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THE HEIGHTS
A Story of Vision

BOOKS BY
MARGUERITE BRYANT

RICHARD

A COURAGEOUS MARRIAGE

THE SHADOW ON THE STONE

THE DOMINANT PASSION

THE ADJUSTMENT

ANNE KEMPBURN: TRUTH SEEKER

FELICITY CROFTON

CHRISTOPHER HIBBAULT: ROADMAKER

THE HEIGHTS *A Story*
of Vision. **By Marguerite Bryant**



1924
DUFFIELD & COMPANY
NEW YORK

PR 6003
R88 HA
1924

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Printed in U. S. A.

DEDICATION

TO MY PEGGY

To you who know those Heights above the sea
Where, through the scented silence came to me
This tale of Vision,—where the distant gleam
Of Faerie mountains like a beckoning dream
Promised the unattainable—

To you,—this Book!

To you who love so well and understand
The air-girt Freedom of our High Down land,—
For whom the wind-swept sky and fragrant earth
A thousand fancies bring to rapturous birth
In exquisite unwritten song—

To you,—this Book!

*I had gazed already; caught the view;
Faced the unfathomable ray of rays
Which to itself and by itself is true.
Then was my vision mightier than man's speech;
Speech snapt before it like a flying spell;
And memory, and all that time can teach
Before that splendid outrage failed and fell.*

*O, light uplifted from all mortal knowing;
Send back a little of that glimpse of thee,
That of its glory I may kindle glowing
One tiny spark for all men yet to be.*

G. K. CHESTERTON.

*When to the new eyes of thee,
All things, by immortal power,
Near or far,
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star;
When thy song is shield and mirror
To the fair, snake-curléd Pain,
Where thou dar'st affront her terror
That on her thou may'st attain
Perséan conquest;—seek no more,
O, seek no more!*

Pass the gates of Luthany, tread the region Elenore!

FRANCIS THOMPSON.

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PART I

THE HEIGHTS.

CHAPTER I

THE WOMAN WITH THE MULE

"There is no scent quite like it," murmured Helena, pausing for a moment on the steep salita. "Olive, eucalyptus, palm, mimosa—and the sun-burnt earth."

"And salted by the sea," Veronica Bessington suggested.

"With a good aroma of drains, manure and unwashed humanity," added Miss Hamberton, who prided herself on having no nonsense in her composition, and remained unaware of the entirely uninteresting nature of the said composition in consequence.

The little party all paused on the upward walk and looked back at what was already familiar country to three of them.

It did not differ greatly from a hundred other spots on the French and Italian Riviera. The steep terraces with their regiments of rose trees, the grey olives, the glossy foliage of orange and lemon trees set with golden balls, graceful mimosa scenting the air, and untidy eucalyptus—and here and there a pink fire of almond standing out against blue sky—a daring glory of colour defying the austerity of stone and grey wall. Dotted here and there were pink or cream villas and tiny hovels, and behind all the blue sea with crisp wavelets breaking on a pebbly and unwalkable beach.

Familiar country, over-described and over-visited

perhaps, and yet its sun-steeped soul is apt to haunt the memory in the grey mud-splashed winters of the north.

That was why Helena Tresham was here. Her work abandoned—abandoned in a perfectly orderly manner, ready to be instantly resumed when her holiday was over, but abandoned. She was a writer, not of the ephemeral novel, but of historical work, lighting with the touch of her undoubted genius the half-forgotten records of the past.

And she left them for this dear colour-splashed country, for the scents and sunshine, and perhaps a little for the sake of the man who stood silently by her, hat in hand, gazing at a mimosa tree, quite oblivious to the trivial remarks of the rest of the party.

Helena turned to him and put her hand on his arm. "You were quite right Geoffrey," she said softly, "it was worth it." He looked at her and smiled. His smile came slowly like that of a child whose confidence in an understanding world has once been shaken. "It was bound to call you; one never forgets it."

"It ought to send me back fit for the stiffest proposition," she went on cheerfully. "You were right again, I needed a holiday, I was getting stale. This will set me right for a year."

The faintest shadow crossed his face; one could not say he frowned actually; it was perhaps a mental frown.

"Don't talk about work or going back, you've only just come. I am hoping——" he stopped.

"Hoping what?"—a flicker of patient amusement in her eyes indicated a certain familiarity to his hiatus.

"That you'd forget all that—and just live."

Helena laughed. "My dear, I don't think anyone

feels more alive than I do! Why did you say you feared we'd not care much for the hotel?"

"Do you?" he looked at her again curiously.

"It's first rate—and our rooms are lovely. Thank you heaps for taking such trouble. Quite amusing people there too; I am sure father will be happy. Why don't you come there?" He gave a little shiver. "I might as well stay in England!" Helena laughed. "Geoffrey you're incorrigible!"

He got a little red.

"I didn't mean to be rude Helena, but you know I'm not here to see people—except yourself and your father, of course."

"Thank you! Look, the others are miles ahead. We must go on."

They continued to climb the awkward path with its mule length steps and unattended fissures.

"What is that yellow flower?" she asked suddenly stopping by a clump of golden bells opening in the sun.

"Oxalis," he answered absently. "Do you like it? There's a fine blossom up there."

He pointed to the top of a half-fallen wall, fallen probably some ten years ago and still unrepaired; the little cluster of fern-like green at the edge of the neglected terrace, had unusually large blossoms. They stood out against the sky, taking on an additional beauty for those standing below.

Hamberton clambered up the loosened fallen stones, at immediate risk of slithering down again and twisting his ankle; twice a stone gave way as he touched it, and dislodged fresh earth and nearly dislodged the climber. He achieved his quest, however, scrambled back to the path with the golden trophy in his hand, and stood looking at it before he handed it over.

"You foolish boy!" remonstrated Helena a trifle

impatiently. "Why take all that trouble when there are hundreds within reach?"

"They are too easy to get," he sighed and handed her the flowers. "I don't want to give you easy things, Helena."

"Well then," she put in quickly, "are you going to give me the one difficult thing I do ask of you?"

She spoke coaxingly, though coaxing was difficult to her, for Helena Tresham was essentially direct, but she was also honestly in love with Geoffrey Hamberton, who was to marry her as soon as he gave up writing poems and dreaming, and started the quite remunerative literary work that awaited him.

"I saw Rythen before I left, Geoff," she went on hastily, "his offer is quite serious. He's immensely pleased with that story of yours; it's brilliant, he says. I was right about it."

"But that's not difficult Helena."

"I ask nothing more of you."

"Why not something better?"

She gave a little impatient stamp. She was after all very human even if she were in love.

"It is better, better than anything else you have done. Rythen says so."

"Is he the judge of ones capabilities?"

She partially ignored this.

"Rythen is not out for clap-trap. He won't touch anything not first class."

Hamberton looked perplexed and a little distressed.

"But it's not worth doing. It's too easy. It means nothing to me."

"My dear Geoff, don't say that to anyone but me; they'd think you were swanking."

"I'm not!" He was genuinely distressed. Now and again his distress had the quality of a child's.

"Oh, I know!"

Only one bend in the road separated them from the

rest of the party and as Helena spoke, young Masters who was ahead with the rest, sang out :

“ ‘Ware mules.”

The walking party made hastily for the nearest gap, for mules with their wide packs and often odorous burdens were apt to show scant consideration to pedestrians making use of their special highways.

The string of mules however, now descending, were mostly burdenless save for an old woman perched precariously on one between two empty baskets. The other women, bronze faced, dark eyed, with wide hips, walked with a swinging gait beside their animals, laughing and clattering ; their head handkerchiefs making little blobs of colour against the rough stone walls.

Helena, unaware of the mule's propensity to require the full width of the path at a turn, was casually continuing her way. Hamberton pulled her back.

“Wait till they've passed,” he said. “It doesn't do to put them off their step.”

The string passed, the women flinging laughing remarks from one to another in a patois, that was unintelligible to all the visitors, except one.

Then as Helena started again, another mule came round the corner. He was a fine animal, picking his way with aristocratic delicacy. His owner walked beside him. She looked neither to right or left, till she was level with the two stragglers from the ascending party. Then she slowly turned her splendid head and looked straight at Geoffrey Hamberton.

It was a strange look, grave, steadfast, knowledgeable. It was almost as if she recognised him, not as an acquaintance, but as a fellow being. So compatriots may meet and claim each other in a strange country.

He stood looking after her.

And Helena Tresham looked after her, too.

She was the first to speak.

"What a wonderful woman!" she said softly. "Could she be just a peasant?"

Geoffrey recovered himself with an effort, looking at her with dazed bewilderment.

"The woman with the mule?" he questioned stupidly.

Helena laughed.

"They were all women with mules, my dear, but that last woman——"

She stopped laughing abruptly, and they went on together in silence and caught up the others; Young Masters joined them.

"I say," he began breathlessly, "did you see her? That last woman?"

"Yes."

"Make some artist Johnny wild to get out paint and brushes and daub down something, eh?"

"Do you want to?"

"Good heavens, no—but——"

"But what?"

"Pretty superb. That's the only word."

"I'd like to take her home to look at when I was feeling tired," said Mrs. Bessington gaily; they overtook her as they talked. "Speaking of that woman, I suppose? She made one feel alive just to see her for a moment."

Further remark and criticism were passed. They all agreed the woman was beautiful but disagreed as to her age, and even to the quality of her beauty. Marian Hamberton said frankly she considered her too big, beautiful in a coarse natural way. Mrs. Bessington interposed quickly:

"Coarse? Surely not. It was the face of a Madonna." She turned to Helena who had said quietly, "I thought her wise—terribly wise!"

Dominic Bessington glanced at her quickly, and then at his wife. Helena walked with them for a while, and they spoke of other matters. She seemed unaware of Hamberton's disappearance; was, indeed, curiously absent-minded. Veronica Bessington wondered if she and Geoffrey had quarrelled.

They had passed the terrace ground now and were out on the lower slope of the hill, which would be a mountain itself in England. The pines here took foothold on a rocky soil, and to the left a deep pine-clad gorge separated this particular hill from a still higher one that even then was enobled by the title of Monte. Monte Negros it was called, perhaps because of the dark depth of pines that covered it to the very summit.

"I'd love to get up there," said Veronica wistfully.

