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#90 in our series by Gilbert Parker

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Title: The Weavers, Volume 3.

Author: Gilbert Parker

Release Date: August, 2004 [EBook #6263]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on November 14, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WEAVERS, BY PARKER, V3 ***

This eBook was produced by David Widger <widger@cecomet.net>

THE WEAVERS

By Gilbert Parker

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CHAPTER XV

SOOLSBY'S HAND UPON THE CURTAIN

Faith raised her eyes from the paper before her and poised her head meditatively.

"How long is it, friend, since--"

"Since he went to Egypt?"

"Nay, since thee--"

"Since I went to Mass?" he grumbled humorously.

She laughed whimsically. "Nay, then, since thee made the promise--"

"That I would drink no more till his return--ay, that was my bargain; till then and no longer! I am not to be held back then, unless I change my mind when I see him. Well, 'tis three years since--"

"Three years! Time hasn't flown. Is it not like an old memory, his living here in this house, Soolsby, and all that happened then?"

Soolsby looked at her over his glasses, resting his chin on the back of the chair he was caning, and his lips worked in and out with a suppressed smile.

"Time's got naught to do with you. He's afeard of you," he continued.

"He lets you be."

"Friend, thee knows I am almost an old woman now." She made marks abstractedly upon the corner of a piece of paper. "Unless my hair turns grey presently I must bleach it, for 'twill seem improper it should remain so brown."

She smoothed it back with her hand. Try as she would to keep it trim after the manner of her people, it still waved loosely on her forehead and over her ears. And the grey bonnet she wore but added piquancy to its luxuriance, gave a sweet gravity to the demure beauty of the face it sheltered.

"I am thirty now," she murmured, with a sigh, and went on writing.

The old man's fingers moved quickly among the strips of cane, and, after a silence, without raising his head, he said: "Thirty, it means naught."

"To those without understanding," she rejoined drily.

"'Tis tough understanding why there's no wedding-ring on yonder finger. There's been many a man that's wanted it, that's true--the Squire's son from Bridgley, the lord of Axwood Manor, the long soldier from Shipley Wood, and doctors, and such folk aplenty. There's where understanding fails."

Faith's face flushed, then it became pale, and her eyes, suffused, dropped upon the paper before her. At first it seemed as though she must resent his boldness; but she had made a friend of him these years past, and she knew he meant no rudeness. In the past they had talked of things deeper and more intimate still. Yet there was that in his words which touched a sensitive corner of her nature.

"Why should I be marrying?" she asked presently. "There was my sister's son all those years. I had to care for him."

"Ay, older than him by a thimbleful!" he rejoined.

"Nay, till he came to live in this hut alone older by many a year. Since then he is older than me by fifty. I had not thought of marriage before he went away. Squire's son, soldier, or pillman, what were they to me! He needed me. They came, did they? Well, and if they came?"

"And since the Egyptian went?"

A sort of sob came into her throat. "He does not need me, but he may--he will one day; and then I shall be ready. But now--"

Old Soolsby's face turned away. His house overlooked every house in the valley beneath: he could see nearly every garden; he could even recognise many in the far streets. Besides, there hung along two nails on the wall a telescope, relic of days when he sailed the main. The grounds of the Cloistered House and the fruit-decked garden-wall of the Red Mansion were

ever within his vision. Once, twice, thrice, he had seen what he had seen, and dark feelings, harsh emotions, had been roused in him.

"He will need us both--the Egyptian will need us both one day," he answered now; "you more than any, me because I can help him, too--ay, I can help him. But married or single you could help him; so why waste your days here?"

"Is it wasting my days to stay with my father? He is lonely, most lonely since our Davy went away; and troubled, too, for the dangers of that life yonder. His voice used to shake when he prayed, in those days when Davy was away in the desert, down at Darfur and elsewhere among the rebel tribes. He frightened me then, he was so stern and still. Ah, but that day when we knew he was safe, I was eighteen, and no more!" she added, smiling. "But, think you, I could marry while my life is so tied to him and to our Egyptian?"

No one looking at her limpid, shining blue eyes but would have set her down for twenty-three or twenty-four, for not a line showed on her smooth face; she was exquisite of limb and feature, and had the lissomeness of a girl of fifteen. There was in her eyes, however, an unquiet sadness; she had abstracted moments when her mind seemed fixed on some vexing problem. Such a mood suddenly came upon her now. The pen lay by the paper untouched, her hands folded in her lap, and a long silence fell upon them, broken only by the twanging of the strips of cane in Soolsby's hands. At last, however, even this sound ceased; and the two scarce moved as the sun drew towards the middle afternoon. At last they were roused by the sound of a horn, and, looking down, they saw a four-in-hand drawing smartly down the road to the village over the gorse-spread common, till it stopped at the Cloistered House. As Faith looked, her face slightly flushed. She bent forward till she saw one figure get down and, waving a hand to the party on the coach as it moved on, disappear into the gateway of the Cloistered House.

"What is the office they have given him?" asked Soolsby, disapproval in his tone, his eyes fixed on the disappearing figure.

"They have made Lord Eglington Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs," she answered.

"And what means that to a common mind?"

"That what his Government does in Egypt will mean good or bad to our Egyptian," she returned.

"That he can do our man good or ill?" Soolsby asked sharply--"that he, yonder, can do that?"

She inclined her head.

"When I see him doing ill--well, when I see him doing that"--he snatched up a piece of wood from the floor--"then I will break him, so!"

He snapped the stick across his knee, and threw the pieces on the ground. He was excited. He got to his feet and walked up and down the little room, his lips shut tight, his round eyes flaring.

Faith watched him in astonishment. In the past she had seen his face cloud over, his eyes grow sulky, at the mention of Lord Eglington's name; she knew that Soolsby hated him; but his aversion now was more definite and violent than he had before shown, save on that night long ago when David went first to Egypt, and she had heard hard words between them in this same hut. She supposed it one of those antipathies which often grow in inverse ratio to the social position of those concerned. She replied in a soothing voice:

"Then we shall hope that he will do our Davy only good."

"You would not wish me to break his lordship? You would not wish it?" He came over to her, and looked sharply at her. "You would not wish it?" he repeated meaningly.

She evaded his question. "Lord Eglington will be a great man one day perhaps," she answered. "He has made his way quickly. How high he has climbed in three years--how high!"

Soolsby's anger was not lessened. "Pooh! Pooh! He is an Earl. An Earl has all with him at the start--name, place, and all. But look at our Egyptian! Look at Egyptian David--what had he but his head and an honest mind? What is he? He is the great man of Egypt. Tell me, who helped Egyptian David? That second-best lordship yonder, he crept about coaxing this one and wheedling that. I know him--I know him. He wheedles and wheedles. No matter whether 'tis a babe or an old woman, he'll talk, and talk, and talk, till they believe in him, poor folks! No one's too small for his net. There's Martha Higham yonder. She's forty five. If he sees her, as sure as eggs he'll make love to her, and fill her ears with words she'd never heard before, and 'd never hear at all if not from him. Ay, there's no man too sour and no woman too old that he'll not blandish, if he gets the chance."

As he spoke Faith shut her eyes, and her fingers clasped tightly together--beautiful long, tapering fingers, like those in Romney's pictures. When he stopped, her eyes opened slowly, and she gazed before her down towards that garden by the Red Mansion where her lifetime had been spent.

"Thee says hard words, Soolsby," she rejoined gently. "But maybe thee is right." Then a flash of humour passed over her face. "Suppose we ask Martha Higham if the Earl has 'blandished' her. If the Earl has blandished Martha, he is the very captain of deceit. Why, he has himself but twenty-eight years. Will a man speak so to one older than himself, save in mockery? So, if thee is right in this, then--then if he speak well to deceive and to serve his turn, he will also speak ill; and he will do ill when it may serve his turn; and so he may do our Davy ill, as thee says, Soolsby."

She rose to her feet and made as if to go, but she kept her face from him. Presently, however, she turned and looked at him. "If he does ill to Davy, there will be those like thee, Soolsby, who will not spare him."

His fingers opened and shut maliciously, he nodded dour assent. After an instant, while he watched her, she added: "Thee has not heard my lord is to marry?"

"Marry--who is the blind lass?"

"Her name is Maryon, Miss Hylda Maryon: and she has a great fortune. But within a month it is to be."

"Thee remembers the woman of the cross-roads, her that our Davy--"

"Her the Egyptian kissed, and put his watch in her belt--ay, Kate Heaver!"

"She is now maid to her Lord Eglington will wed. She is to spend to-night with us."

"Where is her lad that was, that the Egyptian rolled like dough in a trough?"

"Jasper Kimber? He is at Sheffield. He has been up and down, now sober for a year, now drunken for a month, now in, now out of a place, until this past year. But for this whole year he has been sober, and he may keep his pledge. He is working in the trades-unions. Among his fellow-workers he is called a politician--if loud speaking and boasting can make one. Yet if these doings give him stimulant instead of drink, who shall complain?"

Soolsby's head was down. He was looking out over the far hills, while the strips of cane were idle in his hands. "Ay, 'tis true--'tis true," he nodded. "Give a man an idee which keeps him cogitating, makes him think he's greater than he is, and sets his pulses beating, why, that's the cure to drink. Drink is friendship and good company and big thoughts while it lasts; and it's lonely without it, if you've been used to it. Ay, but Kimber's way is best. Get an idee in your noddle, to do a thing that's more to you than work or food or bed, and 'twill be more than drink, too."

He nodded to himself, then began weaving the strips of cane furiously. Presently he stopped again, and threw his head back with a chuckle. "Now, wouldn't it be a joke, a reg'lar first-class joke, if Kimber and me both had the same idee, if we was both workin' for the same thing--an' didn't know it? I reckon it might be so."

"What end is thee working for, friend? If the public prints speak true, Kimber is working to stand for Parliament against Lord Eglington."

Soolsby grunted and laughed in his throat. "Now, is that the game of Mister Kimber? Against my Lord Eglington! Hey, but that's a joke, my

lord!"

"And what is thee working for, Soolsby?"

"What do I be working for? To get the Egyptian back to England--what else?"

"That is no joke."

"Ay, but 'tis a joke." The old man chuckled. "'Tis the best joke in the boilin'." He shook his head and moved his body backwards and forwards with glee. "Me and Kimber! Me and Kimber!" he roared, "and neither of us drunk for a year--not drunk for a whole year. Me and Kimber--and him!"

Faith put her hand on his shoulder. "Indeed, I see no joke, but only that which makes my heart thankful, Soolsby."

"Ay, you will be thankful, you will be thankful, by-and-by," he said, still chuckling, and stood up respectfully to show her out.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DEBT AND THE ACCOUNTING

His forehead frowning, but his eyes full of friendliness, Soolsby watched Faith go down the hillside and until she reached the main road. Here, instead of going to the Red Mansion, she hesitated a moment, and then passed along a wooded path leading to the Meetinghouse, and the graveyard. It was a perfect day of early summer, the gorse was in full bloom, and the may and the hawthorn were alive with colour. The path she had taken led through a narrow lane, overhung with blossoms and greenery. By bearing away to the left into another path, and making a detour, she could reach the Meeting-house through a narrow lane leading past a now disused mill and a small, strong stream flowing from the hill above.

As she came down the hill, other eyes than Soolsby's watched her. From his laboratory--the laboratory in which his father had worked, in which he had lost his life--Eglinton had seen the trim, graceful figure. He watched it till it moved into the wooded path. Then he left his garden, and, moving across a field, came into the path ahead of her. Walking swiftly, he reached the old mill, and waited.

She came slowly, now and again stooping to pick a flower and place it in her belt. Her bonnet was slung on her arm, her hair had broken a little loose and made a sort of hood round the face, so still, so composed, into which the light of steady, soft, apprehending eyes threw a gentle radiance. It was a face to haunt a man when the storm of life was round him. It had, too, a courage which might easily become a delicate stubbornness, a sense of duty which might become sternness, if roused by

a sense of wrong to herself or others.

She reached the mill and stood and listened towards the stream and the waterfall. She came here often. The scene quieted her in moods of restlessness which came from a feeling that her mission was interrupted, that half her life's work had been suddenly taken from her. When David went, her life had seemed to shrivel; for with him she had developed as he had developed; and when her busy care of him was withdrawn, she had felt a sort of paralysis which, in a sense, had never left her. Then suitors had come--the soldier from Shipley Wood, the lord of Axwood Manor, and others, and, in a way, a new sense was born in her, though she was alive to the fact that the fifteen thousand pounds inherited from her Uncle Benn had served to warm the air about her into a wider circle. Yet it was neither to soldier, nor squire, nor civil engineer, nor surgeon that the new sense stirring in her was due. The spring was too far beneath to be found by them.

When, at last, she raised her head, Lord Eglington was in the path, looking at her with a half-smile. She did not start, but her face turned white, and a mist came before her eyes.

Quickly, however, as though fearful lest he should think he could trouble her composure, she laid a hand upon herself.

He came near to her and held out his hand. "It has been a long six months since we met here," he said.

She made no motion to take his hand. "I find days grow shorter as I grow older," she rejoined steadily, and smoothed her hair with her hand, making ready to put on her bonnet.

"Ah, do not put it on," he urged quickly, with a gesture. "It becomes you so--on your arm."

She had regained her self-possession. Pride, the best weapon of a woman, the best tonic, came to her resource. "Thee loves to please thee at any cost," she replied. She fastened the grey strings beneath her chin.

"Would it be costly to keep the bonnet on your arm?"

"It is my pleasure to have it on my head, and my pleasure has some value to myself."

"A moment ago," he rejoined laughing, "it was your pleasure to have it on your arm."

"Are all to be monotonous except Lord Eglington? Is he to have the only patent of change?"

"Do I change?" He smiled at her with a sense of inquisition, with an air that seemed to say, "I have lifted the veil of this woman's heart; I am the master of the situation."

She did not answer to the obvious meaning of his words, but said:

"Thee has done little else but change, so far as eye can see. Thee and thy family were once of Quaker faith, but thee is a High Churchman now. Yet they said a year ago thee was a sceptic or an infidel."

"There is force in what you say," he replied. "I have an inquiring mind; I am ever open to reason. Confucius said: 'It is only the supremely wise or the deeply ignorant who never alter.'"

"Thee has changed politics. Thee made a 'sensation, but that was not enough. Thee that was a rebel became a deserter."

He laughed. "Ah, I was open to conviction! I took my life in my hands, defied consequences." He laughed again.

"It brought office."

"I am Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs," he murmured complacently.

"Change is a policy with thee, I think. It has paid thee well, so it would seem."

"Only a fair rate of interest for the capital invested and the risks I've taken," he answered with an amused look.

"I do not think that interest will increase. Thee has climbed quickly, but fast climbing is not always safe climbing."

His mood changed. His voice quickened, his face lowered. "You think I will fail? You wish me to fail?"

"In so far as thee acts uprightly, I wish thee well. But if, out of office, thee disregards justice and conscience and the rights of others, can thee be just and faithful in office? Subtlety will not always avail. The strong man takes the straight course. Subtlety is not intellect."

He flushed. She had gone to the weakest point in his defences. His vanity was being hurt. She had an advantage now.

"You are wrong," he protested. "You do not understand public life, here in a silly Quaker village."

"Does thee think that all that happens in 'public life' is of consequence? That is not sensible. Thee is in the midst of a thousand immaterial things, though they have importance for the moment. But the chief things that matter to all, does thee not know that a 'silly Quaker village' may realise them to the full--more fully because we see them apart from the thousand little things that do not matter? I remember a thing in political life that mattered. It was at Heddington after the massacre at Damascus. Does thee think that we did not know thee spoke without principle then, and only to draw notice?"

"You would make me into a demagogue," he said irritably.

"Thee is a demagogue," she answered candidly.

"Why did you never say all this to me long ago? Years have passed since then, and since then you and I have--have been friends. You have--"

He paused, for she made a protesting motion, and a fire sprang into her eyes. Her voice got colder. "Thee made me believe--ah, how many times did we speak together? Six times it was, not more. Thee made me believe that what I thought or said helped thee to see things better. Thee said I saw things truly like a child, with the wisdom of a woman. Thee remembers that?"

"It was so," he put in hastily.

"No, not for a moment so, though I was blinded to think for an instant that it was. Thee subtly took the one way which could have made me listen to thee. Thee wanted help, thee said; and if a word of mine could help thee now and then, should I withhold it, so long as I thought thee honest?"

"Do you think I was not honest in wanting your friendship?"

"Nay, it was not friendship thee wanted, for friendship means a giving and a getting. Thee was bent on getting what was, indeed, of but little value save to the giver; but thee gave nothing; thee remembered nothing of what was given thee."

"It is not so, it is not so," he urged eagerly, nervously. "I gave, and I still give."

"In those old days, I did not understand," she went on, "what it was thee wanted. I know now. It was to know the heart and mind of a woman--of a woman older than thee. So that thee should have such sort of experience, though I was but a foolish choice of the experiment. They say thee has a gift for chemistry like thy father; but if thee experiments no more wisely in the laboratory than with me, thee will not reach distinction."

"Your father hated my father and did not believe in him, I know not why, and you are now hating and disbelieving me."

"I do not know why my father held the late Earl in abhorrence; I know he has no faith in thee; and I did ill in listening to thee, in believing for one moment there was truth in thee. But no, no, I think I never believed it. I think that even when thee said most, at heart I believed least."

"You doubt that? You doubt all I said to you?" he urged softly, coming close to her.

She drew aside slightly. She had steeled herself for this inevitable interview, and there was no weakening of her defences; but a great

sadness came into her eyes, and spread over her face, and to this was added, after a moment, a pity which showed the distance she was from him, the safety in which she stood.

"I remember that the garden was beautiful, and that thee spoke as though thee was part of the garden. Thee remembers that, at our meeting in the Cloistered House, when the woman was ill, I had no faith in thee; but thee spoke with grace, and turned common things round about, so that they seemed different to the ear from any past hearing; and I listened. I did not know, and I do not know now, why it is my duty to shun any of thy name, and above all thyself; but it has been so commanded by my father all my life; and though what he says may be in a little wrong, in much it must ever be right."

"And so, from a hatred handed down, your mind has been tuned to shun even when your heart was learning to give me a home--Faith?"

She straightened herself. "Friend, thee will do me the courtesy to forget to use my Christian name. I am not a child--indeed, I am well on in years"--he smiled--"and thee has no friendship or kinship for warrant. If my mind was tuned to shun thee, I gave proof that it was willing to take thee at thine own worth, even against the will of my father, against the desire of David, who knew thee better than I--he gauged thee at first glance."

"You have become a philosopher and a statesman," he said ironically. "Has your nephew, the new Joseph in Egypt, been giving you instructions in high politics? Has he been writing the Epistles of David to the Quakers?"

"Thee will leave his name apart," she answered with dignity. "I have studied neither high politics nor statesmanship, though in the days when thee did flatter me thee said I had a gift for such things. Thee did not speak the truth. And now I will say that I do not respect thee. No matter how high thee may climb, still I shall not respect thee; for thee will ever gain ends by flattery, by subtlety, and by using every man and every woman for selfish ends. Thee cannot be true--not even to that which by nature is greatest in thee."

He withered under her words.

"And what is greatest in me?" he asked abruptly, his coolness and self-possession striving to hold their own.

"That which will ruin thee in the end." Her eyes looked beyond his into the distance, rapt and shining; she seemed scarcely aware of his presence. "That which will bring thee down--thy hungry spirit of discovery. It will serve thee no better than it served the late Earl. But thee it will lead into paths ending in a gulf of darkness."

"Deborah!" he answered, with a rasping laugh. "Continuez! Forewarned is forearmed."

"No, do not think I shall be glad," she answered, still like one in a dream. "I shall lament it as I lament--as I lament now. All else fades away into the end which I see for thee. Thee will live alone without a near and true friend, and thee will die alone, never having had a true friend. Thee will never be a true friend, thee will never love truly man or woman, and thee will never find man or woman who will love thee truly, or will be with thee to aid thee in the dark and falling days."

"Then," he broke in sharply, querulously, "then, I will stand alone. I shall never come whining that I have been ill-used, to fate or fortune, to men or to the Almighty."

"That I believe. Pride will build up in thee a strength which will be like water in the end. Oh, my lord," she added, with a sudden change in her voice and manner, "if thee could only be true--thee who never has been true to any one!"

"Why does a woman always judge a man after her own personal experience with him, or what she thinks is her own personal experience?"

A robin hopped upon the path before her. She watched it for a moment intently, then lifted her head as the sound of a bell came through the wood to her. She looked up at the sun, which was slanting towards evening. She seemed about to speak, but with second thought, moved on slowly past the mill and towards the Meeting-house. He stepped on beside her. She kept her eyes fixed in front of her, as though oblivious of his presence.

"You shall hear me speak. You shall listen to what I have to say, though it is for the last time," he urged stubbornly. "You think ill of me. Are you sure you are not pharisaical?"

"I am honest enough to say that which hurts me in the saying. I do not forget that to believe thee what I think is to take all truth from what thee said to me last year, and again this spring when the tulips first came and there was good news from Egypt."

"I said," he rejoined boldly, "that I was happier with you than with any one else alive. I said that what you thought of me meant more to me than what any one else in the world thought; and that I say now, and will always say it."

The old look of pity came into her face. "I am older than thee by two years," she answered quaintly, "and I know more of real life, though I have lived always here. I have made the most of the little I have seen; thee has made little of the much that thee has seen. Thee does not know the truth concerning thee. Is it not, in truth, vanity which would have me believe in thee? If thee was happier with me than with any one alive, why then did thee make choice of a wife even in the days thee was speaking to me as no man shall ever speak again? Nothing can explain so base a fact. No, no, no, thee said to me what thee said to others, and will say again without shame. But--but see, I will forgive; yes, I will follow thee with good wishes, if thee will promise to help David,

whom thee has ever disliked, as, in the place held by thee, thee can do now. Will thee offer this one proof, in spite of all else that disproves, that thee spoke any words of truth to me in the Cloistered House, in the garden by my father's house, by yonder mill, and hard by the Meeting-house yonder-near to my sister's grave by the willow-tree? Will thee do that for me?"

He was about to reply, when there appeared in the path before them Luke Claridge. His back was upon them, but he heard their footsteps and swung round. As though turned to stone, he waited for them. As they approached, his lips, dry and pale, essayed to speak, but no sound came. A fire was in his eyes which boded no good. Amazement, horror, deadly anger, were all there, but, after a moment, the will behind the tumult commanded it, the wild light died away, and he stood calm and still awaiting them. Faith was as pale as when she had met Eglington. As she came nearer, Luke Claridge said, in a low voice:

"How do I find thee in this company, Faith?" There was reproach unutterable in his voice, in his face. He seemed humiliated and shamed, though all the while a violent spirit in him was struggling for the mastery.

"As I came this way to visit my sister's grave I met my lord by the mill. He spoke to me, and, as I wished a favour of him, I walked with him thither--but a little way. I was going to visit my sister's grave."

"Thy sister's grave!" The fire flamed up again, but the masterful will chilled it down, and he answered: "What secret business can thee have with any of that name which I have cast out of knowledge or notice?"

Ignorant as he was of the old man's cause for quarrel or dislike, Eglington felt himself aggrieved, and, therefore, with an advantage.

"You had differences with my father, sir," he said. "I do not know what they were, but they lasted his lifetime, and all my life you have treated me with aversion. I am not a pestilence. I have never wronged you. I have lived your peaceful neighbour under great provocation, for your treatment would have done me harm if my place were less secure. I think I have cause for complaint."

"I have never acted in haste concerning thee, or those who went before thee. What business had thee with him, Faith?" he asked again. His voice was dry and hard.

Her impulse was to tell the truth, and so for ever have her conscience clear, for there would never be any more need for secrecy. The wheel of understanding between Eglington and herself had come full circle, and there was an end. But to tell the truth would be to wound her father, to vex him against Eglington even as he had never yet been vexed. Besides, it was hard, while Eglington was there, to tell what, after all, was the sole affair of her own life. In one literal sense, Eglington was not guilty of deceit. Never in so many words had he said to her: "I love you;" never had he made any promise to her or exacted one; he had done no

more than lure her to feel one thing, and then to call it another thing. Also there was no direct and vital injury, for she had never loved him; though how far she had travelled towards that land of light and trial she could never now declare. These thoughts flashed through her mind as she stood looking at her father. Her tongue seemed imprisoned, yet her soft and candid eyes conquered the austerity in the old man's gaze.

Eglington spoke for her.

"Permit me to answer, neighbour," he said. "I wished to speak with your daughter, because I am to be married soon, and my wife will, at intervals, come here to live. I wished that she should not be shunned by you and yours as I have been. She would not understand, as I do not. Yours is a constant call to war, while all your religion is an appeal for peace. I wished to ask your daughter to influence you to make it possible for me and mine to live in friendship among you. My wife will have some claims upon you. Her mother was an American, of a Quaker family from Derbyshire. She has done nothing to merit your aversion."

Faith listened astonished and baffled. Nothing of this had he said to her. Had he meant to say it to her? Had it been in his mind? Or was it only a swift adaptation to circumstances, an adroit means of working upon the sympathies of her father, who, she could see, was in a quandary? Eglington had indeed touched the old man as he had not been touched in thirty years and more by one of his name. For a moment the insinuating quality of the appeal submerged the fixed idea in a mind to which the name of Eglington was anathema.

Eglington saw his advantage. He had felt his way carefully, and he pursued it quickly. "For the rest, your daughter asked what I was ready to offer--such help as, in my new official position, I can give to Claridge Pasha in Egypt. As a neighbour, as Minister in the Government, I will do what I can to aid him."

Silent and embarrassed, the old man tried to find his way. Presently he said tentatively: "David Claridge has a title to the esteem of all civilised people." Eglington was quick with his reply. "If he succeeds, his title will become a concrete fact. There is no honour the Crown would not confer for such remarkable service."

The other's face darkened. "I did not speak, I did not think, of handles to his name. I find no good in them, but only means for deceiving and deluding the world. Such honours as might make him baronet, or duke, would add not a cubit to his stature. If he had such a thing by right"--his voice hardened, his eyes grew angry once again--"I would wish it sunk into the sea."

"You are hard on us, sir, who did not give ourselves our titles, but took them with our birth as a matter of course. There was nothing inspiring in them. We became at once distinguished and respectable by patent."

He laughed good-humouredly. Then suddenly he changed, and his eyes took on a far-off look which Faith had seen so often in the eyes of David,

but in David's more intense and meaning, and so different. With what deftness and diplomacy had he worked upon her father! He had crossed a stream which seemed impassable by adroit, insincere diplomacy.

She saw that it was time to go, while yet Eglington's disparagement of rank and aristocracy was ringing in the old man's ears; though she knew there was nothing in Eglington's equipment he valued more than his title and the place it gave him. Grateful, however, for his successful intervention, Faith now held out her hand.

"I must take my father away, or it will be sunset before we reach the Meeting-house," she said. "Goodbye-friend," she added gently.

For an instant Luke Claridge stared at her, scarce comprehending that his movements were being directed by any one save himself. Truth was, Faith had come to her cross-roads in life. For the first time in her memory she had seen her father speak to an Eglington without harshness; and, as he weakened for a moment, she moved to take command of that weakness, though she meant it to seem like leading. While loving her and David profoundly, her father had ever been quietly imperious. If she could but gain ascendancy even in a little, it might lead to a more open book of life for them both.

