into bold definiteness, some barely indicated and as though imprisoned in the thickness of the wood; but all grave, energetic, and, whether inspired by compassion or by mockery, fierce. These grouped around a great web of linen--upheld by some of them at the four corners, hammock-wise, high at the head, low at the foot--wherein lay the corpse of a man in the very flower of his age, of heroic proportions, spare yet muscular, long and finely angular of limb, the articulations notably slender, the head borne proudly though bent, the features severely beautiful, the whole virile, indomitable even in the physical abjection of death.

In this Spanish presentment of the closing act of the Divine Tragedy the sensuous pagan element, which mars too many otherwise admirable works of religious art, was absent. Its appeal was to the intellect rather than to the emotions, inculcating effort rather than inviting any sentimental passion of pity. Its message was that of conquest, of iron self-mastery and self-restraint. This was bracing and courage-begetting even when viewed from the exclusively artistic standpoint. But now not merely the presentment of the event held Iglesias' attention, but the event presented, the thing in itself. His heart and intelligence grasped the meaning of it, not only as a matter of supreme historic interest in view of its astonishing influence upon human development during the last two thousand years; but as an ever-present reality, as an exposition of the Absolute, of that which everlastingly has been, and everlastingly will be, and hence of incalculable and immediate importance to himself. It spoke to him of no vague and general truth; but of a truth intimate and individual, coming to him as the call to enter upon a personal inheritance. Of obedience to the dictates of natural religion, and faithful practice of the pieties of it, Dominic Iglesias had, all his life, been a remarkable if unconscious exponent. But this awakening of the spirit to the actualities of supernatural religion, this crossing of that dark immensity of space which appears to interpose between Almighty God and the mind of man, was new to him. He had sought a language of the soul which might effect an adjustment between the exterior and interior life. Here, in the Word made Flesh, with reverent amazement he found it. He had sought it through the instrumentality of the things of time and sense; and they, though full with promise, had proved illusory. He had fixed his hope on relation to the creature. But here, all the while, close beside him, waiting till the scales should fall from his eyes and he should see and understand, had stood the Creator. Fair, very fair--while it lasted--was human friendship. But here, had he but strength and daring to meet it, was a friendship infinitely fairer, immutable, eternal--namely, the friendship of Almighty God.

The easterly wind still cried in the window-sashes, harsh and shattering. The branches of the exiled cedar tree sawed upon one another, uttering their long-drawn complaint. The voices of the newsboys, hoarse and raucous, shouting their sinister message, still came and went. The livid light of the winter afternoon grew more dreary as it sank into, and was absorbed by, the deepening dusk. But to Dominic Iglesias these things had ceased to matter. Dazzled, enchanted, confounded, alike by the magnitude and the simplicity of his discovery, he remained gazing at the carved panel; gazing through and beyond it to that of which it was the medium and symbol, gazing, clear-eyed and fearlessly, away to the far horizon radiant with the surpassing glory of the Uncreated Light.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Black Week had just ended; but the humiliation of it lay, as a dead weight, upon the heart of London. Three crushing reverses in eight days--Stormberg, Magersfontein, and finally Colenso! There was no getting rid of the facts, or the meaning of them in respect of incapacity, blundering, and reckless waste of personal valour. It was

a sorry tale, and one over which Europe at large chuckled. It has been universally assumed that the English are a serious nation. This is an error. They are not serious, but indifferent, a nation of individualists, each mainly, not to say exclusively, occupied with his own private affairs. With the vast majority unity of sentiment is suspect, and patriotism a passive rather than an active virtue. But at this juncture, under the stress of repeated disaster, unity of sentiment and patriotism--that is, a sense of the national honour and necessity for the vindication of it--became strongly evident. London was profoundly and visibly moved. Not with excitement--that came later, manifesting itself in hysterical outcries of relief--but with a grim anger and sadness of astonishment that such things could indeed be. Strangers, passing in the street, looked one another in the eyes questioningly, a common anxiety forging unexpected bonds of kinship. The town was curiously hushed, as though listening, always listening, for those ugly messages rushed so perpetually by cable from overseas. Men's faces were strained by the effort to hear, and, hearing, to judge justly the extent and the bearings of both national and individual damage. Already mourning struck a sensible note in women's dress. If the Little Englander capered, he was careful to do so at home, or in meeting-places frequented only by persons likeminded with himself. It may be questioned whether he is not ever most courageous when under covert thus; since shooting out of windows or from behind hedges would appear to be his inherent, and not particularly gallant, notion of sport. The newsboys alone openly and blatantly rejoiced, dominating the situation--as on Derby Day or Boat-race Night--and putting a gilded dome to the horror by yelling highly seasoned lies when truth proved insufficiently evil to stimulate custom to the extent of his desires. Depression, as of storm, permeated the social atmosphere. Churches were full, places of amusement comparatively empty. To laugh seemed an indiscretion trenching on indecency.

Amid surrounding bravery of imperial purple, cream-colour, and gold, Poppy St. John sat at the extreme end of the first row of balcony stalls in the newly opened Twentieth Century Theatre. This was a calm and secluded spot, since the partition, dividing off the boxes, flanked it on the right. Partly on this account Poppy had selected it. Partly, also, because it afforded an excellent view of the left of the stage; and it was on the left--looking from the body of the house--that the principal action of the piece, as far as Dot Parris's part was concerned, took place. Poppy was unattended. She wanted an evening's rest, an evening free of conversation and effort; but she wanted something to look at, too, something affording just sufficient emotional stimulus to keep importunate thought at bay. This the theatre supplied. It had ceased long ago to tire her. She knew the ways of it from both sides of the footlights uncommonly well, and loved them indifferently much. She was a shrewd and cynical critic. Nevertheless, to go to the play was a sort of going home to her--a home neither very socially nor morally exalted, perhaps, but one offering the advantages of perfect familiarity.

Huddled in a black velvet fur-lined sacque, reaching to her feet and abundantly trimmed with jet embroidery and black lace, she settled herself in her place. The soft fur was cosy against her bare neck. She felt chilly. Later she might peel, thereby exhibiting the values of the rest of her costume. But it was not worth while to do so yet. The first piece was over, but the house was still a poor one. It might fill up. She hoped it would for Dot's sake; for few things are more disheartening than to play to empty benches. But, at present, the

audience was altogether too sparse for it to be worth while to sacrifice comfort to effect. In point of fact, Poppy was cold from sheer fatigue. For the last month, to employ her own rather variegated phraseology, she had racketed, had persistently and pertinaciously been "going the pace." No doubt they do these things better in France; yet, as she reflected, provided you are unhampered by prejudice, are fairly in funds and know the ropes, even grimy fog-bound London is, in this particular connection, by no means to be sneezed at. And truly Poppy's autobiography during the said month would have made extremely merry reading, amounting in some aspects to a positive classic--though of the kind hardly suited as a basis of instruction for the pupils of a young ladies' school. Setting aside adventures of a more questionable character, a positively alarming good luck had pursued her, everything she touched turning to gold. Even in this hour of financial depression the market favoured her both in buying and selling. If she put money on a horse, that horse was sure to win. If she played cards--and she had played pretty constantly--she inevitably plundered her opponents. This last alone, of all her doubtful doings, really troubled her; for her opponents had frequently been youthful, and it was contrary to Poppy's principles to pluck the but half-fledged chick.

Barring this solitary deflection from her somewhat latitudinarian code of ethics, she had, on the face of it, ample cause for self-congratulation. Never had she been more gaily audacious in word or deed. Never had she been better company, keeping her audience--an almost exclusively masculine one--in a roar, all the louder perhaps because of inward defiance of the news from over-seas, the humiliation of which had now culminated in the disasters of the Black Week. Flame only shows the brighter for a sombre background. And Poppy, during this ill-starred period, had been as a flame to her admirers and associates--a fitful, prankish flame, full of provocation and bedevilment, the light of it inciting to all manner of wild doings and, in the end, not infrequently scorching those pretty shrewdly who were over-bold in warming themselves at the heat of it. For fires of the sort lighted by Poppy are not precisely such as contribute to the peace and security of the domestic hearth.

But now she was tired. The fun seemed fun no longer; so that, notwithstanding her successes, she found herself a prey to dissatisfaction, discontent, and a disposition to recall all the less happy episodes of her varied career. She yawned quite loudly, as she laid opera-glasses and play-bill upon the velvet cushion in front of her, and pulled the soft fur-lined garment up closer about her shoulders.

"The first act's safe to be poorish anyhow, and Dot does not come on till just the end of it. I wonder if I dare go to sleep?" she asked herself, gently rubbing her eyes. "It would be awfully nice to forget the whole blooming show, past, present, and to come, for a little while and plunge in the waters of oblivion. Oblivion with a capital O --a dose of that's what I want. Beautiful roomy consolation-stakes of a word, oblivion, if one could only believe in the existence of it--which, unluckily, some-how I can't."

Here the strains of the orchestra ceased. The lights were turned low in the body of the house. The curtain went up. As it did so a cold draught drew from regions behind the stage, laden with that indefinable odour of gas, glue, humanity, flagged stair and alleyways,

paint, canvas, carpentry, and underground places the sun never penetrates, which haunts the working part of every theatre. Poppy smiled as she snuffed it, with a queer mingling of enjoyment and repulsion. For as is the smell of ocean to the seafarer, of mother-earth to the peasant, of incense to the priest, so is the smell of the theatre to the player. Nature may revolt; but the spell holds. Once an actor always an actor. The mark of the calling is indelible. Even to the third and fourth generation there is no rubbing it out.

"I suppose it would have been wiser if I had stuck to the profession," Poppy commented to herself. "I should have been a leading lady by now, drawing my thirty to forty pounds a week. I had the root of the matter in me. Have it still, worse luck; for it's the sort of root which asserts its continued existence by aching at times like that of a broken tooth. It was a wrench to give it all up. But then those rotten plays of his, inflated impossible stuff, which would never act--couldn't act!--and I carrying them round to manager after manager and using all the gentle arts I knew to get them accepted. Oh! it was very dignified, it was very pretty! And then his perpetual persecutions for money, his jealousy and spite, and his fine feelings, his infernal superiority--yes, that was what really did the job. Flesh and blood couldn't stand it. To prove to a woman, at three meals daily, that she couldn't hold a candle to you in birth, or brains, or education; and then expect her to slave for you--and make it jolly hot for her if she didn't, too--while you sat at home and caressed the delusion of your own heaven-born genius in the only decently comfortable chair in the house! No, it was not good enough--that it was not."

Poppy surveyed the stage, unseeing, her great eyes wide with unlovely memories.

"I wonder what's become of him," she said presently. "He hasn't dunned me for months. Has he found some other poor wretch to bleed? Must have, I imagine, for he always declared he was on the edge of starvation. Supposing that was true, though--supposing he has starved?"

Her thought sank away into a wordless reverie of the dreariest description. Suddenly she roused herself, clenching her hands in her lap.

"Well, supposing he has, what does it matter to me? If ever a man deserved to starve, he did, vain, lazy, cowardly, self-seeking jackal of a fellow. Why in the name of reason should I trouble about him--specially to-night? But then why, whenever I am a bit done, does the remembrance of him always come back?"

Poppy yawned again, staring blankly at the persons on the stage, hearing the sound of their speech but knowing only the sense of her own thought.

"Why? Because it's like him, because it's altogether in the part. He was always on the watch for his opportunity; wheedling or blackguarding, directly he saw one had no fight left in one, till he got his own way."

She leaned forward, resting her hands on the velvet cushion.

"I am confoundedly tired," she said. "All the same, it's rather

horrible. If the thing came over again, which mercifully it can't, I should do precisely the same as I did. And yet I'm never quite sure which of us was really in the right. And, therefore, I suppose just as long as I live, whenever I'm dished--as I am to-night--I shall work the whole hateful business through again, and the remembrance of him will always come back."

She pushed the soft heavy masses of hair up from her forehead with both hands.

"In the main it was your own fault, de Courcy Smyth, and you know that it was. Most women would not have held out nearly as long as I did. So lie quiet. Let me be. Starve, if you've got as far on the downgrade as that. What do I care? I owe you nothing. You never gave me a child. So starve, if you must--yes, starve," she said.

Then she gathered herself back into her stall. Her expression changed.

"Ah, there's Dot. They're giving her a reception. Bless them--how awfully sweet! Hurrah for poor little Dot!" Her hands went up to applaud. And for the ensuing ten minutes her fatigue was forgotten. She became absorbed in the action of the piece.

CHAPTER XIX

Dot Parris earned a recall at the end of the first act, conquering by sheer force of personality that gloomy and half-hearted audience. And Poppy St. John--among whose many faults lack of generosity certainly could not be counted--standing up, leaned right out over the velvet-cushioned barrier of the dress circle, crying "Brava!" and clapping her hands. To achieve the latter demonstration with befitting resonance she had stripped off her gloves. Then as the lights were turned up and the curtain swung into the place, she proceeded to further stripping--namely, that of her black embroidered sacque, which she threw across the back of the empty stall beside her, thereby revealing a startling costume. For she was clothed in rose-scarlet from shoulder to foot; and that without ornament of any description to break up the daring uniformity of colour, save the stiff unstanding black aigrette in her hair, tipped with diamond points which flashed and glittered as she moved. The soft *_mousseline-de-soie_* of which her dress was made swathed her figure, cross-wise, without apparent fastening, moulding it to the turn of the hips. Thence the skirt flowed down in a froth of rose-scarlet gauings and fluted frills, which trailed behind her far. The bodice was cut in a deep V back and front, showing her bare neck. Her arms were bare, too, from the elbow. Her skin, somewhat sallow by day, took on a delicate ivory whiteness under the electric light. By accident or design she had omitted to tinge her cheeks to-night; and the even pallor of her face emphasised the largeness of her eyes--luminous, just now, with sympathy and enthusiasm. For the artist in Poppy dominated all else, vibrant and alert. The glamour of the actor's life was upon her; the seamy side of it forgotten--its unworthy rivalries and bickerings, the slangings and prolonged weariness of rehearsals, its many disappointments, heart-burnings, and sordid shifts. These were as though they were not; so that the stage called her, even as the sea calls one, and mother-earth

another, and religion a third.

"Pou-ah! aren't I just hot, though!" she said, half aloud, as she flung off her sacque. "And what a changeling imp of a creature Dot is, after all! An imp of genius.--well, she's every right to that, as one knows when one looks at James Colthurst's pictures. He'd genius. He didn't shirk living. My stars! there was a man capable of adding to the number of one's emotions! And she's inherited his gifts on her own lines. What a voice, what gestures! She is as clever as she can stick. Oh! she's a real joy of a demon of a thing, bless her; and she's nothing like come to her full strength yet."

Then growing aware that she herself and her vivid attire were beginning to attract more attention than, in the interests of a quiet evening, she desired, Poppy subsided languidly into her stall, and, picking up her opera-glasses, slowly surveyed the occupants of the house.

There to begin with was Bobby Saville in the second row of the stalls, flanked on either hand by a contingent of followers. His round dark head and the set of his tremendous shoulders were unmistakable. Saville was very far from being a model young man, yet Poppy had a soft spot in her heart for this aristocratic bruiser and bravo. His constancy to Dot Parris was really touching. With a dog-like faithfulness and docility, this otherwise most turbulent of his sex had followed the object of his affections from music-hall to comic opera, from comic opera to the high places of legitimate drama. And Dot meanwhile remained serenely invulnerable, tricking and mocking her high-born heavy-weight lover, telling him cheerfully she really had no use for him, though his intentions were strictly honourable. Twenty-five years hence, she added, when he was an elderly peer, and she had begun to grow broad in the beam, and the public had begun to grow tired of her, she might perhaps contemplate the thralldom of wedlock. But not yet awhile--no, thank you. Her art held all her love, satisfied all her passions; she had none to waste upon mankind. Two days hence, as Poppy knew, Bobby Saville would sail for South Africa, to offer an extensive target to Boer bullets. He had come to bid farewell, to-night, to the obdurate object of his affections. And his followers--some of whom were also bound for the seat of war--had come to support him during those pathetic proceedings.

In the boxes she recognised more than one woman whose rank of riches had rendered her appearance common property through the medium of the illustrated papers. But upon these social favourites she bestowed scant scrutiny. To her they did not matter, since she had a comfortable conviction that, given their chances, she might safely have backed herself to beat them at their own game. One large and gentle-looking lady did attract her, by the innocence of her mild eyes set noticeably wide apart, and by the beauty of her small mouth. Her light brown hair, touched with grey, rippled back from her low forehead under a drapery of delicate lace. She was calm, yet there was an engaging timidity in her aspect as she sheltered behind the farther curtain of the box. Beside her sat a young girl, white-clad, deliciously fresh in appearance, an expression of happy half-shy expectation upon her charming face. Behind them, in the shadow, kindly, handsome, debonnaire, stood Lord Fallowfeild. His resemblance to the large and gentle lady declared them brother and sister. Poppy St. John watched the little party with a movement of tenderness. She perceived that they were very fond of one another; moreover they were

so delightfully simple in bearing and manner, so excellently well-bred. But of what was the pretty maiden so shyly expectant? Of something, or somebody, far more immediately interesting to her than players or play--so Poppy judged.

Turning from the contemplation of these pleasant people with a sigh she could hardly have explained--even to herself--Poppy swept the dress circle with her opera-glasses. Presently she paused, and with a lift of surprise looked steadily again, then let both hands and glasses drop upon her rose-scarlet cap. Four rows up and back, on the far side, in a stall next the stepped gang-way, a man sat. His face was turned away, his shoulder being towards her, as he leaned sideways talking to the woman beside him--a slender, faded, yet elegant person of uncertain age, dressed in fluffy black. In the seat beyond, also leaning forward and taking part in the conversation, was another man of so whimsical an appearance as very nearly to make Poppy laugh aloud. She would unquestionably have done so had she been at leisure; but she was not at leisure. Her eyes travelled back to the figure beside the gang-way, which intrigued both her interest and her memory. Tall, spare, faultlessly dressed, yet with an effect of something exotic, aloof, unusual about him, he provoked her curiosity with suggestions of times and places quite other than of the present.

"Who is it?" Poppy said to herself. "Surely I know him. Who the Dickens is it?"

The conversation ceased. The man drew himself up, turned his head; and Poppy gave a little choking cry, as she found herself staring Dominic Iglesias straight in the face.

Whether he recognised her she did not know, did not want to know just yet. For she needed a minute or two to reckon with the position. It was so wholly unexpected. It affected her more deeply than she could have anticipated. Not without amusement she realised that she had never, heretofore, quite believed in him as an ordinary mortal, who ate and drank, went to plays, had relations with human beings other than herself, and conducted himself generally on the commonplace lines of modern humanity. Therefore to see him under existing circumstances was, in a sense, a shock to her. She did not like it. Absurd and unreasonable though it undoubtedly was to feel it so, yet his presence here struck her as in a way unseemly, derogatory. She had never thought of him in this connection, and it took a little time to get accustomed to this aspect of him. Then she discovered, with half-humorous annoyance, that she was called upon to get accustomed to something else as well--namely, to her memories of the past month since she parted from him. For it was undeniable that the said memories took on a queer enough complexion in the light of this sudden encounter with Dominic Iglesias. If an hour ago they had been unsatisfactory, now they were very near odious. And that seemed hardly fair. Poppy turned wicked.

"For what's the worry, after all?" she asked herself. "Why on earth am I either disappointed or penitent? Is he no better than the rest of us, or am I no worse? And with what am I quarrelling, in any case--his being less of a saint, or I less of a sinner than I'd been pleased to imagine? I'm sure I don't know."

Instinctively her eyes sought that kindly worlding, Lord Fallowfeild. With him at least, as she reflected, one knew exactly where one was,

since his feet were always very much upon the floor. But here again discomfiture, alas! awaited her. For another person, and evidently a welcome one, had joined that pleasant little party. Standing beside the large and gentle lady, speaking quickly, gaily, his face keen and eager, she beheld Alaric Barking. Lord Fallowfeild, smiling, patted the young man affectionately on the shoulder. And then, with a shudder of pain gnawing right through her, Poppy St. John, glancing at the graceful white-clad maiden, understood of whose coming this one had been so sweetly and gladly expectant.

To the strong there is something exhilarating in all certainty, even certainty of disaster. And it was very characteristic of Poppy that at this juncture no cry came to her lips, no sob to her throat. She shuddered that once, it is true. But then, setting her teeth, the whole daring of her nature rose to the situation, as a high-mettled horse rises to a heavy fence. What lay on the other side of that fence she did not know as yet, nor did she stop to consider. Desperate though it looked, she took it gallantly without fuss or funk.

"Well, there's no ambiguity about this affair, anyhow," she said grimly. "Of course it had to come sooner or later, and I knew it had to come. Well, here it is, that's all, and there's no use whining. And that's why he's been so jumpy lately: he had a bad conscience. Poor old chap, he must have been having a beastly bad time of it."

Poppy mused a little.

"Still, it's a facer," she added, "and a precious nasty one, too."

She stretched herself, shaking back her head, while the diamond points of her aigrette danced and glittered. Took a deep breath, filling her lungs; listened to herself, so to speak, noting with satisfaction that neither heart nor pulse fluttered.

"No serious damage," she commented. "I must have the nerves of a locomotive. Here I am perfectly sound, perfectly sober, standing at the parting of the ways, between the dear old devil of love and the deep sea of friendship. Poppy Smyth, my good soul, you've always been rather fatally addicted to drama. Are you satisfied at last? For just now, heaven knows, you've jolly well got your fill of it."

Then, for a space, she sat staring out into the house, thinking hard, intently, yet without words. The future, as she knew, hung in the balance, for herself and for others; but, as yet, she could not decide into which scale to throw the determining weight. Presently she looked steadily at Dominic Iglesias. He was again engaged in conversation, trying, with his air of fine old-world courtesy, suitably to entertain his strangely assorted neighbours. Poppy had an idea he found it rather hard work. She was not in the least sorry. That faded piece of feminine elegance, in fluffy black, bored her. She entertained a malicious hope that the said piece of feminine elegance bored Mr. Iglesias also. Finally, with rather bitter courage, she turned her eyes once more upon Lord Fallowfeild and his companions.

"Poor little girl, poor little girl," she said, quite gently, "so that's your heaven on earth, is it? I'm afraid a mighty big crop of wild oats is on show in your Garden of Eden. Still to you, apparently, it is a blissful place enough. Only the question is, do I intend to relinquish my rights in that particular property and make it over to

you in fee simple, my pretty baby, or do I not? Shall I give it you, or shall I keep it? For it is mine to give or to keep still--very much mine, if I choose to make a fight for it, I fancy."

Yet even as she communed thus with herself, the white-clad maiden and the other occupants of the box became indistinct and shadowy. The buzz of conversation in the theatre had ceased; so had the strains of the orchestra. The lights had been turned low and the curtain had risen upon the second act.

About half-way through that act Poppy St. John got up, threw her velvet sacque over her arm, and, slipping past the three intervening stalls, made her way up the steps of the near gang-way to the swing-doors opening out to the couloir. Her movements, though studiously quiet, were, owing to the vivid hue of her attire, very perceptible even in the penumbra of the dress circle, provoking attention and smothered comment. The lady in fluffy black, for example, followed her with glances of undisguised and condemnatory interest, finally calling the attention of both her cavaliers to the progress of this glowing figure.

The New Century Theatre is one of those enterprises of trans-Atlantic origin, undertaken with the praiseworthy and disinterested object of teaching the Old World "how to do it," and is built and furnished regardless of expense. The couloirs are wide, lofty, richly carpeted; the walls of them encrusted with pale highly polished marbles, pilasters of which, with heavily gilded capitals, flank vast panels of looking-glass. The moulded ceilings are studded with electric lights, the glare of which is agreeably softened by pineapple-shaped globes of crystal glass. The scheme of colour, ranging from imperial purple through crimson and rose-pink to softest flesh tints, formed an harmonious setting to the rose-scarlet of Poppy's dress, with its froth of trailing frills and flounces, as she stood discoursing to a smart, black-gowned, white-aproned box-keeper.

"You understand, fourth row on the left, next the gang-way? Tell him a lady wishes particularly to speak to him between the acts. Then bring him to me here."

"Yes, madam, I quite understand," the young person replied, with much intelligence, scenting something in the shape of an adventure.

Poppy moved across and sat down on one of the wide divans, and so doing began to know, once more, how very tired she was. A new tiredness seemed, indeed, to have been added to the original one. That first was, at worst, bored and irritable. This was of a different, a more sad and intimate character.

"I feel as if I had been beaten all over," she said to herself. "Well, perhaps that's just what it is. I have been beaten. I wish I could sleep. Oh! dear, oh! dear, how I wish I could sleep."

Her thought fell away into the vague, the inarticulate, though she did not sleep. Still there was a temporary suspension of volition, of conscious mental activity, which, in a degree, rested her. Persons, passing now and again, looked with curiosity at the brilliant figure, and inscrutable eyes in the dead-white face. The smart box-keeper, moved by some instinct of pity, came back more than once, finally offering one of those unwholesome-looking cups of coffee and boxes of

chocolate of which so few have the requisite audacity to partake. Poppy roused herself sufficiently to reject these terrible delicacies, while smiling at the conveyor of them. Then she relapsed into the vague again, and waited, just waited.

"There's the end of the act, madam," the young woman remarked at last encouragingly.

"All right," Poppy answered. "Go straight away and bring the gentleman here to me. I'm in a hurry. I want to get home."

The glass doors of the exits swished back and forth, letting out the confused stir and murmur of the house, letting out a crowd of men as well. And the aspect the said crowd presented to Poppy's overstrained nerves and exalted sensibility was repulsive. For it suggested to her a flight of gigantic black locusts, strong-jawed, pink-faced, and white-breasted, driven forth by a common hunger, rather cruelly active and intent. Her sense of humour was in abeyance, as was her usually triumphant common sense; so that her thought, going behind appearances and the sane interpretation of them, declined to that fundamental region in which the root laws of animal life become hideously bare and distinct. Out of the deep places of her own womanhood a hatred towards this crowd of men arose; that secular enmity which exists between the sexes asserting itself and, for the time being, obscuring both reason and justice. For upon what, as she asked herself bitterly, when all is said and done, do these male human locusts pasture, save on the souls and bodies of women, finding a garden before them, and, too often, leaving but a desert behind? Sex as sex became abhorrent to her, its penalties unpardonable, its pleasures as loathsome as its sins.

But from the black-coated throng the trim figure of the box-keeper just then detached itself; and a moment later Poppy, looking up, beheld Dominic Iglesias standing before her.

CHAPTER XX

"You sent for me, so I have come," Iglesias said, for Poppy St. John, usually so voluble, just now appeared speechless.

From the moment he had become aware of her presence in the theatre, Dominic had been sensible that she presented herself under a new aspect. Of the many different Poppys he had seen, this was by far the most powerful and dramatic. She stood out from the rest of the audience as some splendid tropic flower stands out from a thick-set mass of foliage, conspicuous in form and colour and in promise. There were handsome women, smart women, beautifully dressed women in plenty, but Poppy did not shade in with all these, making but part of a general effect. She remained unique, solitary; and this not merely on account of her vivid raiment. The effect of her told upon the mind quite as much as upon the sight. Yet she did not look out of place.

She looked, indeed, preeminently at home. Out of doors, in the country sunshine, she had struck Dominic as a slight creature, unreal and fictitious. Here, amid highly artificial and conventional surroundings, she seemed to him the most natural and vital being

present, retaining the completeness of her individuality, the energy and mystery of it alike, almost aggressively evident and untouched. Iglesias ceased to consider her in relation to his and her broken friendship, or in relation to that which he so reluctantly divined of her private life. He contemplated her in herself, finding an element of things primitive in her, which commanded his admiration, though it failed, so far, to touch his heart. And if this was the impression he received seeing her at a comparative distance, that impression was greatly intensified seeing her now at close quarters. The contrast between the subtle softness and the flare--as of a conflagration--of her dress, the weariness of her attitude, and the unfathomable melancholy of her eyes, stirred him profoundly.

"Yes," she answered quietly, almost coldly, "I know I sent. This was about the last place I should have expected to run across you. I flattered myself I was safe enough here. I didn't wish to meet you one little bit. Still, when I did see you, I wanted you. You're the most plaguey impossible person to rid oneself of somehow"--her voice and manner softened a little--"so I sent for you. I don't know why, because now I've got you I seem to have changed my mind. I have nothing to say."

"I can easily go," Iglesias remarked gravely.

"No, no, no," she replied, "why should you hurry? I'm sure those two freaks you're herding--the beetle turned hind-side before and the withered leaf--can't be frantically interesting. And I like to look at you. I never saw you before in evening dress, and you're more _grand seigneur_ than ever. But something's happened to you. I can't tell off-hand what it is, whether you've come on or gone back. But you're altered."

"I have had an illness," Iglesias said simply; "and I have been very unhappy."

"Neither of those are good enough," Poppy answered. "The alteration is right inside you, in your soul. But you're well again now?" she added.

"Yes, I am well again now."

"And you're no longer unhappy?"

"No," he said. "I am sad, for life is sad; but I am no longer unhappy."

"That's a nice distinction," Poppy put in, with a rather scornful inflection. "What's cured your unhappiness? Not an affair of the heart? Please don't tell me it's anything to do with a woman, for I warn you I'm awfully off the affections to-night."

"You can make yourself quite easy on that point," Dominic said with a lift of the head, his native pride asserting itself.

"Ah! that's more like old times!" Poppy's voice softened again, so did the expression of her face. "Suppose you sit down, dear lunatic. This wait is a long one, I know. Dot Parris told me it was. Let the freaks play about together for a little. It will do them good. And I find I wanted you rather more than I knew at first. I'm beginning to have something to say after all. Words, only words, perhaps; still it's a

soulagement to sit here with you like this." The corners of Poppy's mouth drooped and quivered. "I'm having an infernally bad time; and there's worse ahead."

"I am sorry. I am grieved," Iglesias said. For the charm had begun to work again, and friendship, as he began to know, although broken-winged, was very far from dead.

"We won't talk about that," she put in, "or I might make a fool of myself. Dear man, I think I'd better go home. I'm awfully tired. Still, I'm better for seeing you." She stood up. "Just help me on with my coat. Thanks--that's right. Oh! I say, there are the freaks on the prowl, looking for you!" Poppy's tragic eyes turned naughty, malicious, gay even for a moment. "What sport!" she said--"unhappy freaks! The withered leaf has intentions. I see that. She'd like to eat me without salt. Don't marry her--promise me you won't. Ah! heavenly, heavenly," she cried. "I need no promises, bless you. Your face is quite enough. Wretched withered leaf! But look here," she went on, as she gathered the soft warm garment about her, "I'm tired of your incognito. Give me your card. I may want you again. So let me have your name and address."

And Iglesias giving it to her as she requested, she studied it for a minute silently. Then she turned away.

"I want nothing more. Don't come down with me. One of the boys will get me a hansom. I'd rather be alone; so just go back to your flabbergasted freaks, beloved and no-longer-nameless one," she said.

CHAPTER XXI

Thin sunshine slanted in through the lace curtains of the dining-room window. Encouraged thereby, the parrot preened its feathers, making little snapping and clicking noises meanwhile with its tongue and beak. The grass of the Green, seen between the black stems of the encircling trees, glittered with hoarfrost, while the houses on the opposite side of it looked flat and featureless owing to the interposing veil of bluish mist. Tradesmen's carts clattered by at a sharp trot, the defined sound of them breaking up the all-pervading murmur of London, and dying out into it again as they passed. At the street corner, some twenty yards away, a German band discoursed doubtfully sweet music, the trombone making earnest efforts to keep the rest of the instruments up to their work by the emission of loud and reproachful tootings. It was a pleasant and cheery morning as December mornings go, yet constraint reigned at the Lovegrove breakfast-table.

The day of Serena's oft-discussed departure had dawned. A few hours hence she would remove herself and her boxes to her cousin Lady Samuelson's residence in Ladbroke Square. This should have proved a source of regret to her host and hostess; and they were conscience-stricken, confessing to themselves--though not to one another, since each accredited the other with more laudable sentiments than his or her own--that relief rather than regret did actually possess them. A secret from one another, and that a slightly discreditable one, was so

foreign to the experience of the excellent couple that it lay heavy upon their hearts. Each, moreover, was aware of shame in the presence of Serena, as in that of a person upon whom they had inflicted an injury. Hence constraint, which the sunshine was powerless to dissipate.

"May I pass you the eggs, or bacon, or both, Serena?" George Lovegrove inquired, his childlike blue eyes meanwhile humbly imploring pardon for his lack of sorrow at her impending departure. Serena's manner was stiff and abstracted. This, combined with the rustling of her petticoats, filled him with anxiety. Was it possible that she knew?

"Thank you, George, only an egg. Not that one, please, it is much too large. I prefer the smallest. I am not feeling hungry."

"I should never call you much of a breakfast-eater, Serena," Mrs. Lovegrove observed in her comfortable purring voice, from behind the tea urn. She was desirous to pacify her guest. "Now I am rather hearty myself in the morning, always have been so. I do not know whether it is a good thing or not, as a habit. Still, I think to-day you should force yourself a little. You should always make provision against a journey. And then no doubt you are rather fatigued with packing and getting home so late from the theatre. I am pleased to think you had an outing your last night here, Serena. Georgie tells me the play was very comical."

"I dare say it was," Serena replied. "Of course George would be a much better judge of that than I am. Mamma was always very particular what we heard and saw when we were children, and I know I am inclined to think things vulgar which other people only find amusing."

"I did not remark any vulgarity, and do not think Mr. Iglesias would countenance anything of that kind in the presence of a lady. He would ascertain beforehand the nature of the piece to which he invited any lady"--this from George Lovegrove tentatively.

"Oh! of course I don't say there was anything vulgar. I should not like to commit myself to an opinion. I really have been to the theatre very seldom. Mamma never encouraged our going. And then, of course, old Dr. Colthurst, the rector of St. Jude's at Slowby, whose church we always attended, disapproved of the theatre. He had great influence with mamma. And he thought it wicked."

"Indeed," Mrs. Lovegrove commented. "I should be sorry to think that, as so many go. But he may have come across the evils of it personally. He had a son, an artist, who was very wild, I believe. And I remember to have heard our dear vicar speak of Dr. Colthurst as stern, but a true Protestant and a very grand preacher."

"I dare say he was--I don't mean that his son was wild--I know nothing about that, of course, but that Dr. Colthurst was a great preacher."

Serena spoke abstractedly, inspecting the yolk of her poached egg meanwhile as though on the watch for unpleasant foreign bodies.

"But," she continued, "I cannot, of course, be expected to remember his sermons, though I may have been taken to hear him. I suppose I certainly was taken, but I was quite too much of a child to remember. Susan remembers them, but then Susan was so very much older."

She ceased to contemplate her egg, and looked up at her hostess.

"Susan must be very nearly your age, Rhoda; or she may be a year or eighteen months younger. Yes, judging by the difference between her age and mine, she must be quite eighteen months younger. Of course, now, Susan thinks going to the play wicked. I often wonder whether that is not partly because she dislikes sitting still and listening when other people are doing something. Susan likes to take part in everything herself. I often wonder what she would do in church if it was not for the responses and the singing. I am sure she would never sit out a service where the congregation did not join in. Susan cannot bear a choral service. She calls it un-English and Romanising. I do not dislike it--I mean I do not dislike a choral service. But then I do not consider the theatre wicked. I am not prejudiced against it, as Susan is. Still, I cannot deny that I think you do hear very odd things and see very over-dressed people at the theatre."