"I asked about it yesterday," her husband answered. "They say there is no proper path. It's all pines, terribly steep going, and too many trees for a view when one reached the top. There's a sort of narrow ridge, like a razor edge connecting it with this hill; the other side runs down towards Borria, only half-way along there's a big cleft, cutting it right off, no way across. For some reason or other the people here don't like Monte Negros, and won't go up it. You see there are no terraces except just at the foot."

"You are better than twenty guide books!" Marian Hamberton exclaimed. "I've asked Geoffrey heaps of times about Monte Negros, and he knows nothing, and he's been here six weeks, and you six days!"

Bessington laughed. "He'd probably tell you just how the old mountain looked at sunrise or sunset, and the reason why the people don't like it! Where is he?" He looked round as they all did, but Hamberton was not there.

II

Geoffrey Hamberton stood irresolute a moment looking after the little party till they were hidden by another bend in the narrow road.

He was not thinking of his friends, however, or even of Helena and what she would think of his defection. He was vaguely aware that he did not wish to hear them discuss the beautiful peasant girl who had passed, but even that thought was chaotic; he was like a man who had suddenly been overtaken by an unexpected wave on a calm sea-shore, drenched and flung from his balance, and now was regaining poise and safety, bewildered at what had happened.

The trouble was he did not know what had happened. He could not for the moment even recall the woman's face. He had an idea of some flashing, blinding light between them that had hidden her from his mortal eyes and revealed to his soul an unimaginable vista of possibilities.

He turned mechanically into a little intersecting by-path and pursued an upward course by means of a series of neglected and ruined terraces.

It was steep, rough going, but he barely noticed the difficulties, at the most giving them a poor moiety of his attention. That was his way. He had never been able in all his life, either in little things or great, to concentrate on anything but the end to which he moved.

At the present moment his lesser aim was to reach La Croix Verte by a quicker and more solitary route than the salita, by which his friends mounted. He wished to get there because there was something in the wide view from the clear space between the pines that he wanted to savour; that and its nearness to the neighbouring Monte Negros across the narrow separating valley.

The greatest aim in his heart was to get time and

breathing space to face squarely the tangle into which his life was bemeshed.

He hated tangles, complications, compromises; they suffocated him, irritated and bewildered him.

He had come to see, since the grim war had released its strangle-hold on him that life was an amazing thing; an eternal expression of something unseen which man is ever struggling to perceive through the cobweb that mortal existence is ever spinning across his eyes. Yet mortal existence was not life. Here in these mountains, in the solitary pine woods or sun-blistered rocks, in delicate flowers, in the distant magic of the sea, he had found Life—at least traces and glimpses of that Life for which he thirsted, and hungered, and desired beyond all which the material world could offer.

Beyond even Helena Tresham's warm, tender love, it might be!

It was that possibility he had to face. It had been nearly obscured in the three happy days of their reunion, and now a passing face, an imagined flash of light had swept the obscurity aside, and left him face to face with facts.

He had made an abortive attempt to face them last night, as he sat with Helena in the hotel lounge, where the little groups each gathered on to its own oasis of carpet, discussed each other, making a stage of their palatial setting, on which they played mild, but very conscious parts.

It had been a very abortive attempt at best, a sudden wonder what existence would be like bereft of Helena's mothering affection and quaint pride in him. A pride which he did not understand in the least, since it was centred in those things in which he took no pride; his clarity of expression and power of summing up a complete situation in pregnant phrases, his genius, in short, for that most difficult of arts, the

short story. Editors already clamoured for such from him; editors of magazines and reviews of graver import than those usually bedecking the railway stall. But it had taken Helena's best endeavours to bring him to the point of producing the expression of his undoubted genius. Because it was easy, he took no pleasure in it. It meant nothing to him. It was the facility of the good craftsman, not the outflowing of some unknown passion, craving material form because its intricate beauty must needs reach the outermost bounds of creation.

He was ever conscious of an inner world, encompassing him with a beauty he thirsted to understand and interpret aright, and yet which eluded his every effort. There were black hours of despair when he was tempted to deny it, and knew that in doing so, the world and life itself would become to him as dust before a whirlwind from chaos. If this spirit of beauty did not exist, then all the hideous face of that nightmare of war must be real and eternal, destructive of soul and spirit.

He came out by La Croix Verte, a roughly carved crucifix standing amid the bare scaling rocks on a shoulder of the hill.

It would take the others nearly ten minutes longer to reach it by the zigzag of the salita. He meant to face the issue in those ten minutes as he had often intended to face it before, and, as usual, it slipped by him. He sat at the foot of the cross, looking out towards the distant sea.

The pines behind him breathed in their sleep, the air clear as crystal was laden with their scent, and the blue space above seemed to wrap him in a deep security away from all the torturing questions the world below flung at him. Here he could almost grasp—or at least glimpse—the vision towards which he strove, of that eternal wonder hidden behind the

beauteous veil of the material world. Almost!

Would it always elude him like this? Was it actually beyond his grasp? Unconsciously his hand groped for another hand, for the touch of some companion soul. In a second of time his inner vision had flown back along the steep path by which he had climbed, caught up the woman with the mule, who had looked at him, and he saw, not her face, but that strange illumination.

At which precise moment, Helena and Dominic Bessington climbed up the last rough steps of the orthodox path, and Helena cried:

“Well! of all the unexpected people, Geoffrey!”

He smiled back in his shy, diffident manner and said:

“There’s no real path the way I came. It’s just a rough climb.”

III

Marian Hamberton did not approve of her brother. She did not even admire his short stories or his crystalline criticism on contemporary work, except that they helped to fill a none too abundant exchequer. She said she never knew what he was driving at, or when she did, she never found it a point worth discussing. Still it meant money and probably fame, and she was eager for either commodity: money to procure all the things she considered worth having in life, silk stockings, filmy garments, dances, motor rides, chocolates, and fame to secure her entry into a certain social world which, without it, would never trouble over the existence of Marian Hamberton, who as sister and sole relation to Geoffrey Hamberton was entitled to some consideration as mistress of his household destinies, and caretaker of one obviously unable to take care of himself in a humdrum world.

Of course, there was Helena Tresham, whom Geoffrey was to marry as soon as he could make up his mind to stop drifting and "peg into" the remunerative work awaiting him. Helena would remove Geoffrey from his sister's care and her importance would ebb; but then Helena bid fair to prove a sister-in-law, in whose home, the desirable prizes of life would be within reach, and she—Marian—would be thankful to be quit of responsibility for the impossible Geoffrey, with his dreamy ways, his utterly foolish disregard for things which mattered, and his horrible faculty for saying things which couldn't possibly be true however true they might sound.

Marian was quite anxious for the marriage to come off; indeed she betrayed more anxiety about it than did the principals themselves. The engagement had lasted two years, and Mr. Tresham at least betrayed no undue haste to be quit of his daughter.

A man of the world, courteous, tolerant and appreciative of qualities and knowledge which were entirely foreign to his own nature, he gave Geoffrey Hamberton an unexpected affection for which the younger man was grateful, though at times he wondered what Mr. Tresham found in him to like. Geoffrey was amazingly un-self-conscious, but he realised his own shortcomings more easily than he recognised his own virtues, and troubled as little over the one as the other.

He was genuinely glad when Helena had written to say her father would accompany her on her holiday; indeed, more pleased than he was when Marian arrived a week previously, and, declining to share his simple pension, had secured a small, sunless back bedroom in the only fashionable hotel in the place.

Marian sat on Helena's sunny balcony one morning and said abruptly:

“When are you two going to get married?”

Helena laid down her pen and looked at her. Marion was not intentionally rude, but she had a habit of saying familiar things in a manner calculated to ruffle the calmest spirit. Helena said:

“I want to finish my ‘French Cardinals’ Series first. Geoffrey is very patient with me.”

Marian gave what might almost be termed a sniff.

“Is Geoffrey ever going to do any work himself!”

Helena took up her pen again.

“People with his genius must work when they will.”

“They can’t live when they will!” retorted Marian shortly.

“Happily, it’s not a question of living.” Helena was determined not to quarrel, but it took some determination.

Marian was silent for a while, but she had not said all she meant to say. Her concern over her errant brother’s affairs was not entirely personal. She was really fond of Helena and from her point of view, Geoffrey was not behaving well to his betrothed, so long as he eluded the, to her, so simple issue of *£ s. d.*

“No doubt you would like to tell me to mind my own business, Helena, but I really want to make you understand about Geoffrey. You’ve known him three years or thereabouts and I’ve known him twenty; that is, I can remember when I was four years old, and he seven. It was always the same; you could never get Geoffrey to face any really important issue until you held his nose against it. He’d never do his lessons till the last minute, never make up his mind what to do on a holiday till it was nearly over, and he’d idle about doing nothing, or burying himself in a book. At school he’d never decide whether he really wanted to play cricket or not, never make up his mind what he meant to be, never say what he

liked or disliked, till one made him, and if ever you want to be married and won't marry till he has definite work, you'll have to put it to him plainly: 'Get to work or go away.' "

She got up.

"I'm going to play tennis, now. Thank heaven I always know what I want to do and what I'm going to do. It's no use being riled, Helena, I *had* to say it. Geoff was always a dreamer; you've got to shake him to wake him."

She went out abruptly, and Helena leant back in her chair. The stiff outline of the palms in the garden, the new creaminess of the hotel balustrade, the smooth glossiness of the trim orange trees, caught her attention, and seeing Marian in her spotless cream dress pass across the garden with young Masters she was curiously aware how well the girl fitted in with the picture. Marian was undeniably pretty in a perfectly orthodox way. She always looked as if she were turned out by a maid, though she had never possessed such a luxury in her life. She was amusing, too. Helena had heard young Masters' admiring laugh as they passed below. Everything about Marian was clear-cut and decided—her very wit had that quality. She had nothing in common with Geoffrey. She, Helena, understood Geoffrey better after three years than Marian understood him after twenty! And yet there was a tinge of truth in his sister's blunt criticism. Geoffrey had to be brought face to face with facts to make decisions, and he had a habit of treating what were really important matters as mere trivial incidents.

There was this offer of Rythen of the *Imperial Review*. He had not written to accept even now. It was too bad, for the offer was a generous one, and she had worked hard to secure it. It was the sort of offer that led to things. Once Geoffrey could be made

to value his own great gift his future was secure. She leant her head on her hand and considered Marian's words. She did not like them, but she knew they were honest from the speaker's standpoint.