Eglington held out his hand to the old man. "I have kept you too long, sir. Good-bye--if you will."

The offered hand was not taken, but Faith slid hers into the old man's palm, and pressed it, and he said quietly to Eglington:

"Good evening, friend."

"And when I bring my wife, sir?" Eglington added, with a smile.

"When thee brings the lady, there will be occasion to consider--there will be occasion then."

Eglington raised his hat, and turned back upon the path he and Faith had travelled.

The old man stood watching him until he was out of view. Then he seemed more himself. Still holding Faith's hand, he walked with her on the gorse-covered hill towards the graveyard.

"Was it his heart spoke or his tongue--is there any truth in him?" he asked at last.

Faith pressed his hand. "If he help Davy, father--"

"If he help Davy; ay, if he help Davy! Nay, I cannot go to the graveyard, Faith. Take me home," he said with emotion.

His hand remained in hers. She had conquered. She was set upon a new path of influence. Her hand was upon the door of his heart.

"Thee is good to me, Faith," he said, as they entered the door of the Red Mansion.

She glanced over towards the Cloistered House. Smoke was coming from the little chimney of the laboratory.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WOMAN OF THE CROSS-ROADS

The night came down slowly. There was no moon, the stars were few, but a mellow warmth was in the air. At the window of her little sitting-room up-stairs Faith sat looking out into the stillness. Beneath was the garden with its profusion of flowers and fruit; away to the left was the common; and beyond--far beyond--was a glow in the sky, a suffused light, of a delicate orange, merging away into a grey-blueness, deepening into a darker blue; and then a purple depth, palpable and heavy with a comforting silence.

There was something alluring and suggestive in the soft, smothered radiance. It had all the glamour of some distant place of pleasure and quiet joy, of happiness and ethereal being. It was, in fact, the far-off mirror of the flaming furnace of the great Heddington factories. The light of the sky above was a soft radiance, as of a happy Arcadian land; the fire of the toil beneath was the output of human striving, an intricate interweaving of vital forces which, like some Titanic machine, wrought out in pain--a vast destiny.

As Faith looked, she thought of the thousands beneath struggling and striving, none with all desires satisfied, some in an agony of want and penury, all straining for the elusive Enough; like Sisyphus ever rolling the rock of labour up a hill too steep for them.

Her mind flew to the man Kimber and his task of organising labour for its own advance. What a life-work for a man! Here might David have spent his days, here among his own countrymen, instead of in that far-off land where all the forces of centuries were fighting against him. Here the forces would have been fighting for him; the trend was towards the elevation of the standards of living and the wider rights of labour, to the amelioration of hard conditions of life among the poor. David's mind, with its equity, its balance, and its fire--what might it not have accomplished in shepherding such a cause, guiding its activity?

The gate of the garden clicked. Kate Heaver had arrived. Faith got to her feet and left the room.

A few minutes later the woman of the cross-roads was seated opposite Faith at the window. She had changed greatly since the day David had sent her on her way to London and into the unknown. Then there had been

recklessness, something of coarseness, in the fine face. Now it was strong and quiet, marked by purpose and self-reliance.

Ignorance had been her only peril in the past, as it had been the cause of her unhappy connection with Jasper Kimber. The atmosphere in which she was raised had been unmoral; it had not been consciously immoral. Her temper and her indignation against her man for drinking had been the means of driving them apart. He would have married her in those days, if she had given the word, for her will was stronger than his own; but she had broken from him in an agony of rage and regret and despised love.

She was now, again, as she had been in those first days before she went with Jasper Kimber; when she was the rose-red angel of the quarters; when children were lured by the touch of her large, shapely hands; when she had been counted a great nurse among her neighbours. The old simple untutored sympathy was in her face.

They sat for a long time in silence, and at length Faith said: "Thee is happy now with her who is to marry Lord Eglington?"

Kate nodded, smiling. "Who could help but be happy with her! Yet a temper, too--so quick, and then all over in a second. Ah, she is one that'd break her heart if she was treated bad; but I'd be sorry for him that did it. For the like of her goes mad with hurting, and the mad cut with a big scythe."

"Has thee seen Lord Eglington?"

"Once before I left these parts and often in London." Her voice was constrained; she seemed not to wish to speak of him.

"Is it true that Jasper Kimber is to stand against him for Parliament?"

"I do not know. They say my lord has to do with foreign lands now. If he helps Mr. Claridge there, then it would be a foolish thing for Jasper to fight him; and so I've told him. You've got to stand by those that stand by you. Lord Eglington has his own way of doing things. There's not a servant in my lady's house that he hasn't made his friend. He's one that's bound to have his will. I heard my lady say he talks better than any one in England, and there's none she doesn't know from duchesses down."

"She is beautiful?" asked Faith, with hesitation.

"Taller than you, but not so beautiful."

Faith sighed, and was silent for a moment, then she laid a hand upon the other's shoulder. "Thee has never said what happened when thee first got to London. Does thee care to say?"

"It seems so long ago," was the reply. . . . "No need to tell of the journey to London. When I got there it frightened me at first. My head went round. But somehow it came to me what I should do. I asked my way

to a hospital. I'd helped a many that was hurt at Heddington and thereabouts, and doctors said I was as good as them that was trained. I found a hospital at last, and asked for work, but they laughed at me-- it was the porter at the door. I was not to be put down, and asked to see some one that had rights to say yes or no. So he opened the door and told me to go. I said he was no man to treat a woman so, and I would not go. Then a fine white-haired gentleman came forward. He had heard all we had said, standing in a little room at one side. He spoke a kind word or two, and asked me to go into the little room. Before I had time to think, he came to me with the matron, and left me with her. I told her the whole truth, and she looked at first as if she'd turn me out. But the end of it was I stayed there for the night, and in the morning the old gentleman came again, and with him his lady, as kind and sharp of tongue as himself, and as big as three. Some things she said made my tongue ache to speak back to her; but I choked it down. I went to her to be a sort of nurse and maid. She taught me how to do a hundred things, and by-and-by I couldn't be too thankful she had taken me in. I was with her till she died. Then, six months ago I went to Miss Maryon, who knew about me long before from her that died. With her I've been ever since-- and so that's all."

"Surely God has been kind to thee."

"I'd have gone down--down--down, if it hadn't been for Mr. Claridge at the cross-roads."

"Does thee think I shall like her that will live yonder?" She nodded towards the Cloistered House. "There's none but likes her. She will want a friend, I'm thinking. She'll be lonely by-and-by. Surely, she will be lonely."

Faith looked at her closely, and at last leaned over, and again laid a soft hand on her shoulder. "Thee thinks that--why?"

"He cares only what matters to himself. She will be naught to him but one that belongs. He'll never try to do her good. Doing good to any but himself never comes to his mind."

"How does thee know him, to speak so surely?"

"When, at the first, he gave me a letter for her one day, and slipped a sovereign into my hand, and nodded, and smiled at me, I knew him right enough. He never could be true to aught."

"Did thee keep the sovereign?" Faith asked anxiously.

"Ay, that I did. If he was for giving his money away, I'd take it fast enough. The gold gave father boots for a year. Why should I mind?"

Faith's face suffused. How low was Eglington's estimate of humanity!

In the silence that followed the door of her room opened, and her father entered. He held in one hand a paper, in the other a candle. His face

was passive, but his eyes were burning.

"David--David is coming," he cried, in a voice that rang. "Does thee hear, Faith? Davy is coming home!" A woman laughed exultantly. It was not Faith. But still two years passed before David came.

CHAPTER XVIII

TIME, THE IDOL-BREAKER

Lord Windlehurst looked meditatively round the crowded and brilliant salon. His host, the Foreign Minister, had gathered in the vast golden chamber the most notable people of a most notable season, and in as critical a period of the world's politics as had been known for a quarter of a century. After a moment's survey, the ex-Prime-Minister turned to answer the frank and caustic words addressed to him by the Duchess of Snowdon concerning the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. Presently he said:

"But there is method in his haste, dear lady. He is good at his dangerous game. He plays high, he plunges; but, somehow, he makes it do. I've been in Parliament a generation or so, and I've never known an amateur more daring and skilful. I should have given him office had I remained in power. Look at him, and tell me if he wouldn't have been worth the backing."

As Lord Windlehurst uttered the last word with an arid smile, he looked quizzically at the central figure of a group of people gaily talking.

The Duchess impatiently tapped her knee with a fan. "Be thankful you haven't got him on your conscience," she rejoined. "I call Eglington unscrupulous and unreliable. He has but one god--getting on; and he has got on, with a vengeance. Whenever I look at that dear thing he's married, I feel there's no trusting Providence, who seems to make the deserving a footstool for the undeserving. I've known Hylda since she was ten, and I've known him since the minute he came into the world, and I've got the measure of both. She is the finest essence the middle class can distil, and he, oh, he's paraffin-vin ordinaire, if you like it better, a selfish, calculating adventurer!"

Lord Windlehurst chuckled mordantly. "Adventurer! That's what they called me--with more reason. I spotted him as soon as he spoke in the House. There was devilry in him, and unscrupulousness, as you say; but, I confess, I thought it would give way to the more profitable habit of integrity, and that some cause would seize him, make him sincere and mistaken, and give him a few falls. But in that he was more original than I thought. He is superior to convictions. You don't think he married yonder Queen of Hearts from conviction, do you?"

He nodded towards a corner where Hylda, under a great palm, and backed by

a bank of flowers, stood surrounded by a group of people palpably amused and interested; for she had a reputation for wit--a wit that never hurt, and irony that was only whimsical.

"No, there you are wrong," the Duchess answered. "He married from conviction, if ever a man did. Look at her beauty, look at her fortune, listen to her tongue. Don't you think conviction was easy?"

Lord Windlehurst looked at Hylda approvingly. She has the real gift--little information, but much knowledge, the primary gift of public life. Information is full of traps; knowledge avoids them, it reads men; and politics is men--and foreign affairs, perhaps! She is remarkable. I've made some hay in the political world, not so much as the babblers think, but I hadn't her ability at twenty-five."

"Why didn't she see through Eglington?"

"My dear Betty, he didn't give her time. He carried her off her feet. You know how he can talk."

"That's the trouble. She was clever, and liked a clever man, and he--!"

"Quite so. He'd disprove his own honest parentage, if it would help him on--as you say."

"I didn't say it. Now don't repeat that as from me. I'm not clever enough to think of such things. But that Eglington lot--I knew his father and his grandfather. Old Broadbrim they called his grandfather after he turned Quaker, and he didn't do that till he had had his fling, so my father used to say. And Old Broadbrim's father was called I-want-to-know. He was always poking his nose into things, and playing at being a chemist--like this one and the one before. They all fly off. This one's father used to disappear for two or three years at a time. This one will fly off, too. You'll see!

"He is too keen on Number One for that, I fancy. He calculates like a mathematician. As cool as a cracksman of fame and fancy."

The Duchess dropped the fan in her lap. "My dear, I've said nothing as bad as that about him. And there he is at the Foreign Office!"

"Yet, what has he done, Betty, after all? He has never cheated at cards, or forged a cheque, or run away with his neighbour's wife."

"There's no credit in not doing what you don't want to do. There's no virtue in not falling, when you're not tempted. Neighbour's wife! He hasn't enough feeling to face it. Oh no, he'll not break the heart of his neighbour's wife. That's melodrama, and he's a cold-blooded artist. He will torture that sweet child over there until she poisons him, or runs away."

"Isn't he too clever for that? She has a million!"

"He'll not realise it till it's all over. He's too selfish to see--how I hate him!"

Lord Windlehurst smiled indulgently at her. "Ah, you never hated any one--not even the Duke."

"I will not have you take away my character. Of course I've hated, or I wouldn't be worth a button. I'm not the silly thing you've always thought me."

His face became gentler. "I've always thought you one of the wisest women of this world--adventurous, but wise. If it weren't too late, if my day weren't over, I'd ask the one great favour, Betty, and--"

She tapped his arm sharply with her fan. "What a humbug you are--the Great Pretender! But tell me, am I not right about Eglington?"

Windlehurst became grave. "Yes, you are right--but I admire him, too. He is determined to test himself to the full. His ambition is boundless and ruthless, but his mind has a scientific turn--the obligation of energy to apply itself, of intelligence to engage itself to the farthest limit. But service to humanity--"

"Service to humanity!" she sniffed.

"Of course he would think it 'flap-doodle'--except in a speech; but I repeat, I admire him. Think of it all. He was a poor Irish peer, with no wide circle of acquaintance, come of a family none too popular. He strikes out a course for himself--a course which had its dangers, because it was original. He determines to become celebrated--by becoming notorious first. He uses his title as a weapon for advancement as though he were a butter merchant. He plans carefully and adroitly. He writes a book of travel. It is impudent, and it traverses the observations of authorities, and the scientific geographers prance with rage. That was what he wished. He writes a novel. It sets London laughing at me, his political chief. He knew me well enough to be sure I would not resent it. He would have lampooned his grandmother, if he was sure she would not, or could not, hurt him. Then he becomes more audacious. He publishes a monograph on the painters of Spain, artificial, confident, rhetorical, acute: as fascinating as a hide-and-seek drawing-room play--he is so cleverly escaping from his ignorance and indiscretions all the while. Connoisseurs laugh, students of art shriek a little, and Ruskin writes a scathing letter, which was what he had played for. He had got something for nothing cheaply. The few who knew and despised him did not matter, for they were able and learned and obscure, and, in the world where he moves, most people are superficial, mediocre, and 'tuppence coloured.' It was all very brilliant. He pursued his notoriety, and got it."

"Industrious Eglington!"

"But, yes, he is industrious. It is all business. It was an enormous risk, rebelling against his party, and leaving me, and going over; but

his temerity justified itself, and it didn't matter to him that people said he went over to get office as we were going out. He got the office- and people forget so soon. Then, what does he do--"

"He brings out another book, and marries a wife, and abuses his old friends--and you."

"Abuse? With his tongue in his cheek, hoping that I should reply. Dev'lishly ingenious! But on that book of Electricity and Disease he scored. In most other things he's a barber-shop philosopher, but in science he has got a flare, a real talent. So he moves modestly in this thing, for which he had a fine natural gift and more knowledge than he ever had before in any department, whose boundaries his impertinent and ignorant mind had invaded. That book gave him a place. It wasn't full of new things, but it crystallised the discoveries, suggestions, and expectations of others; and, meanwhile, he had got a name at no cost. He is so various. Look at it dispassionately, and you will see much to admire in his skill. He pleases, he amuses, he startles, he baffles, he mystifies."

The Duchess made an impatient exclamation. "The silly newspapers call him a 'remarkable man, a personality.' Now, believe me, Windlehurst, he will overreach himself one of these days, and he'll come down like a stick."

"There you are on solid ground. He thinks that Fate is with him, and that, in taking risks, he is infallible. But the best system breaks at political roulette sooner or later. You have got to work for something outside yourself, something that is bigger than the game, or the end is sickening."

"Eglington hasn't far to go, if that's the truth."

"Well, well, when it comes, we must help him--we must help him up again."

The Duchess nervously adjusted her wig, with ludicrously tiny fingers for one so ample, and said petulantly: "You are incomprehensible. He has been a traitor to you and to your party, he has thrown mud at you, he has played with principles as my terrier plays with his rubber ball, and yet you'll run and pick him up when he falls, and--"

"And kiss the spot to make it well," he laughed softly, then added with a sigh: "Able men in public life are few; 'far too few, for half our tasks; we can spare not one.' Besides, my dear Betty, there is his pretty lass o' London."

The Duchess was mollified at once. "I wish she had been my girl," she said, in a voice a little tremulous. "She never needed looking after. Look at the position she has made for herself. Her father wouldn't go into society, her mother knew a mere handful of people, and--"

"She knew you, Betty."

"Well, suppose I did help her a little--I was only a kind of reference. She did the rest. She's set a half-dozen fashions herself--pure genius. She was born to lead. Her turnouts were always a little smarter, her horses travelled a little faster, than other people's. She took risks, too, but she didn't play a game; she only wanted to do things well. We all gasped when she brought Adelaide to recite from 'Romeo and Juliet' at an evening party, but all London did the same the week after."

"She discovered, and the Duchess of Snowdon applied the science. Ah, Betty, don't think I don't agree. She has the gift. She has temperament. No woman should have temperament. She hasn't scope enough to wear it out in some passion for a cause. Men are saved in spite of themselves by the law of work. Forty comes to a man of temperament, and then a passion for a cause seizes him, and he is safe. A woman of temperament at forty is apt to cut across the bows of iron-clad convention and go down. She has temperament, has my lady yonder, and I don't like the look of her eyes sometimes. There's dark fire smouldering in them. She should have a cause; but a cause to a woman now-a-days means 'too little of pleasure, too much of pain,' for others."

"What was your real cause, Windlehurst? You had one, I suppose, for you've never had a fall."

"My cause? You ask that? Behold the barren figtree! A lifetime in my country's service, and you who have driven me home from the House in your own brougham, and told me that you understood--oh, Betty!"

She laughed. "You'll say something funny as you're dying, Windlehurst."

"Perhaps. But it will be funny to know that presently I'll have a secret that none of you know, who watch me 'launch my pinnacle into the dark.' But causes? There are hundreds, and all worth while. I've come here to-night for a cause--no, don't start, it's not you, Betty, though you are worth any sacrifice. I've come here to-night to see a modern Paladin, a real crusader:

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies, When a new planet swims into his ken."

"Yes, that's poetry, Windlehurst, and you know I love it--I've always kept yours. But who's the man--the planet?"

"Egyptian Claridge."

"Ah, he is in England?"

"He will be here to-night; you shall see him."

"Really! What is his origin?"

He told her briefly, adding: "I've watched the rise of Claridge Pasha. I've watched his cause grow, and now I shall see the man--ah, but here comes our lass o' London!"

The eyes of both brightened, and a whimsical pleasure came to the mask-like face of Lord Windlehurst. There was an eager and delighted look in Hylda's face also as she quickly came to them, her cavaliers following.

The five years that had passed since that tragic night in Cairo had been more than kind to her. She was lissome, radiant, and dignified, her face was alive with expression, and a delicate grace was in every movement. The dark lashes seemed to have grown longer, the brown hair fuller, the smile softer and more alluring.

"She is an invaluable asset to the Government," Lord Windlehurst murmured as she came. "No wonder the party helped the marriage on. London conspired for it, her feet got tangled in the web--and he gave her no time to think. Thinking had saved her till he came."

By instinct Lord Windlehurst knew. During the first year after the catastrophe at Kaid's Palace Hylda could scarcely endure the advances made by her many admirers, the greatly eligible and the eager ineligible, all with as real an appreciation of her wealth as of her personal attributes. But she took her place in London life with more than the old will to make for herself, with the help of her aunt Conyngham, an individual position.

The second year after her visit to Egypt she was less haunted by the dark episode of the Palace, memory tortured her less; she came to think of David and the part he had played with less agitation. At first the thought of him had moved her alternately to sympathy and to revolt. His chivalry had filled her with admiration, with a sense of confidence, of dependence, of touching and vital obligation; but there was, too, another overmastering feeling. He had seen her life naked, as it were, stripped of all independence, with the knowledge of a dangerous indiscretion which, to say the least, was a deformity; and she inwardly resented it, as one would resent the exposure of a long-hidden physical deformity, even by the surgeon who saved one's life. It was not a very lofty attitude of mind, but it was human--and feminine.

These moods had been always dissipated, however, when she recalled, as she did so often, David as he stood before Nahoum Pasha, his soul fighting in him to make of his enemy--of the man whose brother he had killed--a fellow-worker in the path of altruism he had mapped out for himself. David's name had been continually mentioned in telegraphic reports and journalistic correspondence from Egypt; and from this source she had learned that Nahoum Pasha was again high in the service of Prince Kaid. When the news of David's southern expedition to the revolting slave-dealing tribes began to appear, she was deeply roused. Her agitation was the more intense because she never permitted herself to talk of him to others, even when his name was discussed at dinner-tables, accompanied by strange legends of his origin and stranger romances regarding his call to power by Kaid.

She had surrounded him with romance; he seemed more a hero of history than of her own real and living world, a being apart. Even when there

came rumblings of disaster, dark dangers to be conquered by the Quaker crusader, it all was still as of another life. True it was, that when his safe return to Cairo was announced she had cried with joy and relief; but there was nothing emotional or passionate in her feeling; it was the love of the lower for the higher, the hero-worship of an idealist in passionate gratitude.

And, amid it all, her mind scarcely realised that they would surely meet again. At the end of the second year the thought had receded into an almost indefinite past. She was beginning to feel that she had lived two lives, and that this life had no direct or vital bearing upon her previous existence, in which David had moved. Yet now and then the perfume of the Egyptian garden, through which she had fled to escape from tragedy, swept over her senses, clouded her eyes in the daytime, made them burn at night.

At last she had come to meet and know Eglington. From the first moment they met he had directed his course towards marriage. He was the man of the moment. His ambition seemed but patriotism, his ardent and overwhelming courtship the impulse of a powerful nature. As Lord Windlehurst had said, he carried her off her feet, and, on a wave of devotion and popular encouragement, he had swept her to the altar,

The Duchess held both her hands for a moment, admiring her, and, presently, with a playful remark upon her unselfishness, left her alone with Lord Windlehurst.

As they talked, his mask-like face became lighted from the brilliant fire in the inquisitorial eyes, his lips played with topics of the moment in a mordant fashion, which drew from her flashing replies. Looking at her, he was conscious of the mingled qualities of three races in her--English, Welsh, and American-Dutch of the Knickerbocker strain; and he contrasted her keen perception and her exquisite sensitiveness with the purebred Englishwomen round him, stately, kindly, handsome, and monotonously intelligent.

"Now I often wonder," he said, conscious of, but indifferent to, the knowledge that he and the brilliant person beside him were objects of general attention--"I often wonder, when I look at a gathering like this, how many undiscovered crimes there are playing about among us. They never do tell--or shall I say, we never do tell?"

All day, she knew not why, Hylde had been nervous and excited. Without reason his words startled her. Now there flashed before her eyes a room in a Palace at Cairo, and a man lying dead before her. The light slowly faded out of her eyes, leaving them almost lustreless, but her face was calm, and the smile on her lips stayed. She fanned herself slowly, and answered nonchalantly: "Crime is a word of many meanings. I read in the papers of political crimes--it is a common phrase; yet the criminals appear to go unpunished."

"There you are wrong," he answered cynically. "The punishment is, that political virtue goes unrewarded, and in due course crime is the only

refuge to most. Yet in politics the temptation to be virtuous is great."

She laughed now with a sense of relief. The intellectual stimulant had brought back the light to her face. "How is it, then, with you-- inveterate habit or the strain of the ages? For they say you have not had your due reward."

He smiled grimly. "Ah, no, with me virtue is the act of an inquiring mind--to discover where it will lead me. I began with political crime-- I was understood! I practise political virtue: it embarrasses the world, it fogs them, it seems original, because so unnecessary. Mine is the scientific life. Experiment in old substances gives new--well, say, new precipitations. But you are scientific, too. You have a laboratory, and have much to do--with retorts."

"No, you are thinking of my husband. The laboratory is his."

"But the retorts are yours."

"The precipitations are his."

"Ah, well, at least you help him to fuse the constituents! . . . But now, be quite confidential to an old man who has experimented too. Is your husband really an amateur scientist, or is he a scientific amateur? Is it a pose or a taste? I fiddled once--and wrote sonnets; one was a pose, the other a taste."

It was mere persiflage, but it was a jest which made an unintended wound. Hylda became conscious of a sudden sharp inquiry going on in her mind. There flashed into it the question, Does Eglington's heart ever really throb for love of any object or any cause? Even in moments of greatest intimacy, soon after marriage, when he was most demonstrative towards her, he had seemed preoccupied, except when speaking about himself and what he meant to do. Then he made her heart throb in response to his confident, ardent words--concerning himself. But his own heart, did it throb? Or was it only his brain that throbbed?

Suddenly, with an exclamation, she involuntarily laid a hand upon Windlehurst's arm. She was looking down the room straight before her to a group of people towards which other groups were now converging, attracted by one who seemed to be a centre of interest.

Presently the eager onlookers drew aside, and Lord Windlehurst observed moving up the room a figure he had never seen before. The new-comer was dressed in a grey and blue official dress, unrelieved save by silver braid at the collar and at the wrists. There was no decoration, but on the head was a red fez, which gave prominence to the white, broad forehead, with the dark hair waving away behind the ears. Lord Windlehurst held his eye-glass to his eye in interested scrutiny. "H'm," he said, with lips pursed out, "a most notable figure, a most remarkable face! My dear, there's a fortune in that face. It's a national asset."

He saw the flush, the dumb amazement, the poignant look in Lady

Eglinton's face, and registered it in his mind. "Poor thing," he said to himself, "I wonder what it is all about--I wonder. I thought she had no unregulated moments. She gave promise of better things." The Foreign Minister was bringing his guest towards them. The new-comer did not look at them till within a few steps of where they stood. Then his eyes met those of Lady Eglinton. For an instant his steps were arrested. A swift light came into his face, softening its quiet austerity and strength.

It was David.

CHAPTER XIX

SHARPER THAN A SWORD

A glance of the eye was the only sign of recognition between David and Hylda; nothing that others saw could have suggested that they had ever met before. Lord Windlehurst at once engaged David in conversation.

At first when Hylda had come back from Egypt, those five years ago, she had often wondered what she would think or do if she ever were to see this man again; whether, indeed, she could bear it. Well, the moment and the man had come. Her eyes had gone blind for an instant; it had seemed for one sharp, crucial moment as though she could not bear it; then the gulf of agitation was passed, and she had herself in hand.

While her mind was engaged subconsciously with what Lord Windlehurst and David said, comprehending it all, and, when Lord Windlehurst appealed to her, offering by a word contribution to the 'pourparler', she was studying David as steadily as her heated senses would permit her.

He seemed to her to have put on twenty years in the steady force of his personality--in the composure of his bearing, in the self-reliance of his look, though his face and form were singularly youthful. The face was handsome and alight, the look was that of one who weighed things; yet she was conscious of a great change. The old delicate quality of the features was not so marked, though there was nothing material in the look, and the head had not a sordid line, while the hand that he now and again raised, brushing his forehead meditatively, had gained much in strength and force. Yet there was something--something different, that brought a slight cloud into her eyes. It came to her now, a certain melancholy in the bearing of the figure, erect and well-balanced as it was. Once the feeling came, the certainty grew. And presently she found a strange sadness in the eyes, something that lurked behind all that he did and all that he was, some shadow over the spirit. It was even more apparent when he smiled.

As she was conscious of this new reading of him, a motion arrested her glance, a quick lifting of the head to one side, as though the mind had suddenly been struck by an idea, the glance flying upward in abstracted

questioning. This she had seen in her husband, too, the same brisk lifting of the head, the same quick smiling. Yet this face, unlike Eglinton's, expressed a perfect single-mindedness; it wore the look of a self-effacing man of luminous force, a concentrated battery of energy. Since she had last seen him every sign of the provincial had vanished. He was now the well-modulated man of affairs, elegant in his simplicity of dress, with the dignified air of the intellectual, yet with the decision of a man who knew his mind.

Lord Windlehurst was leaving. Now David and she were alone. Without a word they moved on together through the throng, the eyes of all following them, until they reached a quiet room at one end of the salon, where were only a few people watching the crowd pass the doorway.