Serena looked severely at her host, thereby heightening the anxiety which possessed him. For once again, as so often during the past eight or ten hours, a picture presented itself perplexing and fascinating to his mental vision--namely, that of his dear and honoured friend, the grave and stately Dominic Iglesias, helping an unknown lady, of remarkably attractive personal appearance, on with a wonderful black velvet garment--doing so in the calmest way in the world, too, as though it were an event of chronic occurrence--while the frills and furbelows of her voluminous skirts flowed in rosy billows about his feet. What did the picture portend, George Lovegrove asked himself, and still more, what did Serena suppose it portended?

"Do you, indeed?" Mrs. Lovegrove put in, in amiable response to her guest's last remark. She was sensible of being hurt by the allusion to her age. But then Serena was going, and she knew that fact did not distress her as deeply as it might have done. She therefore rose superior to wounded feelings. "It's many years since I've been much of a playgoer," she continued, "and people tell me it's all a good deal changed, and not for the better. I suppose the dressing nowadays is sadly extravagant. I am sure I don't know, and I should always be timid of condemning anybody or their amusements. But there, as I always do say, if you want to keep a happy mind there is so much it is well to be ignorant of."

"I wonder if it is--I mean I wonder if it is well to be ignorant of things," Serena said reflectively. "Of course, if people think you are willing to be ignorant, it encourages them in deceiving you. I think it is very wrong to be deceitful. Sooner or later it is sure to come out, and then it is very difficult to forgive people. Indeed, I am not sure it is right to forgive them."

With difficulty George Lovegrove restrained a groan. His food was as ashes in his mouth; his tea as waters of bitterness.

"Oh! I should be sorry to go as far as that, Serena," Mrs. Lovegrove remonstrated. "If you give way to unforgiving feelings you can never tell quite where they may carry you. But as I was going to say, though I am not much of a playgoer, I was very pleased to have Mr. Iglesias invite me. Only, as I explained to him, I am very liable to find the seats too narrow for comfort in places of amusement, and the atmosphere is often so very close, too. He was most polite and

sympathising; but then that's Mr. Iglesias all over. He always is the perfect gentleman."

Serena paused, her fork arrested in mid-transit to her mouth.

"I am not sure that I agree with you, Rhoda," she said. "I am not sure whether I think Mr. Iglesias is really polite, or whether he only appears to be so because it suits his purpose. Of course you and George know him far better than I do. Perhaps you understand--I cannot pretend that I understand him. I may be wrong, but I often wonder whether there is not a good deal which is rather insincere about Mr. Iglesias."

After throwing which bomb, Serena gave her whole attention to her breakfast. Usually George Lovegrove would have waxed valiant in defence of his friend, but a guilty conscience held him tongue-tied. Not so Rhoda; strive as she might, those allusions to her age still rankled. And, under cover of protest against injustice to the absent, she paid off a little of her private score, to her warm satisfaction.

"Well, I am sure," she cried, "I never could have credited that anybody could question Mr. Iglesias's genuineness! I would sooner doubt Georgie, that I would, and fear him deceitful."

Again the good man came near groaning. It was as though the wife planted a poignard in his heart.

"And after you playing the piano to him so frequently the few days Mr. Iglesias stopped here, and seeming so comfortable together and friendly, and his inviting us all to the theatre! Really, I must say I do think you sadly changeable, Serena, that I do."

"No, I am not changeable, Rhoda," the other lady declared, both voice and colour rising slightly. "Nobody ever accused me of being changeable before, and I do not like it. I do not think you are at all justified in making such an accusation. But I am observant. I always have been so. Even Susan allows that I am very observant. I cannot help being so, and I do not wish to help it. I think it is much safer. It helps you to find out who you can really trust. And, of course, I observed a great deal that happened last night. I felt from the first that I owed it to myself to be particularly on my guard, because certain insinuations had been made--you know, Rhoda, you have made them more than once yourself--and some people might have thought that things had gone rather far when Mr. Iglesias was stopping here. I believe Mrs. Porcher and that dreadful Miss Hart did think it. I do not say that things did go far; I only say that people might naturally think that they had. On several occasions Mr. Iglesias' conduct did seem very marked. And, of course, nothing could be more odious to me than to be placed in a false position. One cannot be too careful, especially with foreigners. Mamma always warned us against foreigners when we first came out. I never had any experience of foreigners until I met Mr. Iglesias, here at your house. But, I am sorry to say, I believe now mamma was perfectly right."

As she ended her harangue, Serena with a petulant movement of her thin hands pushed her plate away from the table edge, leaving a vacant space before her. This was as a declaration of war. She scorned further subterfuge. She announced a demonstration. A bright spot of colour burned on either cheek, her small head, on its long stalk of

neck, was carried very erect. It was one of those pathetic moments when--the merciless revelations of the morning sunshine notwithstanding--this slim, faded, middle-aged spinster appeared to recapture, and that very effectively, the charm and promise of her vanished youth. Excited by foolish anger, animated by a sense of insult wholly misplaced and imaginary, she became a very passably pretty person, the immature but hopeful Serena of eighteen looking forth from the eyes of the narrow-souled disappointed Serena of eight-and-forty.

"Of course, George may have some explanation of what happened last night," she went on, speaking rapidly. "If he has, I think it would be only fair that he should offer it to me. I took for granted he would do so this morning as soon as we met; or that he would send you to me, Rhoda, to explain if he felt too awkward about speaking himself. But as you both are determined to ignore what happened, I am forced to speak. I dare say it would be much more convenient to you, knowing you have made a mistake, to pass the whole thing over in silence. But I really cannot consent to that. If Mr. Iglesias meant nothing all along, then I think he has behaved disgracefully. If he did mean something at first, and then"--the speaker gasped--"changed his mind, he might at least have given some hint. He ought to have refused to stop here, of course."

"He did refuse," George Lovegrove faltered. This was really dreadful, far worse than anything he had anticipated--and he had not a notion what it was safe to say. "I do wish females' minds were a little less ingenious," he commented to himself. "They see such a lot which would never have entered my head, for instance."

"Still, Mr. Iglesias came," cried the belligerent Serena.

"Yes, I over-persuaded him. He was very unwilling, very so indeed, saying that staying out was altogether foreign to his practice. But I pointed out to him that you and the wife might feel rather mortified if he omitted to come, having taken such an interest in his illness and--"

If you made use of my name, George, you took a great liberty."

"I am very distressed to hear you say that, Serena. Both the wife and I certainly supposed you wished him to come."

He looked imploringly at his spouse, asking support. But for once the large kindly countenance failed to beam responsive. A plaintive expression overspread its surface. Then the unhappy man stared despondently out into the misty morning sunshine, plastering down his shiny hair with a moist and shaky hand. Even the wife turned against him, making him feel an outcast at his own breakfast-table. He could have wept.

"I have been so very guarded throughout," Serena resumed, "that it is impossible you should have the slightest excuse for using my name. But, of course, if you have done so, my position is more than ever odious. There is nothing for me to do but to go. Fortunately I am going--and I am thankful. If I had followed my own inclinations, I should have gone long ago. Then I should have been spared all this, and nothing would have been said. Now all sorts of things may be said, because, of course, it must all look very odd. It shows how foolish it

is to allow one's judgment to be overruled. I stayed entirely to oblige Rhoda. And I cannot but see I have been trifled with."

"No, no, Serena, not that--never that," her host cried distractedly. "If I have been in the wrong, I apologise from my heart. But trifling never entered my thoughts. How could it do so, with all the respect I have for you and Susan? I may have been clumsy, but I acted for the best."

"I am afraid I cannot agree," she retorted. "It is useless to apologise. I am sorry to tell you so, George, for I have trusted you until now; but I do feel, and I am afraid I always shall feel, I have been very unkindly treated by you and Rhoda."

She rose, rustling as she spoke, the parrot, meanwhile, leaving off preening its feathers, regarding her, its head very much on one side, with a wicked eye.

"No, please leave me to myself," she said. "I do not want anybody to help me, and if I do I shall ring for the maids. I want to compose myself before I go to Lady Samuelson's. After all this unpleasantness, it is much better for me to be alone."

"Good-bye, girlie, poor old girlie. Hi! p'liceman, bring a four-wheeler," shrieked the parrot, as Serena opened and closed the dining-room door, flapping wildly in the sunshine till the sand and seed husks on the floor of its cage arose and whirled upwards in a crazy little cloud.

George Lovegrove, who had risen to his feet, sank back into his chair, resting his elbows on the table and covering his face with his hands.

"I would rather have forfeited my pension," he murmured. "I would rather have lost a hundred pounds."

Then raising his head he gazed imploringly at his wife. And this time her tender heart could not resist the appeal. He had not been open with her, but she relented, giving him opportunity to retrieve his error. Moreover--but that naturally was a very minor consideration--she was bursting with curiosity.

"Georgie," she asked solemnly, "whatever did happen last night?"

"Mr. Iglesias met a lady friend. She sent for him to talk to her, in the lobby, between the acts," he answered, the red deepening in his clean fresh-coloured face.

"Not any of that designing Cedar Lodge lot?"

"Oh! dear no, not all," he replied, his childlike eyes full of gratitude. He blessed the magnanimity of the wife. But speedily embarrassment supervened. He found this subject singularly difficult to deal with. "Not at all of their class. I confess it did surprise me, for though I have always taken it for granted Dominic belonged to a higher circle by birth than that in which we have known him, I had no idea he had such aristocratic acquaintances. His looks and manner in public, last night, made him seem fitted for any company. Still, I was surprised."

"Did he not introduce you?"

"No. I cannot say he had a convenient opportunity, and the lady may not have wished it. I could fancy she might hold herself a little above us. But, between ourselves, I believe that was what so upset Serena."

"I am of opinion Mr. Iglesias is just as well without Serena," Mrs. Lovegrove declared. "I suppose she cannot help it, but her temper is sadly uncertain. I begin to fear she would be very exacting in marriage. But was the lady young, Georgie?"

The good man blushed furiously.

"Yes, under thirty, I should suppose, and very striking to look at. Serena had called my attention to her already. She thought her overdressed. I am no judge of that, but I could see she was very beautiful."

"Oh! Georgie dear!" This in high protest. For the speaker belonged to that section of the British public in which puritanism is even yet deeply ingrained, with the dreary consequence that beauty, whether of person or in art, is suspect. To admit its existence trenches on immodesty; to speak of it openly is to skirt the edges of licence.

George Lovegrove, however, had developed unaccustomed boldness.

"So she was, my dear," he repeated, not squinting in the least for once. "She was beautiful, dark and splendid, with eyes that looked right through you, mocking and yet mournful. They made a noble couple, she and Dominic, notwithstanding the disparity of age. As they stood there together I felt honoured to see them both. And if Dominic Iglesias is to have friends with whom we are unacquainted--though I do not deny the thing hurt me a little at first--I am glad they should be so handsome and fine. It seems to me fitting, and as if he was in his true sphere at last."

A silence followed this profession of faith, during which Mrs. Lovegrove's face presented a singular study. She stared at her husband in undisguised amazement, while the corners of her mouth and her large soft cheeks quivered.

"Well, I should never have expected to hear you talk so, Georgie," she said huskily. "It seems unlike you somehow, almost as though you were despising your own flesh and blood."

"No, no," he answered, "I could never do that. I could never be so forgetful of all I owe to my own family and to yours, Rhoda. I am under deep obligations to both. But it would be dishonest to deny that I set a wonderfully high value on Dominic Iglesias' regard, and have done so ever since we were boys together at school. To me Dominic has always stood by himself, I knowing how superior he was to me in mind and in all else, so that it has been my truest honour and privilege to be admitted to intimacy with him. But the difference between us never came home to me as it did when I saw him in other company last night. He is fitted for a higher position than he has ever filled yet--we all used to allow that in old days at the bank--or for any society we can offer him. So, though I felt humiliated in a measure, I felt glad. For I can grudge him nothing in the way of new friends, even though they

may be differently placed to ourselves and should come between him and me a little, making our intercourse less frequent and easy than in the past. From my heart I wish him the very best that is going, although it should be rather detrimental to myself."

Mrs. Lovegrove's cheeks still quivered, but the expression of her face was unresponsive once more, not to say obstinate. Jealousy, indeed, possessed her. For the first time in her whole experience she realised her husband as an individual, as a human entity independent of herself. To contemplate him otherwise than in the marital relation was a shock to her. She felt deserted, a potential Ariadne on Naxos. Hence jealousy, resentment, cruel hurt.

"Well, to be sure, what a long story!" she cried, in tones approaching sarcasm, "and all about someone who is no relation, too! Whatever possesses you, Georgie? You aren't a bit like yourself. It seems to me this morning everybody's bewitched." She heaved herself up out of her chair. "I shall go and try to make it up with Serena," she continued. "It is only Christian charity to do so; and, poor thing, I can well understand she may have had cause enough for mortification now I have made out what really did take place last night."

Usually, left alone in the dining-room, George Lovegrove would have proceeded methodically to do a number of neat little odd jobs, humming softly the while funny, shapeless little tunes to himself in the fulness of his guileless content. He would have piled up the fire with small coal and dust, thus keeping it alight but saving fuel till luncheon-time, when one skilful stir with the poker would produce a cheerful blaze. Then he would have proceeded to the little conservatory opening off his box of a sanctum at the back of the house--containing his roller-top desk, his papers, Borough Council and parish reports, his magazines, his best and second-best overcoats hung on pegs against the wall along with his silk hat. In the conservatory, still humming, he would have smoked his morning pipe, feeding the gold-fish in the small square glass tank--a tiny fountain in the centre of which it pleased him to set playing--and later carefully examining the ferns and other pot-plants in search of green-fly, scale, or blight. But to-day the innocent routine of his life was rudely broken up. He had no heart for his accustomed tidy potterings, but lingered aimlessly, fingering the gold watch-chain strained across the convex surface of his waistcoat, and looking pitifully enough between the lace curtains out on to the Green.

The sun had climbed the sky, burning up the hoarfrost and mist, so that the houses opposite had become clearly discernible. Presently he beheld a tall, upright figure emerge from the front door of Cedar Lodge. For a moment Mr. Iglesias stood at the head of the flight of immaculately white stone steps, rolling up his umbrella and putting on his gloves preparatory to setting forth on his morning walk. And, watching him, a wave of humility and self-depreciation swept over George Lovegrove's gentle and candid soul, combined with an aching or regret that destiny had not seen fit to deal with him rather otherwise than it actually had. He felt a great longing that he, too, were possessed of a stately presence, brains, breeding, and handsome looks. There stirred in him an almost impassioned craving for romance, for escape from the interminable respectabilities and domesticities of English middle-class suburban life. He went a step further, rebelling against the feminine atmosphere which surrounded him, in which "feelings" so constantly usurped the place of actions, and

suppositions that of fact. Then, the vision of a beautiful woman with a strange rose-scarlet dress, in whose eyes sorrow struggled with mocking laughter, once again assailed him. Who she might be, and what her history, he most emphatically knew not; yet that she breathed a keener and more tonic air than that to which he was habituated, that feelings in her case did not stand for actions, or suppositions for fact, he was fully convinced.

"Poor old chappie, take a brandy and soda. Got the hump?"--this, shrilly, from the parrot hanging head downwards from the roof of its cage.

At the sound of that at once unhuman and singularly confidential voice close beside him, George Lovegrove gave a guilty start.

"Yes, the wife is quite right," he said, half aloud. "If you want to keep a happy mind there is very much of which it is as well to be ignorant."

Then shame covered him, for in his recent meditations and apprehensions had he not come very near turning traitor, and being, in imagination at all events, subtly unfaithful to that same large kindly comfortable wife?

CHAPTER XXII

Two months had passed, and February was about to give place to March--two months empty of outward event for Dominic Iglesias, but big with thought and consolidation of purpose. He had been more than ever solitary during this period, for his acquaintance, even to the faithful George Lovegrove, stood aloof. But Dominic hardly noticed this. Though solitary, he had not been lonely, since his mind was absorbed in question, in pursuit, in the consciousness of deepening conviction. For the recognition not merely of religion, but of Christianity, as a supreme factor in earthly existence, which had come to him in the dreary December twilight, as, broken in health and in spirit, he gazed upon the carved picture of Calvary, had proved no fugitive experience. It remained by him, entrancing his imagination and satisfying both his heart and his intelligence; so that he looked back upon the hour of his despair thankfully, seeing in it the starting-point of a journey the prosecution of which promised not only to be the main occupation of his remaining years here in time, but, the river of death once crossed, to stretch onward and onward through realms, at present inconceivable, of beauty, of knowledge, and of love. And so, for the moment, solitude was sweet to him, leaving him free of petty cares and anxieties--he moving forward, ignorant of the gossip which in point of fact surrounded him, innocent of the feminine plots and counterplots of which his blameless bachelorhood was at once the provoking cause and the object; while in his eyes--though of this, too, he was ignorant--dwelt increasingly reflection of that mysterious and lovely light which, let obstinately purblind man deny it as he may, lies forever along the far horizon, for comfort of godly wayfarers and as beacon of the elect.

Yet it must not be supposed that the outset of Iglesias' spiritual

journey was wholly serene, free from obstacle or hesitation, from risk of untoward selection, or rejection, of the safe way. Many roads, and those bristling with contradictory signposts, presented themselves. Noisy touts, each crying up his own special mode and means of conveyance, rushed forth at every turn.

Modern Protestantism, as he encountered it in the pages of popular newspapers and magazines, at Mrs. Porcher's dinner-table, or in the good Lovegroves' drawing-room, had small attraction for him, since it appeared to advance chiefly by negations stated with rather blatant self-sufficiency and self-conceit. It might tend to the making of respectable municipal councillors; but, in his opinion, it was idle to pretend that it tended to the making of saints--and for the saints, those experts in the divine science, Iglesias confessed a weakness. Of spirituality it showed, to his seeing, as little outward evidence as of philosophy or of art. The phrases of piety might still be upon the lips of its votaries; but the attitude and aspirations engendered by piety were unfortunately dead. Its system of ethics was frankly utilitarian. Its goal, though hidden from the simple by a maze of high-sounding sentiment, was Rationalism pure and simple. Its god was not the creator of the visible universe, of angels and archangels, dominions, principalities, and powers, of incalculable natural and supernatural forces, but a jerky loose-jointed pasteboard divinity, the exclusive possession, since it is the exclusive invention, of the Anglo-Saxon race, through whose gaping mouth any and every self-elected prophet was free to shout, as heaven-descended truth, in the name of progress and liberty, whatever political or social catchword chanced to be the fashion of the hour.

Nor did the neo-mystics, whose utterances are also sown broadcast in contemporary literature and who are so lavish with their offers of divine enlightenment, please Iglesias any better. For his mind, thanks to his Latin ancestry, was of the logical order, while a business training and long knowledge of affairs had taught him the value of method, giving him an unalterable reverence for fact, and impressing upon him the existence of law, absolute and immutable, in every department of nature and of human activity--law, to break which is to destroy the sequence of cause and effect, and so procure abortion. Therefore this new school of thinkers--if one can dignify by the name of thinkers persons of so vague and topsy-turvy a mental habit--nourishing themselves upon the windy meat of secular and time-exploded fallacies, upon the temple-sweepings of all the religions, oriental and occidental, old and new, combined with ill-attested marvels of modern physical and psychological experiment, were far from commending themselves to his calm and patient judgment. Such excited persons, as a slight acquaintance with history proves beyond all question, have existed in every age; and, suffering from chronic mental dyspepsia, have ever been liable to mistake the rumblings of internal flatulence for the Witness of the Spirit. In their current pronouncements Iglesias met with a wearisome passion for paradox, and an equally wearisome disposition to hail all eccentricity as genius, all hysteria as inspiration. While in their exaltation of the "sub-conscious self"--namely, of those blind movements of instinct and foreboding common to the lower animals and to savage or degenerate man alike--as against the intellect and the reasoned action of the will, he saw a menace to human attainment, to civilisation--in the best meaning of that word--to right reason and noble living, which it would be difficult to overestimate. These good people, while pouring contempt on the body,

and even denying its existence, in point of fact thought and talked about little else. All of which struck him as not only very tiresome and very silly, but very dangerous. Modern Protestantism might eventuate in Rationalism, in a limiting of human endeavour exclusively to the end of material well-being. But this worship of the pseudo-sciences, this tinkering at the accepted foundations and accepted decencies of the social order, this cultivation of intellectual and moral chaos, could, for the vast majority of its professors at all events, eventuate only in the mad-house. And to the mad-house, whether by twentieth-century esoteric airship or occult subway, Dominic Iglesias had not the very smallest desire to go.

For he had no ambition to be "on time" and up-to-date, to electrify either himself or his contemporaries by an exhibition of mental smartness. He merely desired, earnestly yet humbly, to be given grace to find the road--however archaic in the eyes of the modern world that road might be--which leads to the light on the far horizon and beyond to the presence of God. The more he meditated on these things the more inconceivable it became to him but that this road veritably existed; and that, not by labour of man, but by everlasting ordinance of God. It was absurd, in face of a state of being so complex, so highly organised, so universally subjected to law, as the one in which he found himself, that a matter of such supreme importance as the channel of intercourse between the soul and its Maker should have been left to haphazard accident or blundering of lucky chance. And so, having supplemented his researches in print, by listening to the discourses of many teachers, from one end of London to the other in lecture-hall, chapel, and church, having even stood among the crowds which gather around itinerant preachers in the Park, Dominic found his thought fixing itself with deepening assurance upon the communion in which he had been born and baptised, which his father, in the interests of the revolutionary propaganda, had so bitterly repudiated, and from which his mother, broken by the tyranny of circumstance and bodily weakness, had lapsed.

Outside that communion he beheld only weltering seas of prejudice and conflicting opinion, heard only the tumult of confused and acrimonious contest. Within he beheld the calm of fearlessly wielded authority and of loyal obedience; heard the awed silence of those who worship being glad. For the Catholic Church, as Iglesias began to understand, is something far greater than any triumphant example of that which can be attained by cooperation and organisation. It is not an organisation, but an organism; a Living Being, perfectly proportioned, with inherent powers of development and growth; ever-existent in the Divine Mind before Time was; recipient and guardian of the deepest secrets, the most sacred mysteries of existence; endlessly adaptable to changing conditions yet immutably the same. Hence it is that Catholicism presents no questionable historic pedigree and speaks with no uncertain voice. Claiming not only to know the road the soul must tread would it reach the far horizon, but to be the appointed warden of that same road and sustainer of it, she points with proud confidence to the vast multitude which, under her guidance, has joyfully trodden it--a multitude as diverse in gifts and estate, as in age and race--as proof of the authenticity of her mission to the toiling and sorrowful children of men.

Yet, since unconditional surrender must ever strike a pretty shrewd blow at the roots both of personal pride and worldly caution, Dominic Iglesias hesitated to take the final step and declare himself. To one

who has long lived outside the creeds, and that not ungodly, still less bestially, it is no light matter to subject attitude of mind and daily habit to distinct rule. Not only does the natural man rebel against the apparent limiting of his personal freedom, but the conventional and sophisticated man fears lest agreement should, after all, spell weakness, while indifferentism--specially in outward observances--argues strength. A certain shyness, moreover, withheld Iglesias, a not unadmirable dread of being guilty of ostentation. It was so little his custom to obtrude himself, his opinions, and his needs upon the attention of others, that he was scrupulous and diffident in the selection of time and place. The affair, however, decided itself, as affairs usually do when the intention of those undertaking them is a sincere one--and thus.

The tide of war had begun to turn. Earlier in the week had come the news of General Cronje's surrender, after the three days' shelling of his laager at Paardeberg. Hence satisfaction, not only of victory but of compassion, since a sense of horror had weighed on the hearts of even the least sentimental at thought of the stubborn thousands, penned in that flaming rat-trap of the dry river-bed, ringed about by sun-baked rock and sand and death-belching guns. To-day came news of the relief of long-beleaguered Ladysmith, and London was shaken by emotion, under the bleak moisture-laden March sky, the air thick with the clash of joy-bells, buildings gay with riotous outbreak of many-coloured flags, the streets vibrant with the tread and voices of surging crowds.

Iglesias, who early that afternoon had walked Citywards to see the holiday aspect of the town and glean the latest war news, growing somewhat weary on his homeward journey of the humours of his fellow-citizens--which became beery and boisterous as the day drew on--turned in at the open gates of the Oratory, in passing along the Brompton Road. His purpose was to gain a little breathing space from the jostling throng, by standing at the head of the steps under the wide portico of the great church. Looking westward, above the wedge of mean and ill-assorted houses that marks the junction of the Fulham and the Cromwell Roads--the muddy pavements of which, far as the eye carried, were black with people--the yellowish glare of a pallid sunset spread itself across the leaden dulness of the sky. The wan and sickly light touched the architrave and columns of the facade of the great church, bringing this and the statue of the Blessed Virgin which surmounts it into a strange and phantasmal relief--a building not material and of this world, but rather of a city of dreams. To Iglesias it appeared as though there was an element of menace in that cold and melancholy reflection of the sunset. It produced in him a sense of insecurity and distrust, which the roar of the traffic and horseplay of the crowd were powerless to counteract. London, the monstrous mother, in this hour of her rejoicing showed singularly unattractive. Her features were grimed with soot, her dull-hued garments foul with slush, her gestures were common, her laughter coarse. His soul revolted from the sight and sound of her; revolted against the fate which had bound him so closely to her in the past, and which bound him still. The spirit of her infected even the sky above her, painting it with the sad colours of perplexity and doubt. He stepped farther back under the portico, moved by desire to escape from the too insistent thought and spectacle of her. Doing so, he became aware of music reaching him faintly from behind the closed doors of the church, fine yet sonorous harmonies supporting the radiant clarity of a boy's voice.

Then Iglesias understood that he was presented here and immediately with the moment of final choice. Delay was dishonourable, since it was nothing less than a shirking of the obligations which his convictions had created. So there, on the one hand--for so the whole matter pictured itself to his seeing--was London, the type, as she is in fact the capital, of the modern world--of its ambitions, material and social, of its activities, of its amazing association of pleasure and misery, of the rankest poverty and most plethoric wealth--at once formless, sprawling, ugly, vicious, while magnificent in intelligence, in vitality, in display, as in actual area and bulk. On the other hand, and in the eyes of the majority phantasmal as a city of dreams, was Holy Church, austere, restrictive, demanding much yet promising little save clean hands and a pure heart, until the long and difficult road is traversed which--as she declares--leads to the light on the far horizon and beyond to the presence of God.

"If one could be certain of that last, then all would be simple and easy," Iglesias said to himself, looking out over the turbulence of the streets to the pallid menace of the western sky. "But it is in the nature of things, that one cannot be certain. Certainty, whether for good or evil, can only come after the event. One must take the risk. And the risk is great, almost appallingly great."

For just then there awoke and cried in him all the repressed and frustrated pride of a man's life--lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, overweening ambition of power and place, of cruelty even, of gross licence and debauch. For the moment he ceased to be an individual, limited by time and circumstances, and became, in desire, the possessor of the passions and reckless curiosity of the whole human race. So that, in imagination he suffered unexampled temptations; and, in resisting them, flung aside unexampled allurements of grandeur and conceivable delight. Not what actually was, or ever had been, possible to and for him, Dominic Iglesias, bank-clerk, assailed him with provocative vision and voice; but the whole pageant of earthly being, and the inebriation of it. Nothing less than this did he behold, and drink of, and, in spirit, repudiate and put away forever, as at last he pulled open the heavy swing doors and passed into the church.

Within all was dim, mist and incense smoke obscuring the roof of the great dome, the figures of the kneeling congregation far below showing small and dark. Only the high altar was ablaze with many lights, in the centre of which, high-uplifted, encircled by the golden rays of the monstrance, pale, mysterious, pearl of incalculable price, showed the immaculate Host.

Quietly yet fearlessly, as one who comes by long-established right, Dominic walked the length of the nave, knelt devoutly on both knees, prostrating himself as, long ago, in the days of early childhood his mother had taught him to do at the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Now, after all these years--and a sob rose in his throat--he seemed to feel her hand upon his shoulder, the gentle pressure of which enjoined deepest reverence. Then rising, he took his place in the second row of seats on the gospel side, and remained there, through the concluding acts of the ceremonial, until the silent congregation suddenly finds voice--penetrated by austere emotion--in recitation of the Divine Praises.

Some minutes later he knelt in the confessional, laying bare the secrets of his heart.

Thus did Dominic Iglesias cast off the bondage of that monstrous mother, London-town, cast off the terror of those unbidden companions, Loneliness and Old Age, using and, taking the risks, humbly reconcile himself to Holy Church.

CHAPTER XXIII

Good George Lovegrove wandered solitary in Kensington Gardens. He had chosen the lower path running parallel with Kensington Gore, which leads, between flowerborders and thickset belts of shrubbery, from the Broad Walk to the railings enclosing the open space around the Albert Memorial. This path, being sheltered and furnished with many green garden seats, is specially nurse and baby haunted, and it was to see the babies, whether sturdily on foot or seated in their little carriages, that George Lovegrove had come hither, being sad. Thrushes sang lustily from the treetops. The flowerborders grew resplendent with polyanthus, crocus yellow, purple, and white, with early daffodils, and the heaven blue of *_scilla sibirica_*. Above, here and there a froth of almond or cherry blossom overspread the dark twigs and branches, while a ruddiness of burgeoning buds flushed the great elms. But babies of position, looking like tiny pink-faced polar bears, still wore their long leggings and white furs, the March wind being treacherous. They galloped, trumpeting, the clean air and merry sunshine going to their heads in the most inebriating fashion. It was early, moreover, so that they were full of the energy of a good night's sleep, of breakfast, and of comfortable nursery warmth. And George Lovegrove stepped among them carefully, watching their gambols moist-eyed, nervously anxious lest his quaintly solid figure should obstruct the erratic progress of toy-horse, or hoop, or ball. He craved for notice, for even the veriest scrap of friendly recognition, yet was too diffident to attempt any direct intercourse with these delectable small personages, who, on their part, were royally indifferent to his existence so long as he did not get in their way. This he clearly perceived, yet for it bore them no ill-will, preferring, as does every truly devout lover, to worship the beloved from a respectful distance rather than not worship at all.

And it was thus, even as a large and dusky elephant picking its way very gently through a flock of skippeting and lively lambs, that Mr. Iglesias, entering the sheltered walk from the far end, first caught sight of him. To Dominic, it must be admitted, babies, song-birds, burgeoning buds and blossoms, alike presented themselves as but elements in the setting of the outward scene--a scene sweet enough had one leisure to contemplate it, touched by the genial vernal influence, witness to nature's undying youth. But his appreciation of that sweetness was just now cursory and indirect. His thought was absorbed and eager, penetrated by apprehension of matters lying above and beyond the range of ordinary human speech. For he was in that exalted interval of a many hours' fast when the spiritual intelligence is wholly alive and awake, the body becoming but the vesture of the soul --a vesture without impediment or weight, a beautifully negligible quantity in the general scheme of existence. Later reaction sets in. The claims of the body become dominant; and the exalted moment is too often paid for sorrowfully enough in sluggish brain and irritated

nerves. Dominic, however, had not reached that stage of the tragi-comedy of the marriage of flesh and spirit. He was happy, with the white unearthly happiness of those who have been admitted to the Sacred Mysteries. And it was not without a sense of shock, as of rough descent to common things, of pity and of regret, that he recognised good George Lovegrove cruising thus, elephantine, among the roystering babes. Then Iglesias checked himself sternly. To humble themselves, remembering their own great unworthiness, to come down from the Mount of Transfiguration to the dwellers in the plain, and be gentle and human towards them--this surely is the primary duty of those who have assisted at the Divine Sacrament? And so Iglesias went forward and hailed his old school-fellow in all tenderness and friendship, causing the latter to raise his eyes from pathetic contemplation of those charming but wholly self-absorbed small human animals, and look up.

"Dominic!" he cried. "Well, to be sure, you do surprise me. Who would have expected to meet you out at this hour of the morning? I do congratulate myself. I am pleased," he said. His honest face beamed, his fresh colour deepened. As a girl at the unlooked-for advent of her lover, he grew confused and shy. And Iglesias warmed towards him. Whimsical in appearance, simple-minded, not greatly skilled in any sort of learning, yet he had a heart of gold--about that there could be no manner of doubt.

"Turn back then, and let us walk together," Iglesias said affectionately. "It is a long while since we have had a quiet talk--that is, of course, if you have no particular business which calls you to town."

"I have no business of any description," he answered. "And between ourselves, Dominic, since I lost my seat on the borough council, I have had too much time on my hands, I think. It is beginning to be quite a trouble with me."

"Is life too softly padded, too dead-level easy and comfortable?" Iglesias inquired. "Are you beginning to quarrel a little with your blessings?"

George Lovegrove became very serious.

"Yes," he said, "I am afraid you are right. As usual you have laid your finger on the spot. I do reproach myself for unthankfulness often. I know I have a good home, and everything decent and respectable about me; more so, indeed, than a man in my position has any right to expect. And yet I regret the old days in the city, Dominic, that I do. I should enjoy to be back at my old desk at the bank--just the little snap of anxiety in the morning as to whether one would catch the 'bus; the long ride through the streets with one's morning paper; the turning out with the other clerks--good fellows all of them, on the whole, were they not?--to get a snack of lunch. And then the coming home at night, with some trifling present or dainty to please the wife; and a look round the greenhouse and garden afterwards in your lounge suit; and hearing and retailing all the day's news, and talking of the good time coming when you would retire and be quite the independent gentleman; and the half-day on Saturday, too, taking some nice little outing to Richmond or Kew, or an exhibition or something of the sort, and then the Sunday's rest."

He hesitated and sighed, looking wistfully at the white-clad babies.

"If one had two or three of those little people of one's own it might be very different--though I would never breathe a word of such a thought to the wife. Females are so easily upset; and if it raises regrets in us men, it must be much more trying for them, poor things, to be childless. But where was I? Yes, well now the good time has come--and I feel a criminal in saying so, but it appears to me to be growing stale already, Dominic. It was better in anticipation than in fact. I am an ungrateful fellow, that I am, I know it; but sometimes I am inclined to ask myself whether all the things we set such fond hopes on are not like that."

"No, not all," Iglesias answered, with a certain subdued enthusiasm. "There are things--a few--which never grow stale. One may build on them as on a foundation of rock. If they ever seem to fail us, to be shaken and overthrown, it is an evil delusion, and the cause lies not in them but in ourselves. It is we who fail, who are shaken and overthrown through palsied will and feebleness of faith. They remain forever inviolate."

"I suppose so," the other man said timidly. He was unused to such vehemence of assertion on the part of his friend. He wondered to what it could refer. His thought, carrying back to the evening at the theatre, played around visions of distinguished amours. Then he steadied himself to heroic resolve.

"I suppose it is," he repeated, "and that makes my conduct appear all the more discreditable to me. My circumstances are too comfortable and easy. It is just that. And so I take to fretting over trifles and seeing slights and unkindness where none were intended." He looked up at Iglesias, his squinting eyes full of apology and admiration. "Yes, I am sadly poor-spirited and I have no excuse. I have been nursing a sense of injury towards those to whom I have most occasion for gratitude--the wife and you. Dominic, believe me I am heartily ashamed of myself."