Did she understand Geoffrey?

She let her mind drift back over the few days since their arrival in this delectable land. The last two days Geoffrey had been more evasive than ever; only that morning he had failed to turn up at the hotel till past eleven, and then had clearly already taken enough exercise to make him more inclined to saunter along the dusty Corniche Road with her father, than to climb up the steep ascent to La Guarda; and he had offered neither explanation or excuse for his lateness. He might have been working; she knew he still worked intermittently at that strange poetry which she had mind enough to recognise not only as strange, but as poetry.

He wrote it with difficulty, dragging the magical cadence and haunting music from the inner depths of his being with almost reluctant passion.

"It's so hard to set down that I can't resist it," he had said to her once.

That was so like him—so like him!

A wave of passionate tenderness came over her. She knew him as a man made for struggle while thirsting for a peace beyond understanding, and compelled by that very thirst to face the unending struggle. If only he would desist, would take what was his for the asking and give to the world what it asked of him!

"It's not as if it were little, or of no value," she thought fiercely; wrath with that unknowable hidden self of his that condemned the Geoffrey she loved to perpetual conflict. "He could write nothing that was not utterly true and noble," she argued. "It's not as if I wanted him to write *down*, to deny his genius.

I want him to be happy. My poor Geoff!"

Almost she persuaded herself to go back from her declared word, that she would not marry him till he had harnessed himself to definite work that could not be lightly discarded. She had made this demand early in their engagement when she had believed it an easy matter to drive his young genius along the appointed path. Now she knew better, but she had never revoked her decision. It was not a matter of means. She was herself well off, and Geoffrey was blessed—or cursed—with a small competence, just sufficient to supply daily bread if little butter and less jam, but she was no fool; she knew if Geoffrey did not settle down to work of some kind before marriage, he would not do so afterwards. She was unaware that Mr. Tresham was the author of the practical wisdom of her view. When she had told him of it, he had merely smiled, and approved, and neglected entirely to point out that it was the direct result of his own well-digested knowledge of life filtered down to her in indirect streams.

Geoffrey came under her window and signalled to her.

IV

Five minutes later they were following the course of a winding valley that twisted its tortuous way up into the heart of the range of hills that shut in Osraello. Violets fringed the path, and the orange trees bent beneath their golden burden. Here and there a cyprus pointed upwards to the blue heaven.

They had walked silently for a long time. The path was narrow and rough, the little glen shut in on them and on their left the towering mass of Monte Negros darkened the sky, but the sun still shone on the rough wall beside them, and behind, lay the sea

like a sheet of blue and silver, no waves breaking its serene monotony to-day.

Close to a wall grew a fringe of violets, white and fragrant. Without a word he stopped, gathered them and gave them to her.

She looked into his face with question and wonder, caught her breath, and looked beyond him.

Round the turn of the path came a woman, tall, stately, walking slowly, her head tied round with a blue handkerchief, her dress that of a peasant, her face.

It was that which made Helena catch her breath, for this time the woman looked at her, and not at Geoffrey, and her face seemed transfigured with a divine pity that was hard to bear, and Geoffrey turned and saw her.

Helena's eyes were on her lover's face again.

The woman passed on and they, too, moved on silently. Helena's fingers clutching the white violets.

"Who is she?" she asked suddenly.

"I do not know. I have seen her three times now—like that—passing by."

Then abruptly and without warning, he broke into speech.

"Helena, I have something I must say to you. I've been trying to say it for days. I can't accept Rythen's offer. I can't do work of that sort. You'll think me an ungrateful fool. I'm not ungrateful; perhaps I'm a fool, but I can't do it. There are other things—other—"

He stopped, stammering confusedly.

"Your poetry?" she asked quietly.

He shook his head.

"I don't know. Perhaps not even that. I do not know, what it is; that's the point. I've got to *know*, to find out something! Perhaps when I've found it, it will just be something that all the rest of you

know quite well, something you have which I lack. I can't write, I can't *do* anything till I've grasped this thing. Don't ask me to, Helena!"

She looked away from him, along the path by which the woman had gone. The foolish, irrational thought had flickered across her mind that that woman could show him what he sought. It was a mere flicker of thought, dismissed as soon as recognised. She did not even then believe in Geoffrey's vague "something," but she did believe and realise that he was intensely in earnest and unhappy. He was to her like a child crying for the moon and as a comprehending mother she would soothe him, while trembling for the sorrow and disillusionment that must be his.

"Dear Geoff," she said gently, "I do not want you to do anything that makes you unhappy or dissatisfied; all I want is that you should give us your best. If you really feel your poetry *is* the best you have to give, then you must concentrate on that."

"But I don't," he almost groaned, "it might be if I knew anything worth knowing. I'm so ignorant—yet at times I seem on the point of knowing. . . ."

With an unconscious gesture he seemed to wipe away a mist from his eyes.

"I'm so ignorant," he repeated humbly. "You see, Helena, if only I understood, I *could* say it in the right way so people could listen. I do feel that. I can express things only, I must be sure what I have to express."

He was at least tremendously eager to make her understand. He conceived of her as the last hold left him in an alien world which stood between him and his passion for vision.

On the terrace below them a distorted olive tree offered an inviting seat. Helena indicated it.

"Let's sit there and talk it out," she suggested. It was somewhat heroic of her, for she dreaded the talk, shrinking from the effort required to keep in sympathy with a bemused soul; besides, even with one she loved as tenderly as she loved Geoffrey, there were decent reticences to be observed. She could not endure that he should declare to her the innermost secrets of his heart.

What she failed to grasp, with all her sympathy, was that what he revealed was but the outer wrappings of the holy of holies, on which he himself hardly dared to gaze. She made the common mistake of thinking the shell was the kernel.

Still they sat there on the twisted olive, and she made her best endeavour to face the matter honestly and tenderly.

"When did you first feel like this?" she asked, since he would not begin.

"In France, during the war. Either there was something beautiful behind it all, or I prayed the next bullet would put me out of it. In an outside way, one saw it in streaks. Frost, mud, foul words, foul deeds—and then across this a streak of amazing beauty—unexpected selflessness, sacrifice, kindness dressed in most awful rags, maybe, but *there*. One had to lay wait for it, to count a day lost when one had been too blind to see it. It's been harder to see since the war. I suppose it cannot write itself so plainly on drab existence as on that black background."

"You must mean the inherent goodness and kindness that's in humanity."

He moved uneasily.

"I suppose so, but that's not enough explanation. It's there right enough, but I want to understand why. What is it for, where is the point of it—and the origin. I want to see it—*whole*."

Her face grew grave again.

"Aren't you asking too much, Geoff? To see the 'whole' is the attribute of God, I should think."

He was silent. He had failed, he knew he must fail. She brought patience, faith and love to him and yet it was not enough.

Either he must surrender to the limitation of mortal existence or he must struggle alone, and the loneliness appalled him. He had little use for a world of people, but he was most terribly aware of his need for one person. A sense of incompleteness and love surged over him as he looked at her. That he must really lose her had never entered his head till this moment, and the amazed pain in his eyes struck at her heart.

"Geoff, Geoff, my poor Geoff!" she cried and put her arm round him.

He went suddenly on his knees and hid his face against her, and she felt him shiver.

"Geoffrey," she whispered with earnest tenderness; "I promise you I will never interfere, never stand between you and anything you feel you must do—to find——" she faltered—"this understanding. Even if I don't understand myself, I do know we have to follow our own star, and perhaps I've wanted you to follow mine. Well, I don't; I don't want anything except that you should be happy and at peace with yourself. Follow what light you see and don't think of me, Geoff."

He kissed her hands and the violets which she still held.

"I expect I'm every sort of fool," he said huskily. "Perhaps when things—when the gods have given me wisdom, you'll give me your friendship."

"I can never take it away because you have my love—always! Come back and tell me when you've found your—vision."

He looked up quickly.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want, just a flash, a momentary vision of all we cannot see, but it’s there—it’s there, Helena!”

They went back the way they had come. It seemed to Helena as if they were undoing all the hundred little ties that held them together, each step a penance for some unknown sin.

Presently they met the peasant girl again returning carrying a covered basket. The way was narrow and she stood aside to let them pass, a slow tender smile of greeting on her face. Almost mechanically Helena closed her eyes. She could not for some reason endure to meet that look of compassion again. It frightened her.

At the entrance to the hotel Geoffrey left her, and went back the way they had come. Unaccountably as Helena went slowly through the long corridor to her room, she saw again the twisted little path, the peasant girl walking along it without haste, and Geoffrey swaying and stumbling over the rough way behind her.

V

That actually was what he was doing.

Stumbling along the path he had trodden with Helena, in the wake of the woman with the wonderful face, he could not have said when the knowledge that he must see and speak to her had come to him, whether it was on the last or former passing, or whether only when he had actually left Helena that the irresistible impulse had caught him.

The little valley was in deep shadow now, though the heights above were all rose and gold. Cold, too, here in the darkening ways, the pine trees taking strange shapes in the grey, sombre dusk. Still he

hurried, only half aware of his purpose, far more aware that something intangible and precious beyond words might escape him in the thickening shadows.

At the bend beyond the cyprus tree he caught her up, and it may have been she had waited for him. For she stood there in the path, a magnificent, mysterious figure, turned towards him, waiting.

Yet neither found anything to say when he stopped three paces from her. He could feel the beating of his heart, almost could hear it.

He had to find words, he stammered them out:

"Who are you? What is your name?"

He spoke in the dialect of the place, not easily, but intelligibly. She answered him in pure Italian, the purest, most musical sound he had ever heard.

"Down there they call me Maria."

He shook his head.

"But your name?"

She turned her head slowly towards the high hills.

"Visellia."

He did not see her lips frame the word, but he heard it, and a sense of peace and great quiet fell on him. As if he had been sailing on storm-tossed seas and had come into haven.

"Where do you live?" he questioned.

Again she looked up the steep hill, all shadows now.

"Up there?" he asked again.

She nodded.

"You cannot go up so late, there is no path."

She smiled at him.

"There is a path if you know it," she answered, "but you could not tread it."

"When can I see you?"

"I will be by the Croix Verte an hour after sunrise."

She spoke quite calmly as if the assignation were a looked-for, a natural thing."