"You will be glad to sit," he said, motioning her to a chair beside some palms. Then, with a change of tone, he added: "Thee is not sorry I am come?"

Thee--the old-fashioned simple Quaker word! She put her fingers to her eyes. Her senses were swimming with a distant memory. The East was in her brain, the glow of the skies, the gleam of the desert, the swish of the Nile, the cry of the sweet-seller, the song of the dance-girl, the strain of the darabukkeh, the call of the skis. She saw again the ghiassas drifting down the great river, laden with dourha; she saw the mosque of the blue tiles with its placid fountain, and its handful of worshippers praying by the olive-tree. She watched the moon rise above the immobile Sphinx, she looked down on the banqueters in the Palace, David among them, and Foorgat Bey beside her. She saw Foorgat Bey again lying dead at her feet. She heard the stir of the leaves; she caught the smell of the lime-trees in the Palace garden as she fled. She recalled her reckless return to Cairo from Alexandria. She remembered the little room where she and David, Nahoum and Mizraim, crossed a bridge over a chasm, and stood upon ground which had held good till now--till this hour, when the man who had played a most vital part in her life had come again out of a land which, by some forced obliquity of mind and stubbornness of will, she had assured herself she would never see again.

She withdrew her hand from her eyes, and saw him looking at her calmly, though his face was alight. "Thee is fatigued," he said. "This is labour which wears away the strength." He made a motion towards the crowd.

She smiled a very little, and said: "You do not care for such things as this, I know. Your life has its share of it, however, I suppose."

He looked out over the throng before he answered. "It seems an eddy of purposeless waters. Yet there is great depth beneath, or there were no eddy; and where there is depth and the eddy there is danger--always." As he spoke she became almost herself again. "You think that deep natures have most perils?"

"Thee knows it is so. Human nature is like the earth: the deeper the plough goes into the soil unploughed before, the more evil substance is

turned up--evil that becomes alive as soon as the sun and the air fall upon it."

"Then, women like me who pursue a flippant life, who ride in this merry-go-round"--she made a gesture towards the crowd beyond--"who have no depth, we are safest, we live upon the surface." Her gaiety was forced; her words were feigned.

"Thee has passed the point of danger, thee is safe," he answered meaningly.

"Is that because I am not deep, or because the plough has been at work?" she asked. "In neither case I am not sure you are right."

"Thee is happily married," he said reflectively; "and the prospect is fair."

"I think you know my husband," she said in answer, and yet not in answer.

"I was born in Hamley where he has a place--thee has been there?" he asked eagerly.

"Not yet. We are to go next Sunday, for the first time to the Cloistered House. I had not heard that my husband knew you, until I saw in the paper a few days ago that your home was in Hamley. Then I asked Eglington, and he told me that your family and his had been neighbours for generations."

"His father was a Quaker," David rejoined, "but he forsook the faith."

"I did not know," she answered, with some hesitation. There was no reason why, when she and Eglington had talked of Hamley, he should not have said his own father had once been a Quaker; yet she had dwelt so upon the fact that she herself had Quaker blood, and he had laughed so much over it, with the amusement of the superior person, that his silence on this one point struck her now with a sense of confusion.

"You are going to Hamley--we shall meet there?" she continued.

"To-day I should have gone, but I have business at the Foreign Office to-morrow. One needs time to learn that all 'private interests and partial affections' must be sacrificed to public duty."

"But you are going soon? You will be there on Sunday?"

"I shall be there to-morrow night, and Sunday, and for one long week at least. Hamley is the centre of the world, the axle of the universe--you shall see. You doubt it?" he added, with a whimsical smile.

"I shall dispute most of what you say, and all that you think, if you do not continue to use the Quaker 'thee' and 'thou'--ungrammatical as you are so often."

"Thee is now the only person in London, or in England, with whom I use 'thee' and 'thou.' I am no longer my own master, I am a public servant, and so I must follow custom."

"It is destructive of personality. The 'thee' and 'thou' belong to you. I wonder if the people of Hamley will say 'thee' and 'thou' to me. I hope, I do hope they will."

"Thee may be sure they will. They are no respecters of persons there. They called your husband's father Robert--his name was Robert. Friend Robert they called him, and afterwards they called him Robert Denton till he died."

"Will they call me Hylda?" she asked, with a smile. "More like they will call thee Friend Hylda; it sounds simple and strong," he replied.

"As they call Claridge Pasha Friend David," she answered, with a smile. "David is a good name for a strong man."

"That David threw a stone from a sling and smote a giant in the forehead. The stone from this David's sling falls into the ocean and is lost beneath the surface."

His voice had taken on a somewhat sombre tone, his eyes looked away into the distance; yet he smiled too, and a hand upon his knee suddenly closed in sympathy with an inward determination.

A light of understanding came into her face. They had been keeping things upon the surface, and, while it lasted, he seemed a lesser man than she had thought him these past years. But now--now there was the old unschooled simplicity, the unique and lonely personality, the homely soul and body bending to one root-idea, losing themselves in a wave of duty. Again he was to her, once more, the dreamer, the worker, the conqueror--the conqueror of her own imagination. She had in herself the soul of altruism, the heart of the crusader. Touched by the fire of a great idea, she was of those who could have gone out into the world without wallet or scrip, to work passionately for some great end.

And she had married the Earl of Eglington!

She leaned towards David, and said eagerly: "But you are satisfied--you are satisfied with your work for poor Egypt?"

"Thee says 'poor Egypt,'" he answered, "and thee says well. Even now she is not far from the day of Rameses and Joseph. Thee thinks perhaps thee knows Egypt--none knows her."

"You know her--now?"

He shook his head slowly. "It is like putting one's ear to the mouth of the Sphinx. Yet sometimes, almost in despair, when I have lain down in the desert beside my camel, set about with enemies, I have got a message from the barren desert, the wide silence, and the stars." He paused.

"What is the message that comes?" she asked softly. "It is always the same: Work on! Seek not to know too much, nor think that what you do is of vast value. Work, because it is yours to be adjusting the machinery in your own little workshop of life to the wide mechanism of the universe and time. One wheel set right, one flying belt adjusted, and there is a step forward to the final harmony--ah, but how I preach!" he added hastily.

His eyes were fixed on hers with a great sincerity, and they were clear and shining, yet his lips were smiling--what a trick they had of smiling! He looked as though he should apologise for such words in such a place.

She rose to her feet with a great suspiration, with a light in her eyes and a trembling smile.

"But no, no, no, you inspire one. Thee inspires me," she said, with a little laugh, in which there was a note of sadness. "I may use 'thee,' may I not, when I will? I am a little a Quaker also, am I not? My people came from Derbyshire, my American people, that is--and only forty years ago. Almost thee persuades me to be a Quaker now," she added. "And perhaps I shall be, too," she went on, her eyes fixed on the crowd passing by, Eglington among them.

David saw Eglington also, and moved forward with her.

"We shall meet in Hamley," she said composedly, as she saw her husband leave the crush and come towards her. As Eglington noticed David, a curious enigmatical glance flashed from his eyes. He came forward, however, with outstretched hand.

"I am sorry I was not at the Foreign Office when you called to-day. Welcome back to England, home--and beauty." He laughed in a rather mirthless way, but with a certain empressement, conscious, as he always was, of the onlookers. "You have had a busy time in Egypt?" he continued cheerfully, and laughed again.

David laughed slightly, also, and Hylda noticed that it had a certain resemblance in its quick naturalness to that of her husband.

"I am not sure that we are so busy there as we ought to be," David answered. "I have no real standards. I am but an amateur, and have known nothing of public life. But you should come and see."

"It has been in my mind. An ounce of eyesight is worth a ton of print. My lady was there once, I believe"--he turned towards her--"but before your time, I think. Or did you meet there, perhaps?" He glanced at both curiously. He scarcely knew why a thought flashed into his mind--as though by some telepathic sense; for it had never been there before, and there was no reason for its being there now.

Hylda saw what David was about to answer, and she knew instinctively that he would say they had never met. It shamed her. She intervened as she

saw he was about to speak.

"We were introduced for the first time to-night," she said; "but Claridge Pasha is part of my education in the world. It is a miracle that Hamley should produce two such men," she added gaily, and laid her fan upon her husband's arm lightly. "You should have been a Quaker, Harry, and then you two would have been--"

"Two Quaker Don Quixotes," interrupted Eglington ironically.

"I should not have called you a Don Quixote," his wife lightly rejoined, relieved at the turn things had taken. "I cannot imagine you tilting at wind-mills--"

"Or saving maidens in distress? Well, perhaps not; but you do not suggest that Claridge Pasha tilts at windmills either--or saves maidens in distress. Though, now I come to think, there was an episode." He laughed maliciously. "Some time ago it was--a lass of the cross-roads. I think I heard of such an adventure, which did credit to Claridge Pasha's heart, though it shocked Hamley at the time. But I wonder, was the maiden really saved?"

Lady Eglington's face became rigid. "Well, yes," she said slowly, "the maiden was saved. She is now my maid. Hamley may have been shocked, but Claridge Pasha has every reason to be glad that he helped a fellow-being in trouble."

"Your maid--Heaver?" asked Eglington in surprise, a swift shadow crossing his face.

"Yes; she only told me this morning. Perhaps she had seen that Claridge Pasha was coming to England. I had not, however. At any rate, Quixotism saved her."

David smiled. "It is better than I dared to hope," he remarked quietly.

"But that is not all," continued Hylda. "There is more. She had been used badly by a man who now wants to marry her--has tried to do so for years. Now, be prepared for a surprise, for it concerns you rather closely, Eglington. Fate is a whimsical jade. Whom do you think it is? Well, since you could never guess, it was Jasper Kimber."

Eglington's eyes opened wide. "This is nothing but a coarse and impossible stage coincidence," he laughed. "It is one of those tricks played by Fact to discredit the imagination. Life is laughing at us again. The longer I live, the more I am conscious of being an object of derision by the scene-shifters in the wings of the stage. What a cynical comedy life is at the best!"

"It all seems natural enough," rejoined David.

"It is all paradox."

"Isn't it all inevitable law? I have no belief in 'antic Fate.'"

Hylde realised, with a new and poignant understanding, the difference of outlook on life between the two men. She suddenly remembered the words of Confucius, which she had set down in her little book of daily life:

"By nature we approximate, it is only experience that drives us apart."

David would have been content to live in the desert all his life for the sake of a cause, making no calculations as to reward. Eglington must ever have the counters for the game.

"Well, if you do not believe in 'antic Fate,' you must be greatly puzzled as you go on," he rejoined, laughing; "especially in Egypt, where the East and the West collide, race against race, religion against religion, Oriental mind against Occidental intellect. You have an unusual quantity of Quaker composure, to see in it all 'inevitable law.' And it must be dull. But you always were, so they say in Hamley, a monument of seriousness."

"I believe they made one or two exceptions," answered David drily.

"I had assurances."

Eglington laughed boyishly. "You are right. You achieved a name for humour in a day--'a glass, a kick, and a kiss,' it was. Do you have such days in Egypt?"

"You must come and see," David answered lightly, declining to notice the insolence. "These are critical days there. The problems are worthy of your care. Will you not come?"

Eglington was conscious of a peculiar persuasive influence over himself that he had never felt before. In proportion, however, as he felt its compelling quality, there came a jealousy of the man who was its cause. The old antagonism, which had had its sharpest expression the last time they had met on the platform at Heddington, came back. It was one strong will resenting another--as though there was not room enough in the wide world of being for these two atoms of life, sparks from the ceaseless wheel, one making a little brighter flash than the other for the moment, and then presently darkness, and the whirring wheel which threw them off, throwing off millions of others again.

On the moment Eglington had a temptation to say something with an edge, which would show David that his success in Egypt hung upon the course that he himself and the weak Foreign Minister, under whom he served, would take. And this course would be his own course largely, since he had been appointed to be a force and strength in the Foreign Office which his chief did not supply. He refrained, however, and, on the moment, remembered the promise he had given to Faith to help David.

A wave of feeling passed over him. His wife was beautiful, a creature of various charms, a centre of attraction. Yet he had never really loved her--so many sordid elements had entered into the thought of marriage with her, lowering the character of his affection. With a perversity

which only such men know, such heart as he had turned to the unknown Quaker girl who had rebuked him, scathed him, laid bare his soul before himself, as no one ever had done. To Eglington it was a relief that there was one human being--he thought there was only one--who read him through and through; and that knowledge was in itself as powerful an influence as was the secret between David and Hylde. It was a kind of confessional, comforting to a nature not self-contained. Now he restrained his cynical intention to deal David a side-thrust, and quietly said:

"We shall meet at Hamley, shall we not? Let us talk there, and not at the Foreign Office. You would care to go to Egypt, Hylde?"

She forced a smile. "Let us talk it over at Hamley." With a smile to David she turned away to some friends.

Eglington offered to introduce David to some notable people, but he said that he must go--he was fatigued after his journey. He had no wish to be lionised.

As he left the salon, the band was playing a tune that made him close his eyes, as though against something he would not see. The band in Kaid's Palace had played it that night when he had killed Foorgat Bey.

CHAPTER XX

EACH AFTER HIS OWN ORDER

With the passing years new feelings had grown up in the heart of Luke Claridge. Once David's destiny and career were his own peculiar and self-assumed responsibility. "Inwardly convicted," he had wrenched the lad away from the natural circumstances of his life, and created a scheme of existence for him out of his own conscience--a pious egoist.

After David went to Egypt, however, his mind involuntarily formed the resolution that "Davy and God should work it out together."

He had grown very old in appearance, and his quiet face was almost painfully white; but the eyes burned with more fire than in the past. As the day approached when David should arrive in England, he walked by himself continuously, oblivious of the world round him. He spoke to no one, save the wizened Elder Meacham, and to John Fairley, who rightly felt that he had a share in the making of Claridge Pasha.

With head perched in the air, and face half hidden in his great white collar, the wizened Elder, stopping Luke Claridge in the street one day, said:

"Does thee think the lad will ride in Pharaoh's chariot here?"

There were sly lines of humour about the mouth of the wizened Elder as he spoke, but Luke Claridge did not see.

"Pride is far from his heart," he answered portentously. "He will ride in no chariot. He has written that he will walk here from Heddington, and none is to meet him."

"He will come by the cross-roads, perhaps," rejoined the other piously. "Well, well, memory is a flower or a rod, as John Fox said, and the cross-roads have memories for him."

Again flashes of humour crossed his face, for he had a wide humanity, of insufficient exercise.

"He has made full atonement, and thee does ill to recall the past, Reuben," rejoined the other sternly.

"If he has done no more that needs atonement than he did that day at the cross-roads, then has his history been worthy of Hamley," rejoined the wizened Elder, eyes shut and head buried in his collar. "Hamley made him--Hamley made him. We did not spare advice, or example, or any correction that came to our minds--indeed, it was almost a luxury. Think you, does he still play the flute--an instrument none too grave, Luke?"

But, to this, Luke Claridge exclaimed impatiently and hastened on; and the little wizened Elder chuckled to himself all the way to the house of John Fairley. None in Hamley took such pride in David as did these two old men, who had loved him from a child, but had discreetly hidden their favour, save to each other. Many times they had met and prayed together in the weeks when his life was in notorious danger in the Soudan.

As David walked through the streets of Heddington making for the open country, he was conscious of a new feeling regarding the place. It was familiar, but in a new sense. Its grimy, narrow streets, unlovely houses, with shut windows, summer though it was, and no softening influences anywhere, save here and there a box of sickly geraniums in the windows, all struck his mind in a way they had never done before. A mile away were the green fields, the woods, the roadsides gay with flowers and shrubs--loveliness was but over the wall, as it were; yet here the barrack-like houses, the grey, harsh streets, seemed like prison walls, and the people in them prisoners who, with every legal right to call themselves free, were as much captives as the criminal on some small island in a dangerous sea. Escape--where? Into the gulf of no work and degradation?

They never lifted their eyes above the day's labour. They were scarce conscious of anything beyond. What were their pleasures? They had imitations of pleasures. To them a funeral or a wedding, a riot or a vociferous band, a dog-fight or a strike, were alike in this, that they quickened feelings which carried them out of themselves, gave them a sense of intoxication.

Intoxication? David remembered the far-off day of his own wild rebellion

in Hamley. From that day forward he had better realised that in the hearts of so many of the human race there was a passion to forget themselves; to blot out, if for a moment only, the troubles of life and time; or, by creating a false air of exaltation, to rise above them. Once in the desert, when men were dying round him of fever and dysentery, he had been obliged, exhausted and ill, scarce able to drag himself from his bed, to resort to an opiate to allay his own sufferings, that he might minister to others. He remembered how, in the atmosphere it had created--an intoxication, a soothing exhilaration and pervasive thrill-- he had saved so many of his followers. Since then the temptation had come upon him often when trouble weighed or difficulties surrounded him --accompanied always by recurrence of fever--to resort to the insidious medicine. Though he had fought the temptation with every inch of his strength, he could too well understand those who sought for "surcease of pain"

"Seeking for surcease of pain,
Pilgrim to Lethe I came;
Drank not, for pride was too keen,
Stung by the sound of a name!"

As the plough of action had gone deep into his life and laid bare his nature to the light, there had been exposed things which struggled for life and power in him, with the fiery strength which only evil has.

The western heavens were aglow. On every hand the gorse and the may were in bloom, the lilacs were coming to their end, but wild rhododendrons were glowing in the bracken, as he stepped along the road towards the place where he was born. Though every tree and roadmark was familiar, yet he was conscious of a new outlook. He had left these quiet scenes inexperienced and untravelled, to be thrust suddenly into the thick of a struggle of nations over a sick land. He had worked in a vortex of debilitating local intrigue. All who had to do with Egypt gained except herself, and if she moved in revolt or agony, they threatened her. Once when resisting the pressure and the threats of war of a foreign diplomatist, he had, after a trying hour, written to Faith in a burst of passionate complaint, and his letter had ended with these words.

"In your onward march, O men,
White of face, in promise whiter,
You unsheath the sword, and then
Blame the wronged as the fighter.

"Time, ah, Time, rolls onward o'er
All these foetid fields of evil,
While hard at the nation's core
Eats the burning rust and weevill

"Nathless, out beyond the stars
Reigns the Wiser and the Stronger,
Seeing in all strifes and wars
Who the wronged, who the wronger."

Privately he had spoken thus, but before the world he had given way to no impulse, in silence finding safety from the temptation to diplomatic evasion. Looking back over five years, he felt now that the sum of his accomplishment had been small.

He did not realise the truth. When his hand was almost upon the object for which he had toiled and striven--whether pacifying a tribe, meeting a loan by honest means, building a barrage, irrigating the land, financing a new industry, or experimenting in cotton--it suddenly eluded him. Nahoum had snatched it away by subterranean wires. On such occasions Nahoum would shrug his shoulders, and say with a sigh, "Ah, my friend, let us begin again. We are both young; time is with us; and we will flourish palms in the face of Europe yet. We have our course set by a bright star. We will continue."

Yet, withal, David was the true altruist. Even now as he walked this road which led to his old home, dear to him beyond all else, his thoughts kept flying to the Nile and to the desert.

Suddenly he stopped. He was at the cross-roads. Here he had met Kate Heaver, here he had shamed his neighbours--and begun his work in life. He stood for a moment, smiling, as he looked at the stone where he had sat those years ago, his hand feeling instinctively for his flute. Presently he turned to the dusty road again.

Walking quickly away, he swung into the path of the wood which would bring him by a short cut to Hamley, past Soolsby's cottage. Here was the old peace, the old joy of solitude among the healing trees. Experience had broadened his life, had given him a vast theatre of work; but the smell of the woods, the touch of the turf, the whispering of the trees, the song of the birds, had the ancient entry to his heart.

At last he emerged on the hill where Soolsby lived. He had not meant, if he could help it, to speak to any one until he had entered the garden of the Red Mansion, but he had inadvertently come upon this place where he had spent the most momentous days of his life, and a feeling stronger than he cared to resist drew him to the open doorway. The afternoon sun was beating in over the threshold as he reached it, and, at his footstep, a figure started forward from the shadow of a corner.

It was Kate Heaver.

Surprise, then pain showed in her face; she flushed, was agitated.

"I am sorry. It's too bad--it's hard on him you should see," she said in a breath, and turned her head away for an instant; but presently looked him in the face again, all trembling and eager. "He'll be sorry enough to-morrow," she added solicitously, and drew away from something, she had been trying to hide.

Then David saw. On a bench against a wall lay old Soolsby--drunk. A cloud passed across his face and left it pale.

"Of course," he said simply, and went over and touched the heaving shoulders reflectively. "Poor Soolsby!"

"He's been sober four years--over four," she said eagerly. "When he knew you'd come again, he got wild, and he would have the drink in spite of all. Walking from Heddington, I saw him at the tavern, and brought him home."

"At the tavern--" David said reflectively.

"The Fox and Goose, sir." She turned her face away again, and David's head came up with a quick motion. There it was, five years ago, that he had drunk at the bar, and had fought Jasper Kimber.

"Poor fellow!" he said again, and listened to Soolsby's stertorous breathing, as a physician looks at a patient whose case he cannot control, does not wholly understand.

The hand of the sleeping man was suddenly raised, his head gave a jerk, and he said mumblingly: "Claridge for ever!"

Kate nervously intervened. "It fair beat him, your coming back, sir. It's awful temptation, the drink. I lived in it for years, and it's cruel hard to fight it when you're worked up either way, sorrow or joy. There's a real pleasure in being drunk, I'm sure. While it lasts you're rich, and you're young, and you don't care what happens. It's kind of you to take it like this, sir, seeing you've never been tempted and mightn't understand." David shook his head sadly, and looked at Soolsby in silence.

"I don't suppose he took a quarter what he used to take, but it made him drunk. 'Twas but a minute of madness. You've saved him right enough."

"I was not blaming him. I understand--I understand."

He looked at her clearly. She was healthy and fine-looking, with large, eloquent eyes. Her dress was severe and quiet, as became her occupation --a plain, dark grey, but the shapely fulness of the figure gave softness to the outlines. It was no wonder Jasper Kimber wished to marry her; and, if he did, the future of the man was sure. She had a temperament which might have made her an adventuress--or an opera-singer. She had been touched in time, and she had never looked back.

"You are with Lady Eglington now, I have heard?" he asked.

She nodded.

"It was hard for you in London at first?"

She met his look steadily. "It was easy in a way. I could see round me what was the right thing to do. Oh, that was what was so awful in the old life over there at Heddington,"--she pointed beyond the hill, "we didn't know what was good and what was bad. The poor people in big

working-places like Heddington ain't much better than heathens, leastways as to most things that matter. They haven't got a sensible religion, not one that gets down into what they do. The parson doesn't reach them--he talks about church and the sacraments, and they don't get at what good it's going to do them. And the chapel preachers ain't much better. They talk and sing and pray, when what the people want is light, and hot water, and soap, and being shown how to live, and how to bring up children healthy and strong, and decent-cooked food. I'd have food-hospitals if I could, and I'd give the children in the schools one good meal a day. I'm sure the children of the poor go wrong and bad more through the way they live than anything. If only they was taught right --not as though they was paupers! Give me enough nurses of the right sort, and enough good, plain cooks, and meat three times a week, and milk and bread and rice and porridge every day, and I'd make a new place of any town in England in a year. I'd--"

She stopped all at once, however, and flushing, said: "I didn't stop to think I was talking to you, sir."

"I am glad you speak to me so," he answered gently. "You and I are both reformers at heart."

"Me? I've done nothing, sir, not any good to anybody or anything."

"Not to Jasper Kimber?"

"You did that, sir; he says so; he says you made him."

A quick laugh passed David's lips. "Men are not made so easily. I think I know the trowel and the mortar that built that wall! Thee will marry him, friend?"

Her eyes burned as she looked at him. She had been eternally dispossessed of what every woman has the right to have--one memory possessing the elements of beauty. Even if it remain but for the moment, yet that moment is hers by right of her sex, which is denied the wider rights of those they love and serve. She had tasted the cup of bitterness and drunk of the waters of sacrifice. Married life had no lure for her. She wanted none of it. The seed of service had, however, taken root in a nature full of fire and light and power, undisciplined and undeveloped as it was. She wished to do something--the spirit of toil, the first habit of the life of the poor, the natural medium for the good that may be in them, had possession of her.

This man was to her the symbol of work. To have cared for his home, to have looked after his daily needs, to have sheltered him humbly from little things, would have been her one true happiness. And this was denied her. Had she been a man, it would have been so easy. She could have offered to be his servant; could have done those things which she could do better than any, since hers would be a heart-service.

But even as she looked at him now, she had a flash of insight and prescience. She had, from little things said or done, from newspapers

marked and a hundred small indications, made up her mind that her mistress's mind dwelt much upon "the Egyptian." The thought flashed now that she might serve this man, after all; that a day might come when she could say that she had played a part in his happiness, in return for all he had done for her. Life had its chances--and strange things had happened. In her own mind she had decided that her mistress was not happy, and who could tell what might happen? Men did not live for ever! The thought came and went, but it left behind a determination to answer David as she felt.

"I will not marry Jasper," she answered slowly. "I want work, not marriage."

"There would be both," he urged.

"With women there is the one or the other, not both."

"Thee could help him. He has done credit to himself, and he can do good work for England. Thee can help him."

"I want work alone, not marriage, sir."

"He would pay thee his debt."

"He owes me nothing. What happened was no fault of his, but of the life we were born in. He tired of me, and left me. Husbands tire of their wives, but stay on and beat them."

"He drove thee mad almost, I remember."

"Wives go mad and are never cured, so many of them. I've seen them die, poor things, and leave the little ones behind. I had the luck wi' me. I took the right turning at the cross-roads yonder."

"Thee must be Jasper's wife if he asks thee again," he urged.

"He will come when I call, but I will not call," she answered.

"But still thee will marry him when the heart is ready," he persisted.

"It shall be ready soon. He needs thee. Good-bye, friend. Leave Soolsby alone. He will be safe. And do not tell him that I have seen him so." He stooped over and touched the old man's shoulder gently.

He held out his hand to her. She took it, then suddenly leaned over and kissed it. She could not speak.

He stepped to the door and looked out. Behind the Red Mansion the sun was setting, and the far garden looked cool and sweet. He gave a happy sigh, and stepped out and down.

As he disappeared, the woman dropped into a chair, her arms upon a table. Her body shook with sobs. She sat there for an hour, and then, when the sun was setting, she left the drunken man sleeping, and made her way down

the hill to the Cloistered House. Entering, she was summoned to her mistress's room. "I did not expect my lady so soon," she said, surprised.

"No; we came sooner than we expected. Where have you been?"

"At Soolsby's hut on the hill, my lady."

"Who is Soolsby?"

Kate told her all she knew, and of what had happened that afternoon--but not all.

CHAPTER XXI

"THERE IS NOTHING HIDDEN WHICH SHALL NOT BE REVEALED"

A fortnight had passed since they had come to Hamley--David, Eglington, and Hylda--and they had all travelled a long distance in mutual understanding during that time, too far, thought Luke Claridge, who remained neutral and silent. He would not let Faith go to the Cloistered House, though he made no protest against David going; because he recognised in these visits the duty of diplomacy and the business of the nation--more particularly David's business, which, in his eyes, swallowed all. Three times David had gone to the Cloistered House; once Hylda and he had met in the road leading to the old mill, and once at Soolsby's hut. Twice, also, in the garden of his old home he had seen her, when she came to visit Faith, who had captured her heart at once. Eglington and Faith had not met, however. He was either busy in his laboratory, or with his books, or riding over the common and through the woods, and their courses lay apart.