"Come, come," Iglesias answered, brought very much back to earth, yet touched and softened. "My dear friend, you of all men have small cause for self-reproach. In every relation of life--and our knowledge of one another dates back to early youth--I have found you perfect in loyalty and unselfish kindness."

George Lovegrove walked on for a moment in silence. He had to clear his throat once or twice before he could command his voice.

"Praise from you is very encouraging," he managed to say at last. "But I am afraid I do not deserve it. I have felt mortified lately sometimes, and I am afraid envious. I--but after your last words I am more than ever ashamed to own it--I have fancied that you were becoming distant and that an estrangement was growing up between us. Of course I have always understood, though we happened to be school-fellows and in the same employment afterward, that your position and mine were different. And I want you to know that I would never be a clog on you, Dominic"--he spoke with an admirably simple dignity--"believe me, I never would be that. Lately I have been troubled by the thought that I had extracted a promise from you to remain at Trimmer's Green. Now I beg of you most earnestly not to let that promise, given in a moment of generous indulgence, weigh with you in the slightest,

if circumstances have arisen which point at your residing in a more fashionable part of the town."

"But why should I want to go to a more fashionable part of London?" Iglesias asked, smiling.

"Well, you see," the other returned, his face growing furiously red, "it came to my knowledge, unexpectedly, that you have acquaintances in quite another walk of life to ours--the wife's and mine, I mean. And it would pain me deeply, very deeply, Dominic, that any promise given to me, regarding your place of residence, should stand between you and mixing as freely with those acquaintances as you might otherwise do."

They had come to the place where the sheltered pathway is crossed by the Broad Walk--the upward trend of which showed blond, in the sunshine, against the brilliant green of the grass and the dark boles of the great trees bordering it. Here Iglesias paused. He was not altogether pleased.

"I do not quite follow you," he said coldly. Then looking at the guileless and faithful being beside him, he softened once more. Was it not only more just, but more honourable, to treat this matter with candour? "You are alluding to the lady who was good enough to send for me the night you and Miss Lovegrove went with me to the play?"

"Yes," the excellent George assented in a strangled voice. He wanted to know badly. He was agonised by fear of having committed an indiscretion offensive to his idol.

"Set your mind quite at rest on that point then, my dear friend. Her world is not my world and never will be. In it I should be very much out of place."

Iglesias moved forward again, crossing the Broad Walk and making towards the small iron gate, at the lower corner of the Gardens, which opens on to Kensington High Street. But he walked slowly, becoming conscious that he grew tired and spent. The glory of the spirit dominant was departing, the tyranny of the body dominant beginning to reassert itself. His features contracted slightly. He felt unreasoningly sad.

George Lovegrove walked beside him in silence, his eyes downcast, his heart stirred by vague tumultuous sympathy, his modest nature at once inflamed and abashed, recognising in his companion the hero of an exalted and tragic romance.

"Well, he looks it. It suits his character and appearance," he said to himself, adding aloud--for the very life of him he could not help it-- "But she was very beautiful, Dominic."

"Yes," Iglesias answered, "she is beautiful and very clever and--very unhappy."

The good George's heart positively thumped against his ribs. "And to think of all the plans the wife and I have been making!" he said to himself.

"If she wants me, she will send for me," Iglesias continued quietly, "and I shall go to her at once, as I went that evening, without

hesitation or delay, wherever she may be. But," he added, "it becomes increasingly improbable that she will send for me. I have not seen her or heard from her since that night. And so, my dear friend, you perceive that your kindly fears of having circumscribed my liberty of choice in respect of a place of residence are quite unfounded. I have no reason for leaving Cedar Lodge or altering my accustomed habits."

Iglesias smiled affectionately, as dismissing the whole matter.

"And now," he continued, "that little misunderstanding being cleared up, will you mind my turning into the restaurant just here, in High Street, for a cup of coffee and a roll? I have not breakfasted yet."

Whereupon George Lovegrove pranced before him, incoherent in kindly remonstrance and advice.

"At 11 A. M., and after your severe indisposition at Christmas, too, out walking on an empty stomach! It is positively suicidal. Where have you been to?" he cried.

"To Mass," Iglesias answered, still smiling, though with something of a fighting light in his eyes and a lift of his head.

His companion stared at him in blank amazement.

"To what?" he said.

"To Mass," Iglesias repeated. "I have been waiting for a suitable opportunity to speak to you of this, George. I, too, have felt the weight of enforced leisure. It has not been a particularly cheerful experience; but it has given me time to read, and still more to think, with the consequence that I have returned to the faith of my childhood. I have made my peace with the Church."

They continued to walk slowly onward; but George Lovegrove drew away to the further side of the path as though contact might be dangerous, as though infection was hanging about. He kept his eyes averted, his head bent.

"You do surprise me," he said at last. "I had not the slightest inkling that you were contemplating such a step. I give you my word, you have fairly taken away my breath. I do not seem to be able to grasp it, that you, whom I have always looked up to as so mentally superior, so independent in your thought, should have become a Romanist--for that is your meaning, I take it, Dominic?"

"Yes, that is my meaning," Iglesias answered.

"You do surprise me," George Lovegrove said again presently, and in a lamentable voice. "My mind refuses to grasp it. I would rather have lost five hundred pounds than have heard this. I declare I am fairly unmanned. I have never received a greater shock."

Iglesias remained silent. He was weary and sad. But he straightened himself, trying to keep his gaze fixed steadily upon the far horizon where dwells the everlasting light.

"It is presumptuous in me to criticise your action, perhaps," his companion continued. "I never did such a thing before, having always

hesitated to set up my views against yours; but I cannot but fear you have made a sad mistake. And if you were contemplating any change of this kind, why did you not come into our own national English Church?"

"Very much because it is English and national, I think," he answered. "In my opinion there is an inherent falsity of conception in subjecting our approach to the Absolute to restrictions imposed by country or by race, if these can, by any means, be avoided. Why hamper yourself with a late, expurgated, and mutilated edition, when the original, in all its splendour and historic completeness, bearing the sign-manual of the Author, is there ready to your hand?"

Again Iglesias spoke with subdued but unmistakable enthusiasm. The two friends had just reached the iron gate leading into High Street. Here George Lovegrove stopped. He still kept carefully at a distance, averting his eyes as from some distressing, even disgraceful, sight, while his good honest face worked with emotion.

"I think if you will kindly excuse me, I will go no farther," he faltered. "What you say may be true--I am sure I don't know. It is all beyond me. But I should prefer not to talk any more about it until I have accustomed myself to the thought of this change in you. Nothing does come between people like religion," he added with unconscious irony. "So I think, if you will kindly excuse me, I will just go away, Dominic."

And, without more ado, he turned back into the Gardens.

The small polar bears, meanwhile, satiated with exercise, air, and light, had begun to grow restive and fretty. Their stomachs cried cupboardwards, and they were disposed to filch each other's toy horses and hoops, and use each other's small persons as targets for balls, thrown as bombs in a fashion far from polite. Anxious maids and nurses hunted them homewards, not without slight asperity on the one part, on the other occasional squealings and free fights. But upon the babies, engaging even in naughtiness, George Lovegrove had ceased to bestow any attention. He went forward blindly, cruising among them and their attendants and smart little carriages, elephantine, careless where he placed his feet, to the obstruction of traffic and heightening of general annoyance, as sorrowful a man as any would need to meet. For it seemed to him things had gone wrong, just then, past all hope of setting right. His idol, light of his eyes and joy of his guileless heart, has fallen from his high estate, discovering capacity of playing the most discreditable and soul-harrowing pranks. Prejudice is myriad-lived here on earth; and in George Lovegrove all the bigotry, all the semi-superstitious, terror fostered by the accumulated ignorance which generations of Protestant forefathers have bequeathed to the English middle-class, reared itself, not only stubborn, but militant. His thought travelled back to those barbarities of rougher ages which are, in point of fact, more common to the secular than to the religious criminal code; but which Protestant teachers, even yet, find it convenient to put down wholly to the account of the Catholic Church. Practically ignorant of the spoliation and persecution practised under Henry the Eighth--of blessed domestic memory--of the further persecution which disfigured the "spacious days of great Elizabeth," not to mention the long and shameful history of the Penal Laws, he fixed his mind upon lurid legends of the reign of unhappy Mary Tudor, illustrated by prints in Fox's Book of Martyrs; upon inquisitorial tortures, the very thought of which--even out of doors

in the pleasant spring sunshine--made him break into a heavy sweat, and which, by some grotesque perversion of ideas, he believed to be not only the necessary outcome of, but vitally essential to, the practice of the Faith. Against this hideous background he set the calm and stately figure of his beloved friend Iglesias--seeing him no longer as the faithful comrade of more than half a lifetime, but as a foreign being, an unknown quantity, a worshipper of graven images, a participant in blasphemous rites, a believer, in short, in just all that which sound, respectable, and godly British common sense cast forth, with scorn and contumely, close on four centuries back. He was frightened. His everyday, comfortable, jog-trot, little odd and end of a local parochial suburban middle-class world was literally turned upside down and inside out.

"And however will the wife take it--however will she take it?" he mourned to himself. "To think we have been harbouring a Papist in disguise! I dare not contemplate her feelings. She will be upset. I must keep it from her as long as possible. And Serena, too, and Susan! I don't know how I can face them. Females are so very eloquent when put out. Of course I have known there was something wrong for a long time past. I saw there was a change in him, and felt there was some cause of coldness; but it never entered my head it could be as bad as this. Oh! my poor, dear friend. Oh! my poor Dominic, perhaps I have been overattached to you and this comes as a judgment. It would be hard enough to have anything break up our friendship, but this folly, this dreadful doting apostasy--"

He walked on blindly along the sheltered path between the flower-borders, deaf to remonstrant nurses and scornful, beautiful babes clothed in spotless white.

"If anything must come between us I would rather it was a woman," he mourned, "ten thousand times rather, whoever and whatever she was, than this."

CHAPTER XXIV

It happened on the afternoon of that same day that Eliza Hart, in pursuance of her domestic avocations, had occasion to go into Mr. Farge's room on the first floor to lay out a new coverlet on his bed. When, as thus, compelled to enter the apartments of either of the gentlemen guests of the establishment it was her practice to leave the door half open, as a concession to propriety in the abstract and a testimony to her own discretion in the concrete. The handsome mahogany doors of Cedar Lodge, unhappily painted white by some vandal of a former inhabitant, being heavy were hung on a rising hinge. Hence, when half open, a space of some three inches was left between the back of the door and the jamb, through which it was easy to get a good view of the hall or the landing unobserved. Little Mr. Farge professed a warm predilection for gay colours, and Eliza had selected the new bedspread with an eye to this fact. It was of bright raspberry-red cotton twill, enriched with a broad printed border in a flowing design of lemon-yellow tulips and bottle-green leaves. The salesman, in exhibiting it to her, had described it as "very chaste and pleasing." Eliza herself qualified it as "tasty"; and had just disposed it, much

to her own satisfaction, upon the young man's bed, when her attention was arrested by the tones of an unknown feminine voice in the hall below. Shortly afterwards she heard Frederick, the valet's large footsteps hurtling upstairs at a double, followed by a prolonged and leisurely whispering of silken skirts. Here, clearly, was a matter into which, for the reputation of Cedar Lodge, it was desirable to look without delay. Eliza, therefore, moved to the near side of the door, and, through the three-inch aperture afforded by the rising hinge, raked the landing with a vigilant eye.

The door of Mr. Iglesias's sitting-room immediately opposite stood open. In the doorway Frederick indulged in explanatory gesticulation. While, slowly ascending the last treads of the stairs, was a lady of unmistakable elegance, arrayed in a large black hat with drooping plumes to it, a sable cape--the price of which, Eliza felt assured, ran easily into three figures--and a black cloth dress in the cut of which she read the last word of contemporary fashion. Arrived at the stair-head the intruder stood still, calmly surveying her surroundings, presenting, as she turned her head, a pale face, very red lips, and eyes--so at least it appeared to the vigilant orbs of Eliza--quite immodestly large and lustrous, melancholy and somehow extremely impertinent, too. Then Mr. Iglesias emerged from his sitting-room, an expression upon his countenance which startled Eliza. She very certainly had never seen it before. For a moment the lady looked up at him, as though silently asking some question. Then she patted him lightly upon the back, and passed into the sitting-room hand in hand with him, while Frederick with his best flourish closed the door.

"Well, of all the things!" cried Eliza, half aloud; and, oblivious both of discretion and of the new raspberry-red cotton twill coverlet, she backed, and sat, plump, upon the edge of the bed. Just then, as she asserted in subsequently recounting this remarkable incident, you might have knocked her down with a feather.

"Of all the things!" she repeated, after an interval of breathless amazement. "And how long has this been going on, I should like to know? So that is the reason of a certain gentleman's iciness, and his stand-offish high-mightiness. Well, I never! And poor darling Peachie, so trustful and confiding all the time; not that she need fear comparison with anybody.--Bah! the serpent."

Nevertheless she was deeply impressed, and fell into a vein of furious speculation as to who this unlooked-for smart lady might be. Then, suddenly remembering the highly compromising nature of her own existing position sitting not only in the lively little Farge's bed-chamber, but actually upon his bed, she rose with embarrassment and haste, and made her way downstairs to the offices--treading circumspectly in dread of creaking boards--to interview Frederick. But from that functionary she obtained scant information.

"Zee lady she ask for Mr. Iglesias. I tell her I go to find him. I put her in zee drawing-room."

"Quite right, Frederick,"--this encouragingly from Eliza.

"But she no stay zere. She come again out quick. She not any name, not any visiting card give; only write somezing, very fast, on a piece of paper and screw it togezzer. Zen she not wait till I return, but behind me upstairs chase."

So there was nothing for it, as the great Eliza perceived, but to retire to the drawing-room, and--Mrs. Porcher happened to be out--note the hour and, with the door discreetly half open, await the descent of the intruder from the floor above.

"I can just catch darling Peachie, too," she said to herself, "and draw her aside. To meet such a person unexpectedly, on the stairs or in the hall, would be enough to make her turn quite faint."

CHAPTER XXV

Poppy St. John laid her hands lightly on Mr. Iglesias' shoulders and smiled at him. She looked very young, yet very worn; and the corners of her mouth shook.

"If you were anybody else," she said, "I believe I should give you a kiss. But I am not going to, so don't be nervous, dear man. I'll be perfectly correct, I promise you--only I had to come. I have been good, absolutely tiptop beastly good, I tell you. I have washed the slate. It is as clean as a vacuum, as the inside of an exhausted receiver. And I feel as dull as empty space before the creation got started."

Poppy shivered a little, putting one hand over her eyes, and resting her head with its great black hat and sweeping plumes against Mr. Iglesias' chest. And Iglesias quietly put his arm round her, supporting her. The day had been full of experiences. This last, though of a notably different complexion to the rest, promised to be by no means the least searching and surprising. Iglesias steadied himself to take it quite calmly, in his stride; yet his jaw grew rigid and his face blanched in dread of that which might be coming.

"I have sent Alaric Barking about his business," Poppy continued hoarsely. "Sent him back to his soldiering, helped to cart him off to that rotten hole, South Africa. He is a smart officer, and he'll make a name, if he don't get shot. And he won't get shot--I should feel it in my bones if he was going to, and I don't feel it. I broke with him more than a month ago. But I had to see him again to say good-bye, this morning, before he sailed."

Poppy moved a step or two away, turning her back on Iglesias.

"And it hurt a jolly lot more than I expected. I don't suppose I am in love"--she looked around inquiringly at him, as though expecting him to solve the complicated problem of her affections. "It's not likely at this time of day, is it? But I was fonder of Alaric than I quite knew. He is a good sort, and we have had some ripping times together. He had become a sort of habit, you know; and when you have knocked about a lot, as I have, you get rather sick at the notion of any change."

She stood, looking down, leisurely unbuttoning and pulling off her long gloves.

"I don't know that I should have made up my mind to sack him in the end, but that I wanted to please Fallowfeild."

Mr. Iglesias became very tall. His expression was hard, his eyes alight. This the lady noted. She returned and patted him gently on the back again.

"There, there, don't sail off on a wrong tack, my beloved fire-eater. Fallowfeild was quite right. The game was up, really it was; and he wanted me to walk out, like the gentlemanlike dog, so as to avoid being kicked out. I always knew the break was bound to come some time; and it's a long sight pleasanter to break than to be broken with, don't you think so?--You see, Alaric has formed a virtuous attachment." Poppy's lips took a cynical twist. "It was time, high time, he should, if he meant to go in for that line of business at all. The young lady is a niece of Fallowfeild's--a pretty little girl, really quite pretty--I saw her that night we were both at the play--all new, and pink and white, and well-bred, and _ingenue_, and in every respect perfectly suitable."

Poppy looked mutinously, even mischievously, at Dominic Iglesias.

"Poor, dear old Alaric," she said. "I don't quarrel with him. His elder brother's no children, and there are pots and pots of money. That he should want to marry, and that his people should press it on him, is perfectly natural, and obvious, and proper."

"But," Dominic asked fiercely, "if this young man, Captain Barking, proposes to marry, why has he not married you--always supposing you were willing to entertain his suit?"

Poppy flung her long gloves upon the table, unhooked her sable cape and sent it flying to join them.

"Pou-ah! I'm hot!" she exclaimed. "I think I'll sit down, if you have no objection. Yes, that chair, thanks--it looks excellently comfortable. By the way, you've got an uncommonly nice lot of things in this room. I am going to make a tour of inspection presently. It pleases me frightfully to see where you live and look at your possessions." She stared absently at the furniture and pictures.--"But about my marrying Alaric Barking," she continued. "Well, you see--you see, dear man, there is an inconvenient little impediment in the shape of a husband."

As she finished speaking Poppy folded her hands in her lap. She sat perfectly still, her lips pressed together, watching Mr. Iglesias over her shoulder but without turning her head. He had crossed the room and stood at one of the tall narrow windows, looking out into the bright windy afternoon.

For here it was in plain English, at last, that underlying secret thing which he had known yet dreaded to know. It begot in him an immense regret and inevitable repulsion at admitted wrongdoing. He made no attempt to juggle with the meaning of her words. Yet, along with them, came a feeling of gladness that Poppy St. John would remain Poppy St. John still; and a movement of hope--intimate and very tender--since in this tragic hour of her history she had come directly to him, asking comfort and sympathy. Dominic, cut to the quick by the defection of the heretofore ever-faithful George Lovegrove, hailed

with a peculiar thankfulness this mark of confidence and trust. Sinful, greatly erring, still the Lady of the Windswept Dust had returned to him; and thereat he soberly, yet very deeply, rejoiced. In truth, the sharp-edged breath of persecution he had encountered this morning, while painning him, had braced him to high endeavour. The Catholic Church, so he argued, must indeed be a mighty and living power since men fear her so much. And this power he felt to be behind him, sustaining him, inciting him to noble undertakings--he strong in virtue of her strength, fearless through the courage of her saints, able with the energy of their accumulated merit and their prayers. Again, as on his way home that morning from hearing Mass, the spirit was dominant, his whole nature and outlook purified and exalted by the Divine Indwelling. To fail any human creature calling on him for help would be contemptible, and even dastardly, in one blessed as he himself was. Thus his relation to Poppy St. John fell into line. He could afford to love and serve her well, since he loved and purposed, in all things, to serve Almighty God best.

These meditations occupied but a few moments, yet Poppy's patience ran short.

"Dominic Iglesias," she cried suddenly, sharply, "I am tired of waiting."

He crossed the room and stood in front of her, serious but light of heart.

"See here, it is all right between us?" she asked imperatively.

"Yes, all is perfectly right between us," he answered. "Your coming gives me the measure of your faith in me. I am grateful and I am very glad."

"Ah!" Poppy said softly.

She sat forward in her chair, making herself small, patting her hands together, palm to palm, between her knees, and swaying a little as she spoke.

"You see," she went on, "to be quite honest, I didn't break with Alaric simply to enable him to marry and live happy ever after. Nor did I do it exclusively to please Fallowfeild. It would take a greater fool than I am to be as altruistic as all that. I always like to have my run for my money. I--I did it more to get you back."

She paused and raised her head, looking full at him.

"And I have got you back?" she said.

"Yes," he answered, smiling. "I ask nothing better than to come back."

"Do you mean that you are prepared to take everything on trust--after what I have just told you--without wanting explanations?"

"Friendship has no need of explanations," Iglesias said, with a touch of grandeur--"that is, as I understand friendship. It accepts what is given without question, or cavilling as to much or to little, leaving the giver altogether free. Friendship, as I understand it, should have honourable reticences, not only of speech but of thought; wise

economies of proffered sympathy. In its desire of service it should never approach too near or say the word too much; since, if it is to flourish and obtain the grace of continuance, it must be rooted in reverence for the individuality of the person dear to it. This is my belief." His bearing was courtly, his expression very gentle. "Therefore rest assured that whatever confidence you repose in me is sacred. Whatever confidence you withhold from me is sacred likewise."

Poppy mused a little, a smile on her lips and an enigmatic look in her singular eyes.

"You're beautiful, dear man," she murmured. "You're very beautiful. You're worth chucking the devil over for; but you'll take a jolly lot of living up to. So see here, you're bound to look me up pretty constantly just at first, for I tell you life is not going to be exactly a toy-shop for me for some little time to come. You hear? You promise?"

"I promise," Iglesias returned.

"And there's another thing," she continued rather proudly, "a thing men too often blunder over--with the very best intentions, bless them, only they do blunder, and that leads to ructions. Please put the question of money out of your head once and for all. I have a certain amount of my own, nothing princely well understood, but quite possible to live on. It was to prevent his playing ducks and drakes with it that I finally left the jackal of a fellow whom I married. Well, I have that, and I have made a little more, one way and another."--Poppy permitted herself a wicked grimace.--"Poor old Alaric used to tell me I was a great financier wasted, that I should have been invaluable as partner in their family banking concern--that's more than he'll ever be, poor chap, unless marriage makes pretty sweeping changes in him. Some of my sources of income naturally are cut off through the cleaning of the slate. For I have been tiptop beastly good--indeed I have, as I told you! No more cards, and oh dear, no more racing. But no doubt Cappadocia will contribute in the way of puppies. _Noblesse oblige_--she realises her duty towards posterity, does Cappadocia. So I shall scrape along quite tidily. And then, as long as I keep my voice and my figure, at a push there's always my profession.--You hadn't arrived at the fact that I had a profession? Such is fame, dear man, such is fame. Why, I started as a child-actress at thirteen; and went on till the jackal made that impossible, like virtue, and self-respect, and a decent home, and a few kindred trifles in favour of which every clean-minded woman has, after all, a strongish prejudice."

Poppy's voice shook. She had much ado to maintain an indifferent and matter-of-fact manner. Iglesias drew up a chair and sat down beside her. She put out her hand, taking his and holding it quietly.

"There, that's better," she said. "I feel babyish. I should like a good square cry. But I won't have one. Don't be afraid. The motto is 'No snivelling, full steam ahead.'--But as to the stage, I'm not sure that won't prove the solution of most difficulties in the end. Sometimes it pulls badly at my heartstrings, and I shouldn't be half sorry for an excuse for taking to it again. It's a rotten profession for a man, and not precisely a soul-saving one for a woman. But it gives you your opportunity; and, at bottom, I suppose that's the main thing one asks of life--one's opportunity. Too, your art is your art; and if it is bred in you, you sicken for it. I was awfully glad that

night to see you at the play, though in a way it shocked me. It seemed incongruous. Tell me, do you really care for the theatre?"

"To a moderate extent I do," Dominic answered. She wanted, so he divined, to give a lighter tone to the conversation. He tried to meet her wishes.--"I am not a very ardent playgoer, I am afraid. But at the present time I happen to be involved indirectly in theatrical enterprise. I am interested in the production of a play, which I am assured will prove a remarkable success."

"You're not financing it?" Poppy asked sharply.

"Within certain limits I am," he answered, smiling. "An appeal was made to me for help which it would have been cruel to refuse."

Poppy's expression had become curiously sombre, not to say stormy. She got up and began to roam about the room.

"I hope to goodness the limits are clearly defined, and very narrow ones, then," she exclaimed. "For my part I don't believe in talent which can't find a market in the ordinary course of business. I grant you managers sometimes put a play on which is no good; and sometimes cripple what might be a fine play by doctoring it, in deference to the rulings of that archetype of all maiden aunts and incarnation of British hypocrisy, the censor; but they very rarely, in my experience, reject a play which has money in it. Why should they? Poor brutes, they are not exactly surfeited with masterpieces. The play which requires private backing, though a record-breaker in the opinion of its author, is usually rubbish in that of the public. And the public, take it all round, is very fairly level-headed and just; you must not judge it by the stupidities of the censor. He represents only an extreme section of it, if at this time of day he really represents anybody--a section which does the screaming sitting sanctimoniously at home, getting its information at second-hand through the papers, and never darkens the doors of a play-house at all. Moreover, you must remember that the public is master. There is no getting behind its verdict."

Poppy's peregrinations had brought her back beside Mr. Iglesias again. She patted him on the shoulder.

"See here, my beloved no-longer-nameless one," she said. "Be advised. Learn wisdom. For I tell you I've been through that gate if ever a woman has. The jackal--I wish to heaven we could keep him out of our talk, but, for cause unknown, he persistently obtrudes himself--he invariably does so when I'm hip and edgy--well, you see, he was an unappreciated genius in the way of a dramatist, from which fact I derived first-hand acquaintance with the habits of the species. What I don't know about those animals is not worth knowing. They're just simply vermin, I tell you. Their utter unprofitableness is only equalled by their lunatic vanity. They imagine the whole world, lay and professional, is in league to balk and defraud them. So don't touch them, I entreat you, as you value your peace of mind and your pocket. They'll bleed you white and never give you a penn'orth of thanks--more likely turn on you and make out, somehow or other, you are responsible for the failure of their precious productions.--Now let's try to forget them, and talk of pleasanter subjects. These obtrusions of the jackal always bring me bad luck. I'm downright scared at them.--Tell me about your goods, your books and your

pictures. And show me something which belonged to your mother--that is, if it wouldn't pain you to do so. I should like to hold something she had touched in my hands. It would be comforting, somehow. And just set that door wider open, there's a dear. I want to have a look into the other room and see where you sleep."

For the ensuing half hour Poppy was an enchanting companion, wholly womanly, gentle and delicate; eager, too, with the pretty spontaneous eagerness of a child, at the recital of stories and exhibition of treasures beloved by her companion. The lonely cedar tree, lamenting its exile as the wind swept through the labyrinth of its dry branches, moved her almost to tears.

"It is tragic," she said; "still, I am glad you have it. It's very much in the picture, and lifts the sentiment of the place out of the awful suburban rut. It's a little symbolic of you yourself, too, Dominic--there's style, and poetry, and breeding about it. Only, thank the powers, you differ from it mightily in this, that its best days are over, while you are but in the flower of your age. And your rooms are delightful--they're like you, too.--The rest of the house? My dear soul, the manservant ushered me into a drawing-room, when I arrived, the colours of which were simply frantic. I bolted. If I'd stayed another five minutes they'd have given me lockjaw.--Now I must go." She smiled very sweetly upon Mr. Iglesias. "I'm better, ten thousand times better," she said. "When I came I was rather extensively nauseated by my own virtuous actions. Now it's all square between them and me. I'm good right through, I give you my word I am. If only it'll last!"

Poppy's lips quivered, and she looked Iglesias rather desperately in the face.

"Never fear," he answered, "but that it will last."

"Still you'll come and see me often, very often, till I settle down into the running? It will be beastly heavy going--must be, I'm afraid --for a long while yet."

Dominic Iglesias, holding her hand, bent low and kissed it.

"I will serve you perfectly, God helping me, as long as I live," he said.

Five minutes later Mrs. Porcher, supported by the outraged and sympathetic Eliza, watched, through the aperture afforded by the rising hinge of the dining-room door, an unknown lady, escorted by Mr. Iglesias, sweep in whispering skirts and costly sables across the hall.

Passing out and down the white steps, Poppy, usually so light of foot and deft of movement, stumbled, and but for Iglesias' prompt assistance would have fallen headlong. At that same moment de Courcy Smyth, slovenly in dress, with shuffling footsteps, crossed the road, and then slunk aside, his arm jerked up queerly almost as though warding off a blow.

"No, no, I'm not hurt, not in the least hurt," Poppy said breathlessly, in response to Iglesias' inquiry. "But it's given me a bad fright. I'll go straight home. Put me into the first hansom you

see.--No, I'll go by myself. I'd far rather. I give you my word I'm not hurt; but I've a lot of things to think about--I want to be alone. I want to be quiet. Come soon. I was very happy. Good-bye--good-night."

CHAPTER XXVI

A featureless landscape of the brand of ugliness peculiar to the purlicus of a great city, to that intermediate region where the streets have ended and the country has not yet fairly begun. A waste of cabbagefields--the dark lumpy earth between the rows of yellowish stumps strewn with ill-smelling refuse of decaying leaves--seen through the rents in a broken, unkempt, quickset hedge. Running parallel with the said hedge, shiny blacktarred palings, shutting off all view of the river. Between these barriers, a long stretch of drab-coloured high road, flanked by slightly raised footpaths, a verge of coarse weedy grass to them in which a litter of rags, torn posters, and much other unloveliness found harbourage. To the northwest and north, a sky piled to the zenith with mountainous swiftly moving clouds, inky, blue-purple, wildly white, from out the torn bosoms of which rushed, now and again, flurrying showers of hail and sleet driven by a shrieking wind. March was in the act of asserting its proverbial privilege of "going out like a lion"; but the lion, as seen in this particular perspective, was a frankly ignoble and ill-conditioned beast.

And Poppy St. John, heading up against wind and weather along the left-hand footpath, felt frankly ignoble and ill-conditioned, too. Her poor soul, which had made such valiant efforts to spread its wings and fly heavenward--a form of exercise sadly foreign to its habit--crawled, once more, soiled and mud-bespattered, along the common thoroughfare of life. At this degradation, her heart overflowed with bitterness and disgust, let alone the blind rage which possessed her, as of some trapped creature frustrated in escape. She had broken gaol, as she fondly imagined, and secured liberty. Not a bit of it! In the hour of reconciliation, of sweetest security, she met her gaoler face to face and heard the key grind in the lock.

Save for the occasional passing of a market waggon, or high-shouldered scavenger's cart, the road was deserted. Once a low-hung two-wheeled vehicle rattled by, on which, insufficiently covered by sacking, lay a dead horse, the great head swinging ghastly over the slanting tail-board, the legs sticking out stark in front. A man, perched sideways on the carcass, swore at the rickety creak he was driving, and lashed it under the belly with a short-handled heavy-thonged whip. He was collarless, and the scarlet and orange handkerchief, knotted about his throat, had got shifted, the ends of it streaming out behind him as he lifted his arm and swayed his whole body madly using his whip. Poppy shut her eyes, sickened by the sound and sight. Just then a scourging storm of sleet struck her, causing her to turn her back and pause, where a curve in the range of paling offered some slight shelter. For strong though she was, and well furnished against the inclement weather in a thick coaching coat, buttoned up to her chin and down to her feet, her cloth cap tied on with a thick veil, the stinging wind and sleet were almost more than she could face. Her depression was not

physical merely, but moral likewise. For over and above her personal and private sources of trouble, it was a day and place whereon evil deeds seemed unpleasantly possible. The swearing driver and dangling head of the dead horse had served to complete her discomfiture; and presently, the storm slackening a little, hearing footsteps behind her, she wheeled round, her chin bravely in the air, but her heart galloping with nervous fright, while her fingers closed down on the butt of the small silver-plated revolver which rested in the right-hand waist pocket of her long coat.

De Courcy Smyth was close beside her. Poppy set her lips together and braced herself to endure the coming wretchedness. It was some years since she had had speech of him--some years, indeed, since she had seen him, save during that brief moment, twenty-four hours previously, as she descended the steps of Cedar Lodge. Even in his most prosperous days he had been unattractive in person, at once untidy and theatrical in dress. Now Poppy registered a distinct deterioration in his appearance. His puffy face, red-rimmed eyes, and shambling gait were odious to her. She noted, moreover, that he was poorly clad. His grey felt hat was stained and greasy; his ginger-coloured frieze overcoat threadbare at the elbows, thin and stringy in the skirts. The soles of his brown boots were splayed, the upper leathers seamed and cracked. This might denote poverty. It might, also, only denote carelessness and sloth. In any case, it failed to move her to pity, provoking in her uncontrollable irritation; so that, forgetful of diplomacy, stirred by memories of innumerable kindred provocations in the past, Poppy spoke without preamble, asking him sharply as he joined her:

"Have you no better clothes than that?"

Smyth paused before answering, looking her up and down furtively yet deliberately, wiping the wet of his beard and face, meanwhile, with a frayed green silk pocket-handkerchief.

"It offends your niceness that your husband should dress like a tramp, does it?" he said hoarsely. "And pray whose fault is it that he is reduced to doing so? Judging by your own costume, you can easily remove that cause of offence if you choose. It does not occur to you, perhaps, that while you live on the fat of the land I, but for the charity of strangers--which it is loathsome to me to accept--should not have enough to pay for the food I eat or for the detestable garret in which I both work and sleep? Under these circumstances I am scarcely prepared to call in a fashionable tailor to replenish my wardrobe, lest its meagreness should, on the very rare occasions on which I have the honour of meeting you, offer an unpleasing reflection upon your own super-elegance."

To these observations, delivered with a somewhat hysterical volubility, Poppy made no direct reply. Surely it was cruel, cruel, that at this juncture, when she had so honestly striven to refuse the evil and choose the good, this recrudescence of all that was most hateful to her should take place? Moreover, now as always, just that modicum of truth underlay Smyth's exaggerated accusations and perverted statements which made them as difficult to combat as they were exasperating to listen to. For a minute or so Poppy could not trust herself to speak, lest she should give way to foolish invective. His looks, manner, intonation, the phrases he employed were odiously familiar to her. She fought as in a malicious dream, to which the squalor of the surrounding landscape offered an only too appropriate

setting. Turning, she walked slowly in the direction whence she had come--namely, in that of Barnes village and Mortlake. There the quaint riverside houses would afford some shelter and sense of comradeship.

"I am sorry to make you come farther out," she said, with an attempt at civility.

"That is unexpectedly considerate," he commented.

"But it is impossible to talk in the teeth of this wind," she continued, "and I imagine we're neither of us particularly keen to prolong our interview."

"Excuse me, speak for yourself," Smyth interrupted. "I find it decidedly interesting to meet my wife again. She has gone up in the world, and climbed the tree of fashion in the interval. I have gone down in the world, as every scholar and gentleman, every man with brains and high standards of art and culture, is bound to go down sooner or later, in this hideous age of blatant commercialism and Mammon rampant. I don't quarrel with it. I would far rather be one of the downtrodden, persecuted minority. But, just on that account, my wife is all the more worth contemplating, since she offers a highly instructive object-lesson in the advantages which accrue from allying oneself with the victorious majority. See--"

A rush of wind and flurry of cold rain rendered the concluding words of his tirade inaudible. It was as well, for Poppy was growing wicked, anger dominating every more humane and decent feeling in her.

"Look here," she said, when the storm had somewhat abated. "I know that sort of talk as well as my old shoe. Haven't I listened to it for hours? For goodness' sake, quit it. It doesn't wash. Let us come to the point at once without all this idiotic brag and gassing. You wrote me a letter shouting danger and ruin. What did it mean? Anything real, or merely a melodramatic blowing off of steam? Tell me. Let us have it out and have finished with it. What do you want?"