He wanted to hold her there, demand explanation, give it; but he only stood silent, looking at her. She seemed part of the grey shadows of the mountain, except that he felt her eyes like stars lightening the dark corners of his heart.

Then she was gone.

The place was empty—it was almost invisible in the deepening dusk, chilly too, as well as empty, deplorably empty!

He went back: he never remembered one step of the walk, for his mind was toiling up the dark path he could not tread that would come out somewhere on the rose-lit summit.

When he was clear of the valley he looked back. On the very summit of Monte Negros a faint glow still lingered. In the town the lamps shone brightly.

CHAPTER II

HELENA

Gossip grows in big hotels, or little ones, as mushrooms flourish in hot beds, growing up in a night and distributed at breakfast the next morning. But occasionally some mushroom gets left to swell into gargantuan proportions, and then bursting, scatters its seeds around its own circumference.

The Grand Hôtel des Rois was no exception to the rule. Gossip was sown, grew and flourished in the evenings, in the long central lounge, and was dispersed, cut down, destroyed or forgotten next day, did little harm, and kept a number of people amused. Occasionally the toadstools of spite and malice found a lodgement and provoked violent attacks of internal derangement, but on the whole, few people were really the worse for their neighbours critical interest.

"People who do not wish to be talked about should not come to this sort of hotel," said Marian Hamberton when Mrs. Castlemain complained that the Rolland girls never left anybody alone and had eyes at the back of their heads. "Nobody's hurt by what the Rollands say," she went on scornfully, "and if it amuses the Rollands to imagine that Mr. Paton is divorced, and the Countess Murreaux is a Polish refugee, and M. Charbord is losing his wife's fortune at the Casino every night, why shouldn't they amuse themselves? It doesn't make any of it true."

"Or that your brother is infatuated with a peasant

girl!" put in Mrs. Castlemain drily, and she glanced sharply over her glasses at Miss Hamberton, who undoubtedly flushed angrily.

It is easier to bear gossip about other people with equanimity when one's own relations are not involved.

"My brother is not staying here," she returned coolly, "so anything the Miss Rollands say of him must be pure conjecture."

"But they know Miss Bingham who is at the Pension d'Argente. Still, I shall be only too glad to contradict rumour if you give me authority."

Marian Hamberton desired beyond measure to give the required authority but she was handicapped by her own maddening uncertainty, and the best she could do was to evade the point.

"Miss Tresham and he are out together now. It should be answer enough!"

"Of course—if Miss Tresham knows!" she paused digging her knitting needles in and out a little viciously "and equally of course if its not true, it does not matter what people say!"

Marian rose, she could wait for the Bessingtons in the garden as well as in the lounge; Veronica was always late. In the garden she saw Bessington himself talking to General Monteith, and the General was saying:

"Damned fine girl Bessington, anyhow—if he were one of these painting chaps, one would understand!"

And Bessington decided he would wait for Veronica and Marian in the lounge. He met the latter on the steps, and she detained him in the entrance piazza. He contrived to ask casually whether her brother was dining at the hotel that night or not.

Marian said she didn't know. Geoffrey never made up his mind before-hand, and she added, a little defiantly, that he was out with Helena at that moment.

Bessington paused in lighting his cigarette.

"They've gone to St. Geno," she answered firmly, and he nodded.

"Good. When's the marriage coming off Marian?"

"When Helena has sense enough to pin him to a job. Geoffrey is impossible you know. He just drifts and drifts. As long as he's happy——" she paused.

There was a little silence, which Bessington broke abruptly.

"I don't think Geoffrey's looking very fit. Do you think this place suits him? It doesn't suit everyone. We could quite easily move on."

Then Veronica found them, catching her husband's last words. "Move on! That's like Madre! Always moving on unexpectedly. I'm not going on, I love this place."

So the other two buried their private thoughts and climbed up to Corrodi with Veronica. One never thought of troublesome matters in Veronica's presence; it did not pay.

Helena wandered about the streets of St. Geno alone, and bought presents, and told herself she was many kinds of an idiot and ought to bring Geoffrey to book, instead of having let him return to Osraello under promise to lie down and get the sleep of which he was obviously in need.

Hamberton was doing as much at that moment. Lying on a mosquito netted bed, in a darkened room, staring at a tiny reflection of an outside world which showed in the toilet glass.

For five mornings now he had climbed the hill at sunrise to La Croix Verte and on through the young pine forest, almost to the narrow, knife-like ridge that separated the friendly familiar Osraello hill group from Monte Negros: almost as far—not quite—that was forbidden. The wonder of those two hours in those high altitudes, still unwarmed by the

shafts of light from the east, yet glowing in beauty had held his spirit in thrall all the long hot hours of the day. They acted as a sharp cleavage in his being, so that he brought but half his personality to meet the little world round him, was aware of shrunk stature and an incompleteness—ached for the night which was bringing the dream, was torn further with conflict with his natural curiosity concerning the strange woman who had so amazingly taken his life in thrall. Taken it so completely that it was only that day in the jolting, noisy tram, *en route* for St. Geno, that he had suddenly perceived his brutal disloyalty to Helena. So little did his new experiences coincide with his relationship with her that he had never set the one against the other till that moment. And he was horrified at himself when he did.

In some indistinct way he had imagined his experiences were common to them both, or would be. That which was his must necessarily be Helena's. She also would find life enlarged—the glowing beauty of it, and the undreamt-of possibilities opening out like a new, strange country, they would walk together.

He had not consciously thought this, but in that enlightening moment in the tram he recognised it was an unreal background to a very real experience.

It was that moment that Helena had leant forward and said:

“Geoffrey, I'm sure you're not fit to tramp about St. Geno all day. I don't believe you're sleeping properly.”

He stammered some excuse, weak, because he had not been sleeping properly, and he was a most inadequate liar even in these little matters.

She had made him return by the next tram under promise of sleeping, or at least resting. Here he was, not sleeping, but mentally standing on the tottering

stones of good intention in a bog of dishonour, and finding no way out.

Could Helena climb with him beyond the Croix Verte almost to the razor ridge? Could she sit beside him and listen to the slow chant of the woman who lived in those solitudes, wait for her pregnant sentences, see the glory of the world as she saw it?

The woman with the dew-drenched hair, on whose shoulders the birds sat, whose golden voice spoke strange and yet familiar things in many tongues. The peasant woman with the mule, Maria, the Key to the Unknown, Visellia!

Helena loved mountains from the plain. She could not breathe easily on snowy heights—that was why she avoided Switzerland. She had said one day, laughingly, that La Croix Verte was quite as near the clouds as she cared to be. It was barely 1,000 feet.

A thousand feet! A thousand feet! He repeated the phrase mechanically. He wanted to reach the stars! But he kept on repeating it and so fell asleep, which was unheroic, and commonplace; but even to the most adventurous of us, life is something of a sandwich; commonplace bread rather thick, and the sandwich of adventure rather thin.

He slept longer than he intended. The stars were lit when he opened his eyes; still dazed with sleep, he sprang up, opened the window and looked out.

The room was a side one, looking west, that is up the hillside itself, where the road to Corrodi zig-zagged like a white ribbon up to the stars themselves it seemed.

The great stars twinkled and gleamed like golden clasps holding back the curtain of night.

He tried to remember what his sleep had meant, what dream-thoughts, or even what period it had covered, but it was all blank.

It was only by a prodigious effort that he remem-

bered Helena had sent him back from St. Geno to rest—was it that day, or long days and nights ago? He was still so sleep-drenched he could measure nothing. But the night, the white ascending road and the rustling palms were real, and presently he must go out to them.

He plunged his face into cold water, mechanically brushed his disordered hair and slipped on an overcoat. He could not have said why, or how, he did these trivial things. They were not real; reality had fled up the white road to the stars.

He went downstairs. The narrow passages of the little *pension* were odoriferous with dinner; there was a clatter of plates and voices from the dining-room. He slipped out unnoticed, set his face towards the mountains, and went up the white road.

He had not seen on the table in the hall a letter addressed to him, left there an hour previously by a messenger from the Grand Hotel.

II

On the summit of Monte Negros the dark pines caught night's trailing garments and held her prisoner, and not all the stars of heaven could unloose her, however their golden eyes peered into the maze of trees.

Only at the edge of the summit where the pines stopped abruptly above a sheer precipice, there beyond the verge of blackness the sky was spread out, bejewelled as the coronation robe of a Universe, and the sea was a dim mirror to the same.

Those little twinkling lights far below on the edge of the mirror meant nothing, were nothing here among the high hills and precipices and the silent throng of trees that had captured night.

A figure stood there on the precipitous edge, gazing out, listening, absorbing, becoming part of the night itself; unafraid and at peace.

At peace till those twinkling lights on the verge of nothing caught her eyes. She held her breath and heard the night sweep by, and knew a spell was broken.

She threaded her way back through the pines, following a track no unaccustomed eye could have traced, even in daylight, and went down over the steep shoulder of the hill to where the white road winds up to Corrodi.

III

Tresham looked from Hamberton to Bessington and back again. Bessington was troubled and grave. He had said what he had to say with evident reluctance.

Hamberton stood looking straight before him. His thin face was white and sorely distressed; he seemed, however, neither surprised nor indignant at the plain words which had been addressed to him.

Mr. Tresham would have much liked him to be indignant—furiously so. He was quite ridiculously fond of Hamberton. He had considered him a man with a future before him, and if not entirely worthy of Helena—who was?—yet less unworthy than most men— And now?

Would the fellow never speak?

Bessington spoke.

“Don’t think, Geoffrey, that I came here to Mr. Tresham, tale-bearing. If Vardin hadn’t said what he did, I shouldn’t have said anything; but if Mr. Tresham had to be told by anyone, I thought it would be better that a friend should tell the plain facts rather than an enemy. I went straight to your *pension* to see you first, and missed you. Then I had to see Mr. Tresham before Vardin caught him.” Bessington

added after a pause: "Vardin is no friend of yours, Geoffrey, is he?"

Hamberton said dreamily: "Isn't he? I never thought about it."

Mr. Tresham saw Bessington glance swiftly at the portrait of Helena which stood on the writing-table; they were in the private sitting-room which was Mr. Tresham's shelter from a too intrusive world.

Hamberton turned to him a gravely, wistful face.