But there came an afternoon when Hylda and David were a long hour together at the Cloistered House. They talked freely of his work in Egypt. At last she said: "And Nahoum Pasha?"

"He has kept faith."

"He is in high place again?"

"He is a good administrator."

"You put him there!"

"Thee remembers what I said to him, that night in Cairo?"

Hylda closed her eyes and drew in a long breath. Had there been a word spoken that night when she and David and Nahoum met which had not bitten into her soul! That David had done so much in Egypt without ruin or death was a tribute to his power. Nevertheless, though Nahoum had not

struck yet, she was certain he would one day. All that David now told her of the vicissitudes of his plans, and Nahoum's sympathy and help, only deepened this conviction. She could well believe that Nahoum gave David money from his own pocket, which he replaced by extortion from other sources, while gaining credit with David for co-operation.

Armenian Christian Nahoum might be, but he was ranged with the East against the West, with the reactionary and corrupt against advance, against civilisation and freedom and equality. Nahoum's Christianity was permeated with Orientalism, the Christian belief obscured by the theism of the Muslim. David was in a deadlier struggle than he knew. Yet it could serve no good end to attempt to warn him now. He had outlived peril so far; might it not be that, after all, he would win?

So far she had avoided Nahoum's name in talks with David. She could scarcely tell why she did, save that it opened a door better closed, as it were; but the restraint had given way at last.

"Thee remembers what I said that night?" David repeated slowly.

"I remember--I understand. You devise your course and you never change. It is like building on a rock. That is why nothing happens to you as bad as might happen."

"Nothing bad ever happens to me."

"The philosophy of the desert," she commented smiling. "You are living in the desert even when you are here. This is a dream; the desert and Egypt only are real.

"That is true, I think. I seem sometimes like a sojourner here, like a spirit 'revisiting the scenes of life and time.'" He laughed boyishly.

"Yet you are happy here. I understand now why and how you are what you are. Even I that have been here so short a time feel the influence upon me. I breathe an air that, somehow, seems a native air. The spirit of my Quaker grandmother revives in me. Sometimes I sit hours thinking, scarcely stirring; and I believe I know now how people might speak to each other without words. Your Uncle Benn and you--it was so with you, was it not? You heard his voice speaking to you sometimes; you understood what he meant to say to you? You told me so long ago."

David inclined his head. "I heard him speak as one might speak through a closed door. Sometimes, too, in the desert I have heard Faith speak to me."

"And your grandfather?"

"Never my grandfather--never. It would seem as though, in my thoughts, I could never reach him; as though masses of opaque things lay between. Yet he and I--there is love between us. I don't know why I never hear him."

"Tell me of your childhood, of your mother. I have seen her grave under

the ash by the Meeting-house, but I want to know of her from you."

"Has not Faith told you?"

"We have only talked of the present. I could not ask her; but I can ask you. I want to know of your mother and you together."

"We were never together. When I opened my eyes she closed hers. It was so little to get for the life she gave. See, was it not a good face?"
He drew from his pocket a little locket which Faith had given him years ago, and opened it before her.

Hylda looked long. "She was exquisite," she said, "exquisite."

"My father I never knew either. He was a captain of a merchant ship. He married her secretly while she was staying with an aunt at Portsmouth. He sailed away, my mother told my grandfather all, and he brought her home here. The marriage was regular, of course, but my grandfather, after announcing it, and bringing it before the Elders, declared that she should never see her husband again. She never did, for she died a few months after, when I came, and my father died very soon, also. I never saw him, and I do not know if he ever tried to see me. I never had any feeling about it. My grandfather was the only father I ever knew, and Faith, who was born a year before me, became like a sister to me, though she soon made other pretensions!" He laughed again, almost happily.
"To gain an end she exercised authority as my aunt!"

"What was your father's name?"

"Fetherdon--James Fetherdon."

"Fetherdon--James Fetherdon !" Involuntarily Hylda repeated the name after him. Where had she heard the name before--or where had she seen it? It kept flashing before her eyes. Where had she seen it? For days she had been rummaging among old papers in the library of the Cloistered House, and in an old box full of correspondence and papers of the late countess, who had died suddenly. Was it among them that she had seen the name? She could not tell. It was all vague, but that she had seen it or heard it she was sure.

"Your father's people, you never knew them?"

He shook his head. "Nor of them. Here was my home--I had no desire to discover them. We draw in upon ourselves here."

"There is great force in such a life and such a people," she answered.
"If the same concentration of mind could be carried into the wide life of the world, we might revolutionise civilisation; or vitalise and advance it, I mean--as you are doing in Egypt."

"I have done nothing in Egypt. I have sounded the bugle--I have not had my fight."

"That is true in a sense," she replied. "Your real struggle is before you. I do not know why I say it, but I do say it; I feel it. Something here"--she pressed her hand to her heart--"something here tells me that your day of battle is yet to come." Her eyes were brimming and full of excitement. "We must all help you." She gained courage with each word. "You must not fight alone. You work for civilisation; you must have civilisation behind you." Her hands clasped nervously; there was a catch in her throat. "You remember then, that I said I would call to you one day, as your Uncle Benn did, and you should hear and answer me. It shall not be that I will call. You--you will call, and I will help you if I can. I will help, no matter what may seem to prevent, if there is anything I can do. I, surely I, of all the world owe it to you to do what I can, always.

"I owe so much--you did so much. Oh, how it haunts me! Sometimes in the night I wake with a start and see it all--all!"

The flood which had been dyked back these years past had broken loose in her heart.

Out of the stir and sweep of social life and duty, of official and political ambition--heart-hungry, for she had no child; heart-lonely, though she had scarce recognised it in the duties and excitements round her--she had floated suddenly into this backwater of a motionless life in Hamley. Its quiet had settled upon her, the shackles of her spirit had been loosed, and dropped from her; she had suddenly bathed her heart and soul in a freer atmosphere than they had ever known before. And David and Hamley had come together. The old impulses, dominated by a divine altruism, were swinging her out upon a course leading she knew not, reeked not, whither--for the moment reeked not. This man's career, the work he was set to do, the ideal before him, the vision of a land redeemed, captured her, carried her panting into a resolve which, however she might modify her speech or action, must be an influence in her life hereafter. Must the penance and the redemption be his only? This life he lived had come from what had happened to her and to him in Egypt. In a deep sense her life was linked with his.

In a flash David now felt the deep significance of their relations. A curtain seemed suddenly to have been drawn aside. He was blinded for a moment. Her sympathy, her desire to help, gave him a new sense of hope and confidence, but--but there was no room in his crusade for any woman; the dear egotism of a life-dream was masterful in him, possessed him.

Yet, if ever his heart might have dwelt upon a woman with thought of the future, this being before him--he drew himself up with a start! . . . He was going to Egypt again in a few days; they might probably never meet again--would not, no doubt--should not. He had pressed her husband to go to Egypt, but now he would not encourage it; he must "finish his journey alone."

He looked again in her eyes, and their light and beauty held him. His own eyes swam. The exaltation of a great idea was upon them, was a bond of fate between them. It was a moment of peril not fully realised by

either. David did realise, however, that she was beautiful beyond all women he had ever seen--or was he now for the first time really aware of the beauty of woman? She had an expression, a light of eye and face, finely alluring beyond mere outline of feature. Yet the features were there, too, regular and fine; and her brown hair waving away from her broad, white forehead over eyes a greyish violet in colour gave her a classic distinction. In the quietness of the face there was that strain of the Quaker, descending to her through three generations, yet enlivened by a mind of impulse and genius.

They stood looking at each other for a moment, in which both had taken a long step forward in life's experience. But presently his eyes looked beyond her, as though at something that fascinated them.

"Of what are you thinking? What do you see?" she asked.

"You, leaving the garden of my house in Cairo, I standing by the fire," he answered, closing his eyes for an instant.

"It is what I saw also," she said breathlessly. "It is what I saw and was thinking of that instant." When, as though she must break away from the cords of feeling drawing her nearer and nearer to him, she said, with a little laugh, "Tell me again of my Chicago cousin? I have not had a letter for a year."

"Lacey, he is with me always. I should have done little had it not been for him. He has remarkable resource; he is never cast down. He has but one fault."

"What is that?"

"He is no respecter of persons. His humour cuts deep. He has a wide heart for your sex. When leaving the court of the King of Abyssinia he said to his Majesty: 'Well, good-bye, King. Give my love to the girls.'"

She laughed again. "How absurd and childish he is! But he is true and able. And how glad you should be that you are able to make true friends, without an effort. Yesterday I met neighbour Fairley, and another little old Elder who keeps his chin in his collar and his eyes on the sky. They did little else but sing your praises. One might have thought that you had invented the world--or Hamley."

"Yet they would chafe if I were to appear among them without these." He glanced down at the Quaker clothes he wore, and made a gesture towards the broadbrimmed hat reposing on a footstool near by.

"It is good to see that you are not changed, not spoiled at all," she remarked, smiling. "Though, indeed, how could you be, who always work for others and never for yourself? All I envy you is your friends. You make them and keep them so."

She sighed, and a shadow came into her eyes suddenly. She was thinking of Eglington. Did he make friends--true friends? In London--was there

one she knew who would cleave to him for love of him? In England--had she ever seen one? In Hamley, where his people had been for so many generations, had she found one?

Herself? Yes, she was his true friend. She would do what would she not do to help him, to serve his interests? What had she not done since she married Her fortune, it was his; her every waking hour had been filled with something devised to help him on his way. Had he ever said to her: "Hylda, you are a help to me"? He had admired her--but was he singular in that? Before she married there were many--since, there had been many --who had shown, some with tact and carefulness, others with a crudeness making her shudder, that they admired her; and, if they might, would have given their admiration another name with other manifestations. Had she repelled it all? She had been too sure of herself to draw her skirts about her; she was too proud to let any man put her at any disadvantage. She had been safe, because her heart had been untouched. The Duchess of Snowdon, once beautiful, but now with a face like a mask, enamelled and rouged and lifeless, had said to her once: "My dear, I ought to have died at thirty. When I was twenty-three I wanted to squeeze the orange dry in a handful of years, and then go out suddenly, and let the dust of forgetfulness cover my bones. I had one child, a boy, and would have no more; and I squeezed the orange! But I didn't go at thirty, and yet the orange was dry. My boy died; and you see what I am--a fright, I know it; and I dress like a child of twenty; and I can't help it."

There had been moments, once, when Hylda, too, had wished to squeeze the orange dry, but something behind, calling to her, had held her back. She had dropped her anchor in perilous seas, but it had never dragged.

"Tell me how to make friends--and keep them," she added gaily.

"If it be true I make friends, thee taught me how," he answered, "for thee made me a friend, and I forget not the lesson."

She smiled. "Thee has learnt another lesson too well," she answered brightly. "Thee must not flatter. It is not that which makes thee keep friends. Thee sees I also am speaking as they do in Hamley--am I not bold? I love the grammarless speech."

"Then use it freely to-day, for this is farewell," he answered, not looking at her.

"This--is--farewell," she said slowly, vaguely. Why should it startle her so? "You are going so soon--where?"

"To-morrow to London, next week to Egypt."

She laid a hand upon herself, for her heart was beating violently. "Thee is not fair to give no warning--there is so much to say," she said, in so low a tone that he could scarcely hear her. "There is the future, your work, what we are to do here to help. What I am to do.

"Thee will always be a friend to Egypt, I know," he answered. "She needs

friends. Thee has a place where thee can help."

"Will not right be done without my voice?" she asked, her eyes half closing. "There is the Foreign Office, and English policy, and the ministers, and--and Eglington. What need of me?"

He saw the thought had flashed into her mind that he did not trust her husband. "Thee knows and cares for Egypt, and knowing and caring make policy easier to frame," he rejoined.

Suddenly a wave of feeling went over her. He whose life had been flung into this field of labour by an act of her own, who should help him but herself?

But it all baffled her, hurt her, shook her. She was not free to help as she wished. Her life belonged to another; and he exacted the payment of tribute to the uttermost farthing. She was blinded by the thought. Yet she must speak. "I will come to Egypt--we will come to Egypt," she said quickly. "Eglington shall know, too; he shall understand. You shall have his help. You shall not work alone."

"Thee can work here," he said. "It may not be easy for Lord Eglington to come."

"You pressed it on him."

Their eyes met. She suddenly saw what was in his mind.

"You know best what will help you most," she added gently.

"You will not come?" he asked.

"I will not say I will not come--not ever," she answered firmly. "It may be I should have to come." Resolution was in her eyes. She was thinking of Nahoum. "I may have to come," she added after a pause, "to do right by you."

He read her meaning. "Thee will never come," he continued confidently. He held out his hand. "Perhaps I shall see you in town," she rejoined, as her hand rested in his, and she looked away. "When do you start for Egypt?"

"To-morrow week, I think," he answered. "There is much to do."

"Perhaps we shall meet in town," she repeated. But they both knew they would not.

"Farewell," he said, and picked up his hat.

As he turned again, the look in her eyes brought the blood to his face, then it became pale. A new force had come into his life.

"God be good to thee," he said, and turned away.

She watched him leave the room and pass through the garden.

"David! David!" she said softly after him.

At the other end of the room her husband, who had just entered, watched her. He heard her voice, but did not hear what she said.

"Come, Hylde, and have some music," he said brusquely.

She scrutinised him calmly. His face showed nothing. His look was enigmatical.

"Chopin is the thing for me," he said, and opened the piano.

CHAPTER XXII

AS IN A GLASS DARKLY

It was very quiet and cool in the Quaker Meeting-house, though outside there was the rustle of leaves, the low din of the bees, the whistle of a bird, or the even tread of horses' hoofs as they journeyed on the London road. The place was full. For a half-hour the worshippers had sat voiceless. They were waiting for the spirit to move some one to speak. As they waited, a lady entered and glided into a seat. Few saw, and these gave no indication of surprise, though they were little used to strangers, and none of the name borne by this lady had entered the building for many years. It was Hylde.

At last the silence was broken. The wizened Elder, with eyes upon the ceiling and his long white chin like ivory on his great collar, began to pray, sitting where he was, his hands upon his knees. He prayed for all who wandered "into by and forbidden paths." He prayed for one whose work was as that of Joseph, son of Jacob; whose footsteps were now upon the sea, and now upon the desert; whose way was set among strange gods and divers heresies--"For there must also be heresies, that they which are approved may be made manifest among the weak." A moment more, and then he added: "He hath been tried beyond his years; do Thou uphold his hands. Once with a goad did we urge him on, when in ease and sloth he was among us, but now he spurth on his spirit and body in too great haste. O put Thy hand upon the bridle, Lord, that He ride soberly upon Thy business."

There was a longer silence now, but at last came the voice of Luke Claridge.

"Father of the fatherless," he said, "my days are as the sands in the hour-glass hastening to their rest; and my place will soon be empty. He goeth far, and I may not go with him. He fighteth alone, like him that strove with wild beasts at Ephesus; do Thou uphold him that he may bring a nation captive. And if a viper fasten on his hand, as chanced to Paul

of old, give him grace to strike it off without hurt. O Lord, he is to me, Thy servant, as the one ewe lamb; let him be Thine when Thou gatherest for Thy vineyard!"

"And if a viper fasten on his hand--" David passed his hand across his forehead and closed his eyes. The beasts at Ephesus he had fought, and he would fight them again--there was fighting enough to do in the land of Egypt. And the viper would fasten on his hand--it had fastened on his hand, and he had struck it off; but it would come again, the dark thing against which he had fought in the desert.

Their prayers had unnerved him, had got into that corner of his nature where youth and its irresponsibility loitered yet. For a moment he was shaken, and then, looking into the faces of the Elders, said: "Friends, I go again upon paths that lead into the wilderness. I know not if I ever shall return. Howsoe'er that may be, I shall walk with firmer step because of all ye do for me."

He closed his eyes and prayed: "O God, I go into the land of ancient plagues and present pestilence. If it be Thy will, bring me home to this good land, when my task is done. If not, by Thy goodness let me be as a stone set by the wayside for others who come after; and save me from the beast and from the viper. 'Thou art faithful, who wilt not suffer us to be tempted above that we are able; but wilt with the temptation also make a way of escape, that we may be able to bear it!'"

He sat down, and all grew silent again; but suddenly some one sobbed aloud-sobbed, and strove to stay the sobbing, and could not, and, getting up, hastened towards the door.

It was Faith. David heard, and came quickly after her. As he took her arm gently, his eyes met those of Hylda. She rose and came out also.

"Will thee take her home?" he said huskily. "I can bear no more."

Hylda placed her arm round Faith, and led her out under the trees and into the wood. As they went, Faith looked back.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Davy," she said softly.

Three lights burned in Hamley: one in the Red Mansion, one in the Cloistered House, and one in Soolsby's hut upon the hill. In the Red Mansion old Luke Claridge, his face pale with feeling, his white hair tumbling about, his head thrust forward, his eyes shining, sat listening, as Faith read aloud letters which Benn Claridge had written from the East many years before. One letter, written from Bagdad, he made her read twice. The faded sheet had in it the glow and glamour of the East; it was like a heart beating with life; emotion rose and fell in it like the waves of the sea. Once the old man interrupted Faith.

"Davy--it is as though Davy spoke. It is like Davy--both Claridge, both Claridge," he said. "But is it not like Davy? Davy is doing what it was in Benn's heart to do. Benn showed the way; Benn called, and Davy came."

He laid both hands upon his knees and raised his eyes. "O Lord, I have sought to do according to Thy will," he whispered. He was thinking of a thing he had long hidden. Through many years he had no doubt, no qualm; but, since David had gone to Egypt, some spirit of unquiet had worked in him. He had acted against the prayer of his own wife, lying in her grave--a quiet-faced woman, who had never crossed him, who had never shown a note of passion in all her life, save in one thing concerning David. Upon it, like some prophetess, she had flamed out. With the insight which only women have where children are concerned, she had told him that he would live to repent of what he had done. She had died soon after, and was laid beside the deserted young mother, whose days had budded and blossomed, and fallen like petals to the ground, while yet it was the spring.

Luke Claridge had understood neither, not his wife when she had said: "Thee should let the Lord do His own work, Luke," nor his dying daughter Mercy, whose last words had been: "With love and sorrow I have sowed; he shall reap rejoicing--my babe. Thee will set him in the garden in the sun, where God may find him--God will not pass him by. He will take him by the hand and lead him home." The old man had thought her touched by delirium then, though her words were but the parable of a mind fed by the poetry of life, by a shy spirit, to which meditation gave fancy and farseeing. David had come by his idealism honestly. The half-mystical spirit of his Uncle Benn had flowed on to another generation through the filter of a woman's sad soul. It had come to David a pure force, a constructive and practical idealism.

Now, as Faith read, there were ringing in the old man's ears the words which David's mother had said before she closed her eyes and passed away: "Set him in the garden in the sun, where God may find him--God will not pass him by." They seemed to weave themselves into the symbolism of Benn Claridge's letter, written from the hills of Bagdad.

"But," the letter continued, "the Governor passed by with his suite, the buckles of the harness of his horses all silver, his carriage shining with inlay of gold, his turban full of precious stones. When he had passed, I said to a shepherd standing by, 'If thou hadst all his wealth, shepherd, what wouldst thou do?' and he answered, 'If I had his wealth, I would sit on the south side of my house in the sun all day and every day.' To a messenger of the Palace, who must ever be ready night and day to run at his master's order, I asked the same. He replied, 'If I had all the Effendina's wealth, I would sleep till I died.' To a blind beggar, shaking the copper in his cup in the highways, pleading dumbly to those who passed, I made similar inquisition, and he replied 'If the wealth of the exalted one were mine, I would sit on the mastaba by the bake-house, and eat three times a day, save at Ramadan, when I would bless Allah the compassionate and merciful, and breakfast at sunset with the flesh of a kid and a dish of dates.' To a woman at the door of a tomb hung with relics of hundreds of poor souls in misery, who besought the buried saint to intercede for her with Allah, I made the same catechism, and she answered, 'Oh, effendi, if his wealth were mine, I would give my son what he has lost.' 'What has he lost, woman?' said

I; and she answered: 'A little house with a garden, and a flock of ten goats, a cow and a dovecote, his inheritance of which he has been despoiled by one who carried a false debt 'gainst his dead father.' And I said to her: 'But if thy wealth were as that of the ruler of the city, thy son would have no need of the little house and garden and the flock of goats, and a cow and a dovecote.' Whereupon she turned upon me in bitterness, and said: 'Were they not his own as the seed of his father? Shall not one cherish that which is his own, which cometh from seed to seed? Is it not the law?' 'But,' said I, 'if his wealth were thine, there would be herds of cattle, and flocks of sheep, and carpets spread, and the banquet-tables, and great orchards.' But she stubbornly shook her head. 'Where the eagle built shall not the young eagle nest? How should God meet me in the way and bless him who stood not by his birth right? The plot of ground was the lad's, and all that is thereon. I pray thee, mock me not.' God knows I did not mock her, for her words were wisdom. So did it work upon me that, after many days, I got for the lad his own again, and there he is happier, and his mother happier, than the Governor in his palace. Later I did learn some truths from the shepherd, the messenger, and the beggar, and the woman with the child; but chiefly from the woman and the child. The material value has no relation to the value each sets upon that which is his own. Behind this feeling lies the strength of the world. Here on this hill of Bagdad I am thinking these things. And, Luke, I would have thee also think on my story of the woman and the child. There is in it a lesson for thee."

When Luke Claridge first read this letter years before, he had put it from him sternly. Now he heard it with a soft emotion. He took the letter from Faith at last and put it in his pocket. With no apparent relevancy, and laying his hand on Faith's shoulder, he said:

"We have done according to our conscience by Davy--God is our witness, so!"

She leaned her cheek against his hand, but did not speak.

In Soolsby's hut upon the hill David sat talking to the old chair-maker. Since his return he had visited the place several times, only to find Soolsby absent. The old man, on awaking from his drunken sleep, had been visited by a terrible remorse, and, whenever he had seen David coming, had fled into the woods. This evening, however, David came in the dark, and Soolsby was caught.

When David entered first, the old man broke down. He could not speak, but leaned upon the back of a chair, and though his lips moved, no sound came forth. But David took him by the shoulders and set him down, and laughed gently in his face, and at last Soolsby got voice and said:

"Egyptian! O Egyptian!"

Then his tongue was loosened and his eye glistened, and he poured out question after question, many pertinent, some whimsical, all frankly answered by David. But suddenly he stopped short, and his eyes sank before the other, who had laid a hand upon his knee.

"But don't, Egyptian, don't! Don't have aught to do with me. I'm only a drunken swine. I kept sober four years, as she knows--as the Angel down yonder in the Red Mansion knows; but the day you came, going out to meet you, I got drunk--blind drunk. I had only been pretending all the time. I was being coaxed along--made believe I was a real man, I suppose. But I wasn't. I was a pillar of sand. When pressure came I just broke down--broke down, Egyptian. Don't be surprised if you hear me grunt. It's my natural speech. I'm a hog, a drink-swilling hog. I wasn't decent enough to stay sober till you had said 'Good day,' and 'How goes it, Soolsby?' I tried it on; it was no good. I began to live like a man, but I've slipped back into the ditch. You didn't know that, did you?"

David let him have his say, and then in a low voice said: "Yes, I knew thee had been drinking, Soolsby." He started. "She told you--Kate Heaver--"

"She did not tell me. I came and found you here with her. You were asleep."

"A drunken sweep!" He spat upon the ground in disgust at himself.

"I ought never have come back here," he added. "It was no place for me. But it drew me. I didn't belong; but it drew me."

"Thee belongs to Hamley. Thee is an honour to Hamley, Soolsby."

Soolsby's eyes widened; the blurred look of rage and self-reproach in them began to fade away.

"Thee has made a fight, Soolsby, to conquer a thing that has had thee by the throat. There's no fighting like it. It means a watching every hour, every minute--thee can never take the eye off it. Some days it's easy, some days it's hard, but it's never so easy that you can say, 'There is no need to watch.' In sleep it whispers and wakes you; in the morning, when there are no shadows, it casts a shadow on the path. It comes between you and your work; you see it looking out of the eyes of a friend. And one day, when you think it has been conquered, that you have worn it down into oblivion and the dust, and you close your eyes and say, 'I am master,' up it springs with fury from nowhere you can see, and catches you by the throat; and the fight begins again. But you sit stronger, and the fight becomes shorter; and after many battles, and you have learned never to be off guard, to know by instinct where every ambush is, then at last the victory is yours. It is hard, it is bitter, and sometimes it seems hardly worth the struggle. But it is--it is worth the struggle, dear old man."

Soolsby dropped on his knees and caught David by the arms. "How did you know--how did you know?" he asked hoarsely. "It's been just as you say. You've watched some one fighting?"

"I have watched some one fighting--fighting," answered David clearly, but his eyes were moist.

"With drink, the same as me?"

"No, with opium--laudanum."

"Oh, I've heard that's worse, that it makes you mad, the wanting it."

"I have seen it so."

"Did the man break down like me?"

"Only once, but the fight is not yet over with him." "Was he--an Englishman?"

David inclined his head. "It's a great thing to have a temptation to fight, Soolsby. Then we can understand others."

"It's not always true, Egyptian, for you have never had temptation to fight. Yet you know it all."

"God has been good to me," David answered, putting a hand on the old man's shoulder. "And thee is a credit to Hamley, friend. Thee will never fall again."

"You know that--you say that to me! Then, by Mary the mother of God, I never will be a swine again," he said, getting to his feet.

"Well, good-bye, Soolsby. I go to-morrow," David said presently.

Soolsby frowned; his lips worked. "When will you come back?" he asked eagerly.

David smiled. "There is so much to do, they may not let me come--not soon. I am going into the desert again."

Soolsby was shaking. He spoke huskily. "Here is your place," he said. "You shall come back--Oh, but you shall come back, here, where you belong."

David shook his head and smiled, and clasped the strong hand again. A moment later he was gone. From the door of the but Soolsby muttered to himself:

"I will bring you back. If Luke Claridge doesn't, then I will bring you back. If he dies, I will bring you--no, by the love of God, I will bring you back while he lives!"

.....

Two thousand miles away, in a Nile village, women sat wailing in dark doorways, dust on their heads, black mantles covering their faces. By the pond where all the people drank, performed their ablutions, bathed their bodies and rinsed their mouths, sat the sheikh-el-beled, the

village chief, taking counsel in sorrow with the barber, the holy man, and others. Now speaking, now rocking their bodies to and fro, in the evening sunlight, they sat and watched the Nile in flood covering the wide wastes of the Fayoum, spreading over the land rich deposits of earth from the mountains of Abyssinia. When that flood subsided there would be fields to be planted with dourha and onions and sugar-cane; but they whose strong arms should plough and sow and wield the sickle, the youth, the upstanding ones, had been carried off in chains to serve in the army of Egypt, destined for the far Soudan, for hardship, misery, and death, never to see their kindred any more. Twice during three months had the dread servant of the Palace come and driven off their best like sheep to the slaughter. The brave, the stalwart, the bread-winners, were gone; and yet the tax-gatherer would come and press for every impost--on the onion-field, the date-palm, the dourha-field, and the clump of sugar-cane, as though the young men, the toilers, were still there. The old and infirm, the children, the women, must now double and treble their labour. The old men must go to the corvee, and mend the banks of the Nile for the Prince and his pashas, providing their own food, their own tools, their own housing, if housing there would be--if it was more than sleeping under a bush by the riverside, or crawling into a hole in the ground, their yeleks their clothes by day, their only covering at night.