The softening medium of a gauze veil failed to hide the fact that Poppy's expression was distinctly malignant, her great eyes full of sombre fury, her red lips tense. Smyth backed away from her against the palings in genuine alarm.

"I--I believe you'd like to murder me," he said.

"So I should," Poppy answered. "I should very much like to kill you. And I've the wherewithal here, in my pocket, and there's no one on the road. But you needn't be anxious. I'm not going to murder you. The consequences to myself would be too inconvenient."

As she spoke she thought of yesterday, of the renewal of her friendship with Dominic Iglesias, and of all that he stood for to her in things pure, lovely, and of good report. A sob rose in her throat, for nothing, after all, is so horrible as to feel wicked; nothing so hard to forgive as that which causes one to feel so. Poppy walked on again slowly.

"What do you want?" she repeated miserably. "Be straight with me for once, if you can, de Courcy, and tell me plainly--if there's anything to tell. What is it you want?"

"I have my chance at last," he said hurriedly, "of fame, and success, and recognition--of bringing those who have despised me to their knees. I thought I was safe. But yesterday I found that you--yes, you--come into the question, that you may stand between me and the realisation of my hopes--more than hopes, a certainty, unless you play some scurvy trick on me. I had to have your promise, and there was no time to lose--so I wrote."

Poppy looked at him contemptuously.

"What does all that mean?--more money?" she asked. "Haven't you grown ashamed of begging yet? I raised your allowance last year, and it's being paid regularly--Ford & Martin have sent me on your receipts. To give it you at all is an act of grace, for you've no earthly claim on me, and you know it. From the day I married you I never cost you a farthing; I've paid for everything myself, down to every morsel of bread I put into my mouth. You, talked big about your income beforehand, when you knew you were up to your eyes in debt. Well, in debt you may stay, as far as I am concerned. I'll give you that seventy-five a year if you'll keep clear of me; but I won't give you a penny more, for the simple reason that I shan't have it to give. It'll be an uncommonly close shave in any case--I have myself to keep."

"Yourself to keep?" Smyth snarled. "Since when have you taken to wholesale lying, my pretty madam? That is a new development."

"I'm not lying," Poppy blazed out. "I am speaking honest, sober truth."

Smyth laughed. It was not an agreeable sound.

"Is not that a little too brazen?" he asked. "Even with such a negligible quantity as a deserted husband, it is a mistake to overplay the part."

Then, frightened by her expression, he slunk aside again. But Poppy did not linger. Slowly, steadily, she walked on down the rain-lashed footpath.

"For God's sake tell me what you want--tell me what you want," she cried, "and let me get away from all this rottenness."

"You do not believe in me," Smyth replied sullenly, "and that is why it is so difficult to speak to you about this matter. You have always depreciated my powers and scoffed at my talents. No thanks to you I have any self-confidence left."

"All right, all right," Poppy said. "We can miss out the remainder of that speech. I know it by heart. Come to the point--what do you want?"

"I was just filling in the sketch of the third act."

Poppy shrugged her shoulders and raised her hands with a despairing gesture.

"Oh, heavens," she ejaculated, "a play again! Are you mad? You know, just as well as I do, every manager Mill refuse it unread."

"It will be unnecessary to approach any manager. I go straight to the public this time. I have the promise of money to meet the expenses of two matinees at least. I have no scruple in accepting--it is an investment, and an immensely profitable one--for I know the worth of my own work. It is great, nothing less than great--"

"Of course," Poppy said. "But pray where do I come in?" Then she paused. Suddenly she pieced the bits of the puzzle together, saw and understood. Misery, deeper than any she had yet experienced, overflowed in her. "Ah, it is you, then, you who are bleeding Dominic Iglesias," she cried. "Robbing him by appeals to his charity and lying assurances of impossible profits. You shall not do it. I will put a stop to it. You shall not, you shall not!"

"Why?" Smyth inquired. "Do you want all his money yourself?"

"You dirty hound," Poppy said under her breath.

"I did not know of your connection with him till yesterday," Smyth continued--in proportion as Poppy lost herself, he became cool and astute--"though we have lived in the same house for the last eighteen months. I supposed you to be in pursuit of larger game than superannuated bank-clerks. However, your modesty of taste, combined with your charming attitude towards me, might, as I perceived, lead to complications. I ascertained how long you had been at Cedar Lodge yesterday. Then I wrote to you."

Poppy stood still in the wind and wet, listening intently.

"For once," he went on exultantly, "it is my turn to give orders, my fine lady, and yours to obey. If you interfere, in the smallest degree, between Iglesias and me, I will call his attention to certain facts, the appearance of which is highly discreditable to him. He will pay to save his reputation, if he ceases to pay out of charity--not that it is charity. He is making an investment of which, as a business man, he fully appreciates the worth. If you interfere I will make his position a vastly uncomfortable one. The women who keep Cedar Lodge are as jealous as cats. It would not require much blowing to make that fire burst into a very lively flame, I promise you."

"You live there, then?" Poppy said absently. "You live there?" live there?"

"Yes," he answered. "Does that offend your niceness, too? Do you consider the place too good for me? You need not distress yourself. I have only one room, a small one--on the second floor immediately above your friend's handsome sitting-room, but only half the size of it. The floors are old. I can gather a very fair sense of any conversation taking place below."

Poppy moved on again.

"May I inquire what you propose to do?" Smyth asked presently--"warn your mature commercial admirer and compel me, in self-protection, to blast his reputation, or hold your tongue like a reasonable woman?"

They had reached the end of the tarred palings. Upon the left the quaintly irregular bow-windowed rose-and-ivy-covered houses of Barnes Terrace--no two of them alike in height or in architecture--fronted

the road. Upon the right was the river, dull-coloured and wind-tormented. A cargo of bricks, supplying a strong note of red in the otherwise mournful landscape, was being unloaded from a barge; carts backed down the slip to within easy distance of the broad bulwarkless deck, horses shivering as they stood knee-deep in the water. The bricks grated together when the men, handling them, tossed them across. With long-drawn thunderous roar and shriek, a train, heading from Kew Station, rushed across the latticed iron-built railway bridge. Poppy waited, watching the progress of it, watching the unloading of the barge. The one perfectly pure and beautiful gift which life had given her was utterly profaned, so it seemed to her; that which she held dearest and best hopelessly entangled with that which to her was most degrading and abhorrent. And what to do? To be silent was to be disloyal. To speak was to expose Dominic Iglesias to dishonour and disgust far deeper than that which loss of money could inflict. Poppy weighed and balanced, clear that her thought must be wholly for him, not letting anger sway her judgment. Of two evils she must choose that which, for him, was least.

"I will not give you away. I will say nothing," she said at last.

"You swear you will not?"

"Yes, I swear," Poppy said.

"I want it in writing."

"Very well, you shall have it in writing, witnessed if you like," she answered. "The precious document shall be posted to you to-night. Now are you satisfied, you contemptible animal? Have you humbled me enough?"

But Smyth came close to her, pushing his face into hers. He was shaking with excitement, hysterical with mingled fear and relief.

"I am not ungenerous, my dear girl," he whispered. "I am willing to condone the past--to take you back, to acknowledge you as my wife and let you share my success. There is a part in the new play which might have been written for you. You could become world-famous in it. I am not ungenerous, I am willing to make matters up."

"Do you want me to murder you, after all?" Poppy asked. "If you try me much further, I tell you plainly, I can't answer for myself. Therefore, as you value your life, let me alone. Get out of my sight."

CHAPTER XXVII

During the watches of the ensuing night, amid bellowings of wind in the chimneys, long-drawn complaint of the great cedar tree, rattle of sleet, and those half-heard whisperings and footsteps--as of inhabitants long since departed--which so often haunt an old house through the hours of dark, Dominic Iglesias' mind, for cause unknown, was busied with reminiscences of the firm of Barking Brothers & Barking, and the many years he had spent in its service. He had no wish to think of these things. They came unbidden, pushing themselves upon remembrance. All

manner of details, of little histories and episodes connected both with the financial and human affairs of the famous banking-house, occurred to him. And from thoughts of all this, but transmogrified and perverted, when, towards dawn, the storm abating, he at length fell asleep, his dreams were not exempt. For through them caracoled, in grotesque and most irregular inter-relation, those august personages, the heads of the firm, along with his fellow-clerks, living and dead, that militant Protestant, good George Lovegrove, and the whole personnel of the establishment, down to caretaker, messenger-boys, porters and the like. Never surely had been such wild doings in that sedate and reputable place of business--doings in which gross absurdity and ingenious cruelty went hand in hand; while, by some queer freak of the imagination, poor Pascal Pelletier, of hectic and pathetic memory, appeared as leader of the revels, at which the Lady of the Windswept Dust, sad-eyed, inscrutable of countenance, her dragon-embroidered scarf drawn closely about her shoulders, looked on.

Dominic arose from his brief uneasy slumbers anxious and unrefreshed. The phantasmagoria of his dream had been so living, so vivid, that it was difficult to throw off the impression produced by it. Moreover, he was slightly ashamed to find that, the restraining power of the will removed, his mind was capable of creating scenes of so loose and heartless a character. He was displeased with himself, distressed by this outbreak of the undisciplined and unregenerate "natural man" in him. Later, coming into his sitting-room, he unfortunately found matters awaiting him by no means calculated to obliterate displeasing impressions or promote suavity and peace.

For the pile of letters and circulars lying beside his plate upon the breakfast-table was topped by a note directed in de Courcy Smyth's nervous and irritable hand. Dominic opened it with a curious sense of reluctance. Only last week he had lent the man ten pounds; and here was another demand, couched in terms, too, so bullying, so almost threatening, that Dominic's back stiffened considerably.

Smyth requested, or rather commanded, that fifty pounds should be delivered to him without delay. "It was conceivable that Mr. Iglesias had not that amount by him in notes. But, since he had really nothing to do, it would be a little occupation for him to go and procure them." Smyth insisted the money should be paid in a lump sum, adding that, his time being as valuable as Iglesias' was worthless, he could not reasonably be expected to waste it in perpetual letters respecting a subject so essentially uninteresting and distasteful to him as that of ways and means. Such correspondence annoyed him, and put him off his work; and, as it clearly was very much to Iglesias' interest that the play should be finished as soon as possible, it was advisable that he should accede to Smyth's present request without parley and pay up at once.

Reading this mandatory epistle, Dominic was gravely displeased and hurt. Poppy St. John had warned him against the insatiable and insolent greed of persons of this kidney. He had discounted her speech somewhat, supposing it infected with such prejudice as the recollection of private wrongs will breed even in generous natures. Now he began to fear her strictures had been just. The egoism of the unsuccessful is a moral disease, destructive of all sense of proportion. Those suffering from it must be reckoned as insane; not sick merely, but actually mad with self-love. Smyth, to gain his play a hearing, would beggar him--Iglesias--without scruple or regret. But Dominic had no intention of being beggared in this connection. Thrice-sacred charity is one story; the encouragement of the unlimited borrower, the fostering of so colossal

a selfishness quite another. A point had been reached where to accede to Smyth's demands was culpable, a consenting, indeed, to wrongdoing. Here then was occasion for careful consideration. Iglesias gravely laid the offensive missive aside, and proceeded to eat his breakfast before opening the rest of his letters. In the intervals of the meal he glanced at the contents of the morning paper.

The war news was unimportant. A skirmish or two, leaving a few more women's lives maimed and hearts desolate. A lie or two of continental manufacture, tending to blacken the fair fame of the most humane and good-tempered army which, in all probability, ever took the field. A shriek or two from soft-handed sentimentalists at home, who--for reasons best known to themselves--are ardent patriots of every country save their own. Such items formed too permanent a part of the daily menu, during the year of grace 1900, to excite more than passing notice. At the bottom of the column a paragraph of a more unusual character attracted Iglesias' attention. It announced it had authority for stating that Alarmist rumours, current regarding the unstable financial position of a certain well-known and highly respected London bank, were grossly exaggerated. No doubt the losses suffered by the bank in question had been severe, owing to its extensive connection with land and mining property in South Africa, and the disorganisation of business in that country consequent upon the war. The said losses were, however, of a temporary character, and had by no means reached the disastrous proportions commonly reported. Granted time, and a reasonable amount of patience on the part of persons most nearly interested, the storm would be successfully weathered, and the bank would resume the leading position which it had so long and honourably enjoyed. No names were given, but Iglesias had small difficulty in supplying them. It appeared to him that Barking Brothers must be in considerable straits or they would never, surely, put forth disclaimers of this description. His mind went back upon the dreams which had left such disquieting impressions upon his mind. In the light of that newspaper paragraph they took on an almost prophetic character. Absently he turned over the rest of the pile of letters, selected one, the handwriting upon the envelope of which was at once well-known and perplexing to his memory, opened it, and turned to the signature to find that of no less a personage than Sir Abel Barking himself.

During the next quarter of an hour Dominic Iglesias lived hard in thought, in decision, in struggle with personal resentment bred by remembrance of scant courtesy and ingratitude meted out to him. He learned that Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking's embarrassments did, in point of fact, skirt the edge of ruin. Their affairs were in apparently inextricable confusion, owing to Reginald Barking's reckless speculations, while, to add to the general confusion, that strenuous young man had broken down utterly from nervous verstrain, and was, at the present time, incapable of the slightest mental or physical exertion. Things were at a deadlock. "Under these terrible circumstances," Sir Abel Barking wrote, "I turn to you, my good friend, as a person intimately acquainted with the operation of our firm. Your experience may be of service to us in this crisis, and, in virtue of the many benefits you have received from us in the past, I unhesitatingly claim your assistance. In my own name and that of my partners, I offer to reinstate you in your former position, but with enlarged powers. It has always been my endeavour, as you are well aware, to reward merit and to treat those in our employment with generosity and consideration. You will be glad, I am sure, to embrace this opportunity of repaying, in

some small measure, your debt towards me and mine." More followed to the same effect. Neither the taste of the writer nor his manner of expression was happy. Of this Dominic was quite sensible. Patronage, especially after his period of independence, was far from agreeable to him. Yet behind the verbiage, the platitudes and bombastic phrases, his ear detected a very human cry of fear and cry for help. Should he accede, doing his best to allay that fear and render that help?

He rose, still holding the wordy letter in his hand, and paced the room. Of his own ability to render effective help, were he allowed freedom of action, Iglesias entertained little doubt--always supposing that the situation did not prove even worse than he had present reason for supposing. It was not difficult to see how the trouble had come about. The senior partners, lulled into false security by lifelong prosperity, had grown supine and inert. Sooner, in their opinion, might the stars fall from heaven than the august house of Barking prove unsound of foundation or capable of collapse! To hint at this, even as a remote possibility, was little short of blasphemous. Their amiable nephew, meanwhile, had regarded them as a flock of silly fat geese eminently fitted for plucking. He let them complacently hiss and cackle, congratulate themselves upon their worldly wisdom and conspicuous modernity, while, all the time, silently, diligently, relentlessly plucking. Now, awakening suddenly to the fact of their nudity, they were in a terrible taking; scandalised, flustered, very sore, poor birds, and quite past recollecting that feathers grow again if the system is sound and the cuticle health. To Iglesias these purse-proud, self-righteous, middle-aged gentlemen presented a spectacle at once pathetic and humorous in their present sad plight. A calm head and clear judgment might do much to ameliorate their position, and a calm head and cool judgment he was confident of possessing. Only was he, after all, disposed to place these useful possessions at their service?

For in the last nine months Dominic Iglesias' habits and outlook had changed notably. The values were altered. It would be far harder to return to the monotonous routine of business life now--even though a fine revenge, a delicate heaping of coals of fire, accompanied that return--than it had been to part company with it last year. Loneliness, the emptiness induced by absence of definite employment, no longer oppressed him. Holy Church had cured all that, giving him a definite place, and definite purpose, beautiful duties of prayer and worship, the restrained, yet continuous, excitement of the pushing forward of soul and spirit upon the fair, strange, daily, hourly journey towards the far horizon and the friendship of Almighty God. His retirement had become very dear to him, since it afforded scope for the conscious prosecution of that journey. Dominic's state of mind, in short, was that of the lover who dreads any and every outside demand which may, even momentarily, distract his attention from the object of his love. Threadneedle Street, the glass and mahogany walled corridors, and the moral atmosphere of them--money-getting and of this world conspicuously worldly--were not these ironically antagonistic to the journey upon which he had set forth and the habit of mind necessary to the successful prosecution of it? There was Poppy St. John, too, and the closer relation of friendship into which he had just entered with her. This must not be neglected. And, thinking of her, he could not but think of that younger son of the great banking-house, Alaric Barking, and his dealings with her--enjoying her as long as it suited him to do so, leaving her as soon as his passion cooled and a more advantageous social connection presented itself. Towards the handsome young soldier Iglesias was, it must be owned, somewhat merciless.

Why should he go to the rescue of this young libertine's family, and indirectly facilitate his marriage, and increase its promise of happiness, by helping to secure him an otherwise vanishing fortune? Let him pay the price of his illicit pleasures and become a pauper. Such a consummation Dominic admitted he, personally, could face with entire resignation.

And yet--yet--on closer examination were not these reasons against undertaking the work offered him based upon personal disinclination, personal animosity, rather than upon plain right and wrong, and, consequently, were they not insufficient to justify abstention and refusal? That earlier dream of his, on the night following his dismissal last year, came back to him, with its touching memories of the narrow town garden behind the old house in Holland Street, Kensington--the golden laburnum, the shallow stone basin beloved of sooty sparrows, poor, dear Pascal Pelletier and his Huntley & Palmer's biscuit-box infernal machine and very crude methods of adjusting the age-old quarrel between capital and labour. On that occasion the lonely little boy, though at risk of grave injury to himself, had not hesitated to save the ill-favoured chunk-faced grey cat--which bore in speech and appearance so queer a likeness to Sir Abel Barking--from the ugly fate awaiting it. He had gathered it tenderly in his arms, pitying and striving to heal it. Was the child, by instinct, finer, nobler, more self-forgetful, than the man in the full possession of reason, instructed in the divine science, fortified by the example and merits of the saints? That would, indeed, be a melancholy conclusion. And so it occurred to him, not merely as conceivable but as incontestable, that the road to the far horizon, instead of leading in the opposite direction to the city banking-house, for him, at this particular juncture, led directly into and through it; so that to refuse would be to stray from the straight path and risk the obscuring of the blessed light by a cowardly and selfish lust of the immediate comfort of it.

He would go and help those distracted plucked geese to grow new feathers. Only to do so meant time, labour, unremitting application, a wholesale sacrifice of leisure; so he must see Poppy St. John first.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"I did not call yesterday," Iglesias said, "in consequence of your prohibitory telegram. But to-day I have come early and without permission, first because I was anxious to assure myself you were really unhurt, and secondly because something has occurred regarding which I wish to consult you. I must have your sanction before taking action in respect of it."

Entering from the blustering wind and keen, fitful sunshine without, the little drawing-room struck Iglesias as both stuffy and dingy. And Poppy, standing in the centre of it, huddled in a black brocade tea-gown, a sparse pattern of bluey mauve rosebuds upon it, which hung in limp folds from her bosom to her feet, concealing all the outline of her figure, came perilously near looking dingy likewise. The garment, cut square at the neck, had long seen its first youth. The big outstanding black ribbon bow between her shoulders and that upon her breast was creased and crumpled. Beneath the masses of her dark hair her face looked almost unnaturally small, sallow and bloodless, while her eyes were enormous--dusky

dwelling-places, as it seemed to her visitor, of some world-old sorrow. Her face did not light up, neither did she make any demonstration of gladness or greeting, but stood, one toy spaniel tucked under either arm, their forelegs lying along her wrists, their fringed paws resting upon her palms. Dominic had a conviction she had snatched up the little dogs on hearing his voice, and held them so as to render it impossible for him to take her hand. Less than ever, looking upon her, had he any mercy for Alaric Barking. Less than ever did the prospect of spending weeks, perhaps months, in shoring up the imperilled fortunes of that young gentleman's family prove alluring to him.

"You were hurt," he broke out, almost fiercely. "You are suffering, and, worse, you are unhappy. It makes me very angry to see you thus. I wish I could reach those who are guilty of having distressed and injured you."

Poppy's face went a shade paler, and alarm mingled with the sorrow in her eyes, but she made a courageous effort to patter as usual.

"You'd give them the what for, dear man, wouldn't you?" she said. "But you would have to go way back in the ages for that, and get behind the seed-sowing of which this gay hour is the harvest. Still, I love to see you ferocious. It is very flattering to me, and it's mightily becoming to you. Don't snore, Cappadocia. Manners, my good child, manners. All the same, I wasn't hurt slipping on those gorgeous white steps of yours. Upon my honour, I wasn't. But I had to go out yesterday afternoon, and I got caught in one of those infernal hailstorms. It was altogether too cold for comfort, and I feel a bit cheap this morning in consequence. That's why I put on this odious gown. I always try to dress for the part, and the part just now is dismality. From the start this gown has been a disappointment. I counted on the roses fading pink, but the beasts faded blue instead. I feel as if I was dressed in a bruise, and that's appropriate--for I also feel as if I had been beaten all over. Merely the hail--I give you my word. Nothing more than that. I'm never ill." Poppy paused, dropped the little dogs on the floor. They cowered against her, looking up woefully at her. "No, I don't want you," she said. "You're heavy. I'm tired of you."

Then she blew her nose, and, over the top of her hand-kerchief, looked full at Iglesias for the first time.

"Well, what is it? What do you want my sanction for?"

Without waiting for his answer she swept aside, knelt down, crouching over the fire, extending both hands to the heat of it, while her open sleeves falling back showed her arms bare to the elbow.

"Tell me, and, if you don't mind, shove along. I own I am a trifle jumpy--only the weather--but I need humouring, so shove along, there's a good dear," she said.

Whereupon, in as few words as possible, Dominic unfolded to her the contents of Sir Abel Barking's letter. As she listened, Poppy raised herself, turned round, stood upright, her hands clasped behind her.

"Oh! that's it, is it?" she said. She looked less bloodless, more animated, more natural. "I'm not altogether surprised. The poor old lads have found out the cuckoo in their nest at last, have they? Alaric had a notion Reginald Barking--not a nice person Reginald--I saw him once and he looked a cross between a pair of forceps and a bag of shavings--I didn't trust him--you don't, do you? Alaric had a notion this precious

cousin was making hay of the whole show. But it was utterly useless for him to intervene. In the eyes of the elder generation he is the original dog with a bad name, only fit for hanging."

Poppy paused, took a long breath, smiled a little.

"What do you think? Is it a very bad business?"

"I cannot tell till I have gone into details," Iglesias replied. He was slightly put about by the lady's change of demeanour, by the interest she displayed, by the alteration in her expression and bearing.

"And they howl to you to save the sinking ship?" Poppy continued lightly. "Shall you go?"

"That is the question I have come to ask you."

"To ask me?" she said. "But, heart alive, dear man, where do I come in?"

"My duty to you stands before every other duty," Iglesias answered gravely. "Those who have caused you sorrow and injured you, are my enemies. How can it be otherwise? A member of this family--I do not choose to name him--has, in my opinion, played a detestable part by you; therefore only with your sanction, freely given, can I consent to be helpful to his relatives."

The colour leaped into Poppy's cheeks, the light into her eyes, her lips parted in pretty laughter; yet she still kept her hands clasped behind her back.

"Ah! I see--I see," she cried. "But how did you contrive to get left behind, most beloved lunatic, and be born five or six centuries out of your time into this shouting, pushing, modern world which knows not chivalry? Do you imagine this is the fashion most men treat women? Here I am laughing, yet I could cry that you should come to me--me, of all people--on such a lovely, fine, fanciful errand."

"My conduct appears to me perfectly obvious and simple," Iglesias replied rather coldly.

"I know it does, my dear, and there's the pathetic splendour of it," Poppy declared, soft mothering tones in her voice. "All the same we must keep our heads screwed on the right way. So, tell me, will it be of any personal advantage to you to help pull these elderly plungers out of the quagmire?"

"None whatever."

"At least they will make it worth your while by paying up handsomely?"

"No doubt they will make me some offer, but I shall decline it," Iglesias said. "I draw a pension. I will continue to do so. That is just. I have a right to it in virtue of my past work. But I shall refuse to accept any salary over and above that. I shall make it a condition that I give my services. And that which I give I give, whether it be to king or to beggar. To make profit out of my giving would be intolerable to me."

Poppy mused, her head bent, pushing away the tiny dogs with her foot as they fawned upon her.

"Don't bother! you little miseries," she said, "don't bother! I'm busy now. I've no use for you." Presently she glanced up at Mr. Iglesias, who held himself proudly, as he stood waiting before her. "Do you care for these barking people? Is it a question of affection between any of them and you?"

"I am afraid not," he answered. "Ours has been a purely business connection throughout. How should it be otherwise? The social interval between employers and employed is not easily bridged."

"Stuff-a-nonsense!" Poppy put in scornfully. "They might feel honoured to tie your shoe."

"Any attempt to ignore differences of wealth and station, which others are pleased to remember, would be unbecoming," he continued. "Nor do I relish condescension on the part of my social betters. It does not suit me. I prefer to remain within my own borders. Still, there is the tie of long association with these merchant princes and their undertakings, and this, I own, influences me strongly. It would be shocking to me to witness the failure or ruin of those with whom I have been in daily intercourse. Then, too, there is a certain challenge in the present position which appeals to the fighting instinct in me. If not altogether by nature, still by habit I am a business man. Affairs interest me, and consequently the more embarrassed and apparently hopeless the existing state of things is, the greater would be my satisfaction in mastering the intricacies of it and reducing them to order. These practical matters are not without very real excitement and drama to those who have the habit of handling them." Iglesias paused, and then added quietly, "But I am contented enough as I am, and should not voluntarily have touched business again had there not been another consideration over and above those I have enumerated--namely, the plain obligation of right doing, whether the said doing be congenial to one or not. This obligation is supreme, or should be so, in the case of one who, like myself, has bound himself by definite acts of obedience and self-dedication."

His expression had changed, taking on something of exaltation. He no longer looked at Poppy, but away to the far horizon and the light thereon resident.

And the Lady of the Windswept Dust was quick to realise this, though upon what fair unseen object the eyes of his spirit did, in fact, rest she was ignorant. Against it the vanity inherent in her womanhood rebelled. She was piqued and jealous of the unnamed, unknown object which absorbed his attention more than she herself and her friendship did. From the first Iglesias had appealed to her very various nature in a threefold manner. To the artist in her he appealed by the clearness of his individuality, his finish of person and of feature, his gravity and poise--these last taking their rise not in insensibility, but in reasoned will, in passionate emotion held, as she had learned, austerely in check. He appealed to the motherhood in her by his unworldliness, by his ignorance of base motives, thus making her attitude towards him protective; she instinctively trying to stand between him and a naughty world, to stand, too, between him and her own too often naughty self. He appealed to the child in her by the exotic and foreign elements in him, which captivated her fancy, endowing him with an effect of mystery, making him seem to hail from some region of legend and high romance. But the events of the last few days had been far from beneficial to Poppy St. John. They had demoralised her, so that the artistic, maternal, and childlike aspects of her nature were alike

overlaid by the bitterness, the cynicism, the recklessness engendered by her unhappy childless marriage and the irregular life she had led. Poppy's feet were held captive in the quicksands of the things of sense; her outlook was concrete and gross. Finer instincts lit up but momentary flickering fires in her, speedily dying out into the gloom begotten by the deplorable scene of yesterday with her husband, and shame at the conspiracy of silence into which, as the lesser of the two evils presented to her, she had entered, remembrances of which, on his first arrival, had made her feel unworthy and a traitor in the presence of Iglesias. This demoralisation worked in her to rebellion against just all that which, in her happier moods, rendered Iglesias delightful to her. His exaltation, his calm, the mystery which so delicately surrounded him, the very distinction of his appearance irritated her, so soon as she became conscious that she was no longer the sole object of his thoughts. She was pushed by a bad desire to force from him a more complete self-revelation, to cheapen him in some way and break him up.

"Dominic Iglesias," she cried suddenly and imperatively, "you are a trifle too empyrean. I don't quite believe in you. Be more ordinary, more vulgarly human. For who are you, after all? What are you?" she said.

And he, his thoughts recalled from a great distance, regarded her questioningly and as without immediate recognition. Her voice was harsh, and the transition was so abrupt from the radiant land of the spirit to the dingy realities of Poppy's drawing-room, her tired, black, bluey-mauve patterned tea-gown, and her absurdly artificial little dogs. It took him some few seconds to adjust himself. Then he smiled in apology, and spoke very courteously and gently.

"Who am I, what am I, dear friend? Why this, I think--a commonplace, very ordinary person who, long ago, in early childhood, by mournful accident, for which it would be an impiety to hold those on whom he was dependent responsible, lost his sight. Through all the years which men count, and rightly, the best of life--when courage is high and the hand strong, and opportunity fertile, circumstance as a block of precious many-coloured marble out of which to carve fine fortune for ourselves and those we love--he wandered in darkness, insecure of footing, missing the very end and object for which earthly existence has been bestowed upon us mortals. He was sad and homesick for that which he had not; yet ignorant of the nature of his own loss, disposed to blame the constitution of things, rather than his own incapacity, for that which he suffered."

"And then?" Poppy put in sharply. Listening, she had started to mock, the cynic and worldling being hot in her, but, looking at the speaker, somehow, she dared not mock.

"And then--recently--since I have known you in short, it has pleased Almighty God by degrees to restore my sight."

Poppy regarded him intently, her singular eyes wide with question and with doubt, her lips pressed together.

"I see--you have got religion," she said. "But do you seriously mean to tell me that I--I--have had anything to do with that?"

"Yes," Iglesias answered. "You have had much to do with it. First by love--for your friendship woke up my heart. Then by sorrow"--he paused, divided by the desire to spare her and to tell her the whole of his thought--"sorrow, when I came to know you better and value your character

and gifts at their true worth, because I saw noble things put to ignoble uses, which of all pitiful sights is perhaps the most profoundly pitiful."

Silence followed, broken only by minute and reproachful snorings on the part of Cappadocia and her spouse. The little dogs, sensible of neglect, had become the victims of wounded self-love, that most primitive, as it is the most universal, of passions throughout all grades of living things. Poppy meanwhile turned her head aside, unable or unwilling to speak. Again she blew her nose with complete disregard of the unromantic quality of that action, then said huskily:

"I have cleaned the slate. I shall keep it clean." Her voice grew steadier. A touch of malice came into her expression. "I like compliments, and you have paid me about the biggest I ever had. It will take a little time to digest. So I think--I think, dear man, I will not stand in the way of your going back to the City, and saving the sinking ship--that is, if the work won't be too hard for you?"

"No," he answered, touched by her more gracious aspect, yet slightly confused. "I have had nearly a year's holiday and rest; I am quite equal to work. But I am afraid the hours must necessarily be long, and that my opportunities of coming to see you will not be very frequent."

"Perhaps that's just as well," she said, "while I am still in process of digesting the big compliment."

Then impulsively she swept up to him and laid her hands on his shoulders, looking him full in the face.

"See here, you thrice dear innocent, since you have mentioned that terrible word 'love,' the complexion of our relation has changed somewhat. Don't you understand, made as I am, I must fight seven devils within me if I'm to continue to play fair with you, as I swore I would? And so, just because you are so very much to me, I had best not see you too often until I have settled down into my new scheme of life. In a sense Alaric was a safeguard. That safeguard's gone."

She moved a step back, letting her hands fall at her sides, while her eye grew hard and dark.

"And there are other reasons, brutal, unworthy, sordid reasons, why it is wiser that you should not come here often at present. They did not exist--at least I had not the faintest conception that they did--when we last met. They have rushed into hateful prominence since. Don't ask me--I cannot tell you. You must trust me, and you must not let my silence alienate you. I can't be explicit, but I give you my word I am perfectly straight. And you must not let your religion alienate you either. By the way, what form of faith is it?"

"The faith of my own people," Dominic answered. "The faith of the Catholic Church."

Poppy smiled.

"Then I am not so afraid I shall lose you," she said, "for that's the only brand of religion I've ever come across which isn't too nice to reckon with human nature as it really is. It can save sinners, just because it knows how to make saints--and it has made them out of jolly unpromising material at times, there's the comfort of it."

She held out her hand in farewell.

"Good-bye till next time. You've done me good, as you always do. Now, I am going to re-study some of my old parts, just to get the hang of the whole show again."

But the door once shut, she flung herself down on the broad settee, while the tiny dogs, whimpering, crowded upon her lap.

"Poppy St. John, you're not such a bad lot after all," she cried. "But oh! oh! oh! it's beastly rough to be so young, and have gone so far, and know so much. There, Willie Onions, don't snivel. It's both superfluous and unpleasant." She sat up and wiped her eyes. "Upon my honour, I think it was just as well I gave Phillimore the little revolver last night, to lock up in the plate chest," she said.

CHAPTER XXIX

It followed that Dominic Iglesias walked on across the common to Barnes Station and travelled Citywards, solaced and uplifted in spirit, yet greatly troubled by the idea of those newly arrived complications at which the Lady of the Windswept Dust had hinted. He did not permit himself to inquire what they might be. Doubtless she knew best--in her social sense he had great confidence--so he acquiesced in her silence about them. Still, as he reflected, it is not a little lamentable that even friendship, the angelic relation between man and woman, should be thus beset by perils from within and pitfalls without. Where lay the fault--with over-civilisation and the improper proprieties resultant therefrom? Or was it of far more ancient origin, resident in the very foundations of human nature? Woman, eternally the vehicle of man's being, eternally the inspiration of quite three-fifths of his action; yet, at the same time, the eternal stumbling block and danger to the highest of his moral and intellectual attainment! Mr. Iglesias smiled sadly and soberly to himself as the train rolled on into Waterloo. In any case she remains the most astonishing of God's creatures. It would be dull enough here on earth without her, though, to employ one of Poppy's characteristic phrases, "it's most infernally risky" with!

But once inside the bank, such far-ranging meditations gave place to considerations immediate and concrete, Iglesias' whole mind being focussed to arrive at the facts of the case. And this was far from easy. For alarm stalked those usually self-secure and self-complacent rooms and glass and mahogany-walled corridors; men looking up from their desks as he, Iglesias, passed, with anxious faces, or moving with hushed footsteps as though someone lay sick to death within the house. In Sir Abel Barking's private room the drama reached its climax, panic sitting there sensibly enthroned. Her chill presence had visibly affected Sir Abel, causing the contrast between the overblown portrait upon the wall and the subject of it to be ironical to the point of cruelty. For Sir Abel was aged and shrivelled. His clothes hung loose upon him. Hardly could he rally his tongue to the enunciation of a single platitude even of the most obviously staring sort. The mighty, indeed, were fallen and the weapons of wealth-getting perished! Yet never had Iglesias felt so drawn in sympathy towards his late employer, for the spectre of possible ruin had made Sir

Abel almost humble, almost human.