"You were right; why are you trying to apologise? You had to do it, of course. I never saw Vardin or any of you. I'm afraid if I had——" he stopped and looked round helplessly, rather like a trapped animal.

"There's nothing I can say—I was out—away from the *pension*, and I was up in the mountains, and I did not come home till after sunrise. I spent the night sitting on the edge of a precipice watching the stars. Could you believe that? Yet it's perfectly true!"

"Alone?"

"No."

Mr. Tresham made a little helpless gesture.

Hamberton was fingering an unopened letter he carried; which he had taken from the hall-table of his *pension*, when he left it half an hour ago, and which he ought to have taken last night.

He was suddenly aware of it and stared down at it, and the familiar writing. His fingers mechanically began opening it.

He went on speaking slowly in a dead, flat voice:

"I'm not offering any excuse at all. No one's going to be so decent to me as you two. Helena——"

The door opened and Helena came in.

She looked from one to the other with surprise—and her eyes finally rested on Geoffrey, almost as if she were frightened.

"You got my letter, Geoff?" Her voice was not so steady as usual.

He glanced mechanically at the letter he held. He had unconsciously opened it. Helena gave a puzzled frown and turned to her father.

"I suppose he came to tell you, but——"

Mr. Tresham interrupted her.

"You will think this is none of our business, Helena my child, but I hoped Geoffrey would be able to explain, and stop further gossip before it got to your ears."

Bessington shook himself and stepped forward.

"I don't think you'll want me, but if you feel sore Helena, you can come and tell me what you think of me. I hoped, too, that Geoff would have straightened out the foolishness."

He was going, but Helena stopped him.

"I don't know why you call it foolishness, or why you are holding a family conclave on my decision. It would seem to me to be a matter between Geoffrey and myself."

He was not looking at her, but at Geoffrey, and her eyes followed his.

Geoffrey was staring at the letter he held, the letter he should have had last night, and his face was still white and strained with pain and bewilderment.

"Do you mean it, Helena?" He spoke as if no others were there. He had forgotten them indeed.

"I never dreamt you'd take it like this," she answered swiftly. "I thought, even if it hurt at first, you'd feel—happier—if only for a time."

She flashed round on the others; sudden, impatient anger flaming up.

"I can't see why you interfere. I wrote last night to tell Geoffrey I thought our engagement—was—had better stop. I thought, perhaps, he'd not agree at once, but I did not think he'd come first to you and tell you."

"Last night!" murmured Bessington.

Then he suddenly saw that he, alone of the three onlookers, knew that Geoffrey had only that moment opened the letter he held.

Helena crossed to the window and looked out. She was furiously angry with Geoffrey. She felt what he had done was unpardonable, the action at best of a thwarted child, crying aloud its wrongs to a heedless world.

"I've only just opened your letter, Helena," said Geoffrey in a dulled, monotonous voice. "I did not come to tell Mr. Tresham anything. I did not know it."

She wheeled round.

"Then, why are you here?" She flung the challenge at all three.

And for a moment no one answered her.

Tresham, because he hated to hurt her. Bessington, because he must give Geoffrey every chance to right himself in Helena's eyes, and Geoffrey because he waited for the other two to accuse him. Since they refrained, he spoke:

"Your father and Dominic have been asking me to explain why I spent last night up in the mountains, talking to a woman whose name you do not know."

"Maria?"

He looked away. It was not her name, but he let it pass.

"I did not get your letter. It may have been at the *pension*, but I did not see it. I had it in my hand when I came here. I only opened it just before you came in, so you see," he turned abruptly to Bessington, "I can't offer it as an excuse."

"He has uncanny insight sometimes," thought Bessington ruefully, who had hardly realised his own hasty wish.

Helena said nothing. She felt bruised and defenceless, as if her home had suddenly fallen about her

ears, exposing to a scoffing world all the little intimacies of life that decent reticence would hide.

That Dominic and her father were the only "world" present, meant nothing. They had been discussing her—or matters pertaining to her—before her entrance. They would not have done that—she was so far fair to them—if others were not also in train to discuss them. If Geoffrey had done this foolish thing he spoke of, and let the world know it, and their ruptured engagement was admitted, it would be put down to this silly adventure!

Her face burned at the thought. If only he had read the letter last night and known it!

"They'd talk, just the same." She jerked her head back and faced him. At least these two men, listening and sitting in judgement on her and Geoffrey's most private affairs, should know the truth.

"I wrote to tell Geoffrey I felt our engagement could not go on, that we were not suited to each other. I knew nothing of his movements last night—it had nothing whatever to do with it. I merely felt sure I could not make him happy."

His unhappy eyes met hers, and a little of her sharp anger died.

"I think you know it's true, Geoffrey," she added in a softer voice. "And that if I can't make you happy, I'd not be happy myself, so there it is. I just thought, as I told you in the letter, that we'd let things go on a bit and then I'd go home and you'd go on, and—so——" she stopped. It was maddening to feel the prick of tears. She wanted to keep cool, play the part of the modern, commonsense girl who has no dangerous illusions about love at all—and instead she was on the verge of breaking down—aching to unsay the words of the letter, words so much more true, kind, and loving than any that passed now.

If he would give her a loophole, the veriest morsel of excuse to unsay them!

Instead, Geoffrey turned to Mr. Tresham:

"Helena is absolutely justified; I've behaved like a brute to her, but believe me if you can, I never saw it clearly till now. I did not see to what we were drifting. She's a thousand times too good for me, and if I felt I could satisfy her, I'd give up everything to do it, but I'd have to give myself up first and be someone else, and that's the one thing no man can do. If, as you say, people are talking, then she has every excuse for breaking off our engagement. I haven't the ghost of an excuse to offer."

"Nor a plea to put in?" suggested Mr. Tresham. Hamberton realised he was taking it too easily for their liking.

Three days ago he had knelt by her and held to her love and sympathy as the one firm fact in the spinning world; now she was as remote from him as if a chasm had opened between them, as uncrossable as the chain between Monte Negros and Boria. What did it mean?

"If I make any appeal, shouldn't I be asking her to go back on her considered judgment? Would you trust me again, sir? It's done. The only thing is how to arrange it so nothing hurts her."

Bessington nodded. He liked Geoffrey at that moment better than he had ever liked him, and that was saying a good deal.

"If some wretched imp of mischief hadn't dragged Vardin out at an unearthly hour this morning," he said, "it would be easy sailing for you both, but Vardin isn't the kind of man to ask to keep his mouth shut, without making him a great deal more dangerous than he is with it open. Besides the mischief is done."

"But it can't hurt Helena, it only justifies her."

Bessington wrinkled his brows and looked at him.

"It doesn't strike you we are thinking things that may rather hurt you," he suggested.

Helena gave a softened glance. After all Dominic was one of those who read one, though in a comfortable fashion.

"But I deserve to be hurt. Don't consider me at all. I'd better go, I think."

Helena started forward and stopped.

Mr. Tresham rose, signed to Dominic, and they went out.

The two fronted each other.

"Geoffrey you do know, don't you, it had nothing to do with what people are saying—nothing to do with *her*?"

"Quite sure, Helena, about the last?"

She paused. Was she so sure?

"I shall go to her, you know," he half whispered. "I have to. It is for nothing less, it's the only excuse."

One side of her rebelled, shouted it was no excuse but a crowning insult, but in her true self she knew otherwise, knew his incomparable honesty had healing in it, when she could bear the balm.

"She can give you what you want, show you what you seek, this peasant woman?"

She tried to speak coldly.

"Yes. I do not think she is a peasant woman, Helena. I don't know what she is. She does not take what was yours, that remains. It sounds foolishness, perhaps it is. Forgive me, some day."

She put her hands over her face. She had never wanted him so much, and if she said it, if she pleaded, she believed even now she could win him, but—she would not.

She made a great effort, calling on her innermost soul to make it.

"I hope she will make you happy, Geoff. Believe me, I mean it."

He took her hand, dropped it, and went out.

He passed Tresham and Bessington in the corridor, but he did not see them, and though both looked at him, neither spoke, but exchanged swift glances.

IV

Geoffrey Hamberton's final sin was that he did not leave Osraello. He ought by every canon of decent behaviour to have gone away on some good excuse and so ended gossip like a cut string; but instead he took on his rooms for another week, packed a knapsack and disappeared into the mountains. The last place on earth where his footsteps should have taken him, for Verdin's chatter was sufficient to make the Tresham and Bessington position difficult.

Marian Hamberton doubled the difficulty. She was furious with Geoffrey. She saw nothing but a vulgar intrigue with a peasant girl, and said as much in scathing terms. She refused, it is true, to discuss the matter with the outsiders, but in such a way that her opinion of it was even more clear and more damaging to her brother than frank statement would have been, and she could not understand why Helena was cold to her!

Mr. and Mrs. Bessington refused also to discuss the affair, even with Marian. They said it was Geoffrey's and Helena's business, and a broken engagement was better than an unhappy marriage.

"But the reason!" persisted Marian angrily.

Bessington said that Helena had told them the reason was quite different to that assigned by gossip. To which she replied she did not see it made anything any better since everyone else believed it—and why had Geoffrey gone to the mountain?

Since Bessington could not possibly defend that folly, he said nothing more.

The following week they left, ostensibly for Florence. There they parted, Helena and her father returning home. They had disinterestedly tried to persuade Marian to come with them, but she had attached herself to Mrs. Castlemain's party. She liked Osraello and refused to be moved from her plans by the vagaries of her repudiated brother. That her presence kept alive the embers of gossip did not concern her. She had come to Osraello for six weeks and she meant to stay there six weeks; that ended the matter.

Vardin, who otherwise might have turned his dangerous attentions to other travellers, was alert to pass on to her vague rumours, and even lay wait on the salita for the string of mules coming down for their burden of household and garden commodities, but he never saw the beautiful peasant girl.

Then one day he brought Marian an authentic story, that Hamberton had been himself to the Pension d'Argente, taken his portmanteaux, and told the astonished proprietress that he was going to be married! He had gone to St. Geno.

Marian pretended scorn and disbelief—in public. However, she slipped off to St. Geno in the afternoon and studied every shop-window in the one central street of that town, but saw no glimpse of Geoffrey.

The next day he called on her.

"Actually," she wrote to Veronica with indignation that scratched holes in her paper "actually he came to the Grand Hotel and asked for me, as if everyone in the place did not know, by heresay at least, the discreditable story!"