They sat like men without hope, yet with the proud, bitter mien of those who had known good and had lost it, had seen content and now were desolate.

Presently one--a lad--the youngest of them, lifted up his voice and began to chant a recitative, while another took a small drum and beat it in unison. He was but just recovered from an illness, or he had gone also in chains to die for he knew not what, leaving behind without hope all that he loved:

"How has the cloud fallen, and the leaf withered on the tree,
The lemon-tree, that standeth by the door.
The melon and the date have gone bitter to the taste,
The weevil, it has eaten at the core
The core of my heart, the mildew findeth it.
My music, it is but the drip of tears,
The garner empty standeth, the oven hath no fire,
Night filleth me with fears.
O Nile that floweth deeply, hast thou not heard his voice?
His footsteps hast thou covered with thy flood?
He was as one who lifteth up the yoke,
He was as one who taketh off the chain,
As one who sheltereth from the rain,
As one who scattereth bread to the pigeons flying.
His purse was at his side, his mantle was for me,
For any who passeth were his mantle and his purse,
And now like a gourd is he withered from our eyes.
His friendship, it was like a shady wood
Whither has he gone?--Who shall speak for us?
Who shall save us from the kourbash and the stripes?
Who shall proclaim us in the palace?"

Who shall contend for us in the gate?
The sakkia turneth no more; the oxen they are gone;
The young go forth in chains, the old waken in the night,
They waken and weep, for the wheel turns backward,
And the dark days are come again upon us--
Will he return no more?
His friendship was like a shady wood,
O Nile that floweth deeply, hast thou not heard his voice?
Hast thou covered up his footsteps with thy flood?
The core of my heart, the mildew findeth it!"

Another-an old man-took up the strain, as the drum kept time to the beat
of the voice with its undulating call and refrain:

"When his footsteps were among us there was peace;
War entered not the village, nor the call of war.
Now our homes are as those that have no roofs.
As a nest decayed, as a cave forsaken,
As a ship that lieth broken on the beach,
Is the house where we were born.
Out in the desert did we bury our gold,
We buried it where no man robbed us, for his arm was strong.
Now are the jars empty, gold did not avail
To save our young men, to keep them from the chains.
God hath swallowed his voice, or the sea hath drowned it,
Or the Nile hath covered him with its flood;
Else would he come when our voices call.
His word was honey in the prince's ear
Will he return no more?"

And now the sheikh-el-beled spoke. "It hath been so since Nahoum Pasha
passed this way four months ago. He hath changed all. War will not
avail. David Pasha, he will come again. His word is as the centre of
the world. Ye have no hope, because ye see the hawks among the starving
sheep. But the shepherd will return from behind the hill, and the hawks
will flee away.

". . . Behold, once was I in the desert. Listen, for mine are the
words of one who hath travelled far--was I not at Damascus and Palmyra
and Bagdad, and at Medina by the tomb of Mahomet?"

Reverently he touched the green turban on his head, evidence of his
journey to Mahomet's tomb. "Once in the desert I saw afar off an oasis
of wood and water, and flying things, and houses where a man might rest.
And I got me down from my camel, and knelt upon my sheepskin, and gave
thanks in the name of Allah. Thereupon I mounted again and rode on
towards that goodly place. But as I rode it vanished from my sight.
Then did I mourn. Yet once again I saw the trees, and flocks of pigeons
and waving fields, and I was hungry and thirsty, and longed exceedingly.
Yet got I down, and, upon my sheep-skin, once more gave thanks to Allah.
And I mounted thereafter in haste and rode on; but once again was I
mocked. Then I cried aloud in my despair. It was in my heart to die
upon the sheep-skin where I had prayed; for I was burned up within, and

there seemed naught to do but say malaish, and go hence. But that goodly sight came again. My heart rebelled that I should be so mocked. I bent down my head upon my camel that I might not see, yet once more I loosed the sheep-skin. Lifting up my heart, I looked again, and again I took hope and rode on. Farther and farther I rode, and lo! I was no longer mocked; for I came to a goodly place of water and trees, and was saved. So shall it be with us. We have looked for his coming again, and our hearts have fallen and been as ashes, for that he has not come. Yet there be mirages, and one day soon David Pasha will come hither, and our pains shall be eased."

"Aiwa, aiwa--yes, yes," cried the lad who had sung to them.

"Aiwa, aiwa," rang softly over the pond, where naked children stooped to drink.

The smell of the cooking-pots floated out from the mud-houses near by.

"Malaish," said one after another, "I am hungry. He will come again--perhaps to-morrow." So they moved towards the houses over the way.

One cursed his woman for wailing in the doorway; one snatched the lid from a cooking-pot; one drew from an oven cakes of dourha, and gave them to those who had none; one knelt and bowed his forehead to the ground in prayer; one shouted the name of him whose coming they desired.

So was David missed in Egypt.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE TENTS OF CUSHAN

"I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction, and the curtains
of the Land of Midian did tremble."

A Hurdy-Gurdy was standing at the corner, playing with shrill insistence a medley of Scottish airs. Now "Loch Lomond" pleaded for pennies from the upper windows:

"For you'll tak' the high road,
and I'll tak' the low road,
And I'll be in Scotland before ye:
But I and my true love will never meet again,
On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond!"

The hurdy-gurdy was strident and insistent, but for a long time no response came. At last, however, as the strains of "Loch Lomond" ceased, a lady appeared on the balcony of a drawing-room, and, leaning over a little forest of flowers and plants, threw a half-crown to the sorry street-musician. She watched the grotesque thing trundle away, then

entering the house again, took a 'cello from the corner of the room and tuned the instrument tenderly. It was Hylda.

Something of the peace of Hamley had followed her to London, but the poignant pain of it had come also. Like Melisande, she had looked into the quiet pool of life and had seen her own face, its story and its foreshadowings. Since then she had been "apart." She had watched life move on rather than shared in its movement. Things stood still for her. That apathy of soul was upon her which follows the inward struggle that exhausts the throb and fret of inward emotions, leaving the mind dominant, the will in abeyance.

She had become conscious that her fate and future were suspended over a chasm, as, on the trapeze of a balloon, an adventurous aeronaut hangs uncertain over the hungry sea, waiting for the coming wind which will either blow the hazardous vessel to its doom or to safe refuge on the land.

She had not seen David after he left Hamley. Their last words had been spoken at the Meeting-house, when he gave Faith to her care. That scene came back to her now, and a flush crept slowly over her face and faded away again. She was recalling, too, the afternoon of that day when she and David had parted in the drawing-room of the Cloistered House, and Eglington had asked her to sing. She thought of the hours with Eglington that followed, first at the piano and afterwards in the laboratory, where in his long blue smock he made experiments. Had she not been conscious of something enigmatical in his gaiety that afternoon, in his cheerful yet cheerless words, she would have been deeply impressed by his appreciation of her playing, and his keen reflections on the merits of the composers; by his still keener attention to his subsequent experiments, and his amusing comments upon them. But, somehow, that very cheerless cheerfulness seemed to proclaim him superficial. Though she had no knowledge of science, she instinctively doubted his earnestness even in this work, which certainly was not pursued for effect. She had put the feeling from her, but it kept returning. She felt that in nothing did he touch the depths. Nothing could possess him wholly; nothing inherent could make him self-effacing.

Yet she wondered, too, if she was right, when she saw his fox-terrier watching him, ever watching him with his big brown eyes as he buoyantly worked, and saw him stoop to pat its head. Or was this, after all, mere animalism, mere superficial vitality, love of health and being? She shuddered, and shut her eyes, for it came home to her that to him she was just such a being of health, vitality and comeliness, on a little higher plane. She put the thought from her, but it had had its birth, and it would not down. He had immense vitality, he was tireless, and abundant in work and industry; he went from one thing to another with ease and swiftly changing eagerness. Was it all mere force--mere man and mind? Was there no soul behind it? There in the laboratory she had laid her hand on the terrier, and prayed in her heart that she might understand him for her own good, her own happiness, and his. Above all else she wanted to love him truly, and to be loved truly, and duty was to her a daily sacrifice, a constant memorial. She realised to the full that

there lay before her a long race unilluminated by the sacred lamp which, lighted at the altar, should still be burning beside the grave.

Now, as she thought of him, she kept saying to herself: "We should have worked out his life together. Work together would have brought peace. He shuts me out--he shuts me out."

At last she drew the bow across the instrument, once, twice, and then she began to play, forgetful of the world. She had a contralto voice, and she sang with a depth of feeling and a delicate form worthy of a professional; on the piano she was effective and charming, but into the 'cello she poured her soul.

For quite an hour she played with scarce an interruption. At last, with a sigh, she laid the instrument against her knee and gazed out of the window. As she sat lost in her dream--a dream of the desert--a servant entered with letters. One caught her eye. It was from Egypt--from her cousin Lacey. Her heart throbbed violently, yet she opened the official-looking envelope with steady fingers. She would not admit even to her self that news from the desert could move her so. She began to read slowly, but presently, with a little cry, she hastened through the pages. It ran:

THE SOUDAN.

DEAR LADY COUSIN,

I'm still not certain how I ought to style you, but I thought I'd compromise as per above. Anyway, it's a sure thing that I haven't bothered you much with country-cousin letters. I figure, however, that you've put some money in Egypt, so to speak, and what happens to this sandy-eyed foundling of the Nile you would like to know. So I've studied the only "complete letter-writer" I could find between the tropic of Capricorn and Khartoum, and this is the contemptible result, as the dagos in Mexico say. This is a hot place by reason of the sun that shines above us, and likewise it is hot because of the niggers that swarm around us. I figure, if we get out of this portion of the African continent inside our skins, that we will have put up a pretty good bluff, and pulled off a ticklish proposition.

It's a sort of early Christian business. You see, David the Saadat is great on moral suasion--he's a master of it; and he's never failed yet--not altogether; though there have been minutes by a stop-watch when I've thought it wouldn't stand the strain. Like the Mississippi steamboat which was so weak that when the whistle blew the engines stopped! When those frozen minutes have come to us, I've tried to remember the correct religious etiquette, but I've not had much practise since I stayed with Aunt Melissa, and lived on skim-milk and early piety. When things were looking as bad as they did for Dives, "Now I lay me down to sleep," and "For what we are about to receive," was all that I could think of. But the Saadat, he's a wonder from Wondertown. With a little stick, or maybe his flute under his arm, he'll smile and string these heathen along,

when you'd think they weren't waiting for anybody. A spear took off his fez yesterday. He never blinked--he's a jim-dandy at keeping cool; and when a hundred mounted heathens made a rush down on him the other day, spears sticking out like quills on a porcupine--2.5 on the shell-road the chargers were going--did he stir? Say, he watched 'em as if they were playing for his benefit. And sure enough, he was right. They parted either side of him when they were ten feet away, and there he was quite safe, a blessing in the storm, a little rock island in the rapids--but I couldn't remember a proper hymn of praise to say.

There's no getting away from the fact that he's got a will or something, a sort of force different from most of us, or perhaps any of us. These heathen feel it, and keep their hands off him. They say he's mad, but they've got great respect for mad people, for they think that God has got their souls above with Him, and that what's left behind on earth is sacred. He talks to 'em, too, like a father in Israel; tells 'em they must stop buying and selling slaves, and that if they don't he will have to punish them! And I sit holding my sides, for we're only two white men and forty "friendlies" altogether, and two revolvers among us; and I've got the two! And they listen to his blarneying, and say, "Aiwa, Saadat! aiwa, Saadat!" as if he had an army of fifty thousand behind him. Sometimes I've sort of hinted that his canoe was carrying a lot of sail; but my! he believes in it all as if there wasn't a spear or a battle-axe or a rifle within a hundred miles of him. We've been at this for two months now, and a lot of ground we covered till we got here. I've ridden the gentle camel at the rate of sixty and seventy miles a day--sort of sweeping through the land, making treaties, giving presents, freeing slaves, appointing governors and sheikhs-el-beled, doing it as if we owned the continent. He mesmerised 'em, simply mesmerised 'em--till we got here. I don't know what happened then. Now we're distinctly rating low, the laugh is on us somehow. But he--mind it? He goes about talking to the sheikhs as though we were all eating off the same corn-cob, and it seems to stupefy them; they don't grasp it. He goes on arranging for a post here and a station there, and it never occurs to him that it ain't really actual. He doesn't tell me, and I don't ask him, for I came along to wipe his stirrups, so to speak. I put my money on him, and I'm not going to worry him. He's so dead certain in what he does, and what he is, that I don't lose any sleep guessing about him. It will be funny if we do win out on this proposition--funnier than anything.

Now, there's one curious thing about it all which ought to be whispered, for I'm only guessing, and I'm not a good guesser; I guessed too much in Mexico about three railways and two silvermines. The first two days after we came here, everything was all right. Then there came an Egyptian, Halim Bey, with a handful of niggers from Cairo, and letters for Claridge Pasha.

From that minute there was trouble. I figure it out this way: Halim was sent by Nahoum Pasha to bring letters that said one thing to the

Saadat, and, when quite convenient, to say other things to Mustafa, the boss-sheikh of this settlement. Halim Bey has gone again, but he has left his tale behind him. I'd stake all I lost, and more than I ever expect to get out of Mexico on that, and maybe I'll get a hatful out of Mexico yet. I had some good mining propositions down there. The Saadat believes in Nahoum, and has made Nahoum what he is; and on the surface Nahoum pretends to help him; but he is running underground all the time. I'd like to help give him a villa at Fazougli. When the Saadat was in England there was a bad time in Egypt. I was in Cairo; I know. It was the same bad old game--the corvee, the kourbash, conscription, a war manufactured to fill the pockets of a few, while the poor starved and died. It didn't come off, because the Saadat wasn't gone long enough, and he stopped it when he came back. But Nahoum he laid the blame on others, and the Saadat took his word for it, and, instead of a war, there came this expedition of his own.

Ten days later.--Things have happened. First, there's been awful sickness among the natives, and the Saadat has had his chance. His medicine-chest was loaded, he had a special camel for it--and he has fired it off. Night and day he has worked, never resting, never sleeping, curing most, burying a few. He looks like a ghost now, but it's no use saying or doing anything. He says: "Sink your own will; let it be subject to a higher, and you need take no thought." It's eating away his life and strength, but it has given us our return tickets, I guess. They hang about him as if he was Moses in the wilderness smiting the rock. It's his luck. Just when I get scared to death, and run down and want a tonic, and it looks as if there'd be no need to put out next week's washing, then his luck steps in, and we get another run. But it takes a heap out of a man, getting scared. Whenever I look on a lot of green trees and cattle and horses, and the sun, to say nothing of women and children, and listen to music, or feel a horse eating up the ground under me, 2.10 in the sand, I hate to think of leaving it, and I try to prevent it. Besides, I don't like the proposition of going, I don't know where. That's why I get seared. But he says that it's no more than turning down the light and turning it up again. They used to call me a dreamer in Mexico, because I kept seeing things that no one else had thought of, and laid out railways and tapped mines for the future; but I was nothing to him. I'm a high-and-dry hedge-clipper alongside. I'm betting on him all the time; but no one seems to be working to make his dreams come true, except himself. I don't count; I'm no good, no real good. I'm only fit to run the commissariat, and see that he gets enough to eat, and has a safe camel, and so on.

Why doesn't some one else help him? He's working for humanity. Give him half a chance, and Haroun-al-Raschid won't be in it. Kaid trusts him, depends on him, stands by him, but doesn't seem to know how to help him when help would do most good. The Saadat does it all himself; and if it wasn't that the poor devil of a fellah sees what he's doing, and cottons to him, and the dervishes and Arabs feel he's right, he might as well leave. But it's just there he

counts. There's something about him, something that's Quaker in him, primitive, silent, and perceptive--if that's a real word--which makes them feel that he's honest, and isn't after anything for himself. Arabs don't talk much; they make each other understand without many words. They think with all their might on one thing at a time, and they think things into happening--and so does he. He's a thousand years old, which is about as old-fashioned as I mean, and as wise, and as plain to read as though you'd write the letters of words as big as a date-palm. That's where he makes the running with them, and they can read their title clear to mansions in the skies!

You should hear him talk with Ebn Ezra Bey--perhaps you don't know of Ezra? He was a friend of his Uncle Benn, and brought the news of his massacre to England, and came back with the Saadat. Well, three days ago Ebn Ezra came, and there came with him, too, Halim Bey, the Egyptian, who had brought the letters to us from Cairo. Elm Ezra found him down the river deserted by his niggers, and sick with this new sort of fever, which the Saadat is knocking out of time. And there he lies, the Saadat caring for him as though he was his brother. But that's his way; though, now I come to think of it, the Saadat doesn't suspect what I suspect, that Halim Bey brought word from Nahoum to our sheikhs here to keep us here, or lose us, or do away with us. Old Ebn Ezra doesn't say much himself, doesn't say anything about that; but he's guessing the same as me. And the Saadat looks as though he was ready for his grave, but keeps going, going, going. He never seems to sleep. What keeps him alive I don't know. Sometimes I feel clean knocked out myself with the little I do, but he's a travelling hospital all by his lonesome.

Later.--I had to stop writing, for things have been going on--several. I can see that Ebn Ezra has told the Saadat things that make him want to get away to Cairo as soon as possible. That it's Nahoum Pasha and others--oh, plenty of others, of course--I'm certain; but what the particular game is I don't know. Perhaps you know over in England, for you're nearer Cairo than we are by a few miles, and you've got the telegraph. Perhaps there's a revolution, perhaps there's been a massacre of Europeans, perhaps Turkey is kicking up a dust, perhaps Europe is interfering--all of it, all at once.

Later still.--I've found out it's a little of all, and the Saadat is ready to go. I guess he can go now pretty soon, for the worst of the fever is over. But something has happened that's upset him--knocked him stony for a minute. Halim Bey was killed last night--by order of the sheikhs, I'm told; but the sheikhs won't give it away. When the Saadat went to them, his eyes blazing, his face pale as a sheet, and as good as swore at them, and treated them as though he'd string them up the next minute, they only put their hands on their heads, and said they were "the fallen leaves for his foot to scatter," the "snow on the hill for his breath to melt"; but they wouldn't give him any satisfaction. So he came back and shut himself up in his tent, and he sits there like a ghost all shrivelled up for want of sleep, and his eyes like a lime-kiln

burning; for now he knows this at least, that Halim Bey had brought some word from Kaid's Palace that set these Arabs against him, and nearly stopped my correspondence. You see, there's a widow in Cairo--she's a sister of the American consul, and I've promised to take her with a party camping in the Fayoum--cute as she can be, and plays the guitar. But it's all right now, except that the Saadat is running too close and fine. If he has any real friends in England among the Government people, or among those who can make the Government people sit up, and think what's coming to Egypt and to him, they'll help him now when he needs it. He'll need help real bad when he gets back to Cairo--if we get that far. It isn't yet a sure thing, for we've got to fight in the next day or two--I forgot to tell you that sooner. There's a bull-Arab on the rampage with five thousand men, and he's got a claim out on our sheikh, Mustafa, for ivory he has here, and there's going to be a scrimmage. We've got to make for a better position to-morrow, and meet Abdullah, the bull-Arab, further down the river. That's one reason why Mustafa and all our friends here are so sweet on us now. They look on the Saadat as a kind of mascot, and they think that he can wipe out the enemy with his flute, which they believe is a witch-stick to work wonders.

He's just sent for me to come, and I must stop soon. Say, he hasn't had sleep for a fortnight. It's too much; he can't stand it. I tried it, and couldn't. It wore me down. He's killing himself for others. I can't manage him; but I guess you could. I apologise, dear Lady Cousin. I'm only a hayseed, and a failure, but I guess you'll understand that I haven't thought only of myself as I wrote this letter. The higher you go in life the more you'll understand; that's your nature. I'll get this letter off by a nigger to-morrow, with those the Saadat is sending through to Cairo by some friendlies. It's only a chance; but everything's chance here now. Anyhow, it's safer than leaving it till the scrimmage. If you get this, won't you try and make the British Government stand by the Saadat? Your husband, the lord, could pull it off, if he tried; and if you ask him, I guess he'd try. I must be off now. David Pasha will be waiting. Well, give my love to the girls!

Your affectionate cousin,

TOM LACEY.

P. S.--I've got a first-class camel for our scrimmage day after to-morrow. Mustafa sent it to me this morning. I had a fight on mules once, down at Oaxaca, but that was child's play. This will be "slaughter in the pan," if the Saadat doesn't stop it somehow. Perhaps he will. If I wasn't so scared I'd wish he couldn't stop it, for it will be a way-up Barbarian scrap, the tongs and the kettle, a bully panjandrum. It gets mighty dull in the desert when you're not moving. But "it makes to think," as the French say. Since I came out here I've had several real centre thoughts, sort of main principles-key-thoughts, that's it. What I want now is a sort of safety-ring to string 'em on and keep 'em safe; for I haven't a

good memory, and I get mighty rattled sometimes. Thoughts like these are like the secret of a combination lock; they let you into the place where the gold and securities and title-deeds of life are. Trouble is, I haven't got a safety-ring, and I'm certain to lose them. I haven't got what you'd call an intellectual memory. Things come in flashes to me out of experiences, and pull me up short, and I say, "Yes, that's it--that's it; I understand." I see why it's so, and what it means, and where it leads, and how far it spreads. It's five thousand years old. Adam thought it after Cain killed Abel, or Abel thought it just before he died, or Eve learned it from Lilit, or it struck Abraham when he went to sacrifice Isaac. Sometimes things hit me deep like that here in the desert. Then I feel I can see just over on the horizon the tents of Moab in the wilderness; that yesterday and to-day are the same; that I've crossed the prairies of the everlasting years, and am playing about with Ishmael in the wild hills, or fighting with Ahab. Then the world and time seem pretty small potatoes.

You see how it is. I never was trained to think, and I get stunned by thoughts that strike me as being dug right out of the centre. Sometimes I'd like to write them down; but I can't write; I can only talk as I'm talking to you. If you weren't so high up, and so much cleverer than I am, and such a thinker, I'd like you to be my safety-ring, if you would. I could tell the key-thoughts to you when they came to me, before I forgot them with all their bearings; and by-and-by they'd do me a lot of good when I got away from this influence, and back into the machinery of the Western world again. If you could come out here, if you could feel what I feel here--and you would feel a thousand times as much--I don't know what you wouldn't do.

It's pretty wonderful. The nights with the stars so white and glittering, and so near that you'd think you could reach up and hand them down; the dark, deep, blue beyond; such a width of life all round you, a sort of never-ending space, that everything you ever saw or did seems little, and God so great in a kind of hovering sense like a pair of wings; and all the secrets of time coming out of it all, and sort of touching your face like a velvet wind. I expect you'll think me sentimental, a first-class squash out of the pumpkin-garden; but it's in the desert, and it gets into you and saturates you, till you feel that this is a kind of middle space between the world of cities, and factories, and railways, and tenement-houses, and the quiet world to come--a place where they think out things for the benefit of future generations, and convey them through incarnations, or through the desert. Say, your ladyship, I'm a chatterer, I'm a two-cent philosopher, I'm a baby; but you are too much like your grandmother, who was the daughter of a Quaker like David Pasha, to laugh at me.

I've got a suit of fine chain-armour which I bought of an Arab down by Darfur. I'm wondering if it would be too cowardly to wear it in the scrap that's coming. I don't know, though, but what I'll wear it, I get so scared. But it will be a frightful hot thing under my

clothes, and it's hot enough without that, so I'm not sure. It depends how much my teeth chatter when I see "the dawn of battle."

I've got one more thing before I stop. I'm going to send you a piece of poetry which the Saadat wrote, and tore in two, and threw away. He was working off his imagination, I guess, as you have to do out here. I collected it and copied it, and put in the punctuation--he didn't bother about that. Perhaps he can't punctuate. I don't understand quite what the poetry means, but maybe you will. Anyway, you'll see that it's a real desert piece. Here it is:

"THE DESERT ROAD

"In the sands I lived in a hut of palm,
There was never a garden to see;
There was never a path through the desert calm,
Nor a way through its storms for me.

"Tenant was I of a lone domain;
The far pale caravans wound
To the rim of the sky, and vanished again;
My call in the waste was drowned.

"The vultures came and hovered and fled;
And once there stole to my door
A white gazelle, but its eyes were dread
With the hurt of the wounds it bore.

"It passed in the dusk with a foot of fear,
And the white cold mists rolled in;

"And my heart was the heart of a stricken deer,
Of a soul in the snare of sin.

"My days they withered like rootless things,
And the sands rolled on, rolled wide;
Like a pelican I, with broken wings,
Like a drifting barque on the tide.

"But at last, in the light of a rose-red day,
In the windless glow of the morn,
From over the hills and from far away,
You came--ah, the joy of the morn!

"And wherever your footsteps fell, there crept
A path--it was fair and wide:
A desert road which no sands have swept,
Where never a hope has died.

"I followed you forth, and your beauty held
My heart like an ancient song;

By that desert road to the blossoming plains
I came--and the way was long!

"So I set my course by the light of your eyes;
I care not what fate may send;
On the road I tread shine the love-starred skies--
The road with never an end."

Not many men can do things like that, and the other things, too,
that he does. Perhaps he will win through, by himself, but is it
fair to have him run the risk? If he ever did you a good turn, as
you once said to me he did, won't you help him now? You are on the
inside of political things, and if you make up your mind to help,
nothing will stop you--that was your grandmother's way. He ought to
get his backing pretty soon, or it won't be any good. . . . I
hear him at his flute. I expect he's tired waiting for me. Well,
give my love to the girls!

T. L.

As Hylda read, she passed through phases of feeling begotten of new
understanding which shook her composure. She had seen David and all that
David was doing; Egypt, and all that was threatening the land through the
eyes of another who told the whole truth--except about his own cowardice,
which was untrue. She felt the issues at stake. While the mention of
David's personal danger left her sick for a moment, she saw the wider
peril also to the work he had set out to do.

What was the thing without the man? It could not exist--it had no
meaning. Where was he now? What had been the end of the battle? He had
saved others, had he saved himself? The most charmed life must be
pierced by the shaft of doom sooner or later; but he was little more than
a youth yet, he had only just begun!

"And the Saadat looks as though he was ready for his grave--but keeps
going, going, going.!" The words kept ringing in her ears. Again: "And
he sits there like a ghost all shrivelled up for want of sleep, and his
eyes like a lime-kiln burning. . . . He hasn't had sleep for a
fortnight. . . . He's killing himself for others."

Her own eyes were shining with a dry, hot light, her lips were quivering,
but her hands upon the letter were steady and firm. What could she do?