"I am obliged to you for responding to my summons so promptly--yes, sit down, my good friend, sit down," he said. "It is necessary that I should converse with you at some length, and I refuse to keep you standing. Our present position is inexplicable to me. Granting that my nephew Reginald is unworthy of the trust we reposed in his ability and probity, there was still our own judgment in reserve, and our own unquestioned capacity to meet any strain upon our resources. That our confidence in these last was misplaced is still incredible to me. I am completely baffled. The past few months, indeed, with their reiterated discovery of difficulty and of loss, have been a terrible tax upon my fortitude. Veteran financier though I am, I own to you, Iglesias, there have been moments when I feared that I, too, should give way. Only my sense of the duty I owe to my own reputation has supported me." Sir Abel turned sideways in his chair. His eyes sought the derisive portrait upon the wall, contemplation of which appeared to reanimate his self-confidence somewhat, for he continued in his larger manner, "Nor has the sting of private anxiety been lacking. My younger son has been called away to the seat of war under circumstances of a peculiarly affecting character. My earnest hopes for his future, in the shape of a very desirable marriage, touched on fulfilment--."

But here Iglesias intervened. For his temper began to rise at the mention of the loves of Alaric Barking. If the springs of Christian charity, just now welling up so sweetly within him, were not to run incontinently dry, the conversation, he felt, must be steadied down to themes of other import. So he civilly but definitely requested Sir Abel to "come to Hecuba," and to Hecuba the poor man, haltingly yet very obediently, came. He and his ex-head-clerk seemed, indeed, to have changed places, so that, before the end of the interview, Iglesias began to measure himself as never before, to realise his own business acumen, his quickness of apprehension, his grasp of the issues presented to him and his own fearlessness of judgment. Whatever the upshot as to the eventual saving of the credit of Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking, Iglesias became increasingly confident of his own power, and quietly satisfied in the exercise of it.

And so it happened that, although tired in brain and body, his mind weighted with thought, as were his arms with bundles of papers--which he carried home for more leisurely inspection--Iglesias came rapidly up the white steps of Cedar Lodge that night. He was buoyant in spirit, content with his day's work, keenly interested in the development of it. Using his latchkey he entered the square panelled hall silently--with results, for revels were in progress within.

Dinner was over. Mrs. Porcher and the great Eliza, linked arm in arm, stood near the dining-room door watching, while those two gay young sparks, Farge and Worthington, inspired by memories of a recent visit to the Hippodrome, played at lions. It was a simple game, still it gave pleasure to the players. Clad in an easy-fitting dark blue "lounge suit," with narrow white cross-bar lines on it, an aged and faded orange sheep-skin hearthrug thrown gallantly across his shoulders, Farge, on all fours, with the mildest roarings imaginable, made rushes from under the dinner-table at the devoted Worthington, who withstood his fiery onslaught with lungings and brandishings of that truly classic weapon, the humble necessary umbrella. At each rush the ladies backed and tittered, clinging together with the most engagingly natural semblance of terror.

"Ha! caitiff wretch, beware!" declaimed Worthington nobly. "Only across my

prostrate corse shall you reach your innocent victims. Say, Charlie boy," he added in a hurried aside, "I didn't poke you in the eye by mistake just now, did I?"

"Wurra--wurra--wurra," roared Farge. "Never touched me, Bert, by a couple of inches--wurra."

But there the would-be ferocious animal paused, squatted upon its haunches, pointing its finger dramatically towards the front door, thus causing the whole company to wheel round and gaze nervously in the direction indicated.

"Oh, Mr. Iglesias, how you did startle me!" Mrs. Porcher cried plaintively, laying her hand upon her heart.

"Pardon me," he answered. "I had no idea the hall was occupied or I would have rung instead of letting myself in. I must apologise further for being so late, and for not having telephoned that I should be unable to be back in time for dinner."

"We all know that there are counter-attractions, which may easily account for unpunctuality," Miss Hart put in, with a toss of her head.

"Hush, hush, dear Liz," murmured Mrs. Porcher, while the two young men made round eyes at each other, and de Courcy Smyth, leaning against the balusters on the landing of the half-flight, announced his presence by a sarcastic laugh.

Mr. Iglesias looked from one to another in surprise. He had been thinking so very little--perhaps, as he told himself, insolently little--about all these good people for some time past. Now he became aware of a hostile atmosphere. For cause unknown he was in disgrace with them all. Possibly they resented his indifference, possibly they were justified in so doing. Hence he did not feel angry, but merely sorry and perplexed. He addressed his hostess with increased courtliness of bearing.

"I hope I have not caused you inconvenience, Mrs. Porcher," he said. "I was summoned suddenly upon business to the City this morning. The business in question proved more complicated than I had anticipated, and I was detained by it till late. This leads me to tell you, if you will forgive my troubling you with personal matters, that I shall be compelled to go to the City daily for some weeks to come. I shall not, therefore, be able to give myself the pleasure of joining you at luncheon, or probably at dinner, either."

"Indeed," Mrs. Porcher remarked. "This is rather unexpected, Mr. Iglesias."

"To me wholly unexpected," he answered, "and in some respects unwelcome; but it is unavoidable, unfortunately."

He bowed gravely to the two ladies and, ignoring the rest of the little company, went on his way upstairs. At the half-flight Smyth stood aside to let him pass; then, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

"Mr. Iglesias," he said, "may I be permitted so far to presume upon our acquaintance as to remind you that you received a letter from me this morning requiring an answer?"

Dominic paused at the stair-head.

"Yes, I received it," he replied coldly.

"And you condescended to read it, so I venture to imagine, notwithstanding that you were summoned on important business to the City. We are all impressed by that interesting fact--vastly impressed by it, needless to state. I specially so, of course, since commerce in all its branches, as you know, commands my profoundest admiration and respect. Literature and art are but as garbage compared with it--no one ever recognised that gratifying truth more thoroughly than I do myself. Still, the shopkeeper--I beg your pardon, financier I should have said--is not wholly exempted, by the ideal character of his calling, from keeping his promises even to poor devils of scholars and literary men such as myself."

Smyth swaggered, his hands in his trouser pockets, his glance at once impertinent and malevolent, his manner easy to the point of insolence.

"I venture to remind you of my letter, therefore, and I may add I shall feel obliged if you'll just hand me over those notes without delay."

"I read your letter," Iglesias answered. "It required consideration."

"Oh! did it, really? I supposed that I had expressed myself with perfect lucidity. But if any point appeared to you to need explanation, I am disengaged at the present time--I am quite willing to explain."

"Thank you," Iglesias answered, "no explanation is necessary on your part, I believe, though perhaps a little is on mine. I must ask you to remember that I promised to help you within reasonable relation to my means. What constitutes a reasonable relation it is for me to judge, since I alone know what my means are. I regret to tell you that your last demand greatly exceeded that reasonable relation. I am therefore reluctantly obliged to refuse it."

"To refuse it?" Smyth exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, to refuse it," Iglesias said calmly. "When your play is ready for production I am prepared to bear the cost of two representations, as I have already told you. But I am not prepared to make you unlimited advances meanwhile. To do so would be no kindness to you--"

"Wouldn't it?" Smyth broke out excitedly. "No kindness to me? Do you imagine I want kindness, that I would accept or even tolerate kindness from any man, and particularly from you? I offer you a magnificent investment, and you speak to me as though I was a beggar asking alms in the street. No kindness to me? This high moral tone does not become you in the very least, let me tell you, Mr. Iglesias. Do you suppose I am such a stoneblind ass as not to see what has been happening. Doesn't it occur to you that I hold your reputation in my two hands?"

"My reputation?" Iglesias repeated, a very blaze of pride and indignation in his eyes.

Smyth backed hastily away from him, with a livid face and shaking knees.

"No, no, Mr. Iglesias," he protested. "I was a fool to say that. But I am utterly beaten by work and by worry. I do not deny that you have behaved handsomely to me. But persistent injustice and cruelty have soured me. Is it wonderful? And then to-night those blatant young idiots, Farge

and Worthington, have set my nerves on edge by their imbecility and conceit, till I really am not accountable for what I say. I had better go. We can talk of this at another time. I dare say I can manage for a day or two, though it will not be easy to do so. However, I am accustomed to rubbing shoulders with every created description of undeserved indignity and wretchedness. I will go. Good-night."

Iglesias entered his sitting-room, turned up the gas, and looked round at the orderly aspect of the place with a movement of relief. He ranged the bundles of papers upon the table. If he was to master their contents he would have to work far into the night, and the day had been a long one, full of application and of very varied emotions. He stood for a little space thinking of it all. The return to his familiar quarters at the bank had affected him less than he had expected. He had not felt it as a return to slavery.

"Thanks to the Church," he said gratefully, "which confers on her members the only perfect freedom, namely, freedom of soul, freedom of heavenly citizenship."

Then he thought of Poppy--thought very tenderly of that strangely captivating woman of many moods! How clever she was, how accurately she knew the ways of men! Her warnings regarding his dabbling in matters theatrical, for instance, and charities to unsuccessful playwrights.--And at that point Dominic Iglesias drew himself up short. For, in a flash, the truth came to him that Poppy St. John's hated "jackal of a husband" was none other than his fellow-lodger, de Courcy Smyth, whose shuffling footsteps he heard even now, nervelessly crossing and recrossing the floor of the room immediately above.

CHAPTER XXX

"I could not write, Rhoda, because of course I could not be sure beforehand whether, when I came to London, I should really wish to see you and George again or not." This from Serena, loftily and with rustlings. "But as Lady Samuelson was driving in this direction to-day, and offered to drop me here if I could find my own way back, I thought I had better come, as I knew it was your afternoon at home."

"And I am sure for my part I am very pleased to have you come," Mrs. Lovegrove replied, leading the way towards the seat of honour upon the Chesterfield sofa. "I always do hold with letting bygones be bygones, particularly as between relatives, when there has been any little unpleasantness. And perhaps your calling will cheer poor Georgie up. He is very tenacious of your and Susan's affection, is Georgie."

Here the speaker proceeded to swallow rather convulsively, pressing her handkerchief against her lips.

"Perhaps I should be wiser to keep it all to myself," she added, not without agitation. "But the sight of you does bring up so much. And I am sorry to tell you, Serena, things are not as happy as they used to be in this house."

The office of ministering angel was not, it must be conceded, exactly

native to Serena, her sympathies being restricted, the reverse of acute. But, at a push, "curiosity has been known to supply the place of sympathy very passably; and of curiosity Serena had always a large stock at the service of her friends and acquaintance.

"I wonder why," she therefore observed in reply to her hostess's concluding remark--"I mean I wonder why things should not be as happy as they used to be?"

"I trace the commencement of it all to the time when you were visiting here last November--not that I mean you were in any way to blame--"

Serena interrupted with spirit:

"No, pray do not connect anything which occurred then with me, Rhoda. I think it would be most misplaced. After all that I have had to go through I really should have thought it only delicate on your part never to refer to what took place during my visit. I certainly should have hesitated about coming here to-day if I had supposed either you or George would have referred to it.--What dreadfully bad taste of Rhoda!" she added mentally. "I believe I had better go. That would mark my displeasure, and teach her to be more guarded with me in future. But then perhaps she has something to say which I really ought to know. Perhaps it would be a mistake to go. Perhaps I had better stay. I do not want to be too harsh with Rhoda."

The truth being that she actually itched to hear more. For, to Serena, her wholly imaginary love episode with Mr. Iglesias represented the most vivid of all the very limited experiences of her life. Her affections had not been engaged, since she possessed no affections in any vital sense of that word. But she had been flattered and excited.

She had seemed to herself to occupy a most interesting position, demanding infinite tact. During the months which had elapsed she had rehearsed the history of every incident, of every hour of intercourse, with Dominic Iglesias, a thousand times; weighing each word, discounting every look of his, indulging in unlimited speculation and analysis, until the proportions of that which had occurred were magnified beyond all possibility of recognition, let alone of sane relation to fact. To herself, therefore, Serena had become the heroine of an elaborate intrigue. This greatly increased her importance in her own eyes; and, though she was studiously silent regarding the subject save in indirect allusion, the said self-importance, reacting upon those about her, gained both for herself and her opinions a degree of consideration to which she was unaccustomed and which she highly relished. Never had Serena presented so bold a front to her philanthropic and very possessive elder sister. Never had she enjoyed so much attention in the small and rigidly select circle of Slowby society, in which she and Miss Susan moved. Serena spoke with authority upon all subjects, on the strength of a purely fictitious affair of the heart. She is not the first woman who has made capital out of the non-existent in this kind, nor will she probably be the last! Nevertheless, she was very far from admitting the great benefit which Mr. Iglesias had so unconsciously conferred upon her. She regarded herself as a deeply injured person--irreparably injured, but for her own diplomacy, admirable caution, knowledge of the world and self-respect.

"I am well aware it is a trying subject to approach," Mrs. Lovegrove replied, with praiseworthy mildness. "And I am far from blaming you for turning from it, Serena. I am sure it has weighed sadly on my mind and on George's, too. Not that he has said much, but I could see how he felt; and

then a great deal has come out since. That is why I am so gratified to have you call here to-day, and so will Georgie be. He has taken it dreadfully to heart finding how we have all been taken in, and seeing how wrong it must put him with you and with Susan."

"It is very proper that you should say that, Rhoda," the other observed with condescension. "I think you owe it to me to express regret. I should have been sorry if George had proved indifferent, for I have been very careful in what I have told Susan. Of course, I might have spoken strongly. I think anyone would admit I should have been quite justified in doing so. But I wished to spare George. Mamma was very much attached to him, and of course he was constantly with us in old days, before his marriage."

It was significant of the wife's humble state that she received this thrust without a murmur.

"Poor Georgie was too upset to tell even me for a long time," she continued somewhat irrelevantly, "and you may judge by that how badly he felt. He knew how shocked I should be, and that I should take it as such an insult to the dear vicar, after all his kindness, that any friend of ours whom he had talked to in this house should turn Romanist."

"Who? What?" cried Serena. She had determined to maintain a superior and impassive attitude, but at this point curiosity became rampant, refusing further circumlocution or delay.

"Why, Mr. Iglesias, to be sure," Mrs. Lovegrove answered, hardly restraining evidences of satisfaction. The news was lamentable, no doubt; but to have it miss fire in the recital of it would have made it ten times more lamentable still. "And the worst of it was," she continued, refreshed by the effect upon her hearer, "he kept it dark for we don't in the least know how long. He mentioned no dates, and poor Georgie was too upset to ask him. Of course it is well known how double Romanists are always taught to be--not that I was ever acquainted with any. You never meet them out, I am glad to think, where we visit. Still, that Mr. Iglesias, who was quite one of ourselves, as you may say, so intimate and always appearing the perfect gentleman, so open and honest--"

"Ah! there you are wrong, Rhoda," the other lady put in with decision, while making a violent effort to recover her impassivity and superiority. "You and George may be surprised, but I am not. I always had my suspicions of Mr. Iglesias. I told you so more than once. At the time you and George were annoyed. Now you see I was right. I am seldom mistaken. Even Susan admits I am very observant. After his extraordinary behaviour to me I should not be surprised at anything which Mr. Iglesias might do." She paused, breathless but triumphant. "Have you seen him since all this came out, Rhoda?"

"Oh, no. He has called twice, but fortunately Georgie was out walking. He goes out walking a great deal now, does Georgie." The speaker heaved a voluminous sigh. Her satisfaction had been short-lived. "And I told the girl, if Mr. Iglesias asked for me, to say I was particularly engaged. He has written to Georgie. I know that--a long letter--but I have not been asked to read it."

Mrs. Lovegrove pressed her handkerchief against her lips again, agitation gaining her.

"After all these years of marriage, you know, Serena, it is a very cutting thing to have any concealment between me and Georgie. I should not mention it to you but that you were here when it commenced. I never supposed--no, never, never--there could be any coldness between him and me. When I have heard others speak of trouble with their husbands, I have always pitied the poor things from my heart, but held them mainly responsible. Now I think differently--"

"Miss Eliza Hart, mum." This shrilly from the little house-parlourmaid.

Serena rose as well as her hostess. Superiority counselled departure; curiosity urged remaining.

"Of course, I should feel justified in staying if Rhoda pressed me to do so," she said to herself. And Rhoda, in the very act of greeting her new guest, did press her to do so.

"Surely you are not leaving yet?" she said plaintively.

"It would hurt me not to have you stay to tea, and Georgie would be sadly disappointed to think he had missed you."

Thus admonished, Serena graciously consented to remain Miss Hart, as last arrival, being necessarily invited to assume the place of honour upon the sofa, Serena selected a chair at as great a distance from that historic article of furniture as the exigencies of conversation permitted. "I must show her that I stay not to see her, but solely on Georgie's account," she commented inwardly. "I have been very cold in manner. I think she must have observed that."

But the great Eliza was in a militant humour, not easily abashed. She had called with intentions, in the interests of which she plunged volubly into talk.

"You will excuse my coming without Peachie Porcher, Mrs. Lovegrove," she began. "She was all anxiety to come, too, fearing you might think her neglectful. But I prevented it. She overrates her strength, does Peachie, and to-day her neuralgia is cruel. 'I'll run across and account for you,' I said to her. 'You just lie down and take a nap, and let the housemaid bring you up a little something with your tea, and take it early.' 'It's not more nourishment I require, but less worry, Liz dear,' she said. And so it is, Mrs. Lovegrove."

"We all have our troubles, Miss Hart, and often unsuspected ones which call for silence."

The wife's large cheeks quivered ominously, while Serena rustled--but whether in sympathetic agreement with the sentiments expressed by the last speaker, or in protest against the presence of the former one, it would be difficult to determine.

"I wonder whether that is not best, Rhoda--I mean I wonder whether it is not best to be silent," she remarked reflectively. "I think people are not usually half cautious enough what they tell. So many disagreeables can be avoided if you are really on your guard. Mamma impressed that upon us when we were children. I am very careful, but I often think Susan is hardly careful enough. Most troubles arise through trusting other people too much."

"And that's poor darling Peachie all over," Miss Hart declared, with a fine appreciation of opportunity. "Too great trustfulness has been her worst fault, as I always tell her, the generous pet. Not that all our gentlemen are ungrateful, Mrs. Lovegrove. I would not have you suppose that. Poor Mr. Smyth, for instance, whom I'm afraid I have accused of being very surly and bearish at times, has come out wonderfully lately. But it must be a hard nature, indeed, which Peachie's influence would not soften. One such nature I am acquainted with." Eliza paused, looking from one to other of her hearers with much meaning. "But it is not the case with poor Mr. Smyth. He has yielded. Then there is the tie of an unfortunate domestic past between him and Peachie, which helps to bring them together.--Of course that means nothing to you, Mrs. Lovegrove."

The lady addressed swallowed convulsively.

"But all are not blessed with such good fortune as yours," the great Eliza continued. "Mr. Smyth has been very open with Peachie recently. He has some surprising tales to tell, knowing very well all that is going on in society. And that reminds me of a certain gentleman who does not live a thousand miles from here. Mr. Smyth has hinted at much that is very startling in that direction."

The speaker paused again.

"Would it be intrusive to ask whether you have been favoured with much of Mr. Iglesias' company during the last few weeks, Mrs. Lovegrove?" she added.

Ruddy mottlings bespread the wife's kindly countenance. Serena moved slightly upon her chair. She was conscious, of growing excitement.

"Perhaps not quite so much as formerly; but then Mr. Lovegrove has been out walking most evenings. The warmer weather always causes him to feel the need of exercise," the excellent woman returned, putting heroic restraint upon herself. "And I have been very occupied with the spring cleaning. I make it a duty to look into everything myself, you know, Miss Hart. Not but what my girls are very good. I think all the talk about trouble with the servants is very much exaggerated. Our cook, Fanny, has been with us quite a number of years. Still, I hold it is well for them to have a mistress's supervision if the cleaning is to be thorough. If you see to it yourself, then you can have nobody to blame. And so I have had frequently to deny myself to visitors."

She gave a sigh of relief, trusting she had loyally steered the conversation into safer channels. But the great Eliza was not thus to be thwarted.

"I asked on Peachie Porcher's account," she declared, "not on my own, Mrs. Lovegrove. It is all of less than no consequence to me, except for the sake of Cedar Lodge, how a certain gentleman spends his time. But Peachie's interests must be protected. With an establishment such as ours a good name is everything. 'You cannot be too particular; for any talk of fastness, and the place must go down,' as she says to me--"

But here, the wife's natural rectitude and sense of justice triumphed over prejudice and wounded sensibilities.

"I am sure I could never believe anyone would have occasion to accuse Mr. Iglesias of fastness," she said. "Of course, the change of religion is

dreadful, particularly in one who should have known better, though a foreigner, having had the advantage of being brought up in England. Nobody can be more aware of that than myself and Mr. Lovegrove. It has been a sad grief to us"--her voice quavered--"and no doubt early rising and fish meals do make a lot of work and unpleasantness in a house-hold. But as to fastness, well, Miss Hart, I cannot find it in my conscience to agree to anything as bad as that."

With preternatural solemnity the great Eliza shook her head.

"Seeing is believing, Mrs. Lovegrove," she replied. "And when ladies call, dressed in the tiptop of the fashion! Very stylish, no doubt, but not quite the style Peachie Porcher can countenance, circumstanced as we are with our gentlemen guests. Then there is what Mr. Smyth hinted at subsequently, just in a friendly way. He did not say he was actually acquainted with the lady, but intimated that he could say very much more if he chose. No, Mrs. Lovegrove, I regret to speak, knowing how long you and a certain gentleman have been acquainted, but there can be no question Peachie Porcher's interests have been trifled with, and her affections also."

Here aggressive rustlings on the part of Serena arrested the flow of Miss Hart's eloquence.

"You spoke, I believe, Miss Lovegrove?" she inquired.

"No, I did not speak," Serena cried.--"Vulgar, designing person, what presumption!" she cried to herself. "Anyone would feel insulted by her manner. She thinks she has put me at a disadvantage. But she is mistaken. I know more than she supposes." She was greatly enraged; for, unreasonable though it may appear, if trifling were about on the part of Dominic Iglesias, Serena reserved to herself a monopoly in respect of it. Few things, perhaps, are more galling to a woman than the assertion that a Lovelace has been guilty of misleading attentions to others besides herself. If she is not the solitary object of his affections, let her at least be the solitary victim of his perfidy. And that Mrs. Porcher should aspire to share her _role_ of betrayed one was, to Serena, a piece of unheard-of impertinence. She refused to bestow further attention upon Miss Hart, and turned haughtily to her hostess.

"Have you any idea when George will be in, Rhoda? I am quite willing to wait a reasonable time for him, but I cannot be expected to wait indefinitely. I must consider Lady Samuelson. It is a long distance to Ladbrooke Square--of course Trimmer's Green is very far out--and I have to dress for dinner. Everything is very well done at Lady Samuelson's, and she makes a great point of punctuality. Of course it is no difficulty to me to be punctual. I was brought up to be so. Mamma was always extremely particular about our being in time. She said it was very rude to be late. I think it is rude, and so, of course, punctuality is quite natural to me. But I do object to being hurried; and so, unless George is likely to be in almost directly, I really must go, Rhoda."

"I should be very mortified to have you leave before he comes back. It would be a sore disappointment to Georgie to find you had been here and he had missed you," the good creature pleaded.

"And it's something quite new for Mr. Lovegrove to be out on your at-home day, isn't it?" Eliza put in, not without covert sarcasm. "I never remember to have known it happen before."

"Mrs. and Miss Ballard, please, mum"--this from the house-parlourmaid.

Mrs. Lovegrove arose with alacrity, retail trade and nonconformity alike forgiven.

"I am afraid Miss Hart grows very spiteful," she said to herself. "I wish she would go. I should be vexed to have her outsit Serena.--Well, Mrs. Ballard, very pleased, I am sure, to see you"--this aloud--"and your daughter, too. The spring is coming on nicely, is it not? Quite warm this afternoon, walking? I dare say it is. You and my husband's cousin, Miss Lovegrove, have met, I believe? Miss Ballard, Miss Lovegrove.--Are you going, Miss Hart? Kind regards to Mrs. Porcher, and sincere hopes she may soon lose her neuralgia. Very trying complaint, Mrs. Ballard, is it not?--and very prevalent, so they tell me, this year.--Why, you're never going to leave, too, Serena? You'll come again, or Georgie will be so troubled."

But Serena held out small hope of her reappearance.

"Of course I should be glad to see George, but I could not bind myself to anything, Rhoda. You see, Lady Samuelson"--the Ballard ladies, mother and daughter, looked at one another, fluttered and impressed--"Lady Samuelson," Serena repeated, her voice rising a little, "has such a number of engagements, and of course if she wishes to take me with her I cannot refuse. At home she always likes me to help entertain. I really have very little time to call my own, and so I should not feel justified in making any promise. Of course it was just a chance my being able to come to-day. You can tell George I am sorry not to have seen him. I should like him to know that I am sorry."

"You are very kind, Serena," the other said humbly.

"I think Rhoda has improved," Serena said to herself, as she walked across Trimmer's Green between the black iron railings. "I think she has more sense of my position than she did. I wonder whether she thinks that if Mr. Iglesias had proposed I should have accepted him. Of course she thinks I was very badly treated. I think her manner shows that. Certainly she took his part rather against that odious Miss Hart. But I don't believe she really sided with him. I think she only appeared to do so to snub Miss Hart. Of course if she had stayed, I should have had to stay, too. I should have owed it to myself to do so. But, as she went, there was no object in staying; and it was wiser to seem quite indifferent about seeing George. I hope he won't attempt to call upon me at Lady Samuelson's! I should hardly think he would presume to do that. I must tell the butler, if a gentleman calls, to say I am not at home. If it was only George it would not so much matter, but I could not run the chance of having Lady Samuelson and Rhoda meet. It would not do at all to have Rhoda climbing into society through me. I think it is too bad to have people make use of you like that. And Rhoda has no tact. I see I must be on my guard with George and Rhoda. I wonder whether I had better tell Susan Mr. Iglesias has become a Roman Catholic? Of course she would think I had had a great escape; but in any case that does not excuse him. He behaved very badly. I don't believe for an instant he ever took any notice of Mrs. Porcher. I believe that is an entire invention. I wonder if the lady who called is the same lady we saw at the theatre--"

And so on, and so on, all the way home by the Uxbridge Road, and Netting Hill, and then northward to the august retirement of Lady Samuelson's

large corner house in Ladbroke Square. For a deeply injured person Serena had really enjoyed herself very much.

CHAPTER XXXI

The burden of August, dense and heavy, lay upon London. Radiating outward in lifeless and dull-glaring sunshine, it involved the nearer suburbs; so that Dominic Iglesias, sitting on a bench beside the roadway crossing Barnes Common, notwithstanding the hour--past six o'clock--and the open space surrounding him, found the atmosphere hardly less oppressive than that of the streets. The great world, which plays, had departed. The little world, outnumbering the great by some five or six millions, which works, remained. And Dominic Iglesias, since he too worked, remained likewise, sharing with it the burden of the August heat and languor; and sharing also, to-day being Sunday, its weekly going forth over the face of the scorched and sun-seared land seeking rest, and, too often, finding none.

For the past two months he had seen Poppy St. John but seldom, nor had he heard from her. Whether by accident or by design he knew not, she had rarely been at home on those occasions when he had been free to call. For the last three weeks she had been away up the river, so he understood, with her friend Dot Parris--_alias_ Miss Charlotte Colthrust. A blight seemed to Iglesias to have fallen upon his and her friendship, ever since the day of his return to Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking; and his discovery, or rather divination, of the relation in which de Courcy Smyth stood to her. While her husband remained nameless, an unknown quantity, Dominic deplored the fact of her marriage, but as an abstraction. So soon as that fact had acquired in his mind--whether rightly or wrongly--a name and local habitation, now that he was liable to meet it daily incarnate--and that in most unsavoury shape--liable to be constantly reminded of its near neighbourhood, to witness a thousand and one unpleasing peculiarities of speech, habit, and manner, unlooked-for emotions arose in Iglesias, and those of a character of which he was by no means proud. Resentment took him, indignation, strange movements of jealousy and hatred; all very natural, no doubt, but decidedly bad for the soul. It was idle for him to remind himself that his belief regarding de Courcy Smyth was based upon supposition, upon circumstantial evidence which might prove merely coincident. He could not rid himself of that belief, nor of the emotional consequences of it; and these so vexed him that he questioned whether it would not be better to remove from Cedar Lodge and seek a domicile uninfected by the perpetual provocation of the man's presence. But it was not easy to give a plausible reason to his hostess for any immediate change of residence; nor was it easy, in the present stress of business at the bank, to find time or energy for house-hunting. The atmosphere of Cedar Lodge had become inimical. His rooms had ceased to be a place of security and repose. Yet whither should he go? The great wilderness of London seemed vastly inhospitable when it came to the question of selecting a new dwelling-place.

Meanwhile, he was grievously conscious of the growing estrangement between himself and Poppy St. John, which he connected, in some way, with this haunting yet unspoken suspicion of her relation to de Courcy Smyth--a suspicion which tended to rob intercourse of all spontaneity by introducing into it a spirit of embarrassment and constraint. He would

have given so very much to know the truth and be able to reckon finally with it; but he judged it unpermissible that he should approach the ugly subject first. It was Poppy's affair, her private and unlovely property. While she elected to keep silence, therefore, it would be disloyal for him to speak. Still it distressed him, adding to his mental and emotional unrest. The happiness might have gone out of their intercourse, yet there were times when he wearied for sight and for speech of her more than he quite cared to admit. George Lovegrove still held aloof. Dominic rallied his faith in the divine purpose, rallied his obedience to the divine ruling, fixed his eyes more patiently upon the promise of the far horizon; yet it must be owned he felt very friendless and sad at heart.

To-day, driven in part by that friendliness, he had come out on the chance of gaining some news of Poppy. Disappointment, however, awaited him. For the discreet Phillimore, though receiving him graciously, reported her mistress resident at home again, it is true, but gone into town on business, probably theatrical, and unlikely to return until late. Therefore Dominic had walked on to Barnes Common, and finding the uncomfortable bench by the roadside--whereon Cappadocia, the toy spaniel, had sought his protection more than a year ago--untenanted, had sat down there to meditate. Cedar Lodge was no longer a refuge. He preferred to keep away from it as long as might be. Perhaps, too, as the sun dropped the air would grow cooler, and the southeasterly draught, parched and scorching as from the mouth of a furnace, which huffed at times only to fall dead, might shift to some more merciful quarter. A coppery haze hung over London, above which the rusty white summits of a range of cumulus cloud towered into the thick grey-blue of the upper sky. Possibly the cloud harboured thunder and the refreshment of rain amid its giant crags and precipices. On the chance of such refreshment he would stay.

For in good truth he needed refreshment, and that speedily, being very tired, fagged by long hours in the City, by heavy responsibilities, by the burden of the airless August heat, let alone those more intimate causes of disturbance already indicated. Iglesias could not disguise from himself that the close application to business was beginning to tell injuriously upon his health. This same morning, coming back from early Mass, passing through the flagged passage which leads from Kensington Palace Green into Church Street, he had become so faint from exhaustion, that reaching--and not without difficulty--his former home in Holland Street, he had summoned the neat bald-headed little caretaker and asked permission to enter the house and rest. The ground-floor rooms were cool and dusky, sheltered by closed shutters from the summer sun. Only the French-window of the back dining-room stood open, on to the flight of wrought-iron steps leading down into the garden. Beside it the caretaker, not without husky coughings, placed a kitchen chair for Iglesias and fetched him a glass of water.

"I could wish I had something better to offer you, sir," he said, "but I am an abstainer by habit myself; and I have no liquor of any kind, unfortunately, in the house."

The water, however, was pleasantly cold, and Dominic drank it thankfully. He could have fancied there was virtue in it--the virtue of things blessed by long-ago mother-love. And, thinking of that, his eyes filled with tears as he looked out over the small neglected garden. Of the once glorious laburnum there remained only an unsightly stump, but jasmine still clothed the enclosing walls, the dark green of its straggling shoots starred here and there with belated white blossoms. About the lip of the empty stone basin, vigorously chirruping, sparrows came and went, while in

the far corner a grove of starveling sunflowers lifted their brown and yellow-rayed faces towards the light. Dominic, resting gratefully in the cool semi-darkness of the empty room, until the faintness which had attacked him was passed, found the place very gentle, soothing, and sweet. The sadder memories had died out here, so he noted. Only gracious and tender ones remained. He wished he could stay on indefinitely. As the years multiply, and the chequered story of them lengthens, it is comforting to dwell in a place where, once on a time, one had been greatly loved.

Dominic turned to the waiting caretaker, who regarded him with mingled solicitude, admiration, and deference.

"So the house is still unlet?" he said.

"Yes, sir, and is likely to remain so, I apprehend. The lease, as I understand, falls in a very few years hence, and the landlord is unwilling to make any outlay on the house, which will probably then be pulled down; while no tenant, I opine, would be willing to rent a residence so wanting in modern decoration and modern conveniences. Weeks pass, sir, without any persons calling to view."

"Yet the rent is low?" Iglesias said.

"Very low for so genteel a district--I am a native of Kensington, 'the royal village,' myself, sir--and no premium is asked."

Now, sitting on the uneasy bench upon the confines of Barnes Common--while the little many-millioned world, which works, in gangs, and groups, and amatory couples, and somewhat foot-weary family parties, sauntered by--that same oppression of faintness came over Dominic Iglesias, along with a great nostalgia for the cool, dusky, low-ceilinged rooms, and the neglected yet still bravely blossoming garden of the little house in Holland Street.

"It would be pleasant to spend one's last days and draw one's last breath there," Iglesias said to himself; "when the sum of endeavour is complete, when the last cable has been sent, the last column of figures balanced and audited, when the ledgers are closed and one's work being fairly finished one is free to sit still and listen--not fearfully, but with reverent curiosity--for the footsteps of Death and the secrets he has in his keeping."

And there he paused, for the scorched dusty land and pale dense sky, even the rusty white summits of the great range of cloud, slowly, slowly climbing high heaven--even the light dresses of passing women and children--went suddenly black, indistinct, and confused to his sight, so that he seemed to be falling through some depth of dark and untenanted space, while the dust, thick, stifling, clinging, fell with him, encircling, enveloping him with a horror of suffocation, of crushing, impalpable, yet unescapable, dead weight.

Then out of the darkness, out of the dust, in voluminous dusty drab motor veil and dusty drab motor coat, the Lady of the Windswept Dust herself came towards him, bringing consolation and help.

CHAPTER XXXII

"You are coming round, dear man. You really look better. What you wanted was a sensible Christian meal. For, I tell you, you were most uncommonly done, and it was a near shave whether I should get you home here without having to call on the populace for assistance. Don't go and worry now. You were superb as usual, with enough personal dignity to supply a whole dynasty, and have some left over for washing-day into the bargain. You should give lessons in the art of majestic collapse--not that you did collapse, thank goodness! But you came precious near it.--Yes, I mean it, I mean it, dear man"--Poppy nodded her head at him, leaned across the corner of the table and patted his arm with the utmost friendliness. "I want to terrify you into being more careful. There are plenty of people one could jolly well spare; but you're not among them. So lay that to heart, or I shan't have an easy moment. And then as to personal dignity, if you will excuse my entering into details of costume, in that grey top-hat, grey frock-coat, et cetera, et cetera, you looked more fit for the Ascot Royal Enclosure than for Barnes Common on a broiling August Sunday. The populace eyed you with awe.--Don't be offended, there's a dear. You can't help being very smart and very beautiful; and you oughtn't to want to help it even if you could, since it gives me so much pleasure. Your tailor's a gem. But how he must love you, must be ready to dress you free of cost for the simple joy of fitting on."