She had gone down and found him in the chill, discomfiting hotel drawing-room, and he said to her abruptly:

"I thought I ought to tell you that I am going to get married, Marian."

"I heard as much," she retorted sharply.

They remained standing. She did not ask him to sit down, nor make any movement to do so herself.

"I'm sorry. I hoped to be first. At present I am in St. Geno. There are, of course, formalities."

"You are marrying then—that peasant girl?"

The thin ghost of a smile crossed his face.

"She is not a peasant, you know. She speaks English, French, Spanish, Latin, Greek."

She stared at him as if she thought he was either hoaxing her or were mad

"She is the daughter of a Dr. Romano, a Roumanian, I think; a great recluse. He brought her up strangely, perhaps, but she has great knowledge. He is—dead."

He hesitated a little over the last word. Marian shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course, she told you all this I suppose."

His patience was remarkable. Even she, desirous of hurting him, full of righteous indignation at his unpardonable behaviour, realised he did not intend to quarrel.

"I have written to Lorimer," he said quietly, ignoring her last words, "and given him all directions. You have your own money and the house is yours, to live in, or sell. I'm afraid it's all I can do for you. I hope you'll be happy my dear. Why don't you marry? You must have plenty of opportunities?"

"I'll marry when I'm certain I'm in for a good time," she retorted. "It's enough for one of us to have made a hash of life."

Again he smiled, and gazed past her out of the window.

"It must look like that, of course. If you ever want me, a letter *poste restante* will find me."

"*Here!*" she was aghast, up in arms. If he must marry the peasant—she wasn't going to believe a word of the irresponsible story—peasant or adventuress not much to choose—at least they might give each other the chance of strange surroundings.

"Well, not exactly *here*—not the Grand Hotel, you know."

She stamped impatiently.

"You make Osraello impossible for any of us!"

"Is it as bad as that? I'm sorry Marian, but its no use explaining. I thought I ought to tell you that much myself. There is a tremendous lot in life you'll find that you don't understand—well, always put the best interpretation you can on it. You'll get on far better without me than with me."

He held out his hand.

She had not meant to take it, but there was something strange about Geoffrey, those three weeks had changed him, he seemed more vital, stronger, almost bigger. She really did not think when she took his hand, what she was doing. He kissed her gently and went out by the French window to the loggia, leaving her indignant and a little bewildered.

That was the last communication Geoffrey Hamberton's friends and relations had with him for three long years.

CHAPTER III

MONTE NEGROS

I

One has to go back. The interview with Marian came after many happenings which did not concern the little world of Osraello, or Geoffrey Hamberton's old friends or old life. They were as remote and distant from it all as if they had taken place in another planet.

Of the truth and significance of them, and of what followed, the reader must judge for himself. They were of vast significance to those most concerned, but whether Hamberton's final understanding of them is in accordance with actual truth, or a barrier erected in self-protection from the devastating fact that he had followed a temporary obsession, must be a matter for individual judgement.

There are certain attested facts which cannot be explained away. As for example his "Lady of the Heights," knowledge of languages, and the cure of the sick child at the Hotel des Montagnes—thought the Ryders might be unwilling to discuss the point. Then there was the house on Monte Negros, which Bessington visited for Hamberton, disposing of the amazing library, and things of value to a Paris dealer. It was not considered advisable for Hamberton to go there again. Finally, there was the finding of Hamberton alone and unconscious on the edge of the crevasse, and those strange marks on the snow slope on the further side.

There is always Hamberton himself. He has not the appearance of one who has been bemused, fooled, or temporarily insane, but he certainly gives the impression of an unseen handicap.

There remains his poem. But that is not public property yet. Let judgement wait on that event.

So the story goes back to the day when Hamberton walked blindly out of Tresham's room in the hotel, to his *pension*, packed a *knapsack*, and set his face towards La Croix Verte.

II

He went by way of the little valley, at the end of which, following the rocky course of a trickling stream, one came out behind La Croix Verte, amongst the young pines on the western shoulder of the Osraello Hill; the shoulder nearest Monte Negro, that is.

He did not get there. He slipped on a boulder crossing the stream, struck his head against it, and, incidentally, sprained his ankle.

He lay there with the sun beating down on him for some hours, but eventually recovered sufficiently to take in what had happened. His foot was so swollen he dared not take off his boot, and his head ached distractingly.

It is conceivable he might have crawled back the rough way of his ascent to the path in the little valley, and so be at least within shouting distance of some passing peasant. It would no doubt have been an agonizing experience, but ninety-nine men out of a hundred would have thought it preferable to a night on the solitary hill-side with a cold wind whistling down the funnel of the stream. But if the spirit of that stream was set on reaching the sea, the spirit of the man was set on reaching the heights, and the idea of going back never occurred to him.

He bathed his head in the icy-cold water, seriously contemplated cutting off his boot, shirked it, and started to crawl upwards.

He only got a few yards, and every foot of the torturing way he called silently on Visellia.

He anchored his dizzy thoughts on her, dragging, so to speak at that anchor.

She did not know he was coming. This path did not lead to their usual meeting place, not even to La Croix Verte; it was no path indeed. In any case he did not know where to find her even if he performed the impossible, and reached the top. He had always just "met" her somewhere. Nevertheless he convinced himself she would come to him now in his need.

Even when blackness seemed to hurl itself at him with the rock-strewn gorge as a weapon, his last conscious thought was: Would she be in time?

III

She came down the gorge, not slithering nor slipping over the boulders, but with firm certain steps, moving from one rock to another without haste or hesitation. Her eyes saw the prone figure on the pebbly course long before her feet found foothold on the rough stones around him.

She examined him swiftly, touched the bruised head and swollen foot with light fingers, and set to work to remove the boot with incredible deftness, and wasting no time in pity on the revealed result, proceeded to stroke the injured limb with cool fingers. Then she climbed up the bank and diving into the pine trees, returned with her hands full of moss, which she dipped in the stream and bound round the discoloured ankle with her head handkerchief. All the while she half sang, half chanted a little

rhythmical refrain to herself. That finished, she sat by him and looked at his face.

She was not pitying his plight, was not even greatly concerned at it. Behind the grave wonder with which she regarded him there lay an expectant hope, a little fire kindled by some subtle excitement. The touch she laid on him, was as tender as Helena's. She put her hand across his eyes and he opened them.

"I knew you would come," he whispered.

Her face shining down on him, blotted out the surrounding world and all pain and confusion of mind.

"Therefore I am here," she said softly in her beautiful Italian. "There is a little hut near here. You must sleep there, and in the morning you will be well."

He raised himself.

She knelt beside him, but did not attempt to assist him, she only smiled at him.

"I feel perfectly all right!" he said with some surprise, and she laughed.

It was a beautiful laugh, conjuring up to Hamberton a vision of a shaft of sunlight in a dark wood.

She pointed to his bandaged ankle.

"It will be well to-morrow," she repeated soothingly, as a mother might have soothed a child for a trifling bruise. "Are you going to tell me, Geoffrey?"

She made music of his name.

"Ah, you know?" he cried suddenly, and her eyes fell.

"I forgot you do not like me to know things in that way without being told," she said gently, "so tell me yourself."

"Helena has set me free. She does not think we should be happy. There were more reasons, which the others saw, but she had done it before then. If only I could be quite sure she were set free

too,—and will be happy.”

“How can you doubt when she has acted for what she felt was your happiness? She is not selfish, this Helena of yours, so the flowers of happiness will certainly bloom for her. She had learnt the first letter of Love’s name.”

“But it means I have not,” he sighed.

“You know the middle one. Sometimes people have to go back to learn the first. There are three letters you know.”

“The last?” he questioned.

She looked up the dark slopes of the mountains.

“I do not think it can be learnt down here. Very few learn it. Come, give me your haversack.”

“For you to carry? Is it likely!”

“It must be you or your bundle,” she insisted.

He glanced down at his injured foot, made a wry face and obeyed.

She swung the sack casually over her shoulder as if it were a feather weight, which it was not, and picked up his stick.

“Now stand up,” she directed, “but do not take a step till I tell you. I do not want you to suffer.”

She placed his arm across her shoulder and drew close to him. When, at her word he took a forward step, she moved with him.

Three steps and then a pause.

He was very tired, but he felt no pain. The stick and her firm body under him seemed to take all responsibility for his injured foot.

He glanced down at it once, wondering, and felt a sharp twinge.

“Do not do that!” she said quickly. “Oh! Geoffrey how long will you be learning? There is so much to learn!”

“You mean I’m so ignorant,” he answered with a sigh, “that’s what I’ve always felt.”

"It is only in my country you are ignorant. Come, we are here."

They had turned a corner and he saw, on the edge of the stream, a little hut built of wood and stones, such as one frequently finds on the hill-side, shelter for wood-cutters, goat-tenders, or perhaps for mere wayfarers like themselves. Shelter at all events from a solitude that was too great at night for the ordinary human.

The floor of the hut was clean, an unusual fact, and it was in good repair, equally unusual. It contained nothing, however, but a little heap of wood in the corner.

He was directed to sit down with his back to the wall; a curious mental haze still obscured his mind; he saw her through a mist. She was between him and the pile of wood. He could not see what she did, but presently a fire was alight, and she rose. Very tall she seemed, there, in their little dark hut.

"I am going to fetch you some food, and several things. Do not move."

But he was aghast.

"You cannot go to Monte Negros and back now. It would be dark before you reached La Croix Verte."

She looked out of the door. The afternoon sun had long deserted this little gorge which ran at right angles to the valley below.

"I could if it were necessary," she said calmly, "but Madallena will let me have all you need. You will be quite safe till I return."

She went suddenly on her knees by him, and holding his hands in hers gazed at him, her eyes half sad, half tender.

"It is so good to have someone to care for again! I am happy, my friend." She bent forward and kissed him on the forehead.

Her cool firm lips seemed to energize him as cold water will revive a fainting man.

He lay there watching the night creep down through the silent woods. If he listened intently, he could hear the trickling of the little stream as it threaded its dainty way between the boulders. It whispered and laughed of the days to come when the spring rain would break, and far-off snows melt, and it would rush and tumble and race down its course, with boisterous laugh, and turning at the end, swirl down the little valley, out past the washing-place, dive beneath the road, and so meet the sea!