She went to a table, picked up the papers, and scanned them hurriedly.
Not a word about Egypt. She thought for a moment, then left the drawing-
room. Passing up a flight of stairs to her husband's study, she knocked
and entered. It was empty; but Eglinton was in the house, for a red
despatch-box lay open on his table. Instinctively she glanced at the
papers exposed in the box, and at the letters beside it. The document on
the top of the pile in the box related to Cyprus--the name caught her
eye. Another document was half-exposed beneath it. Her hand went to her
heart. She saw the words, "Soudan" and "Claridge Pasha." She reached
for it, then drew back her hand, and her eyes closed as though to shut it

out from her sight. Why should she not see it? They were her husband's papers, husband and wife were one. Husband and wife one! She shrank back. Were they one? An overmastering desire was on her. It seemed terrible to wait, when here before her was news of David, of life or death. Suddenly she put out her hand and drew the Cyprus paper over the Egyptian document, so that she might not see it.

As she did so the door opened on her, and Eglington entered. He had seen the swift motion of her hand, and again a look peculiar to him crossed his face, enigmatical, cynical, not pleasant to see.

She turned on him slowly, and he was aware of her inward distress to some degree, though her face was ruled to quietness.

He nodded at her and smiled. She shrank, for she saw in his nod and his smile that suggestion of knowing all about everything and everybody, and thinking the worst, which had chilled her so often. Even in their short married life it had chilled those confidences which she would gladly have poured out before him, if he had been a man with an open soul. Had there been joined to his intellect and temperament a heart capable of true convictions and abiding love, what a man he might have been! But his intellect was superficial, and his temperament was dangerous, because there were not the experiences of a soul of truth to give the deeper hold upon the meaning of life. She shrank now, as, with a little laugh and glancing suggestively at the despatch-box, he said:

"And what do you think of it all?"

She felt as though something was crushing her heart within its grasp, and her eyes took on a new look of pain. "I did not read the papers," she answered quietly.

"I saw them in your fingers. What creatures women are--so dishonourable in little things," he said ironically.

She laid a hand on his. "I did not read them, Harry," she urged.

He smiled and patted her arm. "There, there, it doesn't matter," he laughed. He watched her narrowly. "It matters greatly," she answered gently, though his words had cut her like a knife. "I did not read the papers. I only saw the word 'Cyprus' on the first paper, and I pushed it over the paper which had the word 'Egypt' on it 'Egypt' and 'Claridge,' lest I should read it. I did not wish to read it. I am not dishonourable, Harry."

He had hurt her more than he had ever done; and only the great matter at stake had prevented the lesser part of her from bursting forth in indignation, from saying things which she did not wish to say. She had given him devotion--such devotion, such self-effacement in his career as few women ever gave. Her wealth--that was so little in comparison with the richness of her nature--had been his; and yet his vast egotism took it all as his right, and she was repaid in a kind of tyranny, the more galling and cruel because it was wielded by a man of intellect and

culture, and ancient name and tradition. If he had been warned that he was losing his wife's love, he would have scouted the idea, his self-assurance was so strong, his vanity complete. If, however, he had been told that another man was thinking of his wife, he would have believed it, as he believed now that David had done; and he cherished that belief, and let resentment grow. He was the Earl of Eglington, and no matter what reputation David had reached, he was still a member of a Quaker trader's family, with an origin slightly touched with scandal. Another resentment, however, was steadily rising in him. It galled him that Hylda should take so powerful an interest in David's work in Egypt; and he knew now that she had always done so. It did not ease his vexed spirit to know that thousands of others of his fellow-countrymen did the same. They might do so, but she was his wife, and his own work was the sun round which her mind and interest should revolve.

"Why should you be so keen about Egypt and Claridge Pasha?" he said to her now.

Her face hardened a little. Had he the right to torture her so? To suspect her? She could read it in his eyes. Her conscience was clear. She was no man's slave. She would not be any man's slave. She was master of her own soul. What right had he to catechise her--as though she were a servant or a criminal? But she checked the answer on her tongue, because she was hurt deeper than words could express, and she said, composedly:

"I have here a letter from my cousin Lacey, who is with Claridge Pasha. It has news of him, of events in the Soudan. He had fever, there was to be a fight, and I wished to know if you had any later news. I thought that document there might contain news, but I did not read it. I realised that it was not yours, that it belonged to the Government, that I had no right. Perhaps you will tell me if you have news. Will you?" She leaned against the table wearily, holding her letter.

"Let me read your letter first," he said wilfully.

A mist seemed to come before her eyes; but she was schooled to self-command, and he did not see he had given her a shock. Her first impulse was to hand the letter over at once; then there came the remembrance of all it contained, all it suggested. Would he see all it suggested? She recalled the words Lacey had used regarding a service which David had once done her. If Eglington asked, what could she say? It was not her secret alone, it was another's. Would she have the right, even if she wished it, to tell the truth, or part of the truth? Or, would she be entitled to relate some immaterial incident which would evade the real truth? What good could it do to tell the dark story? What could it serve? Eglington would horribly misunderstand it--that she knew. There were the verses also. They were more suggestive than anything else, though, indeed, they might have referred to another woman, or were merely impersonal; but she felt that was not so. And there was Eglington's innate unbelief in man and woman! Her first impulse held, however. She would act honestly. She would face whatever there was to face. She would not shelter herself; she would not give him the right in the future

to say she had not dealt fairly by him, had evaded any inquest of her life or mind which he might make.

She gave him the letter, her heart standing still, but she was filled with a regnant determination to defend herself, to defend David against any attack, or from any consequences.

All her life and hopes seemed hanging in the balance, as he began to read the letter. With fear she saw his face cloud over, heard an impatient exclamation pass his lips. She closed her eyes to gather strength for the conflict which was upon her. He spoke, and she vaguely wondered what passage in the letter had fixed his attention. His voice seemed very far away. She scarcely understood. But presently it pierced the clouds of numbness between them, and she realised what he was saying:

"Vulgar fellow--I can't congratulate you upon your American cousin. So, the Saadat is great on moral suasion, master of it--never failed yet--not altogether--and Aunt Melissa and skim-milk and early piety!' And 'the Saadat is a wonder from Wondertown'--like a side-show to a circus, a marvel on the flying trapeze! Perhaps you can give me the sense of the letter, if there is any sense in it. I can't read his writing, and it seems interminable. Would you mind?"

A sigh of relief broke from her. A weight slipped away from her heart and brain. It was as though one in armour awaited the impact of a heavy, cruel, overwhelming foe, who suddenly disappeared, and the armour fell from the shoulders, and breath came easily once again.

"Would you mind?" he repeated drily, as he folded up the letter slowly.

He handed it back to her, the note of sarcasm in his voice pricking her like the point of a dagger. She felt angered with herself that he could rouse her temper by such small mean irony. She had a sense of bitter disappointment in him--or was it a deep hurt?--that she had not made him love her, truly love her. If he had only meant the love that he swore before they had married! Why had he deceived her? It had all been in his hands, her fate and future; but almost before the bridal flowers had faded, she had come to know two bitter things: that he had married with a sordid mind; that he was incapable of the love which transmutes the half-comprehending, half-developed affection of the maid into the absorbing, understanding, beautiful passion of the woman. She had married not knowing what love and passion were; uncomprehending, and innocent because uncomprehending; with a fine affection, but capable of loving wholly. One thing had purified her motives and her life--the desire to share with Eglington his public duty and private hopes, to be his confidante, his friend, his coadjutor, proud of him, eager for him, determined to help him. But he had blocked the path to all inner companionship. He did no more than let her share the obvious and outer responsibilities of his life. From the vital things, if there were vital things, she was shut out. What would she not give for one day of simple tenderness and quiet affection, a true day with a true love!

She was now perfectly composed. She told him the substance of the

letter, of David's plight, of the fever, of the intended fight, of Nahoum Pasha, of the peril to David's work. He continued to interrogate her, while she could have shrieked out the question, "What is in yonder document? What do you know? Have you news of his safety?" Would he never stop his questioning? It was trying her strength and patience beyond endurance. At last he drew the document slowly from the despatch-box, and glanced up and down it musingly. "I fancy he won the battle," he said slowly, "for they have news of him much farther down the river. But from this letter I take it he is not yet within the zone of safety--so Nahoum Pasha says." He flicked the document upwards with his thumb.

"What is our Government doing to help him?" she asked, checking her eagerness.

His heart had gradually hardened towards Egypt. Power had emphasised a certain smallness in him. Personal considerations informed the policy of the moment. He was not going to be dragged at the chariot-wheels of the Quaker. To be passive, when David in Egypt had asked for active interest; to delay, when urgency was important to Claridge Pasha; to speak coldly on Egyptian affairs to his chief, the weak Foreign Secretary, this was the policy he had begun.

So he answered now: "It is the duty of the Egyptian Government to help him--of Prince Kaid, of Nahoum Pasha, who is acting for him in his absence, who governs finance, and therefore the army. Egypt does not belong to England."

"Nahoum Pasha is his enemy. He will do nothing to help, unless you force him."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know Nahoum Pasha."

"When did you know Nahoum?"

"In Egypt, years ago."

"Your acquaintance is more varied than I thought," he said sarcastically.

"Oh, do not speak to me like that!" she returned, in a low, indignant voice.

"Do not patronise me; do not be sarcastic."

"Do not be so sensitive," he answered unemotionally.

"You surely do not mean that you--that the Government will not help him? He is doing the work of Europe, of civilisation, of Christianity there. He is sacrificing himself for the world. Do you not see it? Oh, but you do! You would realise his work if you knew Egypt as I have seen it."

"Expediency must govern the policy of nations," he answered critically.

"But, if through your expediency he is killed like a rat in a trap, and his work goes to pieces--all undone! Is there no right in the matter?"

"In affairs of state other circumstances than absolute 'right' enter. Here and there the individual is sacrificed who otherwise would be saved --if it were expedient."

"Oh, Eglington! He is of your own county, of your own village, is your neighbour, a man of whom all England should be proud. You can intervene if you will be just, and say you will. I know that intervention has been discussed in the Cabinet."

"You say he is of my county. So are many people, and yet they are not county people. A neighbour he was, but more in a Scriptural than social sense." He was hurting her purposely.

She made a protesting motion of her hand. "No, no, no, do not be so small. This is a great matter. Do a great thing now; help it to be done for your own honour, for England's honour--for a good man's sake, for your country's sake."

There came a knock at the door. An instant afterwards a secretary entered. "A message from the Prime Minister, sir." He handed over a paper.

"Will you excuse me?" he asked Hylda suavely, in his eyes the enigmatical look that had chilled her so often before. She felt that her appeal had been useless. She prepared to leave the room. He took her hand, kissed it gallantly, and showed her out. It was his way--too civil to be real.

Blindly she made her way to her room. Inside, she suddenly swayed and sank fainting to the ground, as Kate Heaver ran forward to her. Kate saw the letter in the clinched hand. Loosening it, she read two or three sentences with a gasp. They contained Tom Lacey's appeal for David. She lifted Hylda's head to her shoulder with endearing words, and chafed the cold hands, murmuring to herself the while.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE QUESTIONER

"What has thee come to say?"

Sitting in his high-backed chair, Luke Claridge seemed a part of its dignified severity. In the sparsely furnished room with its uncarpeted floor, its plain teak table, its high wainscoting and undecorated walls, the old man had the look of one who belonged to some ancient consistory, a judge whose piety would march with an austerity that would save a human

soul by destroying the body, if need be.

A crisis had come, vaguely foreseen, sombrely eluded. A questioner was before him who, poor, unheeded, an ancient victim of vice, could yet wield a weapon whose sweep of wounds would be wide. Stern and masterful as he looked in his arid isolation, beneath all was a shaking anxiety.

He knew well what the old chair-maker had come to say, but, in the prologue of the struggle before him, he was unwittingly manoeuvring for position.

"Speak," he added presently, as Soolsby fumbled in his great loose pockets, and drew forth a paper. "What has thee to say?"

Without a word, Soolsby handed over the paper, but the other would not take it.

"What is it?" he asked, his lips growing pale. "Read--if thee can read."

The gibe in the last words made the colour leap into Soolsby's face, and a fighting look came. He too had staved off this inevitable hour, had dreaded it, but now his courage shot up high.

"Doost think I have forgotten how to read since the day I put my hand to a writing you've hid so long from them it most concerns? Ay, I can read, and I can write, and I will prove that I can speak too before I've done."

"Read--read," rejoined the old man hoarsely, his hands tightly gripping the chair-arm.

"The fever caught him at Shendy--that is the place--"

"He is not dead--David is not dead?" came the sharp, pained interruption. The old man's head strained forward, his eyes were misty and dazed.

Soolsby's face showed no pity for the other's anxiety; it had a kind of triumph in it. "Nay, he is living," he answered. "He got well of the fever, and came to Cairo, but he's off again into the desert. It's the third time. You can't be tempting Providence for ever. This paper here says it's too big a job for one man--like throwing a good life away. Here in England is his place, it says. And so say I; and so I have come to say, and to hear you say so, too. What is he there? One man against a million. What put it in his head that he thinks he can do it?"

His voice became lower; he fixed his eyes meaningly on the other. "When a man's life got a twist at the start, no wonder it flies off madlike to do the thing that isn't to be done, and leave undone the thing that's here for it to do. Doost think a straight line could come from the crooked line you drew for him?"

"He is safe--he is well and strong again?" asked the old man painfully.

Suddenly he reached out a hand for the paper. "Let me read," he said, in a voice scarce above a whisper.

He essayed to take the paper calmly, but it trembled in his hands. He spread it out and fumbled for his glasses, but could not find them, and he gazed helplessly at the page before him. Soolsby took the paper from him and read slowly:

". . . Claridge Pasha has done good work in Egypt, but he is a generation too soon, it may be two or three too soon. We can but regard this fresh enterprise as a temptation to Fate to take from our race one of the most promising spirits and vital personalities which this generation has produced. It is a forlorn hope. Most Englishmen familiar with Claridge Pasha's life and aims will ask--"

An exclamation broke from the old man. In the pause which followed he said: "It was none of my doing. He went to Egypt against my will."

"Ay, so many a man's said that's not wanted to look his own acts straight in the face. If Our Man had been started different, if he'd started in the path where God A'mighty dropped him, and not in the path Luke Claridge chose, would he have been in Egypt to-day wearing out his life? He's not making carpets there, he's only beating them."

The homely illustration drawn from the business in which he had been interested so many years went home to Claridge's mind. He shrank back, and sat rigid, his brows drawing over the eyes, till they seemed sunk in caverns of the head. Suddenly Soolsby's voice rose angrily. Luke Claridge seemed so remorseless and unyielding, so set in his vanity and self-will! Soolsby misread the rigid look in the face, the pale sternness. He did not know that there had suddenly come upon Luke Claridge the full consciousness of an agonising truth--that all he had done where David was concerned had been a mistake. The hard look, the sternness, were the signals of a soul challenging itself.

"Ay, you've had your own will," cried Soolsby mercilessly. "You've said to God A'mighty that He wasn't able to work out to a good end what He'd let happen; and so you'd do His work for Him. You kept the lad hid away from the people that belonged to him, you kept him out of his own, and let others take his birthright. You put a shame upon him, hiding who his father and his father's people were, and you put a shame upon her that lies in the graveyard--as sweet a lass, as good, as ever lived on earth. Ay, a shame and a scandal! For your eyes were shut always to the sidelong looks, your ears never heard the things people said--'A good-for-nothing ship-captain, a scamp and a ne'er-do-weel, one that had a lass at every port, and, maybe, wives too; one that none knew or ever had seen--a pirate maybe, or a slave-dealer, or a jail-bird, for all they knew! Married--oh yes, married right enough, but nothing else--not even a home. Just a ring on the finger, and then, beyond and away!' Around her life that brought into the world our lad yonder you let a cloud draw down; and you let it draw round his, too, for he didn't even bear his father's name--much less knew who his father was--or live in his father's home, or come by his own in the end. You gave the lad shame and scandal."

Do you think, he didn't feel it, was it much or little? He wasn't walking in the sun, but--"

"Mercy! Mercy!" broke in the old man, his hand before his eyes. He was thinking of Mercy, his daughter, of the words she had said to him when she died, "Set him in the sun, father, where God can find him," and her name now broke from his lips.

Soolsby misunderstood. "Ay, there'll be mercy when right's been done Our Man, and not till then. I've held my tongue for half a lifetime, but I'll speak now and bring him back. Ay, he shall come back and take the place that is his, and all that belongs to him. That lordship yonder--let him go out into the world and make his place as the Egyptian did. He's had his chance to help Our Man, and he has only hurt, not helped him. We've had enough of his second-best lordship and his ways."

The old man's face was painful in its stricken stillness now. He had regained control of himself, his brain had recovered greatly from its first suffusion of excitement.

"How does thee know my lord yonder has hurt and not helped him?" he asked in an even voice, his lips tightening, however. "How does thee know it surely?"

"From Kate Heaven, my lady's maid. My lady's illness--what was it? Because she would help Our Man, and, out of his hatred, yonder second son said that to her which no woman can bear that's a true woman; and then, what with a chill and fever, she's been yonder ailing these weeks past. She did what she could for him, and her husband did what he could against him."

The old man settled back in his chair again. "Thee has kept silent all these years? Thee has never told any that lives?"

"I gave my word to her that died--to our Egyptian's mother--that I would never speak unless you gave me leave to speak, or if you should die before me. It was but a day before the lad was born. So have I kept my word. But now you shall speak. Ay, then, but you shall speak, or I'll break my word to her, to do right by her son. She herself would speak if she was here, and I'll answer her, if ever I see her after Purgatory, for speaking now."

The old man drew himself up in his chair as though in pain, and said very slowly, almost thickly: "I shall answer also for all I did. The spirit moved me. He is of my blood--his mother was dead--in his veins is the blood that runs in mine. His father--aristocrat, spendthrift, adventurer, renegade, who married her in secret, and left her, bidding her return to me, until he came again, and she to bear him a child--was he fit to bring up the boy?"

He breathed heavily, his face became wan and haggard, as he continued: "Restless on land or sea, for ever seeking some new thing, and when he found it, and saw what was therein, he turned away forgetful. God put it

into my heart to abjure him and the life around him. The Voice made me rescue the child from a life empty and bare and heartless and proud. When he returned, and my child was in her grave, he came to me in secret; he claimed the child of that honest lass whom he had married under a false name. I held my hand lest I should kill him, man of peace as I am. Even his father--Quaker though he once became--did we not know ere the end that he had no part or lot with us, that he but experimented with his soul, as with all else? Experiment--experiment--experiment, until at last an Eglington went exploring in my child's heart, and sent her to her grave--the God of Israel be her rest and refuge! What should such high-placed folk do stooping out of their sphere to us who walk in plain paths? What have we in common with them? My soul would have none of them--masks of men, the slaves of riches and titles, and tyrants over the poor."

His voice grew hoarse and high, and his head bent forward. He spoke as though forgetful of Soolsby's presence: "As the East is from the West, so were we separate from these lovers of this world, the self-indulgent, the hard-hearted, the proud. I chose for the child that he should stay with me and not go to him, to remain among his own people and his own class. He was a sinister, an evil man. Was the child to be trusted with him?"

"The child was his own child," broke in Soolsby. "Your daughter was his lady--the Countess of Eglington! Not all the Quakers in heaven or earth could alter that. His first-born son is Earl of Eglington, and has been so these years past; and you, nor his second-best lordship there, nor all the courts in England can alter that. . . . Ay, I've kept my peace, but I will speak out now. I was with the Earl--James Fetherdon he called himself--when he married her that's gone to heaven, if any ever went to heaven; and I can prove all. There's proof aplenty, and 'tis a pity, ay, God's pity! that 'twas not used long ago. Well I knew, as the years passed, that the Earl's heart was with David, but he had not the courage to face it all, so worn away was the man in him. Ah, if the lad had always been with him--who can tell?--he might have been different! Whether so or not, it was the lad's right to take his place his mother gave him, let be whatever his father was. 'Twas a cruel thing done to him. His own was his own, to run his race as God A'mighty had laid the hurdles, not as Luke Claridge willed. I'm sick of seeing yonder fellow in Our Man's place, he that will not give him help, when he may; he that would see him die like a dog in the desert, brother or no brother--"

"He does not know--Lord Eglington does not know the truth?" interposed the old man in a heavy whisper. "He does not know, but, if he knew, would it matter to him! So much the more would he see Our Man die yonder in the sands. I know the breed. I know him yonder, the skim-milk lord. There is no blood of justice, no milk of kindness in him. Do you think his father that I friended in this thing--did he ever give me a penny, or aught save that hut on the hill that was not worth a pound a year? Did he ever do aught to show that he remembered?--Like father like son. I wanted naught. I held my peace, not for him, but for her--for the promise I made her when she smiled at me and said: 'If I shouldn't be seeing thee again, Soolsby, remember; and if thee can ever prove a friend to the child that is to be, prove it.' And I will prove it now. He must

come back to his own. Right's right, and I will have it so. More brains you may have, and wealth you have, but not more common sense than any common man like me. If the spirit moved you to hold your peace, it moves me to make you speak. With all your meek face you've been a hard, stiff-necked man, a tyrant too, and as much an aristocrat to such as me as any lord in the land. But I've drunk the mug of silence to the bottom. I've--" He stopped short, seeing a strange look come over the other's face, then stepped forward quickly as the old man half rose from his chair, murmuring thickly:

"Mercy--David, my lord, come--!" he muttered, and staggered, and fell into Soolsby's arms.

His head dropped forward on his breast, and with a great sigh he sank into unconsciousness. Soolsby laid him on a couch, and ran to the door and called aloud for help.

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The man of silence was silent indeed now. In the room where paralysis had fallen on him a bed was brought, and he lay nerveless on the verge of a still deeper silence. The hours went by. His eyes opened, he saw and recognised them all, but his look rested only on Faith and Soolsby; and, as time went on, these were the only faces to which he gave an answering look of understanding. Days wore away, but he neither spoke nor moved.

People came and went softly, and he gave no heed. There was ever a trouble in his eyes when they were open. Only when Soolsby came did it seem to lessen. Faith saw this, and urged Soolsby to sit by him. She had questioned much concerning what had happened before the stroke fell, but Soolsby said only that the old man had been greatly troubled about David. Once Lady Eglington, frail and gentle and sympathetic, came, but the trouble deepened in his eyes, and the lids closed over them, so that he might not see her face.

When she had gone, Soolsby, who had been present and had interpreted the old man's look according to a knowledge all his own, came over to the bed, leaned down and whispered: "I will speak now."

Then the eyes opened, and a smile faintly flickered at the mouth.

"I will speak now," Soolsby said again into the old man's ear.

CHAPTER XXV

THE VOICE THROUGH THE DOOR

That night Soolsby tapped at the door of the lighted laboratory of the Cloistered House where Lord Eglington was at work; opened it, peered in, and stepped inside.

With a glass retort in his hand Eglington faced him. "What's this--what do you want?" he demanded.

"I want to try an experiment," answered Soolsby grimly.

"Ah, a scientific turn!" rejoined Eglington coolly--looking at him narrowly, however. He was conscious of danger of some kind.

Then for a minute neither spoke. Now that Soolsby had come to the moment for which he had waited for so many years, the situation was not what he had so often prefigured. The words he had chosen long ago were gone from his memory; in his ignorance of what had been a commonplace to Soolsby's dark reflection so long, the man he had meant to bring low stood up before him on his own ground, powerful and unabashed.

Eglington wore a blue smock, and over his eyes was a green shade to protect them from the light, but they peered sharply out at the chair-maker, and were boldly alive to the unexpected. He was no physical coward, and, in any case, what reason had he for physical fear in the presence of this man weakened by vice and age? Yet ever since he was a boy there had existed between them an antagonism which had shown itself in many ways. There had ever been something sinister in Soolsby's attitude to his father and himself.

Eglington vaguely knew that now he was to face some trial of mind and nerve, but with great deliberation he continued dropping liquid from a bottle into the glass retort he carried, his eyes, however, watchful of his visitor, who involuntarily stared around the laboratory.

It was fifteen years since Soolsby had been in this room; and then he had faced this man's father with a challenge on his tongue such as he meant to speak now. The smell of the chemicals, the carboys filled with acids, the queer, tapering glasses with engraved measurements showing against the coloured liquids, the great blue bottles, the mortars and pestles, the microscopic instruments--all brought back the far-off, acrid scene between the late Earl and himself. Nothing had changed, except that now there were wires which gave out hissing sparks, electrical instruments invented since the earlier day; except that this man, gently dropping acids into the round white bottle upon a crystal which gave off musty fumes, was bolder, stronger, had more at stake than the other.

Slowly Eglington moved back to put the retort on a long table against the wall, and Soolsby stepped forward till he stood where the electric sparks were gently hissing about him. Now Eglington leaned against the table, poured some alcohol on his fingers to cleanse the acid from them, and wiped them with a piece of linen, while he looked inquiringly at Soolsby. Still, Soolsby did not speak. Eglington lit a cigarette, and took away the shade from his eyes.

"Well, now, what is your experiment?" he asked, "and why bring it here? Didn't you know the way to the stables or the scullery?"

"I knew my way better here," answered Soolsby, steadying himself.

"Ah, you've been here often?" asked Eglington nonchalantly, yet feeling for the cause of this midnight visit.

"It is fifteen years since I was here, my lord. Then I came to see the Earl of Eglington."

"And so history repeats itself every fifteen years! You came to see the Earl of Eglington then; you come to see the Earl of Eglington again--after fifteen years!"

"I come to speak with him that's called the Earl of Eglington."

Eglington's eyes half closed, as though the light hurt them. "That sounds communistic, or is it pure Quakerism? I believe they used to call my father Friend Robert till he backslided. But you are not a Quaker, Soolsby, so why be too familiar? Or is it merely the way of the old family friend?"

"I knew your father before you were born, my lord--he troosted me then."

"So long? And fifteen years ago--here?" He felt a menace, vague and penetrating. His eyes were hard and cruel.

"It wasn't a question of troost then; 'twas one of right or wrong--naught else."

"Ah--and who was right, and what was wrong?" At that moment there came a tap at the door leading into the living part of the house, and the butler entered. "The doctor--he has used up all his oxygen, my lord. He begs to know if you can give him some for Mr. Claridge. Mr. Claridge is bad to-night."

A sinister smile passed over Eglington's face. "Who brings the message, Garry?"

"A servant--Miss Claridge's, my lord."

An ironical look came into Eglington's eyes; then they softened a little. In a moment he placed a jar of oxygen in the butler's hands.

"My compliments to Miss Claridge, and I am happy to find my laboratory of use at last to my neighbours," he said, and the door closed upon the man.

Then he came back thoughtfully. Soolsby had not moved.

"Do you know what oxygen's for, Soolsby?" he asked quizzically.

"No, my lord, I've never heard tell of it."

"Well, if you brought the top of Ben Lomond to the bottom of a coal-mine--breath to the breathless--that's it.

"You've been doing that to Mr. Claridge, my lord?"

"A little oxygen more or less makes all the difference to a man--it probably will to neighbour Claridge, Soolsby; and so I've done him a good turn."

A grim look passed over Soolsby's face. "It's the first, I'm thinking, my lord, and none too soon; and it'll be the last, I'm thinking, too. It's many a year since this house was neighbourly to that."

Eglington's eyes almost closed, as he studied the other's face; then he said: "I asked you a little while ago who was right and what was wrong when you came to see my father here fifteen years ago. Well?"