The little dinner had been excellent. The clear soup hot, and the ninety-two Ayala, extra dry, chilled to a nicety--and so with the rest of the menu. Glass, silver, china, were set forth daintily upon the fine white damask, under the glow of scarlet-shaded candles. The double doors connecting the small drawing-room and dining-room stood open; this, combined with the fact that lights were limited to the dinner-table, giving an agreeable effect of coolness and of space. While, as arrayed in a crisp black muslin gown--the frills and panels of it painted with shaded crimson roses and bronze-green leaves--Poppy St. John ministered to her guest, chattered to, and rallied him, her eyes were extraordinarily dark and luminous, and her voice rich in soft caressing tones. Never had she appeared more engaging, more natural and human, never stronger yet more tenderly gay. Dominic Iglesias yielded himself up gladly, gratefully, to the charm of the woman and to the comfort of his surroundings. Temperate in all things, he was temperate in enjoyment. Yet he was touched, he was happy. Life was very sweet to him in this hour of relief from physical distress, of renewed friendship, and of pretty material circumstance.

"It was such a mercy I had a decent meal to offer you," Poppy went on. "Often the commissariat department is a bit sketchy on Sunday, in--well, in these days of the cleaned slate. But you see, Lionel Gordon, of the Twentieth Century Theatre, was to tell me, this afternoon, what decision he had come to about the engagement I have been spelling to get. He is an appalling mongrel, three-parts German Jew and one part Scotchman--sweet mixture of the Chosen and Self-Chosen people! He never was pretty, and increasing years have not rendered his appearance more enticing; but he's the cleverest manager going, on either side of the Atlantic, and he doesn't go back on his word once given, as too many of them do. Well, he was to let me know; and to tell the truth, beloved lunatic, I was rather keen about this engagement. I knew if he did not give it me I should be a little hipped, and should stand in need of support and consolation; while, if he did, I should be rather expansive, and should want suitably to celebrate the event. So I ordered a good dinner to be ready in either case"--Poppy laughed gently. "Queer thing the artist," she said, "with its

instinct of falling back on creature comforts. Whatever happens, good luck or bad luck, it always eats."

"And they gave you the engagement?" Iglesias inquired.

Poppy nodded her head in assent.

"Yes, dear man, Lionel gave it me. He'd have been a fool if he hadn't, for he knows who I am and what training I've had. And then Fallowfeild has made things easy. He's a thundering good friend, Fallowfeild is; and in view of late events--once I had told him to go, I wouldn't, of course, take a penny of Alaric's--I had no conscience about letting Fallowfeild be useful. He was lovely about it. I shall only draw a nominal salary for the first six months until I have proved myself. What I want is my opportunity; and money matters being made easy helped materially. Both the Chosen and Self-Chosen People have a wonderfully keen eye to the boodle, bless their little hearts and consciences!"

She paused, leaning her elbows on the table and looking sideways at Iglesias, her head thrown back.

"I am dreadfully glad to have you here to-night," she went on, "because you see it's a turning-point. I have pretty well climbed the ridge and reached the watershed. The streams have all started running in the other direction--towards the dear old work and worry, the envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness, and all the fun, too, and good comradeship, and ambition, and joy, of the theatre. Can you understand, I at once adore and detest it, for it's a terribly mixed business. Already I keep on seeing the rows of pinky-white faces rising, tier above tier, up to the roof, which turn you sick and give you cold shivers all down your spine when you first come on. And then I go hot with the fight against their apathy or opposition, the glorious fight to conquer and hold an audience, and bend its emotions and its sympathies, as the wind bends the meadow grass, to one's will."

Poppy stretched out her hand across the corner of the table again, laying it upon Iglesias' hand. Her eyes danced with excitement, yet her voice shook and the words came brokenly.

"But, dearly beloved, I have your blessing on this new departure, haven't I?" she asked. "After all, it's you, just simply you, that sends me back to an honest life and to my profession. So I should like to have your blessing--that, and your prayers."

"Can you doubt that you have them," Iglesias answered, and his voice, too, shook, somewhat, "now and always, dearest of friends?"

For a little minute Poppy sat looking full at him, he looking full at her. Then, with a sort of rush, she rose to her feet.

"Come along, this won't do," she said. "Sentiment strictly prohibited. It's not wholesome for you after the nasty turn you had on Barnes Common--and it's not particularly wholesome for me either, though for quite other reasons. Moreover, it's fiendishly hot in here. So see, dear man, you're not going just yet. I telephoned to the Bell Inn stables for a private hansom to be on hand about ten thirty for you. Meanwhile, you're to take it easy and rest. It is but five steps upstairs, and that won't tire you. Come up into the cool and have your coffee on the balcony."

And so it came about that Dominic Iglesias followed Poppy St. John upstairs--she moving rapidly, in a way defiantly--followed her into a bedchamber, where a subtle sweetness of orris-root met him; and a fantastic brightness of gaslight and moonlight, coming in through open windows, chequered the handsome dark-polished brass-inlaid furniture, the green silk coverlet and hangings, the dimly patterned ceiling and walls. Without hesitation or apology, Poppy walked straight through this apartment, and passed out on to the white-planked and white-railed balcony.

The dome of the sky was immense and had become perfectly clear, the great clouds having boiled up during the afternoon only to sink away and vanish at sunset, as is their wont in seasons of drought. North and east the glare of London pulsed along the horizon; and above it the stars were faint, since the radiant first-quarter moon rode high, drenching roadway and palings, the stretch of the polo-ground, the shrubberies and grove of giant elms, with white light blotted and barred, here and there, by black shadow. The air was still, but less oppressive, the cruelty of sun-heat having gone out of it and only a suavity remaining. The facade of the terrace of smirking, self-conscious, much-be-flowered and be-balconied little houses had taken on a certain worth of picturesqueness, suggestive of the bazaar of some far-away Oriental city rather than of a vulgar London suburb, the summer night even here producing an exquisiteness of effect and making itself very sensibly felt. Poppy silently motioned her guest to the further of the two cane deck-chairs set in the recess, arranged a cushion at his back, drew up a little mother-of-pearl inlaid table beside him, poured coffee into two cups. Then she moved across to the rail of the balcony, and stood there, her head thrown back, her hands clasped behind her, facing the moonlight, which covered her slender rounded figure from head to foot as with a pale transparent veil of infinite tenuity. Iglesias could see the rise and fall of her bosom, the flutter of her eyelids, the involuntary movement of her lips as she pressed them together, restraining, as might be divined, words to which she judged it wiser to deny utterance.

And this hardly repressed excitement in Poppy's bearing and aspect, along with the peculiar scene and circumstances in which he found himself, worked profoundly upon Dominic Iglesias. In passing through that scented, half-discovered, fantastically lighted bedchamber and stepping out into the magic of the night, he had stepped out, in imagination, into regions dreamed of in earlier years--when reading poetry or hearing music,--but never fairly entered, still less enjoyed, since all the duties and obligations of his daily life militated against and even forbade such enjoyment. The weariness of his work in the City, the petty annoyances he suffered at Cedar Lodge, the haunting disgust of de Courcy Smyth's presence, fell away from him, becoming for the time as though they were not. He never had been, nor was he now, in any degree self-indulgent or a sentimentalist. The appeal of the present somewhat enchanted hour was to the intellect and the spirit, rather than sensuous, still less sensual. Nevertheless, an almost passionate desire of earthly beauty took him--of the beauty of things seen, of things plastic, beauty of the human form; beauty of far-distant lands and the varied pageant of their aspect and history; of great rivers flowing seaward; of tombs by the wayside; of the glorious terror of the desert's naked face; of languorous fountain-cooled gardens, close hid in the burning heart of ancient cities; beauty of sound, beauty of words and phrases, above all, of the eternal beauty of youth and the illimitable expectation and hope of it.

And it was out of all this, out of the mirage of these vast elusive

prospects and apprehensions, that he answered Poppy St. John, as with serious eyes yet smiling lips she turned, and coming across the white floor sat down beside him, saying:

"How goes it, Dominic? Are you rested?"

"Yes," he answered, "I am rested. And more than that, I am alive and awake, strangely awake and full of vision--thanks to you."

Poppy's expression sweetened, becoming protective, maternal. She leaned back in her chair and folded her hands in her lap; yet there was still a certain tension in her expression, an intensity as of inward excitement in her gaze.

"Tell me things, then," she said, "tell me things about yourself, if the gift of seeing is upon you.--There's no one to overhear. The neighbours on both sides are away for the holidays, thank the powers! and their houses stand empty. While the voices and footsteps down in the road only make us more happily alone. So tell me things, Dominic. I am a trifle stirred up with all this affair of the theatre, and you always quiet me. I'm really a very good child. I deserve a treat. And there are things I dreadfully want to know."

"Alas! there is so absurdly little to tell," Iglesias answered, "that, here and now, in face of my existing sense of life and of vision, I am humbled by my own ignorance and poverty of achievement. That poverty, I suppose, is all the more apparent to me, because twice to-day I have been--so I judge, at least--within measurable distance of bidding farewell to this astonishingly wonderful world and the fashion of it. It comes home to me how little I have seen, how little I have profited, how little I know. I would have liked to leave it; it would be more seemly to do so, having profited more largely by my sojourn here."

Iglesias paused, excitement which his natural sobriety disapproved gaining him, too, through that ache of unrealised beauty. For a moment he struggled with it as with a rising tide, then resigned himself.

"And yet," he added, "in other respects I should not be sorry to hear the hour strike, for curiosity of the unknown is very strong in me. Opportunity may have been narrow, and one may have been balked of high endeavour and rich experience, by lack of talent and by adverse circumstances; but in the supreme, the crowning experience, that of death and all which, for joy or sorrow, lies beyond it, even the most obscure, the most uncultured and untravelled must participate."

"Don't be in too great a deuce of a hurry to satisfy that curiosity, dear man," Poppy put in. "You must contrive to exercise patience for a little while yet, please; always remembering that it is entirely superfluous to run to catch a train which is bound not to start until you are on board of it. And then, too, you see--well, there's me, after all, and I want you."

Iglesias' face grew keen, as he looked at her through that encompassing whiteness of moonlight.

"I am glad of that," he said very quietly, "because you are to me, dear friend, what no other human being has ever yet been. The saddest thing that could happen to me, save loss of faith, would be that you should cease to want me. I only pray God, if it is not self-seeking, that you may continue to want me as long as I live."

"But your religion?" she asked, a point of jealousy pricking her.

"My religion forbids sin, whether of body or mind; forbids violation of the eternal spiritual proportion, by any placing of the creature before the Creator in a man's action or in his heart. But my religion enjoins love and stimulates it; since only through loving can we fulfil the highest possibility of our nature, which is to grow into the likeness of Almighty God."

"You believe that?" Poppy asked again.

"I do more," Iglesias said. "I know it."

Then both fell silent, having reached the place where words hinder rather than help thought. And, as it happened, just then the stillness was sensibly broken up, and the magic of the night encroached upon by the passing of a couple of _char-a-bancs_ in the road below, loaded up with trippers faring homewards from a day's outing at Hampton Court. The tired teams jog-trotted haltingly. The wheels whispered hoarsely in the muffling dust; and voices mingled somewhat plaintively in the singing of a then popular khaki sing--"The Soldiers of the Queen." Hearing all of which, as the refrain died away Londonwards up the great suburban road, the compelling drama and pathos of life as the multitude lives it--stupidly, without ideas, without any conscious nobility of purpose, yet with a certain blundering and clumsy heroism--took Poppy St. John by the throat. Those who stand aside from that democratic everyday drama, rejecting alike the common joys and common sorrows of it, have need--so it seemed to her--to account for and justify themselves lest they become suspect. Therefore she looked at Dominic Iglesias intently, questioningly, hesitated a moment, and then spoke.

"Still I don't understand you, in your determined detachment of attitude. Tell me, if you are not afraid of love, why have you never married?" she said.

And he, divining to an extent that which inspired her question, smiled at her somewhat proudly as he answered.

"Be under no misapprehension, dear friend. I am a perfectly normal piece of flesh and blood, with a man's normal passions, and his natural craving for wife, and child, home, family, and the like. But during my mother's lifetime I was bound to other service than that of marriage."

"But in these years since her death?" Poppy asked.

"There is a time for everything, as the Preacher testifies, a due and proper time which must be observed if life is to be a reasoned progress, not a mere haphazard stumbling from the weakness of childhood to the incapacity of old age. And, can anything be more objectionably at variance with that wise teaching than the spectacle of amorous uxorious efflorescence in a man of well over fifty?"

Poppy permitted herself a lively grimace.

"All the same you have sacrificed yourself, as usual," she said.

"Not so very greatly, perhaps," Iglesias replied, with a soberly humorous expression. "For I have always been very exacting and have asked very

much. I am culpably fastidious. My tastes are far beyond my means, my desires out of all reasonable relation to my station and my merits. And it should be remembered that my circle of acquaintances has been a very limited one, until quite recently--I do not wish to appear more glaringly arrogant or discourteous than I actually am. I had my ideal. It happened that I failed to realise it; and I am very impatient of compromise in matters of intimate and purely personal import. In respect of them I hold I have an unqualified right to consult my own tastes. It has always been easier to me to go without than to accept a second-best."

"In point of fact no woman was good enough! Poor brutes!"

Poppy mused a little, with averted face.

"How beastly cheap they'd all feel--I've not forgotten the undulating and aspiring withered leaf--if they knew how mightily they all fell short!" she added naughtily. Suddenly she looked round at Dominic Iglesias. Her eyes were as stars, but her lips trembled. "Bless me, but you've extensively original methods of conveying information! It's lucky for me I've a steady head. So--so it comes to this--I reign all alone?" she said.

"Yes, dear friend, save for my love for my mother--such as the throne is or ever has been--you reign alone," Iglesias answered quietly.

Poppy rested her elbows upon her knees, dropped her face into her hands, and sat thus bowed together in the whiteness of the moonlight.

"Ah, dear!" she murmured presently, brokenly, "I've got my answer. It's better and--worse, than I expected. All the same I'm content--that's to say, the best of me is--royally, consummately content.--Thank you a thousand times, thrice-beloved and very most exceedingly unworldly-wise one," she said.

Then for a while both were silent, wrapped about by, and resting in, the magic of the summer night. When Poppy roused herself at last to speak, it was in a different key, studiously matter-of-fact.

"Look here, dear man, do you in the least realise how extremely far gone you were when I arrived to you on Barnes Common this evening? Because I tell you plainly I didn't in the very least like it. In my opinion it is high time you gave up dragging that Barking Brothers & Barking cart."

"I shall give up doing so very soon," Iglesias replied. "Just now I am acting as manager. Sir Abel is at Marienbad, and the other partners are out of town."

"I like that--lazy animals!" Poppy said.

"But the situation is in process of righting itself--has practically righted itself already."

"Thanks to you."

"In part, no doubt. There was a disposition to panic, which rendered it exceedingly difficult to get accurate and definite information at first. However, I arrived at the necessary data with patience and diplomacy, and was able to draw out a clear detailed statement. This proved so far satisfactory that Messrs. Gommee, Hills, Murray & Co. and Pavitt's Bank have considered themselves justified in undertaking to finance Barking

Brothers until business in South Africa has resumed its ordinary course."

"Then the elderly plungers are saved?"

"Yes, I believe, practically they are saved," Iglesias said. "And, therefore, as soon as Sir Abel has finished his cure and returns I shall retire."

Poppy rose, clapping her hands together with irritation.

"Sir Abel's cure be hanged!" she cried. "What do I care about his idiotic old liver or his gout, or anything else. Let him pay the price of steadily over-eating himself for more than half a century. I've no use for him. What I have a use for is you, dear man; more than ever now, don't you see," her voice softened, became caressing, "after our recent little explanation. And you shan't kill yourself. I won't have it. I won't allow it. Therefore be reasonable, my good dear. Put away your mania of self-immolation--or keep it exclusively for my benefit. Write and tell the Barking man to hurry up with his liver and his gout. Tell him you're being sweated to death dragging his rotten old banking cart, and that he's just got to come home and set you free, and get between the shafts and do the dragging and sweating himself.--Ah, there's the hansom. You must go. I'd no notion it was so late."

And so it came about that, once more, Dominic Iglesias followed the Lady of the Windswept Dust into the faintly scented bedchamber, where fantastic brightness of gaslight and moonlight chequered the polished surfaces of the dark furniture, the green silk coverlet and hangings, the dimly-patterned ceiling and walls. His instinct was to pass on, as quickly as might be, to the secure commonplace of the landing without. But half-way across the room, at the foot of the low-pillared and brass-inlaid bedstead, Poppy St. John stopped, and turned swiftly, barring his passage with extended arms.

"Stay a minute, for probably we shall never meet in this poor little house again, best beloved one," she said. "It is too far out. I must move into town. Lionel puts the play into rehearsal next week, and I must live near the theatre. And then, too--well, you know, since I've made up my mind, it's best to clean the slate even in respect of one's dwelling-place. Memories stick, stick like a leech; and they raise emotions of a slightly disturbing character sometimes. I am sure of myself; and yet I know it's safest to make a clean sweep of whatever reminds me of all the forbidden dear damned lot. I regret nothing--don't imagine that. I'm keen on my work. The artist, after all, is the strongest thing in me. I'm quite happy, now I have made up my mind. My nose is in the air. I can look creation in the face without winking an eyelid. I can respect myself. And I'm tremendously grateful to Lionel Gordon for taking me on spec, and to Fallowfeild for greasing the creature's Caledonian-Teutonic-Hebraic palm for me. Still--still--you can imagine, can't you, that, take it all round, it's not precisely a Young Woman's Christian Association blooming picnic party for me just at present?"

Poppy dashed her hand across her eyes, half laughing, half sobbing.

"Ah, love me, Dominic, love me, in your own way, the clean way--that's all I ask, all that I want--only love me always," she said.

She laid her hands on Iglesias' shoulders and threw back her head. And he, holding her, bending down kissed her white face, soft heavy hair, over-red

lips, her tragic and unfathomable eyes--which looking on the evil and measuring the very actual immediate delights of it, still had courage, in the end, to reject it and choose the good--kissed them reverently, gravely, proudly, with the chastity and chivalry of perfect friendship.

"Ah! that's better. I'm better. Bless you; don't be afraid. I'll play fair to the finish--only keep well. Quit that rotten old bank.--Now go, dear man, go," Poppy said.

CHAPTER XXXIII

During the past six weeks events had galloped. To Iglesias it appeared that changes were in course of arriving in battalions. He neither hailed nor deplored them, but met them with a stoical patience. To realise them clearly, in all their bearings, would have been to add to the sense of fatigue from which he too constantly suffered. More than sufficient to

each day was the labour thereof. So he looked beyond, to the greater repose and freedom which, as he trusted, lay ahead.

Upon the morning immediately in question he had closed his work at the bank. Sir Abel's demeanour had been characteristic. His clothes, it is true, still hung loosely upon him. His library chair and extensive writing-table appeared a world too big. For he was shrunken and had become an old man. Yet, though signs of chastening thus outwardly declared themselves, in spirit he had regained tone and returned to his former high estate. Along with the revival of financial security had come a revival of pomposity, an addiction to patronage in manner and platitudes in speech. He had ceased to be humble and human, self-righteous self-complacency again loudly announcing itself.

"So you propose to retire, you ask to be relieved of your duties, my good friend?" he asked of Iglesias, who had requested the favour of an interview in his private room. "Let us, then, congratulate ourselves upon the fact that I have returned from my sojourn upon the continent with so far renovated health that I feel equal to meeting the arduous responsibilities of my position unaided; and am not, consequently, compelled, out of a sense of duty either to myself or to my colleagues, to offer any objection to your retirement. Before we part I should, however, wish to place it clearly on record that my confidence, both in the soundness of my own judgment and in our capacity, as capitalists, to meet any strain put upon our resources, was not misplaced. This no one can, I think, fail to admit. Our house emerges from this period of trial with the hall-mark of public sympathy and esteem upon it. And, in this connection, it is instructive to note the working of the law of compensation. This war, for example, which to the ordinary mind might have appeared an unmixed evil, since it threatened to jeopardise our position among the leading financiers of the capital of the civilised world, has, in the event, served, not only to consolidate our position, but to unmask the practices of that unscrupulous and self-seeking member of our firm, my unhappy nephew Reginald, and afford us legitimate excuse for his removal. We appeared to touch on disaster; but, by that very means, we have been enabled to rid ourselves of a canker. Still this must remain a painful subject."

Sir Abel became pensive, fixing his gaze, the while, upon the portrait adorning the wall over against him. To an acute observer the said portrait had always been subtly ironical. Now it had become coarsely so--a merciless caricature of the shrivelled old gentleman whom it represented, and to whom it bore much the same resemblance as a balloon soaring skywards, fully inflated, bears to that same object with half the gas let out of it in a condition of flabby and wobbling semi-collapse.

"A painful subject," he repeated nobly--"I refrain from enlarging upon it, and pass to other matters. As to the part you yourself have borne in the history of our recent anxieties, Iglesias, I feel I cannot do less than tender you the thanks of myself and my co-partners. I do not disguise from you that a tendency existed to criticise my action in summoning you, to dub your business methods antiquated, and question your ability to march with the times. But these objections proved, I am happy to think, unfounded. The faith I reposed in you has been justified. And I may tell you, in confidence, that, should the occasion for doing so arise, my colleagues will in future have as little hesitation in calling upon your services as I should have myself."

The speaker paused, as for applause. And Dominic, who had remained standing during this prolonged oration--no suggestion having been made on the present occasion that he should be seated--proceeded to acknowledge the peculiar compliment just paid him, with somewhat sardonic courtesy.

"Your words are extremely reassuring, Sir Abel," he remarked calmly.

The gentleman addressed regarded him sharply for a moment, as though doubtful of the exact purport of his words. Then, suspicion of covert sarcasm being clearly inadmissible, Sir Abel spoke again in his largest platform manner, although the tones of his voice, like his person, were shrunk, docked of the fulness of their former rotundity and unction.

"It has ever been my effort to reward merit by encouragement," he replied. "And, were testimony to the wisdom of my practice, in this particular, needed, I should point, I candidly tell you, my good friend, to the excellent results of my recent demand upon your cooperation and support." He leaned sideways in his chair, assuming the posture of the portrait, conscious of having really said a very handsome thing indeed to his ex-head-clerk. "For," he added, "I sincerely believe in the worth of example. It is hardly too much to assert that a generous and high-minded employer eventually stamps the employed with a reflection, at least, of his own superior qualities."

Again he paused. But truth to tell, Dominic Iglesias had not only grown very weary of discourse and discourser, but somewhat impatient also. He had hoped better things of the man after the nasty shaking fortune had recently given him. Consequently he was disappointed; for it was very effectually borne in upon him that only absence of feathers makes for grace in a goose. Once the nudity of the foolish bird covered, it hisses, and that loudly, to the old tune. Hence, in the interests of Christian charity, he agreed with himself to cut short the interview, lest anger should get the better of toleration.

"I think we have now discussed all questions calling for your personal attention, Sir Abel," he said, "and all documents and correspondence relating to affairs during your absence have been placed in your hands. If therefore you have nothing further to ask me, I need not encroach any longer upon your valuable time."

With that, after a brief pause, he moved towards the door; but the other man, half rising from his chair, called after him.

"Iglesias, your attention for one moment--that matter of a salary?"

"I supposed I had made my terms perfectly clear, Sir Abel," Dominic remarked coldly.

"No doubt, in the first instance. But should you have reconsidered your decision, and should you think the pension you enjoy an insufficient remuneration, I am empowered to make you the offer, in addition, of a fixed salary for the past six months."

Listening to which tardy and awkward recognition of his own rather princely dealings, Mr. Iglesias' temper began to rise, his jaw to grow rigid, and his eyes dangerously alight.

"I am not in the habit of changing my mind, Sir Abel," he said. "I proposed to make you a free gift of my time and such experience as I may possess. Nothing has occurred to alter or modify that intention. There are circumstances, into which I do not choose to enter, which would render it extremely distasteful to me to accept anything--over and above my pension--from yourself or from any member of your family or firm."

Here Sir Abel, who had been standing, sagged down, half-empty-balloon-like, into his chair. Again he eyed Iglesias sharply, doubtful of the exact purport of his speech. But again suspicion of covert sarcasm, still more of covert rebuke, being to him quite inconceivable, he rejoined with a condescension which he could not but feel was altogether praiseworthy:

"Enough, enough, my good friend. That is sufficient. I will detain you no longer; but will merely add that I commend your reticence while appreciating the sentiments which dictate your refusal. These it is easy to interpret. They shall not be forgotten, since they constitute a very suitable acknowledgment of the advantages and benefits which have accrued to you during your long association with my partners and myself."

Later, journeying westward upon the 'bustop, Dominic Iglesias meditated in a spirit of humorous pity upon the above conversation. He was very glad he had not lost his temper. Eyes blinded by self-worship, an impenetrable hide, these things, too, have their uses in time--very practical uses, which it would be silly to ignore. Why, then, be angry? The truly wise man, as Dominic told himself with a somewhat mournful smile, learns to leave such time-wise fools as Sir Abel Barking to Almighty God for chastisement, because--if it can be said without irreverence--the Almighty alone has wit enough to deal with them. And, for his comfort on lower levels, he reminded himself that though the house of Barking might show him scant gratitude, and attribute its financial resurrection to its own inherent virtue, this was not the opinion held by outsiders. The manager of Pavitt's Bank, and certain members of Goome, Hills, Murray & Co., had congratulated Iglesias, personally, upon his admirable conduct of affairs during the crisis, and assured him of the high respect they had conceived for his judgment, his probity, and business acumen. In this there was satisfaction of a silent but deep-seated sort--satisfaction of pride, since he had accomplished that which he had set forth to accomplish: satisfaction of honour through unbiassed and unsolicited commendation. With that satisfaction he bade himself rest thankfully

content, while turning his thoughts to other and more edifying subjects.

And, in this connection, it was inevitable that a former journeying westward upon a 'bustop should occur to him, with its strange record of likeness and unlikeness in circumstance and outlook. Then, as now, somewhat outworn in mind and in health, he had closed a period of labour and faced new conditions, new habits, unaccustomed freedom and leisure. But now on matters of vital, because of eternal, importance, his mind was at rest. Loneliness and on-coming old age had ceased to disquiet him. The ship of his individual fate no longer drifted rudderless or risked danger of stranding, but steered steadily, fearlessly, towards the promise of a secure and lovely harbourage. The voyage might be long or short. At this moment Dominic supposed himself indifferent in the matter, since he believed--not presumptuously, but through the outreaching of a great faith--that the end was certain. And meditating, just now, upon that gracious conviction, while the red-painted half-empty omnibus fared onward down Piccadilly, a sense of the unusual graciousness of things immediate and visible took hold on him.

For to-day the monstrous mother, London-town, wore a pensive and delicate aspect. The tender melancholy of early autumn was upon her, she looking etherealised and even youthful, as does a penitent cleansed from the soil of past transgressions by fasting and tears. No doubt she would sin again and befoul herself, for the melting moods of a great city are transient; yet for the moment she showed very meek and mild. The atmosphere was clear, with the exquisite clarity which follows abundant and welcome rain after a spell of heat and drought. The trees, somewhat sparse in foliage, were distinct with infinite gradations of blonde, golden, and umber tints, as of burnished metal, against their black branches and stems. The endless vista of grey and red buildings, outlined finely yet without harshness, towered up into a thin, sad, blue sky overspread with long-drawn shoals and islands, low-shored and sinuous, of pale luminous cloud. Upon the grey pavements the bright-coloured dress of a woman--mauve, green, or pink--took on a peculiar value here and there, amid the generality of darkly clad pedestrians. And in the traffic, too, the white tilt of a van or rather barbaric reds and yellows of the omnibuses, stood away from the sombre hues of the mass of vehicles. The air, as Iglesias met it--he occupying the seat on the right immediately behind that of the driver--was soft, yet with a perceptible freshness of moisture in it; a cool, wistful wind seeming to hail from very far, the wings of it laden less with hopeful promise than with rare unspoken farewells, gentle yet penetrating regrets; so that Dominic, even while welcoming the refreshment of it, was moved in spirit with impressions of impending finality as though it spoke to him of things finished, laid aside, not wholly without sorrow relinquished and--so far as outward seeming went--forgot.

Involuntarily his eyes filled with tears. Then he reproached himself. Of what had he to complain? The will must indeed be weak, the spiritual vision reprehensively clouded, if these vague voices of nature could so disturb the serenity of the soul. Thus he reasoned with himself, almost sternly. But, just then, the flaming rose-scarlet bill on the knife-board of a passing omnibus attracted his attention, along with the announcement, in big letters, which it set forth. To-night the Twentieth Century Theatre opened its winter season with a new piece by that admirable but all too indolent and intermittent dramatist, Antony Hammond; and in it Poppy St. John played the leading lady's part.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Opposite St. Mary Abbott's church Mr. Iglesias lighted down from the 'bustop. His eyes were still dazzled by those flaming bills.--Lionel Gordon was advertising handsomely. The knife-board of every second omnibus displayed them, now he came to look.--His thought turned in quickened interest towards the Lady of the Windswept Dust and all that the said advertisements stood for in her case. He had seen her a few days ago, after rehearsal, and she had warned him off being present tonight.

"It's all going like hot cakes, dear man," she had said gaily, "still, as you love me, don't come. I should be more nervous of you than ninety dozen critics. I shall want you badly, all the same, don't doubt that; and I shall play to you, all the while, though you're not there. But--don't you understand?--if I actually saw you it might come between me and my part. I shouldn't be sure who I really was, and that would make me as jumpy as a sick cat. You shall know--I'll wire to you directly the show's over; but I'd best have my first round quite alone with the public. And then a first night is always a bit jungly--not quite fair on the play or the company, or the audience either for that matter. A play's the same as a ship, if there's any real art in it. It needs time to find itself. So just wait, like a lamb, till we've all shaken into place, and I'm quite at home in the saddle."

And in truth Dominic Iglesias had plenty to occupy his time and attention at this particular juncture, irrespective of Poppy's debut at the Twentieth Century Theatre. For tomorrow would close his connection with Cedar Lodge, as to-day had closed his connection with Messrs. Barking Brothers & Barking. The mind in hours of fatigue, when vitality is low and the power of concentration consequently deficient, has a tendency to work in layers, so to speak, one strain of thought overlying another. Hence it was that Iglesias' contemplation of those gaudy advertisements, and of their bearing upon Poppy's fortunes, failed to oust the premonitions of finality which had come to and somewhat perturbed him as he looked upon the pensive tearwashed face of London-penitent, cleansed by the breath of the wistful far-hailing autumn wind. Involuntarily, and notwithstanding his repudiation of them, he continued to question those premonitions and the clinging melancholy of them, asking whether they bore relation merely to the two not wholly unwelcome partings above indicated; or whether the foreboding induced by them did not find its source in some sentiment, some intuition of approaching change, far more intimate and profound than cessation of employment or alteration of dwelling-place. Then, as he walked on up Church Street another layer of thought presented itself. For he could not but call to mind how many hundred times he had trodden that pavement before close against the close-packed traffic, the high barrack-wall on the right hand, the row of modest shop-fronts on the left, on his way home to the little house in Holland Street. Once more that house was home to him. He would cross its familiar threshold to-day as master. Yet how differently to of old! How steep the hill was! How languid and spent he became in ascending it--slowly, deliberately, instead of with light-footed energy and indifference! And this made him ask himself, what if these premonitions of finality, of impending farewells, of compulsory relinquishment, had indeed a very special and definite significance, being sent to him as heralds of the approach of a common yet--to each individual being--unique and altogether tremendous change? What if that haunting curiosity of the unknown--concerning which he had spoken with Poppy St. John amid the white magic of the moonlight during

the enchanted hour of his and her friendship--was to be satisfied very soon?

Iglesias drew himself up to his full height, fatigue and bodily weakness alike forgotten, and stood for a little space at the turn into Holland Street, hat in hand, facing the delicately chill wind and looking away into the fine perspective of sky overspread by shoals and islands of pale luminous cloud. Calmly--yet with the sharp amazement inevitable when things taken for granted, tacitly and nominally accepted throughout a lifetime, suddenly advance into the immediate foreground, becoming actual, tangible, imperative--he asked himself, was death so very near, then? At the church of the Carmelite Priory just above--the high slated roofs and slender iron crockets of which overtopped the parapets of the intervening houses--a bell tolled as the officiating priest, in giving the Benediction, elevated the sacred Host. And that note, at once austere and plaintive, striking across the hoarse murmur and trample of the streets, was very grateful to Dominic Iglesias. For it assured him of this, at least, that when for him the supreme hour did indeed strike and he was called upon to go forth alone--as every soul must go--to meet the impenetrable mystery which veils the close of the earthly chapter, he would not go forth unbefriended, but absolved, anointed, fortified, made ready--in so far as readiness for so stupendous an ordeal is possible--by the rites of Holy Church.

"_Fiat misericordia tua Domine super nos: quemad-modum speravimus te. In te Domine speravi: non confundar in aeternum,_" he quoted half aloud.

And then could not forbear to smile, gravely and somewhat sadly, registering the deep pathos of the fact that the majestic hymn of praise and thanksgiving, dedicated by the use of Christendom throughout centuries to the celebration of highest triumph, still ends brokenly with a childlike sob of shrinking, of entreaty, and very human pain.

Meditating upon which, and upon much implied by it, not only of sorrow but of consolation for whoso is not afraid to understand, Iglesias moved onward. But so closely do things absurd and trivial jostle things august and of profound significance in daily happenings--he was speedily aroused from meditation and his attention claimed by example of quite another order of pathos to that suggested by the concluding verses of the _Te Deum_. Some little way ahead a brown-painted furniture van was backed against the curb. From the cave-like interior of it coatless white-aproned men bore a miscellaneous collection of goods--among others a battered dapple-grey rocking-horse with flowing mane and tail--across the yard-wide strip of garden, and in at the front door of a small old-fashioned house. Bass mats were strewn upon the pavement. Sheets of packing paper pirouetted down the roadway before the wind. While, standing in the midst of the litter, watching the process of unloading with perplexed and even agitated interest, was a whimsical figure--large of girth, short of limb, convex where the accredited lines of beauty demand, if not concavity, at least a refined flatness of surface.

The Latin, unlike the Anglo-Saxon, does not consider it necessary as soon as adolescence is past to extirpate his heart; or, failing successful performance of that heroic operation, strictly to limit the activities of it to his amours, legitimate or otherwise. Hence Dominic Iglesias felt no shame that the sight of his old plaything, or of his old school-fellow--now unhappily estranged from and suspicious of him--should provoke in him a great tenderness. Upon the battered rocking-horse his heart rode away to the dear sheltered happiness of childhood, while

towards his former school-fellow it went forth in unmixed kindness. For it appeared to him that for one who had so lately held converse with approaching death, it would be a very scandal of light-minded pettiness to nourish resentment against any fellow creature. In near prospect of the eternal judgment, private and temporal judgment can surely afford to declare a universal amnesty in respect of personal slights and injuries. Therefore, after but a moment's hesitation, he went on, laid his hand upon George Lovegrove's shoulder, and called him affectionately by name.

"Dominic!" the latter cried, and stood staring. "Well to be sure--you did surprise me! To think of meeting you just by accident to-day, like this!"