Hamberton shut his eyes. He was conscious of no pain, only a great desire to rest.

That scene in the Tresham's room of three hours ago seemed strangely remote, but at the same time it was amazing to realise how it had shaken him. It had been a tearing-up, a dislodgement beyond what he had at first imagined. There was no pain there either, yet he was aware of a wound; aware, too, that all he had done since his hurried visit to the *pension*, the swift walk through the Valley, the steep climb, had been actions prompted by pain, perhaps an attempt to escape it.

Well, he had escaped. Even though he recognised the wound and knew its power to hurt, he had ceased to fear it—and with the eradication of fear, the possibility of pain sank to insignificance.

That which he had sought so long, that hidden secret of life for which he had hungered, was just a step nearer by reason of the scene in the hotel. He had always known he could only find it by suffering, by struggle, by renunciation; known also that these things must come to him out of life, and not be created by his will. He had only to fix his mind on the goal to which he strove; Life would see to it that the road was none too easy!

Visellia knew the secret. He was certain of that:

had been certain from the moment her calm, beautiful eyes met his.

She knows! The thought that surged up in his mind even then.

So he sought her—and his certainty deepened, yet, though they had spoken of many things, they had never spoken of this secret knowledge, nor of his quest.

They had spoken of the beauty of the earth, the sky and sea—of the reflected glory of it in the innermost mood of the soul—of the river—of the toiling peasants, dragging a scant livelihood from the hard earth. She knew them well. She would accost them gravely and kindly, and they responded in the same patois; but for all that, in spite of dress and, at will, dialect, and her apparent mode of living, she was not one of them. She had told him the little he had told Marian. Strangely enough, it interested him hardly at all.

He knew this woman of the mountains was not like other women, because she knew what he ached to know—the ultimate goal of life, the reality of the Immortal hope that keeps the race from perishing or passing back through the shadows to that void from which it once emerged.

So far it had been enough to be with her who knew. It brought him strange content, and rest. He was in sight of his goal. It had no longer an uncertain existence. It was a reality—and he could wait.

His wait there in the dark hut seemed typical of the whole situation. He was hurt, so his material senses insisted. He could not retrace his steps. He was alone, but Visellia was coming back to him, and would bring him all he needed. He had only to wait.

By and by she returned. Someone was with her; he heard her speaking. The light of a lantern flashed in.

She placed it, and one of the wide country baskets, on the floor, and turning to the door, took from a man outside another bundle.

She spoke to the man in dialect. Hamberton could hardly understand it. She was thanking him and apparently adding some order to her thanks. The man's voice was respectfully subdued. He called her Maria, and presently he went. Viselliã came back and closed the door. She hung the lantern on a nail in the rafter, and proceeded to unpack the basket.

She moved about making her arrangements deftly, despite the uncertain light, for the lantern only cast a golden halo in the centre of the hut.

As she moved she sang her strange little chant, so that the bare interior seemed full of harmony, light, and content.

First she spread a skin rug on the floor by him, placed a pillow on it and a heavy wadded quilt by the side and helped him move on to the temporary bed.

Then she made up the fire which had gone down, and Hamberton, sleepily content, watched the blue smoke mounting in winding spirals to a little aperture in the roof. The fire smelt of pines, resinous and refreshing.

Then she placed a little stand across the burning logs and put a kettle on, having first vanished into the night outside, to fill it. If he wondered at her ability to find her way over the rough banks to the stream in the darkness, it was only a faint wonder, for all she did was to him wonderful, and yet so easily done that one accepted it as the natural course of things.

Presently she brought him hot coffee, bread, cheese made of goats' milk, olives, salt, and an orange.

She served him, kneeling beside him, the meal laid out in easy reach.

At first he rebelled, declaring he felt quite well, and should wait on himself; but she shook her head.

"Your mind is in advance of your body, my friend." Then she talked inconsequently of other things.

"There was a wood-mouse" she told him, "living a few yards farther up the gorge. He had evidently had a hard time for when I passed, carrying food, he smelt it and followed me—and his wife, too. They are waiting outside now, debating whether it's safe to break in or not. Do you mind mice? If not, I will feed them presently!"

"Feed them now!" he laughed.

"When you have finished," She looked at him curiously,

"I do not think you believe me," she added seriously.

"Was I meant to? It's so pretty."

She rose and opened the door, and made some little noise which he could hardly hear.

Two minute moving streaks stirred the shadows, and hesitated on the edge of the halo of yellow light. She bent down and held out her hand still making the faint noise. A little wood-mouse climbed up her hand, and sniffed with quick twitches of impatience at her fingers. She looked from it to Geoffrey rather wistfully, then she set the mouse on the floor.

"I apologise," he said, and then perplexity clouded him.

"But you could not have seen them in the dark?"

"I could hear," she said, breaking bread and scattering the crumbs. "Just think how strange it is. In the mouse world, they think you slipped and injured your foot in order that two extremely hungry creatures should be fed!"

He leant back against the wall watching the mice and their Lady Bountiful, and she knelt, and watched, too. Presently they were satisfied and melted away into the shadows again. He did not see them go; the little darting streaks were there, and then—not there!

She gathered up the remnants of the meal, placed the things in the basket again, and put more wood on the fire.

“You must sleep now,” she said decidedly, “or you will not be healed.”

“But you?”

“You will sleep till morning; you will not want me.”

“But you must sleep somewhere.”

“Everywhere is somewhere. Do not trouble about me, my friend. Your business is to sleep.”

She continued to sit near the fire and recommenced the soft chant. If it were meant to draw down sleep through the darkness, it fulfilled its purpose.

Hamberton slept.

Once only he woke. The fire burnt low, a mere glimmer in the darkness, but he knew the hut was empty save for himself.

He slept again.

IV

The top-most ridge of the hills behind Osraello was pine-clad to the summit. Monte Negros, similarly clad, rose some 200 feet higher, and was in fact the highest point of the lower range of foot-hills to the Alpes Maritimes.

The few travellers who questioned the hotel concierge (who knew little and said much) or the natives (who knew much and said little) as to the possibility of climbing Monte Negros, were invariably told it was not worth the trouble, since the trees

at the top were too thick to afford a view, and for what else would one climb a mountain?

The natives would have said the same though they knew better, would have added, perhaps, that it was not a good place to climb, perhaps hinted that "things" happened there. The hill behind La Croix was climbable, yes, but rough going and also not worth the effort. The route by Corrodi and so on to the more open mountain-sides above Allago was a better walk.

Naturally forty-nine people out of fifty took the Corrodi Road. The fiftieth occasionally adventured beyond La Croix Verte and returned by an obvious if zig-zagging path into another valley.

The concierge never thought of mentioning that the top of Monte Negros was private property, possibly he would not know it. It was a transaction that really only concerned the Italian Government and the purchaser, and at the time, the handful of peasants and wood-cutters, who were the only likely trespassers, for in those days, visitors were few and far between. By now a peasant would as soon cut down his olive trees or stand the statues in the little coloured road-side shrines on their heads, as set foot on the narrow "divide," or cross the unmarked boundary on the steep mountain.

Fortunately, the visitors never knew what they missed, for the view was delectable.

Beautiful, looking seaward, though it is true it was only in places where the pines stopped on the edge of a sheer precipice, that one could see the panorama. There was indeed a far wider view from Corrodi. Here the sea was framed between the red pine stems, and on the days when it took on the livery of the sky, and the horizon melted into nothingness, it was like looking over the edge of the world into space. Osraello, straggling along a narrow sea-

board between the spurs of the hills, was hidden by its own ramparts.

But on the other side of Monte Negros, across a tumbled country of green valley and steep forest-ridden hills, punctuated by little lonely hill towns, there shone in the sun, the snow-clad Alpes Maritimes, far away like some fairy country, clouds of crystal against a sapphire sky. The view had an amazing beauty of its own. Perhaps the distant ridge of frozen whiteness gained in remoteness by the featureless landscape. Most certainly it was infinitely alluring. The distant peaks were as magnets, drawing the imagination and will with undeviating attraction.

That was what Hamberton experienced, at least, as he sat beneath the pines and looked towards them. He was seated near the narrow causeway that connected "his" hill with Monte Negros. Behind him the ground fell in a rough and tumble of boulder, young pine and scrub, and on the other side where he sat, a sheer bare precipice of scaling rock, some eighty feet high, dropped to a grassy slope running up between the pines.

The causeway itself was about three feet wide; the precipice made one wall of it, and the other was a practically unclimbable slope of slippery rock.

He had never yet crossed the narrow path. Visellia came across it daily, and disappeared over it at nightfall, but she had never suggested he should accompany her, and a certain delicacy held him from exploring unasked, what appeared to be her territory, though he knew nothing of possession or trespass.

He was living on the southern face of the hill near La Croix Verte, in a hut that had been built when those amazing long sagging lines of telegraph wire were slung from pole to pole across deep gorge and

wide valley, and the dividings of hill from hill.

He had come up here at Visellia's bidding the morning after his sojourn in the little hut in the gorge. Climbed, forgetful of an injury miraculously passed.

They had visited a farm a little lower down. The last outpost of those who strive with nature, here, where the sun burns on blistering rock and hardened earth through the long summer, and hardly softens the keen chill of the winter air; where water is garnered carefully in big concrete tanks, and earth calls for incessant labour from dawn till eve.

The house was yellow-washed and red-tiled and stood to the east of La Croix Verte. The woman who lived there stopped her washing as Visellia and her companion approached, and the group of dark-eyed children gathered round, with goats and odd-looking dogs and three cats as audience.

Visellia's dress and that of the worn, bronze-faced woman did not materially differ in make. A short, full, brown skirt, a knitted coat and coloured apron and the inevitable head handkerchief. That of the woman, however, was of indistinguishable colour, while Visellia's was blue, but the one woman was scarred by heavy toil and much child-bearing, bent in form and slow in movement, while Visellia stood in superb erection, with grace, vigour, and health in every line.

The woman wiped the suds off her arms as Visellia introduced her companion.

"This good gentleman would live in the hut by the poles awhile and breathe our air, and lo! he insists on cleaning the hut himself! Will you lend him the necessary things?"

The woman flashed a laugh at him, showing white teeth, still strong and unbroken.

"Of course, if it were Maria's wish! Who would deny her anything?"