Suddenly a thought flashed into his eyes, and it seemed to course through his veins like some anaesthetic, for he grew very still, and a minute passed before he added quietly: "Was it a thing between my father and Luke Claridge? There was trouble--well, what was it?" All at once he seemed to rise above the vague anxiety that possessed him, and he fingered inquiringly a long tapering glass of acids on the bench beside him. "There's been so much mystery, and I suppose it was nothing, after all. What was it all about? Or do you know--eh? Fifteen years ago you came to see my father, and now you have come to see me--all in the light o' the moon, as it were; like a villain in a play. Ah, yes, you said it was to make an experiment--yet you didn't know what oxygen was! It's foolish making experiments, unless you know what you are playing with, Soolsby. See, here are two glasses." He held them up. "If I poured one into the other, we'd have an experiment--and you and I would be picked up in fragments and carried away in a basket. And that wouldn't be a successful experiment, Soolsby."

"I'm not so sure of that, my lord. Some things would be put right then."

"H'm, there would be a new Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and--"

"And Claridge Pasha would come back from Egypt, my lord," was the sharp interjection. Suddenly Soolsby's anger flared up, his hands twitched. "You had your chance to be a friend to him, my lord. You promised her yonder at the Red Mansion that you would help him--him that never wronged you, him you always wronged, and you haven't lifted hand to help him in his danger. A moment since you asked me who was right and what was wrong. You shall know. If you had treated him right, I'd have held my peace, and kept my word to her that's gone these thirty-odd years. I'll hold it no more, and so I told Luke Claridge. I've been silent, but not for your father's sake or yours, for he was as cruel as you, with no heart, and a conscience like a pin's head, not big enough for use. . . . Ay, you shall know. You are no more the Earl of Eglington than me."

"The Earl of Eglington is your elder brother, called David Claridge."

As Soolsby's words poured forth passionately, weighty, Eglington listened like one in a dream. Since this man entered the laboratory fifty reasons

for his coming had flashed across his mind; he had prepared himself at many corners for defence, he had rallied every mental resource, he had imagined a dozen dangerous events which his father and Luke Claridge shared--with the balance against his father; but this thing was beyond all speculation. Yet on the instant the words were said he had a conviction of their inevitable truth. Even as they were uttered, kaleidoscopic memories rushed in, and David's face, figure, personal characteristics, flashed before him. He saw, he felt, the likeness to his father and himself; a thousand things were explained that could only be explained by this fatal fact launched at him without warning. It was as though, fully armed for his battle of life, he had suddenly been stripped of armour and every weapon, and left naked on the field. But he had the mind of the gamester, and the true gamester's self-control. He had taken chances so often that the tornado of ill-luck left him standing.

"What proof have you?" he asked quietly. Soolsby's explicit answer left no ground for doubt. He had not asked the question with any idea of finding gaps in the evidence, but rather to find if there were a chance for resistance, of escape, anywhere. The marriage certificate existed; identification of James Fetherdon with his father could be established by Soolsby and Luke Claridge.

Soolsby and Luke Claridge! Luke Claridge--he could not help but smile cynically, for he was composed and calculating now. A few minutes ago he had sent a jar of oxygen to keep Luke Claridge alive! But for it one enemy to his career, to his future, would be gone. He did not shrink from the thought. Born a gentleman, there were in him some degenerate characteristics which heart could not drown or temperament refine. Selfishness was inwoven with every fibre of his nature.

Now, as he stood with eyes fixed on Soolsby, the world seemed to narrow down to this laboratory. It was a vacuum where sensation was suspended, and the million facts of ordinary existence disappeared into inactivity. There was a fine sense of proportion in it all. Only the bare essential things that concerned him remained: David Claridge was the Earl of Eglington, this man before him knew, Luke Claridge knew; and there was one thing yet to know! When he spoke his voice showed no excitement--the tones were even, colourless.

"Does he know?" In these words he acknowledged that he believed the tale told him.

Soolsby had expected a different attitude; he was not easier in mind because his story had not been challenged. He blindly felt working in the man before him a powerful mind, more powerful because it faced the truth unflinchingly; but he knew that this did not mean calm acceptance of the consequences. He, not Eglington, was dazed and embarrassed, was not equal to the situation. He moved uneasily, changed his position.

"Does he know?" Eglington questioned again quietly. There was no need for Eglington to explain who he was.

"Of course he does not know--I said so. If he knew, do you think he'd be in Egypt and you here, my lord?"

Eglington was very quiet. His intellect more than his passions were now at work.

"I am not sure. You never can tell. This might not mean much to him. He has got his work cut out; he wasn't brought up to this. What he has done is in line with the life he has lived as a pious Quaker. What good would it do to bring him back? I have been brought up to it; I am used to it; I have worked things out 'according to the state of life to which I was called.' Take what I've always had away from me, and I am crippled; give him what he never had, and it doesn't work into his scheme. It would do him no good and me harm--Where's the use? Besides, I am still my father's son. Don't you see how unreasonable you are? Luke Claridge was right. He knew that he and his belonged to a different sphere. He didn't speak. Why do you speak now after all these years when we are all set in our grooves? It's silly to disturb us, Soolsby."

The voice was low, persuasive, and searching; the mind was working as it had never worked before, to achieve an end by peaceful means, when war seemed against him. And all the time he was fascinated by the fact that Soolsby's hand was within a few inches of a live electric wire, which, if he touched, would probably complete "the experiment" he had come to make; and what had been the silence of a generation would continue indefinitely. It was as though Fate had deliberately tempted him and arranged the necessary conditions, for Soolsby's feet were in a little pool of liquid which had been spilled on the floor--the experiment was exact and real.

For minutes he had watched Soolsby's hand near the wire--had watched as he talked, and his talk was his argument for non-interference against warning the man who had come to destroy him and his career. Why had Fate placed that hand so near the wire there, and provided the other perfect conditions for tragedy? Why should he intervene? It would never have crossed his mind to do Soolsby harm, yet here, as the man's arm was stretched out to strike him, Fate offered an escape. Luke Claridge was stricken with paralysis, no doubt would die; Soolsby alone stood in his way.

"You see, Soolsby, it has gone on too long," he added, in a low, penetrating tone. "It would be a crime to alter things now. Give him the earldom and the estates, and his work in Egypt goes to pieces; he will be spoiled for all he wants to do. I've got my faults, but, on the whole, I'm useful, and I play my part here, as I was born to it, as well as most. Anyhow, it's no robbery for me to have what has been mine by every right except the accident of being born after him. I think you'll see that you will do a good thing to let it all be. Luke Claridge, if he was up and well, wouldn't thank you for it--have you got any right to give him trouble, too? Besides, I've saved his life to-night, and. . . . and perhaps I might save yours, Soolsby, if it was in danger."

Soolsby's hand had moved slightly. It was only an inch from the wire.

For an instant the room was terribly still.

An instant, and it might be too late. An instant, and Soolsby would be gone. Eglington watched the hand which had been resting on the table turn slowly over to the wire. Why should he intervene? Was it his business? This thing was not his doing. Destiny had laid the train of circumstance and accident, and who was stronger than Destiny? In spite of himself his eyes fixed themselves on Soolsby's hand. It was but a hair's breadth from the wire. The end would come now. Suddenly a voice was heard outside the door. "Eglington!" it called.

Soolsby started, his hand drew spasmodically away from the wire, and he stepped back quickly.

The door opened, and Hylde entered.

"Mr. Claridge is dead, Eglington," she said. Destiny had decided.

CHAPTER XXVI

"I OWE YOU NOTHING"

Beside the grave under the willow-tree another grave had been made. It was sprinkled with the fallen leaves of autumn. In the Red Mansion Faith's delicate figure moved forlornly among relics of an austere, beloved figure vanished from the apricot-garden and the primitive simplicity of wealth combined with narrow thought.

Since her father's death, the bereaved girl had been occupied by matters of law and business, by affairs of the estate; but the first pressure was over, long letters had been written to David which might never reach him; and now, when the strain was withdrawn, the gentle mind was lost in a grey mist of quiet suffering. In Hamley there were but two in whom she had any real comfort and help--Lady Eglington and the old chair-maker. Of an afternoon or evening one or the other was to be seen in the long high-wainscoted room, where a great fire burned, or in the fruitless garden where the breeze stirred the bare branches.

Almost as deep a quiet brooded in the Cloistered House as in the home where mourning enjoined movement in a minor key. Hylde had not recovered wholly from the illness which had stricken her down on that day in London when she had sought news of David from Eglington, at such cost to her peace and health and happiness. Then had come her slow convalescence in Hamley, and long days of loneliness, in which Eglington seemed to retreat farther and farther from her inner life. Inquiries had poured in from friends in town, many had asked to come and see her; flowers came from one or two who loved her benignly, like Lord Windlehurst; and now and then she had some cheerful friend with her who cared for music or could sing; and then the old home rang; but she was mostly alone, and Eglington was kept in town by official business the greater part of each week. She

did not gain strength as quickly as she ought to have done, and this was what brought the Duchess of Snowdon down on a special mission one day of early November.

Ever since the night she had announced Luke Claridge's death to Eglington, had discovered Soolsby with him, had seen the look in her husband's face and caught the tension of the moment on which she had broken, she had been haunted by a hovering sense of trouble. What had Soolsby been doing in the laboratory at that time of night? What was the cause of this secret meeting? All Hamley knew--she had long known--how Luke Claridge had held the Cloistered House in abhorrence, and she knew also that Soolsby worshipped David and Faith, and, whatever the cause of the family antipathy, championed it. She was conscious of a shadow somewhere, and behind it all was the name of David's father, James Fetherdon. That last afternoon when she had talked with him, and he had told her of his life, she had recalled the name as one she had seen or heard, and it had floated into her mind at last that she had seen it among the papers and letters of the late Countess of Eglington.

As the look in Eglington's face the night she came upon him and Soolsby in the laboratory haunted her, so the look in her own face had haunted Soolsby. Her voice announcing Luke Claridge's death had suddenly opened up a new situation to him. It stunned him; and afterwards, as he saw Hylda with Faith in the apricot-garden, or walking in the grounds of the Cloistered House hour after hour alone or with her maid, he became vexed by a problem greater than had yet perplexed him. It was one thing to turn Eglington out of his lands and home and title; it was another thing to strike this beautiful being, whose smile had won him from the first, whose voice, had he but known, had saved his life. Perhaps the truth in some dim way was conveyed to him, for he came to think of her a little as he thought of Faith.

Since the moment when he had left the laboratory and made his way to the Red Mansion, he and Eglington had never met face to face; and he avoided a meeting. He was not a blackmailer, he had no personal wrongs to avenge, he had not sprung the bolt of secrecy for evil ends; and when he saw the possible results of his disclosure, he was unnerved. His mind had seen one thing only, the rights of "Our Man," the wrong that had been done him and his mother; but now he saw how the sword of justice, which he had kept by his hand these many years, would cut both ways. His mind was troubled, too, that he had spoken while yet Luke Claridge lived, and so broken his word to Mercy Claridge. If he had but waited till the old man died--but one brief half-hour--his pledge would have been kept. Nothing had worked out wholly as he expected. The heavens had not fallen. The "second-best lordship" still came and went, the wheels went round as usual. There was no change; yet, as he sat in his hut and looked down into the grounds of the Cloistered House, he kept saying to himself.

"It had to be told. It's for my lord now. He knows the truth. I'll wait and see. It's for him to do right by Our Man that's beyond and away."

The logic and fairness of this position, reached after much thinking, comforted him. He had done his duty so far. If, in the end, the "second-best lordship" failed to do his part, hid the truth from the world, refused to do right by his half-brother, the true Earl, then would be time to act again. Also he waited for word out of Egypt; and he had a superstitious belief that David would return, that any day might see him entering the door of the Red Mansion.

Eglington himself was haunted by a spectre which touched his elbow by day, and said: "You are not the Earl of Eglington," and at night laid a clammy finger on his forehead, waking him, and whispering in his ear: "If Soolsby had touched the wire, all would now be well!" And as deep as thought and feeling in him lay, he felt that Fate had tricked him--Fate and Hylda. If Hylda had not come at that crucial instant, the chairmaker's but on the hill would be empty. Why had not Soolsby told the world the truth since? Was the man waiting to see what course he himself would take? Had the old chair-maker perhaps written the truth to the Egyptian--to his brother David.

His brother! The thought irritated every nerve in him. No note of kindness or kinship or blood stirred in him. If, before, he had had innate antagonism and a dark, hovering jealousy, he had a black repugnance now--the antipathy of the lesser to the greater nature, of the man in the wrong to the man in the right.

And behind it all was the belief that his wife had set David above him--by how much or in what fashion he did not stop to consider; but it made him desire that death and the desert would swallow up his father's son and leave no trace behind.

Policy? His work in the Foreign Office now had but one policy so far as Egypt was concerned. The active sophistry in him made him advocate non-intervention in Egyptian affairs as diplomatic wisdom, though it was but personal purpose; and he almost convinced himself that he was acting from a national stand-point. Kaid and Claridge Pasha pursued their course of civilisation in the Soudan, and who could tell what danger might not bring forth? If only Soolsby held his peace yet a while!

Did Faith know? Luke Claridge was gone without speaking, but had Soolsby told Faith? How closely had he watched the faces round him at Luke Claridge's funeral, to see if they betrayed any knowledge!

Anxious days had followed that night in the laboratory. His boundless egotism had widened the chasm between Hylda and himself, which had been made on the day when she fell ill in London, with Lacey's letter in her hand. It had not grown less in the weeks that followed. He nursed a grievance which had, so far as he knew, no foundation in fact; he was vaguely jealous of a man--his brother--thousands of miles away; he was not certain how far Hylda had pierced the disguise of sincerity which he himself had always worn, or how far she understood him. He thought that she shrank from what she had seen of his real self, much or little, and he was conscious of so many gifts and abilities and attractive personal qualities that he felt a sense of injury. Yet what would his position

be without her? Suppose David should return and take the estates and titles, and suppose that she should close her hand upon her fortune and leave him, where would he be?

He thought of all this as he sat in his room at the Foreign Office and looked over St. James's Park, his day's work done. He was suddenly seized by a new-born anxiety, for he had been so long used to the open purse and the unchecked stream of gold, had taken it so much as a matter of course, as not to realise the possibility of its being withdrawn. He was conscious of a kind of meanness and ugly sordidness in the suggestion; but the stake--his future, his career, his position in the world--was too high to allow him to be too chivalrous. His sense of the real facts was perverted. He said to himself that he must be practical.

Moved by the new thought, he seized a time-table and looked up the trains. He had been ten days in town, receiving every morning a little note from Hylda telling of what she had done each day; a calm, dutiful note, written without pretence, and out of a womanly affection with which she surrounded the man who, it seemed once--such a little while ago--must be all in all to her. She had no element of pretence in her. What she could give she gave freely, and it was just what it appeared to be. He had taken it all as his due, with an underlying belief that, if he chose to make love to her again, he could blind her to all else in the world. Hurt vanity and egotism and jealousy had prevented him from luring her back to that fine atmosphere in which he had hypnotised her so few years ago. But suddenly, as he watched the swans swimming in the pond below, a new sense of approaching loss, all that Hylda had meant in his march and progress, came upon him; and he hastened to return to Hamley.

Getting out of the train at Heddington, he made up his mind to walk home by the road that David had taken on his return from Egypt, and he left word at the station that he would send for his luggage.

His first objective was Soolsby's hut, and, long before he reached it, darkness had fallen. From a light shining through the crack of the blind he knew that Soolsby was at home. He opened the door and entered without knocking. Soolsby was seated at a table, a map and a newspaper spread out before him. Egypt and David, always David and Egypt!

Soolsby got to his feet slowly, his eyes fixed inquiringly on his visitor.

"I didn't knock," said Eglington, taking off his greatcoat and reaching for a chair; then added, as he seated himself: "Better sit down, Soolsby."

After a moment he continued: "Do you mind my smoking?"

Soolsby did not reply, but sat down again. He watched Eglington light a cigar and stretch out his hands to the wood fire with an air of comfort.

A silence followed. Eglington appeared to forget the other's presence, and to occupy himself with thoughts that glimmered in the fire.

At last Soolsby said moodily: "What have you come for, my lord?"

"Oh, I am my lord still, am I?" Eglington returned lazily. "Is it a genealogical tree you are studying there?" He pointed to the map.

"I've studied your family tree with care, as you should know, my lord; and a map of Egypt"--he tapped the parchment before him--"goes well with it. And see, my lord, Egypt concerns you too. Lord Eglington is there, and 'tis time he was returning-ay, 'tis time."

There was a baleful look in Soolsby's eyes. Whatever he might think, whatever considerations might arise at other times, a sinister feeling came upon him when Eglington was with him.

"And, my lord," he went on, "I'd be glad to know that you've sent for him, and told him the truth."

"Have you?" Eglington flicked the ash from his cigar, speaking coolly.

Soolsby looked at him with his honest blue eyes aflame, and answered deliberately: "I was not for taking your place, my lord. 'Twas my duty to tell you, but the rest was between you and the Earl of Eglington."

"That was thoughtful of you, Soolsby. And Miss Claridge?"

"I told you that night, my lord, that only her father and myself knew; and what was then is now."

A look of relief stole across Eglington's face. "Of course--of course. These things need a lot of thought, Soolsby. One must act with care--no haste, no flurry, no mistakes."

"I would not wait too long, my lord, or be too careful." There was menace in the tone.

"But if you go at things blind, you're likely to hurt where you don't mean to hurt. When you're mowing in a field by a school-house, you must look out for the children asleep in the grass. Sometimes the longest way round is the shortest way home."

"Do you mean to do it or not, my lord? I've left it to you as a gentleman."

"It's going to upset more than you think, Soolsby. Suppose he, out there in Egypt"--he pointed again to the map--"doesn't thank me for the information. Suppose he says no, and--"

"Right's right. Give him the chance, my lord. How can you know, unless you tell him the truth?"

"Do you like living, Soolsby?"

"Do you want to kill me, my lord?"

There was a dark look in Eglington's face. "But answer me, do you want to live?"

"I want to live long enough to see the Earl of Eglington in his own house."

"Well, I've made that possible. The other night when you were telling me your little story, you were near sending yourself into eternity--as near as I am knocking this ash off my cigar." His little finger almost touched the ash. "Your hand was as near touching a wire charged with death. I saw it. It would have been better for me if you had gone; but I shut off the electricity. Suppose I hadn't, could I have been blamed? It would have been an accident. Providence did not intervene; I did. You owe me something, Soolsby."

Soolsby stared at him almost blindly for a moment. A mist was before his eyes; but through the mist, though he saw nothing of this scene in which he now was, he saw the laboratory, and himself and Eglington, and Eglington's face as it peered at him, and, just before the voice called outside, Eglington's eyes fastened on his hand. It all flashed upon him now, and he saw himself starting back at the sound of the voice.

Slowly he got up now, went to the door, and opened it. "My lord, it is not true," he said. "You have not spoken like a gentleman. It was my lady's voice that saved me. This is my castle, my lord--you lodge yonder." He pointed down into the darkness where the lights of the village shone. "I owe you nothing. I pay my debts. Pay yours, my lord, to him that's beyond and away."

Eglington kept his countenance as he drew on his great-coat and slowly passed from the house.

"I ought to have let you die, Soolsby. Y'ou'll think better of this soon. But it's quite right to leave the matter to me. It may take a little time, but everything will come right. Justice shall be done. Well, good night, Soolsby. You live too much alone, and imagination is a bad thing for the lonely. Good night-good night."

Going down the hill quickly, he said to himself: "A sort of second sight he had about that wire. But time is on my side, time and the Soudan--and 'The heathen in his blindness. . . .' I will keep what is mine. I will keep it!"

CHAPTER XXVII

THE AWAKENING

In her heart of hearts Hylda had not greatly welcomed the Duchess of

Snowdon to Hamley. There was no one whose friendship she prized more; but she was passing through a phase of her life when she felt that she was better apart, finding her own path by those intuitions and perceptions which belonged to her own personal experience. She vaguely felt, what all realise sooner or later, that we must live our dark hours alone.

Yet the frank downright nature of the once beautiful, now faded, Duchess, the humorous glimmer in the pale-blue eyes, the droll irony and dry truth of her speech, appealed to Hylde, made her smile a warm greeting when she would rather have been alone. For, a few days before, she had begun a quest which had absorbed her, fascinated her. The miner, finding his way across the gap of a reef to pick up the vein of quartz at some distant and uncertain point, could not have been more lost to the world than was the young wife searching for a family skeleton, indefinitely embodied in her imagination by the name, James Fetherdon.

Pile after pile of papers and letters of the late Earl and his Countess had passed through her hands from chaos to order. As she had read, hour after hour, the diaries of the cold, blue-eyed woman, Sybil Eglington, who had lived without love of either husband or son, as they, in turn, lived without love of each other, she had been overwhelmed by the revelation of a human heart, whose powers of expression were smothered by a shy and awkward temperament. The late Countess's letters were the unclenching of a heart which had never expanded to the eyes of those whose love would have broken up a natural reserve, which became at last a proud coldness, and gave her a reputation for lack of feeling that she carried to her grave.

In the diaries which Hylde unearthed--the Countess had died suddenly--was the muffled cry of a soul tortured through different degrees of misunderstanding; from the vague pain of suffered indifference, of being left out of her husband's calculations, to the blank neglect narrowing her life down to a tiny stream of duty, which was finally lost in the sands. She had died abroad, and alone, save for her faithful maid, who, knowing the chasm that lay between her mistress and her lord, had brought her letters and papers back to the Cloistered House, and locked them away with all the other papers and correspondence which the Countess had accumulated.

Among these papers was a letter to the late Lord Eglington written the day before she died. In the haste and confusion ensuing on her death, the maid had not seen it. It had never reached his hands, but lay in a pocket of the dead woman's writing-portfolio, which Hylde had explored without discovering. Only a few hours, however, before the Duchess of Snowdon came, Hylde had found again an empty envelope on which was written the name, James Fetherdon. The writing on the envelope was that of Sybil Lady Eglington.

When she discovered the envelope, a sense of mystery and premonition possessed her. What was the association between the Countess of Eglington and James Fetherdon, the father of David Claridge? In vain she searched among the voluminous letters and papers, for it would seem that

the dead woman had saved every letter she received, and kept copies of numberless letters she had written. But she had searched without avail. Even the diaries, curiously frank and without reserve, never mentioned the name, so far as she could find, though here and there were strange allusive references, hints of a trouble that weighed her down, phrases of exasperation and defiance. One phrase, or the idea in it, was, however, much repeated in the diaries during the course of years, and towards the last almost feverishly emphasised--"Why should I bear it for one who would bear nothing for me, for his sake, who would do nothing for my sake? Is it only the mother in me, not the love in me?"

These words were haunting Hylda's brain when the telegram from the Duchess of Snowdon came. They followed her to Heddington, whither she went in the carriage to bring her visitor to Hamley, and kept repeating themselves at the back of her mind through the cheerful rallying of the Duchess, who spread out the wings of good-humour and motherly freedom over her.

After all, it was an agreeable thing to be taken possession of, and "put in her proper place," as the Duchess said; made to understand that her own affairs were not so important, after all; and that it was far more essential to hear the charming gossip about the new and most popular Princess of Wales, or the quarrel between Dickens and Thackeray. Yet, after dinner, in the little sitting-room, where the Duchess, in a white gown with great pink bows, fitter for a girl fresh from Confirmation, and her cheeks with their fixed colour, which changed only at the discretion of her maid, babbled of nothing that mattered, Hylda's mind kept turning to the book of life an unhappy woman had left behind her. The sitting-room had been that of the late Countess also, and on the wall was an oil-painting of her, stately and distant and not very alluring, though the mouth had a sweetness which seemed unable to break into a smile.

"What was she really like--that wasn't her quite, was it?" asked Hylda, at last, leaning her chin on the hand which held the 'cello she had been playing.

"Oh, yes, it's Sybil Eglington, my dear, but done in wood; and she wasn't the graven image that makes her out to be. That's as most people saw her; as the fellow that painted her saw her; but she had another side to her. She disapproved of me rather, because I was squeezing the orange dry, and trying to find yesterday's roses in to-morrow's garden. But she didn't shut her door in my face--it's hard to do that to a Duchess; which is one of the few advantages of living naked in the street, as it were, with only the strawberry leaves to clothe you. No, Sybil Eglington was a woman who never had her chance. Your husband's forbears were difficult, my dear. They didn't exactly draw you out. She needed drawing out; and her husband drove her back into her corner, where she sulked rather till she died--died alone at Wiesbaden, with a German doctor, a stray curate, and a stuttering maid to wish her bon voyage. Yet I fancy she went glad enough, for she had no memories, not even an affaire to repent of, and to cherish. La, la! she wasn't so stupid, Sybil there, and she was an ornament to her own sex and the despair of the other. His Serene Highness Heinrich of Saxe-Gunden fancied the task of breaking that ice,

and he was an adept and an Apollo, but it broke his reputation instead.

"No doubt she is happy now. I shall probably never see!"

In spite of the poignant nature of the talk, Hylda could not but smile at the last words.

"Don't despair," she rejoined; "one star differeth from another star in glory, but that is no reason why they should not be on visiting terms."

"My dear, you may laugh--you may laugh, but I am sixty-five, and I am not laughing at the idea of what company I may be obliged to keep presently. In any case I'm sure I shall not be comfortable. If I'm where she is, I shall be dull; if I'm where her husband is, I'll have no reputation; and if there is one thing I want, it is a spotless reputation--sometime."

Hylda laughed--the manner and the voice were so droll--but her face saddened too, and her big eyes with the drooping lashes looked up pensively at the portrait of her husband's mother.

"Was it ever a happy family, or a lucky family?" she asked.

"It's lucky now, and it ought to be happy now," was the meaning reply.

Hylda made no answer, but caught the strings of the 'cello lightly, and shook her head reprovingly, with a smile meant to be playful. For a moment she played, humming to herself, and then the Duchess touched the hand that was drawing the bow softly across the strings. She had behind her garishness a gift for sympathy and a keen intuition, delicacy, and allusiveness. She knew what to say and what to leave unsaid, when her heart was moved.

"My darling," she said now, "you are not quite happy; but that is because you don't allow yourself to get well. You've never recovered from your attack last summer; and you won't, until you come out into the world again and see people. This autumn you ought to have been at Homburg or at Aix, where you'd take a little cure of waters and a great deal of cure of people. You were born to bask in friendship and the sun, and to draw from the world as much as you deserve, a little from many, for all you give in return. Because, dearest, you are a very agreeable person, with enough wit and humanity to make it worth the world's while to conspire to make you do what will give it most pleasure, and let yourself get most--and that's why I've come."

"What a person of importance I am!" answered Hylda, with a laugh that was far from mirthful, though she caught the plump, wrinkled little hand of the Duchess and pressed it. "But really I'm getting well here fast. I'm very strong again. It is so restful, and one's days go by so quietly."

"Yet, I'm not sure that it's rest you want. I don't think it is. You want tonics--men and women and things. Monte Carlo would do you a world of good--I'd go with you. Eglington gambles here"--she watched Hylda

closely--"why shouldn't you gamble there?"

"Eglington gambles?" Hylda's face took on a frightened look, then it cleared again, and she smiled. "Oh, of course, with international affairs, you mean. Well, I must stay here and be the croupier."

"Nonsense! Eglington is his own croupier. Besides, he is so much in London, and you so much here. You sit with the distaff; he throws the dice."