He grew furiously red, gladness and embarrassment struggling within him. Conscientiously he strove to be faithful to the menagerie of ignorances and prejudices which he misnamed his convictions. For here was the representative of the Accursed Thing--persecutor, enemy of truth, of patriotism, of marriage, worshipper of senseless idols; but, alas! how he loved that representative! How he honoured his intelligence, admired his person, coveted his companionship! Beholding Iglesias once again, George Lovegrove rejoiced as at the finding of lost treasure. Hence, perplexed, perspiring, lamentably squinting, yet with the innocent half-shy ecstasy of a girl looking upon her recovered lover, he gazed up into Mr. Iglesias' face.

"I give you my word I was never more taken aback in my life," he protested. "As it happened I was just thinking about old times, observing that some family is moving into your former house. But I had no notion of meeting you. Positively I am unable to grasp the fact. I have not a word to say to you, because I require to say so much. I know there is a great deal which needs explanation on my part. And then your calling me by my name, too! I declare it went right through me, as a voice from the grave might."

"Put aside explanations," Iglesias replied indulgently. "You are not going to quarrel with me any more--let that suffice."

"No, I cannot quarrel with you any more. I am sure I don't know whether it is unprincipled or not, but I cannot do it."

Regardless of observation, he pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"If it is unprincipled I must just let it go," he said, quite recklessly. "I cannot help myself. I give you my word, Dominic, I have held out as long as I could."

This appeal to Iglesias, as against himself, appeared to him abundantly unaffected and ingenuous.

"I cannot but believe you will find the consequences of renewed intercourse with me less damaging than you suppose," he answered, smiling.

"That is what the wife says," the other man stated. "She has veered round completely in her opinion, has the wife. I do not understand why, except that Mrs. Porcher and Miss Hart and she seem to have fallen out. The workings of females' minds are very difficult to follow, even after years of marriage, you know, Dominic. Opposition to one of their own sex will make them warmly embrace opinions you supposed were just those which they most strongly condemned. She has taken a very high tone, for some time

past, about the Cedar Lodge ladies, has the wife. And when I came in, the evening of her last at-home day, I found her sadly upset at having heard from one of them that you were about to leave. She implied that I was to blame; whereas I can truthfully say my conduct throughout has been largely influenced by the fear of hurting her feelings." The speaker looked helplessly at Mr. Iglesias. "Of course we do not expect the same reticence in speech from females we require of ourselves. Still, such unfounded accusations are rather galling."

"I cannot be otherwise than very grateful to Mrs. Lovegrove for espousing my cause, you see," Iglesias replied. This confused and gentle being, struggling with the complexities of friendship, religious prejudice, and feminine methods and amenities, was wholly moving. "Circumstances have arisen which have made me decide to give up my rooms at Cedar Lodge. To-night is the last upon which I shall occupy them. But I do not wish Mrs. Lovegrove to be under any misapprehension regarding my hostess and her companion. I have nothing to complain of. During my long residence they have treated me with courtesy and consideration. I wish them nothing but good. Still the time has come, I feel, for leaving Cedar Lodge."

Here the worthy George's imagination indulged in wild flights. Visions of a hideous and rugged cell--of the sort known exclusively to serial melodrama--and of a beautiful woman, in voluminous rose-red skirts and a costly overcoat, presented themselves to him in amazing juxtaposition.

"Of course, I have forfeited all right to question you as to your plans, Dominic," he said hurriedly and humbly. "I quite realise that. I believed I was acting on principle in keeping away from you, all the more because it pained me terribly to do so. I believed I was being consistent. Now I begin to fear I was only obstinate and cowardly. Your kindness of manner has completely unmanned me. I see how superior you are in liberality to myself. And so it cuts me to the quick, more than ever, to part from you."

"Why should we part?" Iglesias asked.

"But you are going away. The wife told me she heard you were leaving London altogether; whether to--I hardly like to mention the supposition--to join some brotherhood or--or, to be married, she did not know."

Mr. Iglesias shook his head, smiling sweetly and bravely.

"Oh! no, no, my dear fellow," he answered. "Rumour must have been rather unpardonably busy with my name. I fear I am about equally ill-fitted for monastic and for married life. The day of splendid ventures, whether of religion or of love, is over for me; and I shall die, as I have lived, a bachelor and a layman. Nor shall I cease to be your neighbour, for I am only returning here"--he pointed to the open door, in at which coatless white-aproned men carried that miscellaneous collection of furniture--"to the little old Holland Street house. Lately I have had a great craving upon me to be at home again--alone, save for one or two precious friendships; with leisure to read and to think; and, in as far as my poor mental powers permit, to become a humble student of the awe-inspiring philosophy--reconciling things natural and supernatural--of which the Catholic Church is the exponent, her creeds its textbook, her ceremonies and ritual the divinely appointed symbols of its secret truths." Iglesias' expression was exalted, his speech penetrated by enthusiasm. "It would be profitable and happy," he said, "before the final auditing of accounts, to be a little better versed in this wonderful and living wisdom."

And George Lovegrove stood watching him, bewildered, agitated, full of doubt and inquiry.

"Ah! it is all beyond me, quite beyond me," he exclaimed presently. "Mistaken or not, I see you are in touch with thoughts altogether outside my experience and comprehension. I supposed Romanism could only be held by uneducated and superstitious persons. I see I was wrong. I ask your pardon, Dominic. I see I quite undervalued it." Then his manner changed, quick perception and consequent distress seizing him. "Ah! but you are ill. That is the meaning of it all. You are ill. Now I come to observe you, I see how thin and drawn your face is. How shall I ever forgive myself for not finding that out sooner! I have differed from you and blamed you. I have sulked, and thought bitterly of you, and avoided you. I have even been envious, hearing how successfully you carried through affairs this anxious time at the bank. I have been a contemptibly mean-spirited individual. No, I can never forgive myself. I have found you again, only to lose you. You are in bad health. You have been suffering, and I never thought to inquire about that. I never knew it."

But Dominic Iglesias made effort to comfort him, speaking not uncheerfully, determining even to fight the fatigue and weakness which, as he could not but own, daily increased on him, if only for the sake of this faithful and simple adherent.

"Perhaps the sands are running rather low," he said; "but that does not greatly matter. The conditions are in process of alteration. Now that I am free of my City work, the strain is practically over. With care and quiet, the sands that remain in the glass may run very slowly. I have a peaceful time in prospect, here in my old home. When I left here, eight years ago, I could not make up my mind to part with any of our family belongings, so I warehoused all the contents of the house, save those which I took to furnish my rooms at Cedar Lodge. Now these half-forgotten possessions see the light once more. This in itself should constitute a staying of the running sands, a putting back of the hands of the clock. Then I have two good servants to care for me. I am fortunate in that. And your friendship is restored to me. I should be ungrateful if I did not live on for a while to enjoy all this kindly circumstance. So do not grieve. There are many after-dinner pipes to be smoked, many talks to be talked yet.--Come into the house, and see it as you used to know it when we both were young. Surely it is a good omen that you, my earliest friend, should be my first visitor when I come home?"

CHAPTER XXXV

De Courcy Smyth was not drunk, but he had been drinking--persistently nipping, as his custom was in times of mental excitement, in the fallacious hope of keeping up courage and steadying irritable nerves. The series of moods usually resultant on such recourse to spirituous liquors, followed one another with clock-work regularity. He was alternately hysterically elated, preternaturally moral, offensively quarrelsome, maudlin to the point of tears. The first matinee of his long-promised play had prospered but very ill, notwithstanding large advertisement and free list. The second had prospered even worse. Mercifully disposed persons, slipping out between the acts, had been

careful not to return. Less amiably disposed ones had remained to titter or hiss. Failure had been written in capital letters across the whole performance--and deservedly, in the estimation of every one save the unhappy author himself. The play had perished in the very act of birth.

But of this tragic termination to so many extravagant hopes Dominic Iglesias was still ignorant, as he entered the dismantled sitting-room at Cedar Lodge that same night a little after half-past ten o'clock. He had dined in the old house in Holland Street; served by Frederick, the German-Swiss valet, who, some weeks previously, hearing of his intended departure, had announced his intention of "bettering himself," had given Mrs. Porcher warning, and, in moving terms and three languages, implored employment of Iglesias, declaring that the other gentlemen resident at Cedar Lodge were "no class," their clothes utterly unworthy of his powers of brushing and folding.

Iglesias stayed on in Holland Street until late, the charm and gentleness of old associations, the sight of familiar objects, the gladness of restored friendship with George Lovegrove working upon him to thankfulness. He was tranquil in spirit, serene with the calm twilight serenity of the strong who have learned the secret of detachment, and, who, while welcoming all glad and gracious occurrences, have schooled themselves to resignation, and, in the affairs of this world, do neither greatly fear nor greatly hope. And it was in this spirit he had made his way back to Cedar Lodge and entered the square panelled sitting-room. But, the door closed, he paused, aware of some sinister influence, some unknown yet repulsive presence. The room was nearly dark, the gas being lowered to a pin-point on either side the mantelpiece. Dominic moved across to turn it up, and in so doing stumbled over an unexpected obstacle. De Courcy Smith, who had been dozing uneasily in the one remaining armchair, sat upright with an oath.

"What are you at, you swine!" he shouted. Then as the light shone forth he made an effort to recover himself.

"It's hardly necessary to announce your advent by kicking me, Mr. Iglesias," he said thickly, and without attempting to rise from his seat. "Not but that there is an appropriateness in that graceful form of introduction. Only a kick from the benevolent patron, who professed himself so charitably disposed towards me, was required to make up the sum of outrage which has been my portion to-day.--Have you seen the theatrical items in the evening papers?" With trembling hands he spread out a newspaper upon his knees. "See the way that dirty reptile, Percy Gerrard, who succeeded me upon The Daily Bulletin, has chopped me and my play to mincemeat, cut bits of live flesh out of me and fried them in filth, and washed down my wounds with the vitriol of hypocritical compassion and good advice? That is the style of recognition a really first-class work of art, fit to rank with the classics, with Wycherley, and Congreve, and Sheridan, or Lytton--for there are qualities of all these very dissimilar masters in my writing--gets from the present-day press. As I have told you all along, the critics and playwrights hate me because they fear me. I have never spared them. I have exposed them and their ignorance, and want of scholarship, in print. They know I spoke the truth. Their hatred is witness to my veracity. They have been nursing their venom for years. Now with one consent they pour it forth. It is a vile plot and conspiracy. They were sworn to swamp me, so they formed a ring. They did not care what they spent so long as they succeeded in crushing me. Every one has been bought, miserably, scandalously bought. This is the only conceivable explanation of the reception my play has met

with. They got at the members of my company. My actors played better at first, better at rehearsal. Yesterday and to-day they have played like a row of wooden ninepins, of straw-stuffed scarecrows, of rot-stricken idiots! They missed their cues, and forgot their lines, or pretended to do so; and then had the infernal impertinence to giggle and gag, blast them! I heard them. I could have screamed. I tried to stop them; and the stage-manager swore at me in the wings, and the scene-shifters laughed. It was a hideous nightmare. The audience laughed--the sound of it is in my ears now, and it tortures me, for it was not natural laughter. It was not spontaneous--how could it be so? It was simply part of this iniquitous conspiracy to ruin me. It was hired mockery, bought and paid for, the mockery of subsidised traitors, liars, imbeciles, the inhuman mockery of grinning apes!"

He crushed the newspaper together with both hands, flung it across the room, and broke into hysterical weeping.

"For my play is a masterpiece," he wailed. "It is a work of genius. No other man living could have written it. Yet it is damned by a brainless public and vindictive press, while I know and they know--they must know, the fact is self-evident--that it is great, nothing less than great."

During this harangue Dominic Iglesias stood immovable, facing the speaker, but looking down, not at him, rigid in attitude, silent. Any attempt to stem the torrent of the wretched man's speech would have been futile. Dominic judged it kindest just to wait, letting passion tear him till, by force of its own violence, it had worn itself out. Then, but not till then, it might be helpful to intervene. Still the exhibition was a very painful one, putting a heavy strain upon the spectator. For be a fellow creature never so displeasing in nature and in habit, never so cankered by vanity and self-love, it cannot be otherwise than hideous to see him upon the rack. And that de Courcy Smyth was very actually upon the rack--a rack well deserved, may be, and of his own constructing, but which wrenched his every joint to the agony of dislocation nevertheless--there could be no manner of doubt. Coming as conclusion to the long day, to the peaceful evening--the thought of the Lady of the Windswept Dust, moreover, and her fortunes so eminently and presently just now in the balance, in his mind--the whole situation was horrible to Dominic Iglesias.

But Smyth's mood changed, his tears ceasing as incontinently as they had begun. He ceased to slouch and writhe, passed his hands across his blood-shot eyes, drew himself up in his chair, began to snarl, even to swagger.

"I forget myself, and forget you, too, Mr. Iglesias--which is annoying," he said; "for you are about the last person from whom I could expect, or should desire to receive, sympathy. Persons of my world, scholars and idealists, and persons of your world, money-grubbing materialists, can, in the nature of things, have very little in common. There is a great gulf fixed between them. I beg your pardon for having so far forgotten myself as to ignore that fact, and talked on subjects incomprehensible to you. What follows, however, will be more in your line, I imagine, and it is this which has made me come here to-night. You realise that your investment has turned out an unfortunate one? You have lost, irretrievably lost, your money."

"I was not wholly unprepared for that," Dominic answered. His temper was beginning to rise. Sodden with drink, maddened by failure, hardly accountable for his words or actions, still the man's tone was rather too

offensive for endurance. "I had made full provision for such a contingency. I accept the loss. Pray do not let it trouble you."

"Oh! you accept it, do you? You were prepared for it?" Smyth broke in. "You can afford to throw away a cool three hundred pounds--the expenses will amount to that at least in the bulk. How very agreeable for you! Your late operations in the City must have been surprisingly profitable. I was not aware, until now, that we had the honour of numbering a millionaire among us at Cedar Lodge. But let me tell you this extremely superior tone does not please me, Mr. Iglesias. It smells of insult. I warn you, you had better be a little careful. Even a miserable persecuted pauper like myself can make it unpleasant for those who insult him. I must request you to remember that I am a gentleman by birth, and that I have the feelings of my class where my personal honour is concerned. Do you suppose I do not know perfectly well that the benevolent attitude you have seen fit to assume towards me has been a blind, from first to last; and that every penny you have advanced me until now, as well as the three hundred pounds, the loss of which you so amiably beg me not to let trouble me, is hush-money? Yes, hush-money, I repeat, the price of my silence regarding your intrigue with my wife--my wife who calls herself--"

"We will introduce no woman's name into this conversation, if you please," Iglesias interrupted sternly.

The limit of things pardonable had been passed. His face was white and keen as a sword. The weight of years and of failing health had vanished, burned up by fierce disgust and anger, as is mist by the sun-heat. He was young, arrogant in bearing, careless of consequence or of danger as some fifteenth-century finely bred fighting man face to face with his enemy and traducer, who, given honourable opportunity, he would kill or be killed by, without faintest scruple or remorse. And of this temper of mind his aspect was so eloquent that de Courcy Smyth, muddled with liquor though he was, seeing him, was seized with panic. He scrambled to his feet, flung himself behind the chair, clinging to the back of it for support.

"Don't look at me like that, you Spanish devil!" he whimpered. "You paralyse me. You hypnotise me. My brain is splitting. You're drawing the life out of me. I shall go mad. If you come a step nearer I'll make a scandal. I'll call for help. Ah! God in heaven, who's that?"

Only the housemaid entering, salver in hand, and leaving the door wide open behind her. Upon the landing with out, Farge and Worthington, in comic attitudes, stood at attention.

"A telegram for you, sir. Is the boy to wait?" she inquired, in a stifled voice. "She could hardly keep a straight face," as she reported downstairs subsequently, "that ridiculous Farge was so full of his jokes."

Iglesias tore open the yellow envelope and held the telegraph-form to the light.

"Glorious luck. Happy as a queen. Come to supper after performance to-morrow. Love. Poppy,"

His face softened.

"No answer," he said, and turned purposing to speak some word of mercy to wretched de Courcy Smyth. But the latter had slunk out at the open door, while Mr. Farge, in an ungovernable paroxysm of humour--levelled at the

departing housemaid--effectually covered his retreat by cake-walking, with very high knee action, the length of the landing, playing appropriate dance-music, the while, upon an imaginary banjo in the shape of Worthington's new crook-handled walking stick.

For some time Dominic Iglesias heard shuffling, nerveless footsteps moving to and fro in the room overhead. Then Smyth threw himself heavily upon his bed. The wire-wove mattress creaked, and creaked again twice. Unbroken silence followed, and Iglesias breathed more easily, hoping the miserable being slept. For him, Iglesias, there was no sleep. His body was too tired. His mind too vividly and painfully awake. He lay down, it is true, since he did not care to remain in the dismantled sitting-room or occupy the chair in which de Courcy Smyth had sat. But, throughout the night, he stared at the darkness and heard the hours strike. At sunset the wind had dropped dead. In the small hours it began to rise, and before dawn to freshen, veering to another quarter. Softly at first, and then with richer diapason, the cedar tree greeted its mysterious comrade, singing of far-distant times and places, and of the permanence of nature as against the fitful evanescent life of man. That husky singing soothed Dominic Iglesias, and calmed him, assuring him that in the hands of the Almighty are all things, small and great, past, present, and to come. There is neither haste, nor omission, nor accident, nor oversight in the divine plan; but that plan is large beyond the possibility of human intellect to grasp or comprehend, therefore humble faith is also highest wisdom.

As the dawn quickened into day Dominic drew aside the curtain and looked out. Behind the dark branches, where they cleared the housetops and met the open sky, thrown wide upward to the zenith, was the rose-scarlet of sunrise, holding, as it seemed to him, at once the splendour of battle and the peace of crowned achievement and--was it but a pretty conceit or a truth of happiest import?--the colour of certain flaring omnibus knifeboard bills and the colour of a certain woman's name.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The narrow lane, running back at right angles to the great thoroughfare, was filled with blurred yellowish light and covered in with gloom, low-hanging and impenetrable. The high, blank buildings on either side of it looked like the perpendicular walls of a tunnel, the black roof they apparently supported being as solid and substantial as themselves. The effect thereby produced was suspect and prison-like, as of a space walled in and closed from open air and day. Outside the stage entrance of the Twentieth Century Theatre a small crowd had collected and formed up in two parallel lines across the pavement to the curb, against which a smart single brougham and some half a dozen four-wheelers and hansom were drawn up. The crowd, which gathered and broke only to gather again, was composed for the main part of persons of the better artisan class, respectable, soberly habited, evidently awaiting the advent of relations employed within the theatre. There was also a sprinkling of showy young women, attended by undersized youths flashily dressed. On the fringes of it night-birds, male and female, of evil aspect, loitered, watchful of possible prey; while two or three gentlemen, correct, highly-civilised, stood smoking, each with the air of studied indifference which defies attempted recognition on the part of friend or foe.

And among these last Dominic Iglesias must be counted; though, in his case, indifference was not assumed but real. His surroundings were novel, it is true, and produced on him clear impressions both pictorial and moral; but those impressions were of his surroundings in and for themselves, rather than in any doubtfulness of their relation to himself. For his mind was occupied with problems painful in character and difficult of solution; and to the said problems, heightening the emotional strain of them, his surroundings--the sense of feverish life, of all-encompassing restless humanity; the figures anxious, degraded, of questionable purpose or merely frivolous, which started into momentary distinctness; the scraps of conversation, caught in passing, instinct with suggestion, squalid or passionate; along with the ceaseless tramp of footsteps, and tumult of the great thoroughfare just now packed with the turn-out of neighbouring places of entertainment--supplied a background penetratingly appropriate.

For a good half-hour Mr. Iglesias stood there. At intervals the doors of the stage entrance swung open, causing a movement of interest and comment among the crowd. One by one hansoms and four-wheelers, obtaining fares, rattled away over the stones. Yet the Lady of the Windswept Dust tarried. It grew late, and Iglesias greatly desired her coming, greatly desired to speak with her, and speaking to find approximate solution, at least, of some of the problems which lay so heavy upon his mind. Meanwhile, the crowd melted and vanished, leaving him alone in the blurred yellowish light beneath the low-hanging roof of impenetrable gloom, save for the haunting presence of some few of those terrible human birds of prey.

He was about to turn away also, not particularly relishing the remaining company, when, with a rush, Poppy was beside him, in stately garments of black velvet and glimmering tissue of silver; her head and shoulders draped with something of daring and magnificence, in her blue-purple jewelled dragon-embroidered scarf. She caught Iglesias' right hand in both of hers and held it a moment against her breast. And during that brief interval he registered the fact that, notwithstanding her beauty, the force of her personality and richness of her dress, she did not look out of place in this somewhat cut-throat alley, with the questionable sights and sounds of midnight London all about her; but vivid, exultant, true daughter of great cities, fearless manipulator of the very varied opportunities they offer, past-master, for joy and sorrow, in the curious arts they teach.

"Get into the brougham, dear man," she said, "and let me talk. There, put up the window on the traffic side. I have been in the liveliest worry about you. Had the house turned out of windows to find you--and gave things in general the deuce of a time.--The brougham's comfortable, isn't it? Fallowfeild's jobbed it for the winter for me.--All the same I played like an angel, out of pure desperation, thinking you might be ill. I made the audience cry big, big tears, bless 'em. And it wasn't the part--not a bit of it. It was you, just simply you.--And then I dawdled talking to Antony Hammond about some lines in the second act I want altered, so as to let myself down easy before digesting the disappointment of driving back to Bletchworth Mansions alone. I wanted so very badly to have you see me. Beloved and most faithless of beings, why the mischief didn't you come?"

And Iglesias sitting beside her watching her joyous face, crowned by her dark hair, set in the gleaming folds of her jewelled scarf, as passing lights revealed it clearly, or shifting left it in soft shadow, divined rather than actually seen, became sadly conscious that the problems which oppressed him were not only hard of solution but hard of statement likewise. It seemed heartless to propound them in this, her hour of

success. Yet, unless he was deeply mistaken, the statement of them must tell for emancipation and relief in the end.

"The play has gone well, and you are happy?" he asked her.

"Gorgeously--I grant you I was a bit nervous as to whether during these years of--well--love in idleness, I had not lost touch with my art. But I haven't. I have only matured in mind and in method. I am not conceited, dear man, truly I am not; but I am neither too lazy nor too modest to use my brains. What I know I am not afraid to apply. I've very little theory, but a precious deal of practice--and that's the way to get on. Don't talk about your ideas--just use them for all you're worth.--But this is beside the mark. You're trying to head me off. Why didn't you come?"

"I would gladly have come," Iglesias answered. "My disappointment has been quite as great as yours."

"Bless your heart!" Poppy murmured under her breath.

"But it was impossible for me to come. I was detained until it was too late." He paused, uncertain how best to say that which had to be said.

"Oh! fiddle!" Poppy cried, with a lift of her head. "I stand first. You ought not to have let yourself be detained. After all, it's not every day someone you know blazes from a farthing dip into a star of the first magnitude. You might very well have crowded other things aside. I feel a trifle hurt, dear man, really I do."

"Believe me, no ordinary matter would have prevented my coming," Iglesias answered. To his relief the carriage just then turned into the comparative peace of Langham Place. It became possible to speak softly. "There was a death in the house last night," he went on, "that of a person with whom I have been rather closely associated. He died under circumstances demanding investigations of a distressing character. No one save myself was qualified, or perhaps willing, to assume the responsibility of calling in the authorities."

Iglesias glanced at his companion, conscious that while he spoke her attitude and humour had altered considerably. She was motionless. He saw her profile, dark against the square light of window-glass. Her mouth was slightly open, as with intensity of attention.

"Well--well--what then?" she said.

"The man had just suffered a heavy reverse. He had staked all his hopes, all his future, upon a single venture. It proved a failure. He could not accept the fact, and believed himself the victim of gross injustice and of organised conspiracy."

"Do you believe it, too?"

"No," Iglesias answered. "I have an immense pity for him, as who would not. Still, I am compelled to believe that failure came from within, rather than from without. He overrated his own powers."

Poppy held up her hand imperiously. "Wait half a minute," she said, in an oddly harsh voice. Leaning forward she put down the front glass and called to the coachman:--"Don't go to Bletchworth Mansions. Drive on. Never mind where, so long as you keep to empty streets. Drive on and on--do you

hear?--till I tell you to stop."

She put the window up again and settled herself back in her place, dragging the scarf from off her head and baring her throat. She looked full at Mr. Iglesias, her face showing ghostly white against the dark upholstery of the carriage. Her eyes were wide with question and with fear, which was also, in some strange way, hope.

"Now you can speak, dear friend," she said quite steadily. "I shall be glad to hear the whole of it, though it is an ugly story. The man was miserable, and he is dead, and the circumstances of his death point to--what--suicide?"

In reply Iglesias told her how that morning, the servants failing to get any response to their knocking, the upper part of the house being, moreover, pervaded by a sickening smell of gas, help had been called in; and, de Courcy Smyth's door being forced open, he had been found lying, fully clothed, stark and cold upon his bed, an empty phial of morphia and an empty glass on the table beside him, both gas-jets turned full on though not alight.

At the top of Portland Place the coachman took his way northwestward, first skirting the outer ring of Regent's Park and then making the gradually ascending slope of the Finchley Road. The detached houses on either side, standing back in their walled gardens, were mostly blind. Only here and there, behind drawn curtains, a window glowed, telling of intimate drama gallant or mournful within. The wide grey pavements were deserted; the place arrestingly quiet, save for the occasional heavy tread of a passing policeman on beat, and the rhythmical trot of the horse. And the Lady of the Windswept Dust was quiet likewise, looking straight before her, sitting stiffly upright, her hands clasped in her lap, the shifting lights and shadows playing queerly over her face and her bare neck, causing her to appear unsubstantial and indefinite as a figure in a dream. Yet a strange energy possessed her and emanated from her, so that the atmosphere about her was electric, oppressive to Iglesias as with a brooding of storm. Her very quietness was agitating, weighed with meaning which challenged his imagination and even his powers of reticence and self-control. Opposite Swiss Cottage Station, where the main road forks, a string of market waggons--slouching, drowsy car-men, backed by a pale green wall of glistening cabbages, nodding above their slow-moving teams--passed, with a jingle of brass-mounted harness and grind of wheels. This roused Poppy, and the storm broke.

"Dominic," she said breathlessly, "do you at all know that you've just told me means to me?"

"I have never known positively until now; but it was impossible that I should not have entertained suspicions."

"Did he--you know who I mean--ever speak of me?"

"I think," Iglesias said, "he came very near doing so, more than once. But I put a stop to the conversation."

"You frightened him," Poppy rejoined. "I know one could do that. It was a last resource, a hateful one. Is there anything so difficult to forgive as being driven to be cruel? One was bound to be cruel in self-defence, or one would have been stifled, utterly degraded by self-contempt, bled to death not only in respect of money but of self-esteem."

She threw up her hands with a gesture at once fierce and despairing.

"Oh! the weak, the weak," she cried, "of how many crimes they are the authors! Crimes more particularly abominable when the weak one is the man, and woman--poor brute--is strong."

She settled herself sideways in the corner of the carriage, turning her face once more full upon her companion.

"Look here," she said, "I don't want to whitewash myself. What I've done I've done. I don't pretend it's pretty or innocent, or that I haven't jolly well got to pay the price of it--though I think a good deal has been paid by now. But it seems to me my real crime was in marrying him, rather than in leaving him. It was a crime against love--love, which alone, if you've any real sense of the inherent decencies of things, makes marriage otherwise than an outrage upon a woman's pride and her virtue. But, then, one doesn't know all that when one's barely out of one's teens. And, you see, like a fool I took the first comer out of bravado, just that people mightn't see how awfully hard hit I was by his people interfering and preventing my marrying the poor, dear boy who gave me this"--Poppy spread out the end of her dragon scarf--"I've told you about him.--Stage people are absurdly simple in some ways, you know. They live in such a world of pretences and fictions that they lose their sense of fact, or rather they never develop it. They're awfully easily taken in. Words go a tremendous long way with them. And de Courcy could talk. He was appallingly fluent, specially on the subject of himself. He made me believe he was rather wonderful, and I wanted to believe he was wonderful. I wanted to believe he was all the geniuses in creation rolled into one. All the more I wanted to believe it because I wasn't one scrap in love with him."

Poppy beat with one hand almost roughly on Mr. Iglesias' arm.

"Do you see, do you see, do you see?" she repeated. "Do you understand? I want you so badly to understand."

And he answered her gently and gravely: "Do not be afraid, dear friend. I see with your eyes. I feel with your heart. As far as one human being can enter into and share the experience of another, I do understand."

"But the nuisance is," she went on, the corners of her mouth taking a wicked twist, "you know so very much more about a man after you've married him. Other people are inclined to forget that sometimes. Consuming egoism is hideous at close quarters. It comes out in a thousand ways, in mean little tyrannies and absurd jealousies which would never have entered into one's head.--I don't want to go into all that. It's better forgot.--Only they piled up and up, till the shadow of them shut out the sunshine; and I got so bored, so madly and intolerably bored. You see, I had tried to believe in him at first. In self-defence I had done so, and stood by him, and done my very best to put him through. But when I began to understand that there was nothing to stand by or put through, that his talent was not talent at all, but merely a vain man's longing to possess talent--well, the situation became pretty bad. I tried to be civil. I tried to hold my tongue, indeed I did. But to be bullied and grumbled at, and expected to work, so as to give him leisure and means for the development of gifts which didn't exist--it wasn't good enough."

Poppy put up her hands and pushed the masses of her hair from her forehead. And all the while the shifting lights and shadows played over

her white face and bare neck, and the horse trotted on, past closed shops and curtained windows, farther out of London and into the night.

"He didn't do anything which the world calls vicious," she continued presently. A great dreariness had come into the tones of her voice. "He was faithful to me, as the world counts faithfulness, simply because he didn't care for women--except for philandering with sentimental sillies who thought him an unappreciated eighth wonder of the world, and pawed over and pitied him. La! La! The mere thought of it makes me sick! But he was too much in love with himself to be capable of even an animal passion for anybody else. And he made a great point of his virtue. I heard a lot about it--oh! a lot!"

For a minute or two Poppy sat silent. Then she turned to Mr. Iglesias, smiling, as those smile who refuse submission to some cruel pain.

"I wasn't born bad, dear man," she said, "and I held out longer than most women in my profession would, where morals are easy and it's lightly come and lightly go in respect of lovers and love. But one fine day I packed up my traps and cleared out. He'd been whining for years, and some little thing he said or did--I really forget exactly what--raised Cain in me, and I thought I'd jolly well give him something to whine about. I knew perfectly well he wouldn't divorce me. He wanted me too much, at the end of a string, to torment, and to get money from when times were bad. Not that I cared for a divorce. I consider it the clumsiest invention out for setting wrongs right. I have too great a respect for marriage, which ought, if it means anything, to mean motherhood and children, and a clean, wholesome start in life for the second generation. When a woman breaks away and crosses the lines, she only makes bad worse, in my opinion, by the hypocritical respectability of a marriage while her husband is still alive. Let's be honest sinners any way, if sin we must."

Again she paused, looking backward in thought, seeing and hearing things which, for the honour of others, it was kindest not to repeat. The carriage moved slowly, the horse slackening its pace in climbing the last steep piece of hill which leads to the pond on Hampstead Heath.

"And now it's over," Poppy said, letting her hands drop in her lap. "Done with. The poor wretched thing's dead--has killed himself. That is a fitting conclusion. He was always his own worst enemy.--Well, as far as I am concerned, let him rest in peace."

"Amen," Iglesias responded, "so let him rest. 'Shall not the judge of all the world do right,' counting his merits as well as his demerits, making all just excuses for his lapses and wrong-doings; knowing, as we can never know, exactly how far he was and was not accountable for his own and for others' sins. And now, dear friend, as you have said, this long misery is over and done with. Whatever remains of practical business you can leave safely to me. His memory shall be shielded as far as foresight and sympathy can shield it, and your name need not appear."

The Lady of the Windswept Dust took his hand and held it.

"I don't know," she said brokenly, "why all this should all come upon you."

"For a very simple reason," he answered. "What did you tell me yourself? You stand first. And that is true."

But it may be remarked in passing that there are limits to the passive obedience of even the best-trained of men-servants. Those of Poppy's coachman had been reached. At the top of the hill he drew up, vigorously determined to drive no farther into the wilderness, without renewed and very distinct information as to why and where he went, perceiving which Dominic Iglesias opened the carriage door and stepped out.

"The night is fine and dry," he said. "Let us walk a little, and then let us drive home. You have your work to-morrow--or, rather, to-day--and you must have a reasonable amount of rest first. The stream of your life has been arrested, diverted from its natural channel; but it still runs strong and clear yet. You have genius, real, not imagined, so you must husband your energies.--Come and walk. Let the air soothe and calm you; and then, leaving all the past in Almighty God's safe keeping, go home and rest."

Here the high-road stretches along the ridge of the hill, a giant causeway, the broken land of the open heath falling away sharply to left and right. It was windless. The sky was covered, and the atmosphere, though not foggy at this height, was thick as with smoke; so that the road, with its long avenue of sparse-set lamps--dwindling in the extreme distance to faintest sparks--was as a pale bridge thrown across the void of black unsounded space. All, save the road itself, the lamps, and seats, and broken fringe of grass edging the raised footpath of it, was formless and vague, peopled by shapes, dark against darkness, such as the eye itself fearfully produces in straining to penetrate unyielding obscurity. The effect was one of intense isolation, of divorce from humanity and the works and ways of it, so present and overpowering it might well seem that, reaching the far end of that pale bridge, the wayfarer would part company with the things of time altogether and pass into another state of being.

And this so worked upon Poppy that, some fifty yards along the causeway, her black and silver skirts gathered ankle-high about her, she stopped, drawing very close to Iglesias and laying her hand upon his arm.

"Listen to the silence," she said. "Look at the emptiness. I don't quite like it, even with you. It's too suggestive of death, death with no sure hope of life beyond it.--I am quite good now, quite sane and reasonable. I have put aside all bitterness. I'll never say another hard word of him, or, in as far as I can, think a hard thought."

Then turning, suddenly she gave a cry, perceiving that east and south all London lay below them--formless, too, indefinite, enormous, a City of the Plains, unseen in detail but indicated through the gloom as a vast semi-circle of smouldering fire.

Poppy stretched out both arms, letting her splendid draperies trail in the dust.

"Ah! how I love it, how I love it," she cried. "Let us go back, dear man. For it belongs to me and I belong to it. In the name of my art I must try conclusions with it. I must play to it, and conquer it, and enchant, and possess it, since I am free at last--I am free."

Serena's manner, though gracious, was lofty, almost regal. She had, indeed, lately looked upon crowned heads, and the glory of them seemed, somehow, to have rubbed off on her.

"Yes," she said, "I came up for the Queen's funeral. Lady Samuelson felt it was a thing I ought not to miss, and I agreed with her. It was inconvenient to leave home, because I had a number of engagements. Still, I felt I might regret it afterwards if I did not see it. And then, of course, Lady Samuelson was so kind the year before last, when I had so very much to worry me, that I feel I owe it to her to stay with her whenever she asks me to do so. Where did you see the procession from, Rhoda?"

"Well, on the whole I thought it better to remain at home," Mrs. Lovegrove confessed, "though Georgie was most pressing I should go with him. You are slender, Serena, and that makes a great deal of difference in going about. But I find crowds and excitement very trying. And then it must all have been very affecting and solemn. I doubted if I could witness it without giving way too much and troubling others. It is mortifying to feel you are spoiling the pleasure of those that are with you, and I wanted poor Georgie to enjoy himself as much as he could."

"In that case it was certainly better to remain at home," Serena rejoined. "I have my feelings very much under control. Even when I was quite a child that used to be said of me. It used to irritate Susan."

"Susan has a more impetuous nature," Mrs. Lovegrove observed. The day of domestic eclipse was happily passed. She had come into her own again; consequently she was disposed to be slightly argumentative, sitting here upon her own Chesterfield sofa in her own drawing-room, even with Serena.

"I wonder if she has--I mean I wonder whether Susan really has a more impetuous nature," the latter rejoined, "or whether she is only more wanting in self-control. I often think people get credit for strong feelings, when it is only that they make no effort to control themselves. And that is unfair. I never have been able to see why it was considered so creditable to have strong feelings. They usually give a lot of inconvenience to other people. I am not sure that it is not self-indulgent to have strong feelings.--We had excellent places just opposite the Marble Arch. Of course Lady Samuelson has a great deal of interest; and we saw everything. In some ways I think, as a sight, the procession was overrated. But I am glad I went. You can never tell whether anything is worth seeing or not until you have seen it; and so I certainly might have regretted if I had not gone. Still, I think you were quite wise in not going, Rhoda, if you were likely to be upset; and then, as you say, it must be unpleasant getting about if one is very stout. Of course, I cannot really enter into that. I take after mamma's family. They are always slender. But the Lovegroves often grow stout. George, of course, has, and I should not be surprised if Susan did when she is older. But then Susan and I are entirely different in almost everything."

"I suppose you have heard of our dear vicar being appointed to the new bishopric of Slowby, Serena," Mrs. Lovegrove remarked. The amplitude, or non-amplitude, of the family figure was beginning to get upon her nerves.

"Oh! dear, yes, of course I have," Serena answered with raised eyebrows and a condescending expression of countenance. "Not that it will make very much difference to me, I suppose. I am so little at home now. But naturally people, hearing we knew the Nevingtons, came to us for

information about them. I don't think anybody had ever heard of Dr. Nevington at Slowby, and so they were very glad to learn anything we could tell them. Of course it is a very great rise for Dr. Nevington, though he will only be a suffragan bishop. Still, he must be very much flattered, after merely having a parish of this kind. Susan is very pleased at the appointment. She wrote to Dr. Nevington immediately and has had a number of letters from him. I was quite willing she should write, but she told him how popular his appointment was in Midlandshire. And I thought that was going rather far, because Susan has no real means of knowing whether it is popular or not. She could only know that she thought she liked it herself, and had praised him among her friends. And I wonder whether she is right--I mean I wonder whether she really will like it. Of course Susan has been very prominent and has had everything her own way with most of the clergymen's wives in Slowby. I think that has been rather bad for Susan and given her an undue idea of her own importance. Now naturally Mrs. Nevington will be the head of everything and the clergymen's wives will go for advice to her. I do not see how Susan can help disliking that. And then Mrs. Nevington is said to be a very good public speaker. I am perfectly certain Susan will dislike that. For I always observe that people who speak a great deal themselves, like Susan, never get on well with other good speakers."--She moved a little, throwing back the fronts of her black beaded jacket--her complimentary mourning was scrupulously correct--and adjusting the black silk tie at her throat. "Of course I may be mistaken," she added, "but if you ask me, Rhoda, I fancy you will find that Susan and Mrs. Nevington will not remain friends for very long."

"I am distressed to hear you express such an opinion, Serena," Mrs. Lovegrove returned. The tone of mingled patronage and possession in which her guest spoke of her own two particular sacred totems, vicar and vicaress, incensed her highly. She wished she had not introduced the subject of the Slowby bishopric.--"When the object in view is a truly good one," she added, with some severity, "I should suppose all right-meaning people would strive to sink petty rivalries and cooperate. I should quite believe it would prove so in Susan's case."

"Of course she would not give Mrs. Nevington's speaking well as her reason, if they did not remain on friendly terms," Serena returned negligently. "But then people so very seldom give their real reasons for what they do, Rhoda. Surely you must have observed that. I think they are generally very willing to deceive themselves a good deal."

"I am afraid it is so with too many, Serena, and with some who would be the last to own it when applied to themselves."--Then the wife determined by a piece of daring strategy to carry the war into the enemy's country.--"And that reminds me," she said. "I suppose you have heard that Mr. Iglesias has left Trimmer's Green?"

"I do not the least know what right you have to suppose anything of the kind, Rhoda," the lady addressed replied with a haste and asperity far from regal. "You must have very odd ideas of the people I meet, either at Lady Samuelson's or at Slowby, if you imagine I am likely to hear anything about Mr. Iglesias from them. If I had not met him here, of course, I should never have heard of him at all; and if I had never heard of him I should have been spared a great deal. Still, after all that has occurred, I can quite see that Mr. Iglesias might find it better to leave Trimmer's Green."

"Miss Eliza Hart, if you please, ma'am," this from the house-parlourmaid.

In accordance with established precedent, Serena should have risen from the place of honour, upon the sofa, making room for the newcomer. But she defied precedent. Acknowledging the said newcomer with the stiffest of bows, she sat tight. Her hostess, however, proved equal to the occasion.

"Dear me, Miss Hart," she began, "I am sure you are quite the stranger. Take that chair, will you not? And how is Mrs. Porcher? The numbers, I trust, filling up again at Cedar Lodge? Mr. Lovegrove and myself did truly sympathise in Mrs. Porcher's trouble in the autumn. Such a terrible occurrence to have in your house! Of course very damaging, for a time, to all prospects. And I shall always believe it was the great exertions he made then that broke down poor Mr. Iglesias' health.--Yes, indeed, Miss Hart, I regret to say he does remain very ailing. Mr. Lovegrove sees him almost daily. He has run round to Holland Street now, has Georgie; but I expect him back any minute.--We were just speaking of Mr. Iglesias--were we not, Serena?--and I was about to tell Miss Lovegrove what a sweet pretty house he has. You have seen it often no doubt, Miss Hart."

But here Serena arose, with much dignity, and retired in the direction of the window.

"Pray do not think about me, Rhoda," she said over her shoulder, "or let me interrupt your and your friend's conversation. I am going to see if the carriage is here. Lady Samuelson said she might be able to send it for me. She could not be sure, but she might. And I told her I would be on the watch, as she objects to the horses being kept standing in this weather. But pray do not think about me. Until it comes I can quite well amuse myself."

Holding aside the lace curtain she looked out. Upon the rawly green grass remnants of discoloured snow lay in unsightly patches, while the bare branches of the plane-trees and balsam-poplars shuddered in the harsh blast. The prospect was far from alluring, and Serena surveyed it with a wrathful eye.

"Really, Rhoda's behaviour to me is most extraordinary," she said to herself. "I had to mark my displeasure. For poor George's sake she ought not to be allowed to go too far. She has grown so very self-assertive. Last year her manner was much better. I suppose she and George have made it up again. People who are not really ladies, like Rhoda, are always so very much nicer when they are depressed. I wonder what has happened to make George make it up with her!"

And then she fell very furiously to listening.

"We did talk it over, did Peachie Porcher and myself," the great Eliza was saying, "for I do not deny, at the time of our trouble, a certain gentleman came out very well. He may have had his reasons, but I will not go into that, Mrs. Lovegrove. I am all for giving everybody his due. But Peachie felt when he left it would be better the connection should cease as far as visiting went. 'Should Mr. Iglesias call here, dear Liz,' she said to me, 'I should not refuse to see him. But, after what has passed and situated as I am, I cannot be too careful. And calling on a bachelor living privately, with whom your name has been at all associated, must invite comment. Throughout all,' she said, 'my conscience tells me I have done my duty, and in that I must find my reward.' Very affecting, was it not?"

"Yes," the other lady admitted, candour and natural goodness of heart getting the better alike of resentment and diplomacy. "I always have maintained there were many sterling qualities in Mrs. Porcher."

"So there are, the sweet pet!" Eliza responded warmly. "And I sometimes question, Mrs. Lovegrove, whether a certain gentleman, now that he has cut himself adrift from her, may not be beginning to find that out and wish he had been less stand-offish and stony. Not that it would be any use now. For, if he did not appreciate Peachie Porcher, there are other and younger gentlemen, not a thousand miles from here, who do. I am not at liberty to speak more plainly at present, as the poor young fellow is very shy about his secret. A long attachment, and some might think it rather derogatory to Peachie's position to entertain it. But straws tell which way the wind blows; and a little bird seems to twitter to me, Mrs. Lovegrove, that if Charlie Farge did come to the point--why--"

Miss Hart shook her leonine mane and laid her finger on her lip in an arch and playful manner. But before her hostess could rally sufficiently from the stupor into which this announcement plunged her to make suitable rejoinder, a fine booming clerical voice and large clerical presence invaded the room.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Lovegrove? I come unannounced but not unsanctioned. I met with your good husband in the street just now, and he encouraged me to look in on you. Good-day to you, Miss Hart. All is well, I trust, with our excellent friend Mrs. Porcher.--Ah! and here is Miss Serena Lovegrove.--An unexpected piece of good fortune."

Promptly Serena had emerged from her self-imposed exile; and it was with an air of assured proprietorship that she greeted the clergyman.

"Mrs. Nevington heard from your kind sister only this morning," he continued. "Full of active helpfulness as usual, Mrs. Lovegrove.--She proposes that we should quarter ourselves upon you and her for a few days, Miss Serena, while we are seeking a temporary residence. She kindly gives us the names of several houses which she considers worth inspection."

Here by an adroit flank movement, rapidly executed, Serena managed to possess herself once again of the seat of honour upon the sofa, thereby interposing a thin but impenetrable barrier between her hostess and the latter's own particular fetish, the bishop-designate.

"You have enough room? I do not crowd you, Rhoda?" she remarked parenthetically. Then turning sideways, so as to present an expanse of neatly clad back and shoulder to her outraged relative, she continued:--"I wonder which, Dr. Nevington--I mean I wonder which houses Susan has recommended. Of course there is the Priory. But nobody has lived in it for ages and ages. It is in a very low neighbourhood, close to the canal and brickfields on the Tullingworth Road. I should think it was dreadfully damp and unwholesome. And there is old Mrs. Waghorn's in Abney Park. That is well situated and the grounds are rather nice. But the reception-rooms are poor, I always think. Susan was fond of Mrs. Waghorn. I cannot say I ever cared for her myself; but there is a tower to it, of course."

"Ah! we hardly need towers yet, Miss Lovegrove. A 'suffering bishop'--you recall the well-worn joke?--such as myself, must not aspire to anything approaching castles or palaces, but be content with a very modest place of residence."

Here his unhappy hostess, sitting quite perilously near the edge of the sofa, craned round the interposing barrier.

"But that is only a matter of time, Dr. Nevington," she said, "surely. There is but one voice all round the Green, and through the parish generally, that this is but the first step for you; and that it will lead on--though I am far from wishing to hasten the death of the present archbishop--to the primacy."

"Hardly that, hardly that," he rejoined with becoming modesty. Yet the speech was not unpalatable to him. "Out of the mouth of babes," he said to himself, leaning back in his chair, and eyeing--in imagination--the chaste outline of an episcopal apron and well-cut black gaiter, while visions of Lambeth and Canterbury floated enticingly before him.--"Hardly that. This is little more than an embryo bishopric. Still, though it is a wrench to leave my dear old congregation, here in this wonderful London of ours, I cannot refuse the call to a wider sphere of usefulness. My views as a churchman are well known. I have never, even though it might have been professionally advantageous to me to do so, attempted any concealment."

"No, truly," Rhoda put in, still balancing and craning. "Everyone, I am sure, must bear witness you have always been most nobly outspoken."

"I trust so," he returned. "I have never disguised the fact that I take my stand upon the Reformation Settlement. Therefore I cannot but think it a most hopeful sign of the times that I should receive this call to the episcopate.--Ah, here is Lovegrove. You find us deep in matters ecclesiastical. I only hope I am not taxing your ladies' patience too heavily by talking on such serious subjects.--In Slowby itself that grand old stalwart, the late Dr. Colthurst--a positively Cromwellian figure--has left a sound Protestant tradition. But I hear--your good sister confirms the rumour, Miss Serena--that there is a strong ritualistic party at Tullingworth. I shall deal very roundly with persons of that persuasion. My conviction is that we must suit our teaching to the progressive spirit of this modern world of ours. Personally I am willing, if necessary, to sacrifice very much so-called dogma to conciliate our worthy Nonconformist brethren; while I shall lose no opportunity of cutting at the roots of those Romanising tendencies which are so lamentably and insidiously active in the very heart of our dear old National Church."

While the great drum-like voice was thus rolling and booming, George Lovegrove had shaken hands with Serena. But there was none of the accustomed respectful enthusiasm in his greeting. He wore a preoccupied and dejected air. For once he looked upon that pearl of spinsterhood with a lack-lustre and indifferent eye.

"I wonder what can have happened to George," the lady in question said to herself, in high displeasure. "I think his manner is really very odd--nearly as odd as Rhoda's. I wish I had not come. But then if I had not come I should have had no opportunity of showing Rhoda what intimate terms Susan and I are upon with the Nevingtons. And I think it is right she should know.--Oh! that detestable Miss Hart is going. What a dreadfully vulgar purple blouse she has on! And her hair is so unpleasant. It always looks damp and shows the marks of the comb. I wonder why hair of that particular colour always does look damp." Here she bowed stiffly without rising.--"I shall simply ignore George, and not speak to him. I think that will be sufficiently marked. But I shall stay as long as Dr. Nevington does--I don't for one moment believe Miranda Samuelson really

intended to send the carriage--so I will just wait and go when he goes. I think I owe it to myself to show George and Rhoda that they cannot drive me away against my will, however much they may wish to do so."

Having come to which amiable decision Serena turned her mind and conversation to questions of house-hunting in Slowby. The subject, however, began to pall, before long, upon her companion. Dr. Nevington changed his position more than once. His replies became vague and perfunctory, while his attention evidently strayed to the conversation taking place at the other end of the sofa.

"I fear you did not find Mr. Iglesias very bright then to-day?" the wife was inquiring in her kindest tones.

George Lovegrove shook his head sadly. "No, my dear, I am sorry to say not. I have been rather broken up. I will tell you all later."

The clergyman had risen.

"Iglesias?--ah yes," he said. "I remember meeting a person of that name here once, eh, Lovegrove? One of our parochial oversights, unfortunately. He proved to be a dweller. His appearance pleased me and I proposed to call on him; and then in the press of my many duties the matter was forgotten."

Serena had risen likewise. A spot of colour burned on either of her cheeks. Her eyes snapped. She carried her small head high. Her presence asserted itself quite forcibly. Her skirts rustled. At that moment she was young and very passably pretty--an elegant spirited Serena of eighteen, rather than a faded and, alas! spiteful Serena of close upon fifty.

"Oh! really, I think it was just as well you did not call, Dr. Nevington," she cried. "I do not think it would have been in the least suitable. Of course I may be wrong, but I do not think you would have found anything to like in Mr. Iglesias. There was so much that was never really explained about him.--You know you acknowledged that yourself at one time, Rhoda. But now you and George seem to have gone round again completely.--One cannot help knowing he associated with such very odd people; and then the way in which he turned Roman Catholic, all of a sudden, really was disgraceful."

Dr. Nevington's cold, watchful glance steadied on to the speaker, then travelled to the two other members of the little company in sharp inquiry. George Lovegrove's innocent countenance bore an expression of agonised entreaty, of yearning, of apology, yet of defiance. The corners of Rhoda's mouth drooped, her large soft cheeks shook; yet she stood firm, her sorrow tempered, and her whole warm-hearted person rendered stubborn, by virtuous indignation.

"You forget yourself greatly, Serena," she said, "and when you have time to think it over will repent having passed such cruel remarks. They are liable to create a very wrong impression, and cannot fail to cause severe pain to others."

For an appreciable space the clergyman hesitated. But Slowby and the bishopric were ahead of him; Trimmer's Green and all its quaint unimportant little inhabitants behind. She was tedious, no doubt; but her sister promised to be very useful, so he threw in his lot with Serena.

"Ah, well, ah, well, for I my part I admire zeal, I must confess, Mrs. Lovegrove," he said. "No doubt these terrible lapses will occur. Superstition and bigotry will claim their victims even in our enlightened century, and this free England of ours. I would not judge the case of this poor fellow, Iglesias, too harshly. Race influences are strong; and we of the Anglo-Saxon stock, with our enormous advantages of brain, and grit, and hard-headed manliness of character, can afford--deeply though we deplore their weakness and errors--to be lenient toward the less favoured foreigner. Our mission is to educate him.--And this I think you should not have forgotten, Lovegrove. You should have acted upon it. You should have brought your unfortunate friend to me. I should have been quite willing to give him half an hour, or even longer. A few facts, a little plain speaking, might have saved him from more than I quite care to contemplate, both here and hereafter.--However, good-bye to you, Mrs. Lovegrove. You are starting, too, Miss Serena? Assure your good, kind sister, when you write, how gladly Mrs. Nevington and I shall avail ourselves of her proffered hospitality."

"Don't fret, don't take it too much to heart, Georgie dear," the wife said soothingly later. "The vicar did seem very stern, but that was owing to Serena. I am afraid she's a terrible mischief-maker, is Serena. She turns things inside out so in saying them, that you do not recognise your own words again. All this afternoon she was most trying. If Dr. Nevington heard the real story, he would never blame you. You must not fret."

"I am not fretting about Dr. Nevington," he answered, "but about Dominic. I am afraid we shall not have him with us very much longer, Rhoda."

"Oh! dear, oh! dear, you don't mean it? Never!" she cried in accents of genuine distress. "Did you see him, Georgie?"

"No, Miss St. John was there."

The wife's large cheeks shook again.

"You know," she said, "I am never very partial to hearing anything about that Miss St. John. Actresses are all very well in the theatre, I daresay, but they are out of place in private houses. And from what I hear, though there may be nothing really wrong with many of them, they are all sadly free in their manners. I should be very hurt if you got into the habit of frequenting their society much, Georgie.--But there, I'm sure I cannot tell what is coming to all the women nowadays! You don't seem as if you could be safe with any one of them. To think of a middle-aged person like Mrs. Porcher, for instance, taking up with that little snip of a Farge, and she old enough to be his mother!"

The wife bustled about the room straightening the chairs, patting cushions into place, folding up the handkerchief which, in the interests of human conversation, had been thrown over the cage of the all-too-articulate parrot.

"I feel terribly stirred up somehow," she said, "what with the vicar, and Serena, and all the talk about Roman Catholics and Protestants, and Mrs. Porcher's engagement, too, and then this bad news of Mr. Iglesias--not but that I am sure enough we shall meet him in heaven some day, if we can ever contrive to get there ourselves in all this chatter and worry--"

She laid the handkerchief away in the drawer of the work-table.

"Such an afternoon," she declared, "what with one thing and another! I always do say there's nothing for making unpleasantnesses like religion and marriages.--But, thank God, through all of it you are spared to me, Georgie."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Outside, the slanting spring sunshine visited the sheltered strip of garden in clear lights and transparent shadows. The small grass-plot surrounding the rockery was brightly green. In the stone basin the surface of the water trembled, glistening in broken curves of silver white. Along the narrow border, beneath the soot-stained eastern wall, yellow and mauve crocuses and yellow aconites opened wide, greeting the gentle warmth. Trees in the neighbouring gardens were thick with bud. Busily the sparrows and starlings came and went.

Within, the house--though not uncheerful, thanks to a scrupulous cleanliness, warm colourings, and the peculiar mellowness which comes to rooms and furnishings that, through prolonged association, have grown in a great mutual friendliness of aspect--was very still, with the strange, almost eerie, stillness which seems to listen and to wait.--A singular stillness, from which the rough utilitarian activities of ordinary life are banished, the rude noise of them suspended, while spiritual presences, rare apprehensions, exquisite memories and hopes, mysterious invitations of mingled alarm and ecstasy, come forth, taking on form and voice, passing lightly to and fro--an enchantment, yet in a manner fearful from the subtlety of their being and piercing intimacy of their speech. Personality, that supreme moral and emotional factor in human life, must of necessity create an atmosphere about it, permeated with its individual tastes and mental attributes, distinct and powerful in proportion to its individual distinction and its strength. And, without being overfanciful, it may be confidently asserted that, for some weeks now, ever since indeed the specialists--summoned in consultation at the good Lovegroves' and the Lady of the Windswept Dust's urgent request--had pronounced the cardiac affection, from which Dominic Iglesias suffered, likely to terminate fatally in the near future, this living stillness, this alert tranquillity, had been more or less sensible to all those who entered the house, offering an arresting contrast to the multitudinous rush and clamour of London without. But to-day the impression was no longer an intermittent and fugitive one, as heretofore. It was constant and complete, those spiritual visitants being, as it would seem, in full possession; so that the hours appeared to move reluctantly, and as though enjoining watchfulness, a carefulness and economy even in prevailing repose, lest any remaining moment and the message of it should be overlooked and lost.

It was characteristic of Iglesias that learning, in as far as the consultant doctors could diagnose it, the exact conditions of his physical state, he should refuse all experiment, however humane in intention or plausible in theory. For he had no sympathy with the modern greediness and worship of physical life, which is willing to sacrifice the decencies and dignities of it to its possible prolongation. Courteously but plainly he bade his advisers depart. The body, though an excellent servant, is a contemptible master; and Iglesias proposed that, while his soul continued to inhabit it, it should, as always before, be kept very much in its

place. It must remain unobtrusive, obedient, not daring to usurp, in its present hour of failure and impediment, an interest and consideration to which, in its full usefulness and vigour, it had not presumed to aspire. Therefore Dominic Iglesias held calmly on his way, seeing the circle of his occupations, pleasures, and activities dwindle and decrease, yet maintaining not only his serenity of mind, but his accustomed self-respecting outward refinement of bearing and habit. To meet death with a gracious stoicism, well-dressed and standing upright, is, rightly considered, a very fine art, reflecting much credit upon the successful professor of it.

And it was thus that, on the day in question, Mr. Iglesias sat waiting, in the quaint irregularly shaped drawing-room of the old house in Holland Street, himself the centre of that peopled stillness, that alert tranquillity, which so strangely and sensibly filled it. Looking out of the low window, he could see the shadow of the houses shrink and the light broaden in the little garden below, as the sun travelled westward. Looking into the room itself, the many familiar objects and rich sober colours of it, quickened by a flickering of fire-light, were pleasant to his sense. The images which passed before him, whether actually visible or not he hardly knew, appeared beautiful. Words and phrases which occurred to him were beautiful likewise. But all were seen and heard remotely, as through some softly dazzling medium which, while heightening the charm of them, produced a delicate confusion leaving him uncertain whether he really slept or woke. More than once, not without effort, he roused himself; but only to slip back again into the same state of fair yet gently distracted vision.

At last the sound of opening casements in the dining-room underneath and of a voice, touched with laughter, reached him.

"There, you absurdities--skip, scuttle, take exercise, catch birds, improve your figures!" Poppy cried, clapping her hands encouragingly as she stood at the head of the flight of iron steps down which, with her foot, she shot the toy spaniels unceremoniously into the sunny garden below.

The little creatures, welcoming their freedom, forgetful for once of their languid overbred airs, scampered away yapping and skirmishing in the merriest fashion about the grass-plat and flower-beds. The window closed again and there followed a sound of voices, interjectional on Poppy's part, low and continuous on that of Mrs. Peters, the house-keeper. Then a pause, so prolonged that Iglesias, who had rallied all his energy and prepared to rise and to go forward to meet his guest, sank away once more into half-consciousness which neither actually sleeps or wakes. When he came fully to himself Poppy was sitting on the low window-seat close beside him. Her back was to the light and his sight was somewhat clouded, so that at first he failed to see her clearly; but he knew that her mood had changed and her laughter departed, through the sympathy of her touch, she holding his hand as it lay along the arm of the chair. He would have spoken, but she stopped him.

"No, dear man, don't hurry," she said. "I know already. Peters has just told me, now, downstairs, that you received the Last Sacraments this morning. That's why I didn't come up sooner. I couldn't see you directly, somehow. I had--well, I had to get my second wind, dearly beloved, so to speak. You see it's such a heavenly day that I couldn't help feeling happier about you. I had persuaded myself those doctors were a pack of croaking old grannies whose collective wisdom had eventuated in a wild

mistake, and that, given time and summer weather, you would be better again--you know you have had ups and downs lots of times before--and that then, when the theatre closes and I have my holiday, I'd carry you off, somewhere, anywhere, back to your own fierce, passionate Spain, perhaps, and nurse and coax and care for you till living grew so pretty a business you really wouldn't have the conscience to quit."

Poppy's voice was sweet with caressing tones, sympathetic in quality as her lingering touch.

"Haven't you, perhaps, been a little premature after all?" she said. "Has it really and truly come to that? Mightn't you have put off those last grim ceremonies a trifle longer, and let them wait?"

"They are not grim, dearest friend, but full of strong consolation," Iglesias answered, smiling. He began to see her face more clearly. Her expression was tragic, a world of anguish in it, for all the restraint of her manner and playful glibness of her speech. "Nor, in any case," he added, "can they hasten the event."

"I'm not altogether sure of that," Poppy declared rebelliously.

"I could not quite trust myself as to what the day might bring forth," Iglesias continued. "In point of fact, I have gained strength as it has gone on.--And so it seemed wisest and most fitting to ask for the performance of those sacred rites while I was still of sound mind, and ready in my perception of that in which I was taking part."

"You have suffered?" Poppy said.

"Nothing unendurable. The nights are somewhat wearisome, since I cannot lie down, in ordinary fashion, to rest. But I sit here, or wander through the quiet, kindly house, contentedly enough. And I am well cared for--have no fear as to that. Peters is a faithful creature. She nursed my mother at the last, and her presence is grateful to me, for association's sake."

Iglesias straightened himself up.

"There, there," he said, "do not be too sad. The road is not such a very hard one to tread. The last few months have been the happiest I remember since my childhood. Any anxieties I felt concerning you are set at rest. You are famous, and will be more famous yet, and I know I shall live in your remembrance while you live. It is no slight thing, after all, for a man to have been loved so well by the two women whom he loved. And for the rest, dearest friend, as one draws near to the edge of the great shadow, which we call death, one begins to trust more and fuss less; looking to the next step only, so that one may take it neither with faltering nor with presumptuous haste."

"Ah!" Poppy cried, "that's all very well for you. But where do I come in? I lose you."

Iglesias smiled, lifting his shoulders slightly and raising his hands.

"Yes," he said, "it seems that sorrow, here on earth, is always, sooner or later, the guerdon of love. Why, I know not; but so it is, as the most sacred and august of all examples testifies. Only let us be thankful, you and I, that to us this parting, and the inevitable pain of it, comes while love is still in its full strength, having endured nothing unworthy, no

shame, or diminution, or disillusionment. The more bitter the wrench, the finer the memory, and the more desirable the meeting which lies ahead, however far distant in time it may be and in difference of condition."

"Yes, dear man, yes, I dare say--no doubt," Poppy answered brokenly. "Only I can't rise to these philosophic heights. I'm right here, don't you see, my feet well on the floor, planted in brutal commonplace. I shall want you--just simply I shall want you, and you won't be there, and I shall be most cut-throat horribly lonely and sad. But, looking at you, still I don't believe it. I won't believe it. I shall keep you a long while yet."

She leaned over and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Now I must go," she said, "if I'm to get any dinner before the theatre. I would have liked to stay, and put my poor little understudy on, so as to give her a chance. She's a nice little girl--not half stupid, and really keen to learn and to work. But I can't. I'm in honour bound to appear to-night. You see, it's our second century--the first one we could not observe, because it came at the end of January just in the general mourning--so there's an awful to-do and tomasha to-night, souvenir programmes and I don't know what all, also a rather extra special audience. It would be little too bad if I played them false. But," she added, rising, "when it's over I shall come back--yes, I will, I will, I tell you. Don't flatter yourself you can prevent me, beloved lunatic, for you jolly well can't.--I shall come back directly the performance is over, and watch with you, through the bad hours till the dawn."

Dominic Iglesias had risen, too. He crossed the room, going to the door and holding it open for her; then, standing on the little landing, he watched her as she went down the narrow crooked stairs. And so doing, it came to him, with a movement of thankfulness and of satisfied pride, how very fully in the past six months the Lady of the Windswept Dust had realised and fulfilled all the finer promise of her complex nature. Just as her figure had matured, retaining its admirable proportions and suppleness while gaining in distinction and dignity, her mind had matured likewise. Her splendid fearlessness was no longer that of naughty dare-devil audacity, but of secure position and recognised success. Indeed, she had grown into a somewhat imperial creature, for whom the world, and rightly, is very willing to make place.

At the bottom of the flight Poppy paused, looking up and kissing her hand.

"Till to-night," she cried. "Now I go to herd those two small miseries, W. O. and Cappadocia.--Take most precious care of yourself until I come back, dear man. Good-bye and God keep you, till to-night."

Mr. Iglesias crossed the drawing-room, glad at heart, erect and stately as in the fulness of health. For a minute or so he stood looking out into the garden, at the stone basin full to the lip--in which the sparrows, relieved of the presence of the toy spaniels, washed with much fluttering of sooty wings--and at the spring flowers, beginning to close their delicate blossoms as the sun declined towards its setting in the gold and grey of the west. In the recovered stillness, those same spiritual presences, rare apprehensions, exquisite memories, mysterious invitations, once again obtained possession, coming forth, passing lightly to and fro, filling all the place. In aspect and sentiment they were benign, all fearfulness having gone from out them--they telling of fair things only, of human relations unbroken by treachery or self-seeking, unsullied by lust; telling, too, of godly endeavour faithfully to travel the road which

leads to the far horizon touched by the illimitable glory of the Uncreated Light.

But presently Dominic Iglesias became aware that he was very, very tired. He sat down in the chair again.

"Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy," he murmured, crossing himself. "I think the day's work is over. I will sleep."

That night Poppy St. John played as she had never played before; and her audience, taking her astonishing manifestation of talent as a compliment to themselves, cried with her and laughed with her in most wholehearted fashion.

Antony Hammond, in the stage box on the right, turned to Adolphus Carr, his companion, saying:

"Did I really write such admirable drama as this? I have girded at that term, 'creating a part,' as an example of the colossal vanity of the actor, and his very inadequate reverence for his maker, the playwright. But, I give you my word, after to-night I hide my diminished head. The player and playing are greater than any fondest conception of mine, when I put those words on paper."

And Lionel Gordon, his habitual imperturbability altogether broken up by excitement, stamped up and down stammering:

"Ge-ge-hanna, gehanna, what possesses the woman? I'd tour creation with her. She must be made to sign a three years' contract. If she can act like this there's nothing less than a cool half-million sterling in her."

And Alaric Barking, lean and haggard, invalided home from South Africa, escaping for one evening from the ministrations of gentle Lady Constance Decies and his pretty _fiancee_, sat huddled together at the end of a row at the back of the pit, hoping, "The deuce! nobody would see him," with a choke in his throat. He would love, honour, and cherish his pretty, high-bred, innocent maiden; but Poppy's voice tore at his very vitals. And he asked himself how had he ever borne to give her up, forgetting, as is the habit of civilised man in such slightly humiliating circumstances, that it was Poppy herself, not he, who loved and rode away.

Twice the curtain was raised at the end of the performance, and the Lady of the Windswept Dust made her bow with the rest of the company.--Now she could depart; thank heaven! she could go back to the strangely still house in Holland Street and fulfil her promise to Dominic Iglesias to watch with him till dawn. All through the play, the passion and excitement and pathos and mirth of it, her anxiety had deepened, her yearning increased, so that the joy of her public triumph was barred and seared by intimate pain. Now she could go. Already the carpenters were beginning their nightly work of destruction, metamorphosing the so-lately brilliant stage into a vast unsightly cavern of gaunt timbers, creaking pulleys, noisy mechanical contrivances, gaudy painted surfaces of canvas and paper, piled-up properties, of uncertain lights and draughts many and chill. Careless of all save that determination of going, Poppy moved away. But still the unseen audience clamoured. A fury had taken it, a madness such as will sometimes attack even the soberest and most aristocratic crowd, excitement reacting upon itself and stimulating excitement, till the demand which had begun in kindly enthusiasm became oddly violent, even brutal, men and women standing up, applauding, drumming, shouting a single

name.

"There, it's over, thank the powers! Now let me get out of all this infernal din," she said, putting her hands over her ears as she pushed into the wings.

But Lionel Gordon met her, barring her passage, his face working with nervous agitation, and caught hold of her unceremoniously by both arms.

"What's the matter?" she cried angrily. "I can't stay. I have a case of illness on hand."

"Hang illness!" he answered. "My good girl, pull yourself together. Go back. Don't be a blooming fool. Listen--it's you they're splitting their throats for--yes, you--about the most fastidious audience in Europe yelling like a pack of drunken bookies! Gehenna! you're the luckiest woman living. You're made, great heavens, you're made!"

He dragged her aside, pushing her into the mouth of the narrow passage between the curtain and the footlights, where the roar of the house and the welter of faces met her like a breaking wave.

* * * * *

Standing against the edge of the pavement in front of Mr. Iglesias' house, in Holland Street, was a covered van. As Poppy drove up a couple of men came down the steps, in the black and white of the moonlight. Their dark clothing and somewhat sleek appearance were repulsive to her. She swept past them, swept past Frederick holding open the door, and on up the stairs. Her hands were encumbered by her trailing draperies of velvet and silver tissue, and by an extravagant bouquet of orchids, lilies, and roses, with long yellow satin streamers to it. She had not stayed even to wash the grease paint off her face. Just as she was, the stamp of her calling upon her, eager, fictitious, courageous, triumphant, pushed by a great fear, she came. But in the doorway she faltered, set her teeth, bowed her head, and paused.

For in the centre of the room a bier was dressed, and on either side of it stood lighted tapers of brownish wax, in tall black and gold candlesticks. At the foot, some distance apart, two low-seated rush-bottomed high-backed _prie-dieu_ had been placed. Upon the one on the left a little nun knelt, her loose black habit concealing all the outline of her figure. The white linen pall was turned back, across the chest of the corpse, to where the shapely long-fingered hands were folded upon an ebony and silver crucifix. By some harsh irony of imagination Lionel Gordon's voice rang in Poppy's ears: "My good girl, pull yourself together. Gehenna! you're the luckiest woman living. You're made, great heavens, you're made!"--while, blank despair in her heart, she went forward, the little nun looking up momentarily from her prayers, and stood beside the bier. Beautiful in death as in life, serene, proud, austere, but young now with the eternal youth of those who have believed, and attained, and reached the Land of the Far Horizon, Dominic Iglesias lay before her.

Presently a sound of sobbing broke up the stillness, and turning, Poppy descried good George Lovegrove, sitting in the dusky far corner of the room, his knees wide apart, his shiny forehead showing high above the handkerchief he pressed against his eyes. She backed away from the corpse, as in all reverence from the presence of a personage august and sacred. Coming close to him, she laid her hand gently upon George Lovegrove's

shoulder. "Go home, my best beetle," she said, very tenderly. "You're worn out with sorrow. Come back in the morning if you will. I promised Dominic I would watch with him till the dawn. I keep my promise."

Then the Lady of the Windswept Dust laid her extravagant bouquet with its yellow streamers, on the floor, at the foot of the bier; and kneeling upon the vacant _prie-dieu_, beside the little nun, buried her painted face in her hands and wept.

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