Hylda's lips tightened a little. Her own inner life, what Eglington was to her or she to Eglington, was for the ears of no human being, however friendly. She had seen little of him of late, but in one sense that had been a relief, though she would have done anything to make that feeling impossible. His rather precise courtesy and consideration, when he was with her, emphasised the distance between "the first fine careless rapture" and this grey quiet. And, strange to say, though in the first five years after the Cairo days and deeds, Egypt seemed an infinite space away, and David a distant, almost legendary figure, now Egypt seemed but beyond the door--as though, opening it, she would stand near him who represented the best of all that she might be capable of thinking. Yet all the time she longed for Eglington to come and say one word, which would be like touching the lever of the sluice-gates of her heart, to let loose the flood. As the space grew between her and Eglington, her spirit trembled, she shrank back, because she saw that sea towards which she was drifting.

As she did not answer the last words of the Duchess, the latter said presently: "When do you expect Eglington?"

"Not till the week-end; it is a busy week with him," Hylda answered; then added hastily, though she had not thought of it till this moment: "I shall probably go up to town with you to-morrow."

She did not know that Eglington was already in the house, and had given orders to the butler that she was not to be informed of his arrival for the present.

"Well, if you get that far, will you come with me to the Riviera, or to Florence, or Sicily--or Cairo?" the other asked, adjusting her gold-brown wig with her babyish hands.

Cairo! Cairo! A light shot up into Hylda's eyes. The Duchess had spoken without thought, but, as she spoke, she watched the sudden change in Hylda. What did it mean? Cairo--why should Cairo have waked her so? Suddenly she recalled certain vague references of Lord Windlehurst, and, for the first time, she associated Hylda with Claridge Pasha in a way which might mean much, account for much, in this life she was leading.

"Perhaps! Perhaps!" answered Hylda abstractedly, after a moment.

The Duchess got to her feet. She had made progress. She would let her medicine work.

"I'm going to bed, my dear. I'm sixty-five, and I take my sleep when I can get it. Think it over, Sicily--Cairo!"

She left the room, saying to herself that Eglington was a fool, and that danger was ahead. "But I hold a red light--poor darling!" she said aloud, as she went up the staircase. She did not know that Eglington, standing in a deep doorway, heard her, and seized upon the words eagerly and suspiciously, and turned them over in his mind.

Below, at the desk where Eglington's mother used to write, Hylda sat with a bundle of letters before her. For some moments she opened, glanced through them, and put them aside. Presently she sat back in her chair, thinking--her mind was invaded by the last words of the Duchess; and somehow they kept repeating themselves with the words in the late Countess's diary: "Is it only the mother in me, not the love in me?" Mechanically her hand moved over the portfolio of the late Countess, and it involuntarily felt in one of its many pockets. Her hand came upon a letter. This had remained when the others had been taken out. It was addressed to the late Earl, and was open. She hesitated a moment, then, with a strange premonition and a tightening of her heart-strings, she spread it out and read it.

At first she could scarcely see because of the mist in her eyes; but presently her sight cleared, and she read quickly, her cheeks burning with excitement, her heart throbbing violently. The letter was the last expression of a disappointed and barren life. The slow, stammering tongue of an almost silent existence had found the fulness of speech. The fountains of the deep had been broken up, and Sybil Eglington's repressed emotions, undeveloped passions, tortured by mortal sufferings, and refined and vitalised by the atmosphere blown in upon her last hours from the Hereafter, were set free, given voice and power at last.

The letter reviewed the life she had lived with her husband during twenty-odd years, reproved herself for not speaking out and telling him his faults at the beginning, and for drawing in upon herself, when she might have compelled him to a truer understanding; and, when all that was said, called him to such an account as only the dying might make--the irrevocable, disillusionising truth which may not be altered, the poignant record of failure and its causes.

". . . I could not talk well, I never could, as a girl," the letter ran; "and you could talk like one inspired, and so speciously, so overwhelmingly, that I felt I could say nothing in disagreement, not anything but assent; while all the time I felt how hollow was so much you said--a cloak of words to cover up the real thought behind. Before I knew the truth, I felt the shadow of secrecy in your life. When you talked most, I felt you most secretive, and the feeling slowly closed the door upon all frankness and sympathy and open speech between us. I was always shy and self-conscious and self-centred, and thought little of myself; and I needed deep love and confidence and encouragement to give out what was in me. I gave nothing out, nothing to you that you wanted, or

sought for, or needed. You were complete, self-contained. Harry, my beloved babe Harry, helped at first; but, as the years went on, he too began to despise me for my little intellect and slow intelligence, and he grew to be like you in all things--and secretive also, though I tried so hard to be to him what a mother should be. Oh, Bobby, Bobby--I used to call you that in the days before we were married, and I will call you that now when all is over and done--why did you not tell me all? Why did you not tell me that my boy, my baby Harry, was not your only child, that there had been another wife, and that your eldest son was alive?

"I know all. I have known all for years. The clergyman who married you to Mercy Claridge was a distant relative of my mother's, and before he died he told me. When you married her, he knew you only as James Fetherdon, but, years afterwards, he saw and recognised you. He held his peace then, but at last he came to me. And I did not speak. I was not strong enough, nor good enough, to face the trouble of it all. I could not endure the scandal, to see my own son take the second place--he is so brilliant and able and unscrupulous, like yourself; but, oh, so sure of winning a great place in the world, surer than yourself ever was, he is so calculating and determined and ambitious! And though he loves me little, as he loves you little, too, yet he is my son, and for what he is we are both responsible, one way or another; and I had not the courage to give him the second place, and the Quaker, David Claridge, the first place. Why Luke Claridge, his grandfather, chose the course he did, does not concern me, no more than why you chose secrecy, and kept your own firstborn legitimate son, of whom you might well be proud, a stranger to you and his rights all these years. Ah, Eglington, you never knew what love was, you never had a heart--experiment, subterfuge, secrecy, 'reaping where you had not sowed, and gathering where you had not strawed.' Always, experiment, experiment, experiment!

"I shall be gone in a few hours--I feel it, but before I go I must try to do right, and to warn you. I have had such bad dreams about you and Harry--they haunt me--that I am sure you will suffer terribly, will have some awful tragedy, unless you undo what was done long ago, and tell the truth to the world, and give your titles and estates where they truly belong. Near to death, seeing how little life is, and how much right is in the end, I am sure that I was wrong in holding my peace; for Harry cannot prosper with this black thing behind him, and you cannot die happy if you smother up the truth. Night after night I have dreamed of you in your laboratory, a vague, dark, terrifying dream of you in that laboratory which I have hated so. It has always seemed to me the place where some native evil and cruelty in your blood worked out its will. I know I am an ignorant woman, with no brain, but God has given me clear sight at the last, and the things I see are true things, and I must warn you. Remember that. . . ."

The letter ended there. She had been interrupted or seized with illness, and had never finished it, and had died a few hours afterwards; and the

letter was now, for the first time, read by her whom it most concerned, into whose heart and soul the words sank with an immitigable pain and agonised amazement. A few moments with this death-document had transformed Hylda's life.

Her husband and--and David, were sons of the same father; and the name she bore, the home in which she was living, the estates the title carried, were not her husband's, but another's--David's. She fell back in her chair, white and faint, but, with a great effort, she conquered the swimming weakness which blinded her. Sons of the same father! The past flashed before her, the strange likeness she had observed, the trick of the head, the laugh, the swift gesture, the something in the voice. She shuddered as she had done in reading the letter. But they were related only in name, in some distant, irreconcilable way--in a way which did not warrant the sudden scarlet flush that flooded her face. Presently she recovered herself. She--what did she suffer, compared with her who wrote this revelation of a lifetime of pain, of bitter and torturing knowledge! She looked up at the picture on the wall, at the still, proud, emotionless face, the conventional, uninspired personality, behind which no one had seen, which had agonised alone till the last. With what tender yet pitiless hand had she laid bare the lives of her husband and her son! How had the neglected mother told the bitter truth of him to whom she had given birth! "So brilliant and able, and unscrupulous, like yourself; but, oh, sure of winning a great place in the world . . . so calculating and determined and ambitious. . . . That laboratory which I have hated so. It has always seemed to me the place where some native evil and cruelty in your blood worked out its will. . . ."

With a deep-drawn sigh Hylda said to herself: "If I were dying to-morrow, would I say that? She loved them so--at first must have loved them so; and yet this at the last! And I--oh, no, no, no!" She looked at a portrait of Eglington on the table near, touched it caressingly, and added, with a sob in her voice: "Oh, Harry, no, it is not true! It is not native evil and cruelty in your blood. It has all been a mistake. You will do right. We will do right, Harry. You will suffer, it will hurt, the lesson will be hard--to give up what has meant so much to you; but we will work it out together, you and I, my very dear. Oh, say that we shall, that..." She suddenly grew silent. A tremor ran through her, she became conscious of his presence near her, and turned, as though he were behind her. There was nothing. Yet she felt him near, and, as she did so, the soul-deep feeling with which she had spoken to the portrait fled. Why was it that, so often, when absent from him, her imagination helped her to make excuses for him, inspired her to press the real truth out of sight, and to make believe that he was worthy of a love which, but through some inner fault of her own, might be his altogether, and all the love of which he was capable might be hers?

She felt him near her, and the feelings possessing her a moment before slowly chilled and sank away. Instinctively her eyes glanced towards the door. She saw the handle turn, and she slipped the letter inside the portfolio again.

The door opened briskly now, and Eglington entered with what his enemies in the newspaper press had called his "professional smile"--a criticism which had angered his wife, chiefly because it was so near the truth. He smiled. Smiling was part of his equipment, and was for any one at any time that suited him.

Her eyes met his, and he noted in her something that he had never seen before. Something had happened. The Duchess of Snowdon was in the house; had it anything to do with her? Had she made trouble? There was trouble enough without her. He came forward, took Hylda's hand and kissed it, then kissed her on the cheek. As he did so, she laid a hand on his arm with a sudden impulse, and pressed it. Though his presence had chilled the high emotions of a few moments before, yet she had to break to him a truth which would hurt him, dismay him, rob his life of so much that helped it; and a sudden protective, maternal sense was roused in her, reached out to shelter him as he faced his loss and the call of duty.

"You have just come?" she said, in a voice that, to herself, seemed far away.

"I have been here some hours," he answered. Secrecy again--always the thing that had chilled the dead woman, and laid a cold hand upon herself --"I felt the shadow of secrecy in your life. When you talked most I felt you most secretive, and the feeling slowly closed the door upon all frankness and sympathy and open speech between us."

"Why did you not see me--dine with me?" she asked. "What can the servants think?" Even in such a crisis the little things had place--habit struck its note in the presence of her tragedy.

"You had the Duchess of Snowdon, and we are not precisely congenial; besides, I had much to do in the laboratory. I'm working for that new explosive of which I told you. There's fame and fortune in it, and I'm on the way. I feel it coming"--his eyes sparkled a little. "I made it right with the servants; so don't be apprehensive."

"I have not seen you for nearly a week. It doesn't seem--friendly."

"Politics and science are stern masters," he answered gaily.

"They leave little time for your mistress," she rejoined meaningly.

"Who is my mistress?"

"Well, I am not greatly your wife," she replied. "I have the dregs of your life. I help you--I am allowed to help you--so little, to share so little in the things that matter to you."

"Now, that's imagination and misunderstanding," he rejoined. "It has helped immensely your being such a figure in society, and entertaining so much, and being so popular, at any rate until very lately."

"I do not misunderstand," she answered gravely. "I do not share your real life. I do not help you where your brain works, in the plans and purposes and hopes that lie behind all that you do--oh, yes, I know your ambitions and what positions you are aiming for; but there is something more than that. There is the object of it all, the pulse of it, the machinery down, down deep in your being that drives it all. Oh, I am not a child! I have some intellect, and I want--I want that we should work it out together."

In spite of all that had come and gone, in spite of the dead mother's words and all her own convictions, seeing trouble coming upon him, she wanted to make one last effort for what might save their lives--her life--from shipwreck in the end. If she failed now, she foresaw a bitter, cynical figure working out his life with a narrowing soul, a hard spirit unrelieved by the softening influence of a great love--even yet the woman in her had a far-off hope that, where the law had made them one by book and scrip, the love which should consecrate such a union, lift it above an almost offensive relation, might be theirs. She did not know how much of her heart, of her being, was wandering over the distant sands of Egypt, looking for its oasis. Eglington had never needed or wanted more than she had given him--her fortune, her person, her charm, her ability to play an express and definite part in his career. It was this material use to which she was so largely assigned, almost involuntarily but none the less truly, that had destroyed all of the finer, dearer, more delicate intimacy invading his mind sometimes, more or less vaguely, where Faith was concerned. So extreme was his egotism that it had never occurred to him, as it had done to the Duchess of Snowdon and Lord Windlehurst, that he might lose Hylda herself as well as her fortune; that the day might come when her high spirit could bear it no longer. As the Duchess of Snowdon had said: "It would all depend upon the other man, whoever he might be."

So he answered her with superficial cheerfulness now; he had not the depth of soul to see that they were at a crisis, and that she could bear no longer the old method of treating her as though she were a child, to be humoured or to be dominated.

"Well, you see all there is," he answered; "you are so imaginative, crying for some moon there never was in any sky."

In part he had spoken the truth. He had no high objects or ends or purposes. He wanted only success somehow or another, and there was no nobility of mind or aspiration behind it. In her heart of hearts she knew it; but it was the last cry of her soul to him, seeking, though in vain, for what she had never had, could never have.

"What have you been doing?" he added, looking at the desk where she had sat, glancing round the room. "Has the Duchess left any rags on the multitude of her acquaintances? I wonder that you can make yourself contented here with nothing to do. You don't look much stronger. I'm sure you ought to have a change. My mother was never well here; though, for the matter of that, she was never very well anywhere. I suppose it's the laboratory that attracts me here, as it did my father, playing with

the ancient forces of the world in these Arcadian surroundings--Arcady without beauty or Arcadians." He glanced up at his mother's picture. "No, she never liked it--a very silent woman, secretive almost."

Suddenly her eyes flared up. Anger possessed her. She choked it down. Secretive--the poor bruised soul who had gone to her grave with a broken heart!

"She secretive? No, Eglington," she rejoined gravely, "she was congealed. She lived in too cold an air. She was not secretive, but yet she kept a secret--another's."

Again Eglington had the feeling which possessed him when he entered the room. She had changed. There was something in her tone, a meaning, he had never heard before. He was startled. He recalled the words of the Duchess as she went up the staircase.

What was it all about?

"Whose secrets did she keep?" he asked, calmly enough.

"Your father's, yours, mine," she replied, in a whisper almost.

"Secret? What secret? Good Lord, such mystery!" He laughed mirthlessly.

She came close to him. "I am sorry--sorry, Harry," she said with difficulty. "It will hurt you, shock you so. It will be a blow to you, but you must bear it."

She tried to speak further, but her heart was beating so violently that she could not. She turned quickly to the portfolio on the desk, drew forth the fatal letter, and, turning to the page which contained the truth concerning David, handed it to him. "It is there," she said.

He had great self-control. Before looking at the page to which she had directed his attention, he turned the letter over slowly, fingering the pages one by one. "My mother to my father," he remarked.

Instinctively he knew what it contained. "You have been reading my mother's correspondence," he added in cold reproof.

"Do you forget that you asked me to arrange her papers?" she retorted, stung by his suggestion.

"Your imagination is vivid," he exclaimed. Then he bethought himself that, after all, he might sorely need all she could give, if things went against him, and that she was the last person he could afford to alienate; "but I do remember that I asked you that," he added--"no doubt foolishly."

"Read what is there," she broke in, "and you will see that it was not foolish, that it was meant to be." He felt a cold dead hand reaching out

from the past to strike him; but he nerved himself, and his eyes searched the paper with assumed coolness--even with her he must still be acting. The first words he saw were: "Why did you not tell me that my boy, my baby Harry, was not your only child, and that your eldest son was alive?"

So that was it, after all. Even his mother knew. Master of his nerves as he was, it blinded him for a moment. Presently he read on--the whole page--and lingered upon the words, that he might have time to think what he must say to Hylda. Nothing of the tragedy of his mother touched him, though he was faintly conscious of a revelation of a woman he had never known, whose hungering caresses had made him, as a child, rather peevish, when a fit of affection was not on him. Suddenly, as he read the lines touching himself, "Brilliant and able and unscrupulous.... and though he loves me little, as he loves you little too," his eye lighted up with anger, his face became pale--yet he had borne the same truths from Faith without resentment, in the wood by the mill that other year. For a moment he stood infuriated, then, going to the fireplace, he dropped the letter on the coals, as Hylda, in horror, started forward to arrest his hand.

"Oh, Eglington--but no--no! It is not honourable. It is proof of all!"

He turned upon her slowly, his face rigid, a strange, cold light in his eyes. "If there is no more proof than that, you need not vex your mind," he said, commanding his voice to evenness.

A bitter anger was on him. His mother had read him through and through--he had not deceived her even; and she had given evidence against him to Hylda, who, he had ever thought, believed in him completely. Now there was added to the miserable tale, that first marriage, and the rights of David--David, the man who, he was convinced, had captured her imagination. Hurt vanity played a disproportionate part in this crisis.

The effect on him had been different from what Hylda had anticipated. She had pictured him stricken and dumfounded by the blow. It had never occurred to her, it did not now, that he had known the truth; for, of course, to know the truth was to speak, to restore to David his own, to step down into the second and unconsidered place. After all, to her mind, there was no disgrace. The late Earl had married secretly, but he had been duly married, and he did not marry again until Mercy Claridge was dead. The only wrong was to David, whose grandfather had been even more to blame than his own father. She had looked to help Eglington in this moment, and now there seemed nothing for her to do. He was superior to the situation, though it was apparent in his pale face and rigid manner that he had been struck hard.

She came near to him, but there was no encouragement to her to play that part which is a woman's deepest right and joy and pain in one--to comfort her man in trouble, sorrow, or evil. Always, always, he stood alone, whatever the moment might be, leaving her nothing to do--"playing his own game with his own weapons," as he had once put it. Yet there was strength in it too, and this came to her mind now, as though in excuse for whatever else there was in the situation which, against her will,

repelled her.

"I am so sorry for you," she said at last.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"To lose all that has been yours so long."

This was their great moment. The response to this must be the touchstone of their lives. A--half dozen words might alter all the future, might be the watch word to the end of all things. Involuntarily her heart fashioned the response he ought to give--"I shall have you left, Hylda."

The air seemed to grow oppressive, and the instant's silence a torture, and, when he spoke, his words struck a chill to her heart--rough notes of pain. "I have not lost yet," were his words.

She shrank. "You will not hide it. You will do right by--by him," she said with difficulty.

"Let him establish his claim to the last item of fact," he said with savage hate.

"Luke Claridge knew. The proofs are but just across the way, no doubt," she answered, almost coldly, so had his words congealed her heart.

Their great moment had passed. It was as though a cord had snapped that held her to him, and in the recoil she had been thrown far off from him. Swift as his mind worked, it had not seen his opportunity to win her to his cause, to asphyxiate her high senses, her quixotic justice, by that old flood of eloquence and compelling persuasion of the emotions with which he had swept her to the altar--an altar of sacrifice. He had not even done what he had left London to do--make sure of her, by an alluring flattery and devotion, no difficult duty with one so beautiful and desirable; though neither love of beauty nor great desire was strong enough in him to divert him from his course for an hour, save by his own initiative. His mother's letter had changed it all. A few hours before he had had a struggle with Soolsby, and now another struggle on the same theme was here. Fate had dealt illy with him, who had ever been its spoiled child and favourite. He had not learned yet the arts of defence against adversity.

"Luke Claridge is dead," he answered sharply. "But you will tell--him, you will write to Egypt and tell your brother?" she said, the conviction slowly coming to her that he would not.

"It is not my duty to displace myself, to furnish evidence against myself--"

"You have destroyed the evidence," she intervened, a little scornfully.

"If there were no more than that--" He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Do you know there is more?" she asked searchingly. "In whose interests are you speaking?" he rejoined, with a sneer. A sudden fury possessed him. Claridge Pasha--she was thinking of him!

"In yours--your conscience, your honour."

"There is over thirty years' possession on my side," he rejoined.

"It is not as if it were going from your family," she argued.

"Family--what is he to me!"

"What is any one to you?" she returned bitterly.

"I am not going to unravel a mystery in order to facilitate the cutting of my own throat."

"It might be worth while to do something once for another's sake than your own--it would break the monotony," she retorted, all her sense tortured by his words, and even more so by his manner.

Long ago Faith had said in Soolsby's but that he "blandished" all with whom he came in contact; but Hylde realised with a lacerated heart that he had ceased to blandish her. Possession had altered that. Yet how had he vowed to her in those sweet tempestuous days of his courtship when the wind of his passion blew so hard! Had one of the vows been kept?

Even as she looked at him now, words she had read some days before flashed through her mind--they had burnt themselves into her brain:

"Broken faith is the crown of evils,
Broken vows are the knotted thongs
Set in the hands of laughing devils,
To scourge us for deep wrongs.

"Broken hearts, when all is ended,
Bear the better all after-stings;
Bruised once, the citadel mended,
Standeth through all things."

Suddenly he turned upon her with aggrieved petulance. "Why are you so eager for proof?"

"Oh, I have," she said, with a sudden flood of tears in her voice, though her eyes were dry--"I have the feeling your mother had, that nothing will be well until you undo the wrong your father did. I know it was not your fault. I feel for you--oh, believe me, I feel as I have never felt, could never feel, for myself. It was brought on you by your father, but you must be the more innocent because he was so guilty. You have had much out of it, it has helped you on your way. It does not mean so much now. By-and-by another--an English-peerage may be yours by your own achievement. Let it go. There is so much left, Harry. It is a small

thing in a world of work. It means nothing to me." Once again, even when she had given up all hope, seeing what was the bent of his mind--once again she made essay to win him out of his selfishness. If he would only say, "I have you left," how she would strive to shut all else out of her life!

He was exasperated. His usual prescience and prudence forsook him. It angered him that she should press him to an act of sacrifice for the man who had so great an influence upon her. Perversity possessed him. Lifelong egotism was too strong for wisdom, or discretion.

Suddenly he caught her hands in both of his and said hoarsely: "Do you love me--answer me, do you love me with all your heart and soul? The truth now, as though it were your last word on earth."

Always self. She had asked, if not in so many words, for a little love, something for herself to feed on in the darkening days for him, for her, for both; and he was thinking only of himself.

She shrank, but her hands lay passive in his. "No, not with all my heart and soul--but, oh--!"

He flung her hands from him. "No, not with all your heart and soul--I know! You are willing to sacrifice me for him, and you think I do not understand."

She drew herself up, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes. "You understand nothing--nothing. If you had ever understood me, or any human being, or any human heart, you would not have ruined all that might have given you an undying love, something that would have followed you through fire and flood to the grave. You cannot love. You do not understand love. Self--self, always self. Oh, you are mad, mad, to have thrown it all away, all that might have given happiness! All that I have, all that I am, has been at your service; everything has been bent and tuned to your pleasure, for your good. All has been done for you, with thought of you and your position and your advancement, and now--now, when you have killed all that might have been yours, you cry out in anger that it is dying, and you insinuate what you should kill another for insinuating. Oh, the wicked, cruel folly of it all! You suggest--you dare! I never heard a word from David Claridge that might not be written on the hoardings. His honour is deeper than that which might attach to the title of Earl of Eglington."

She seemed to tower above him. For an instant she looked him in the eyes with frigid dignity, but a great scorn in her face. Then she went to the door--he hastened to open it for her.

"You will be very sorry for this," he said stubbornly. He was too dumfounded to be discreet, too suddenly embarrassed by the turn affairs had taken. He realised too late that he had made a mistake, that he had lost his hold upon her.

As she passed through, there suddenly flashed before her mind the scene

in the laboratory with the chairmaker. She felt the meaning of it now.

"You do not intend to tell him--perhaps Soolsby has done so," she said keenly, and moved on to the staircase.

He was thunderstruck at her intuition. "Why do you want to rob yourself?" he asked after her vaguely. She turned back. "Think of your mother's letter that you destroyed," she rejoined solemnly and quietly. "Was it right?"

He shut the door, and threw himself into a chair. "I will put it straight with her to-morrow," he said helplessly.

He sat for a half-hour silent, planning his course.

At last there came a tap at the door, and the butler appeared.

"Some one from the Foreign Office, my lord," he said. A moment afterwards a young official, his subordinate, entered. "There's the deuce to pay in Egypt, sir; I've brought the despatch," he said.

GLOSSARY

Aiwa----Yes.

Allah hu Achbar----God is most Great.

Al'mah----Female professional singers, signifying "a learned female."

Ardab----A measure equivalent to five English bushels.

Backsheesh----Tip, douceur.

Balass----Earthen vessel for carrying water.

Bdsha----Pasha.

Bersim----Clover.

Bismillah----In the name of God.

Bowdb----A doorkeeper.

Dahabieh----A Nile houseboat with large lateen sails.

Darabukkeh----A drum made of a skin stretched over an earthenware funnel.

Dourha----Maize.

Effendina----Most noble.

El Azhar----The Arab University at Cairo.

Feddn----A measure of land representing about an acre.

Fellah----The Egyptian peasant.

Ghiassa----Small boat.

Hakim----Doctor.

Hasheesh----Leaves of hemp.

Inshallah----God willing.

Kdnoon----A musical instrument like a dulcimer.

Kavass----An orderly.

Kemengeh----A cocoanut fiddle.

Khamsin----A hot wind of Egypt and the Soudan.

Kourbash----A whip, often made of rhinoceros hide.

La ilaha illa-llah----There is no deity but God.

Malaish----No matter.

Malboos----Demented.

Mastaba----A bench.

Medjidie----A Turkish Order.

Mooshrabieh----Lattice window.

Moufettish----High Steward.

Mudir----The Governor of a

Mudirieh, or province.

Muezzin----The sheikh of the mosque who calls to prayer.

Narghileh----A Persian pipe.

Nebool----A quarter-staff.

Ramadan----The Mahommedan season of fasting.

Saadat-el-bdsha----Excellency Pasha.

Sdis----Groom.

Sakkia----The Persian water-wheel.

Salaam----Eastern salutation.

Sheikh-el-beled----Head of a village.

Tarboosh----A Turkish turban.

Ulema----Learned men.

Wakf----Mahommedan Court dealing with succession, etc.

Welee----A holy man or saint.

Yashmak----A veil for the lower part of the face.

Yelek----A long vest or smock.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A cloak of words to cover up the real thought behind

Antipathy of the lesser to the greater nature

Antipathy of the man in the wrong to the man in the right

Friendship means a giving and a getting

He's a barber-shop philosopher

Monotonously intelligent

No virtue in not falling, when you're not tempted
Of course I've hated, or I wouldn't be worth a button
Only the supremely wise or the deeply ignorant who never alter
Passion to forget themselves
Political virtue goes unrewarded
She knew what to say and what to leave unsaid
Smiling was part of his equipment
Sometimes the longest way round is the shortest way home
Soul tortured through different degrees of misunderstanding
The vague pain of suffered indifference
There's no credit in not doing what you don't want to do
Tricks played by Fact to discredit the imagination
We must live our dark hours alone
Woman's deepest right and joy and pain in one--to comfort

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