Hamberton made out that much with his ears, and he also gathered the fact that "Maria" was not only known here, but loved, and that the familiar name expressed no sense of equality.

They secured their implements, left sound deposit against wear and tear and returned to the hut. Hamberton refused to be further served by his "Lady of the Heights," which was the title he had bestowed on her. He set to work to prepare his lodging. The hut already contained a table and a chair; while he cleaned, Visellia disappeared. Later on she took him to the end of the causeway and showed him an assorted heap of goods. A mattress, rugs, a lamp, cooking materials, enough, indeed, to furnish his modest dwelling.

"But from where?" he stammered, amazed.

"I do not live in the trees," she answered, laughing. "Come, we must carry them down."

The little homestead they had visited was on the other side of him. He was thus midway between Madallena and the unseen dwelling of his "Lady of the Heights."

"Madallena or I go to Osraello once or twice a week," she told him; "we will buy your provisions there. Meanwhile, I will provide you with bread, butter and cheese, and oranges. Madallena will sell you eggs, and milk, and vegetables. Wood, you must gather for yourself. These are trivial things, but they have to be seen to."

So, for two wonderful weeks he had lived there content, lacking nothing. The trivial tasks which belonged to mere existence, took him, perhaps, three hours a day, and the getting of wood for the evening fire was the greatest of them. For the rest, he made himself passable coffee, which Visellia disdained,

cooked eggs under her direction, even made vegetable soups, and grew to regard goat's cheese as being as essential to the menu as bread. If the diet was monotonous and rather insistently vegetarian, he brought good appetite to it. The air up here had none of the odd mental stimulation of the air on the sea-board, which was inductive to dreamful sleep and restless nerves. Here it was keen, fresh, blowing from off distant snows. It energized his body and soothed his mind, making him at first disinclined for thought beyond the momentous fact of living.

He and Visellia went for long walks down steep valleys and up distant hills, visiting, now and then, villages clinging to precipitous paths, and climbing round pink-washed churches. Villages of ugly smells, dark streets, and narrow ways, but packed with human interest.

Sometimes they sought open country. Visellia would take him miles to view a patch of blue hypaticas, to see a lichen-covered rock in a certain light; or they would wander through the nearer woods, and occasionally he would read to her, quote from those modern poets who have dived deep for pearls and set them finely.

At the end of the first fortnight, time was marked by a sort of shock which made it necessary to re-adjust his mind. He counted it later as an upward step.

They were watching the stars in the darkening sky. Far away the ghostly line of the snowy mountains was like a twilight song. The black masses of the pines seemed to drink in the stillness of the night. They sat there, silent, and the great stars grew in multitude and size.

He said softly, half aloud:

"Had I the sky's embroidered cloths
Enwrought with gold and silver light,
The blue, the dim, and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light."

"Had I the heavens," she corrected quietly. "Yeats saw further than the sky."

"Are you sure?"

Then he stopped abruptly.

How came the woman, Maria, his "Lady of the Heights," to know Yeats? He caught his thought back into leash, as if he had stumbled on the edge of a precipice.

"How do you know?"

He stammered the query. He had to say something.

The dark pine woods were suddenly too dark, the silence too deafening.

"One has to know what poets are saying," she answered evasively, "some may have messages for us."

"But Yeats?"

He fought against his bewilderment, and then realised with another shock that she was speaking English!

She had never spoken to him before in that tongue.

The keen, cold air could not cool him as he remembered he had had vague thoughts of teaching her English. Of teaching English to a woman who spoke it like this and knew Yeats better than he himself!

He put his hands suddenly before his face.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked huskily.

He knew her face turned to him in the dusky starlight.

"I wanted you to know me better first. If I had spoken English you would have missed something that makes for understanding. Italian was my first language."

He knew that was true, but not all the truth. Though he spoke her "first" tongue well, a strange language had been a barrier between them, insisting

on a reticence, acting as a screen between his thoughts and hers. He knew it only because the barrier was down, and he was a little afraid.

"You see, it does make a difference!"

She spoke with grave wistfulness, and presently went on:

"I should not have let you know if I were not sure of you, but now we can dare to meet mind to mind. Your mind is quite good to meet."

She turned to him again, He could see the dusky oval of her face against the background of her hair; she wore no peasant's handkerchief to-night, and the fur robe that wrapped her round, seemed to hide something that was not the peasant dress.

"You are not hurt, that I wished to make you my friend in my first language?"

"Hurt! No—but bewildered. You speak French, too, yet you tell me you have never left the mountains, never been down to the world to live."

"There are other mountains." Her manner was evasive. "My father spoke many languages. He was not an ordinary man. You must not be surprised to learn, Geoffrey, that I know many things that seem strange to you. After all, if I know the one thing you want, is it not enough?"

"You do know it?" he stammered eagerly. "You will tell me?"

She pointed to the sky.

"Look at the stars. Take them as the lamps of God's knowledge. Can you say which you would make your own?"

Deep within himself he heard a faint echo of a nearly forgotten voice.

"Dear Geoffrey isn't that an attribute of God?"

"In your heart," she went on, "you think of me as strange, as not quite normal even, yet of what have we spoken that you should think so? You

have told me something of your dreams, and I have understood. I have shown you something of the hidden beauties of nature, perhaps suggested new thoughts to you, but we have not spoken of the stars, or of things that matter. Why then have you thought of me as you have thought?"

"I am ignorant," he said quietly, "but at least I have the grace to recognise a great soul when I meet it. You are not like other women."

She sighed. It was like a faint breath stirring through pines, nothing sad, yet full of longing.

"Neither are you quite like other men, Geoffrey, or you would not be on the Heights, here. They are not easy to reach. But you find it easy to live here?"

He considered a moment.

"It is so easy that I never think of it."

"If I were not here?"

He was staggered at the mere suggestion. The stars might as well fall from the sky!

However, he only said:

"They would not be the Heights without you."

She rose and stood before him, a dark figure outlined against the faint sky. Far, far behind her, the fairy mountains glimmered white and mystic.

He saw a glimmer of gold beneath her fur robe.

"Come to-morrow an hour before sunset. I will take you to my home," she said, "and we will learn to catch the stars together."

Before he could rise, she was gone, without noise or footfall. He was used to that; she seemed to melt into the black shadows and vanish. He found himself, still on one knee—so far had he risen—gazing after her into the thick mass of the trees.

Never before, however, had she left him without setting him on his homeward path. It did not trouble him to-night. He made his way without thinking,

as any woodland denizen winds through the undergrowth, and his heart sang exultingly so that each star piercing the cloudless masses of the pines above him seemed a note of music, harmony made visible.

“She knows! She will take me to her home!”

It was a simple chant to sing over and over again, but singing it he reached his hut without stumble, or fall, or false turn.

CHAPTER IV

THE LADY OF THE HEIGHTS

I

Hamberton woke at dawn, with a sense of expectation hammering at the door of his heart, but his waking wits quickly took rule. He was aware—quite persistently aware—of certain needs and deficiencies which hitherto had not troubled him in the least.

His Gillette razor needed new blades. His stock of handkerchiefs was low, and Madallena's washing-tub was a fortnightly affair. His shoes—he had brought but one pair—were disreputable, and he had forgotten a clothes brush.

The three inches of mirror, in which he viewed the results of his daily toilet, ensured a certain decency of detail, but he had new misgivings as to the general effect. Misgivings so serious that they must be solved by instant action.

He set about making his fire and heating coffee an hour before it was customary. It was bitterly cold up here before the sun rose behind the faint barrier of Italy's languid form, stretched down between the Ligurian coast and the east. He wore, however, the fur robe that Visellia had given him. He knew, though she had not said so, that it must have belonged to that mystic, shadowy father who loomed behind her. It was a magnificent and priceless garment, had he known it, but he merely regarded

it as a comfortable coat that did its best to compensate for the sun's absence. He liked, however, the leather belt with its quaint silver clasps, curiously chased.

He got through his morning tasks quickly; so much wood stored—he had a big pile now near at hand—rugs and mattresses were spread to catch the full sunshine later on. He understood the people's passion for sun-warmed bedding. His water supply was replenished and the store cupboard examined. It was all a matter of routine. It was only when he looked into the coffee tin he remembered with consternation it was a routine of only fifteen days!

He set down the tin, and his hands shook a little.

What had he been doing that time had lost its values like this? That other life of his had sunk behind him into an abyss from which he could in no way rescue it—if so, indeed, he should desire.

Some voice from that abyss seemed to call to him: "We are here—your old life—old friends—old ways—come back to us, the holiday is over!"

He went outside and knew himself shaken and unstrung. How could a mere fortnight's camping on the mountain side have divorced him from the world of men, the life of struggle, disappointment, endeavour, failure, hope, fellowship?

For one devastating moment he was standing, hot-footed, ready to hurry down those rough ways, down, back, to the abyss!

Then his spinning mind came to equilibrium. He saw his momentary panic as the folly of a fool.

What was a fortnight, after all? Why relinquish an experience till one had drawn the full savour to oneself? Life had never been so beautiful to him as during these strange days when nothing happened, and time stood still.

A fortnight! Why, Helena herself would hardly have readjusted her life!

The thought of Helena was another shock. He had hardly thought of her at all.

Now she appeared in his memory as a lamp illuminating a dark mist. He did not know if it were regret that moved him. His heart was full of gratitude towards her. Surely one does not *regret* beautiful days, and experiences that have been, even if they are in an unredeemable past?

Again he shrank from realising the unbridgeableness of that past, telling himself passionately that he *could* slip back, only he *would* not—yet awhile!

Out of the east came a silver glow, turning rose and red and flame above the purple horizon. Golden islands rose and floated in the opal sky. The sea caught back the glowing colours and held them prisoned as in iridescent glass. Moment by moment the beauty deepened, the shadowy headlines were masses of dark against the stream of colour pouring itself over sky and sea.

In the north the grey of dawn was grey no longer, but blue.

Golden spears quivered between sea and sky.

The sun rose.

II

Hamberton stopped on the way down at Madallena's and offered to perform any errands in Osraello for her. She glanced at his empty knapsack and smiled. Her errands required Jacquo the mule, and big panniers. Nevertheless the sugar tin was empty for that rascal Beppo had found the cover off. Also her "man" had worn the last pair of rope-soled boots to tatters.

Hamberton made note of the requirements, noted also that no oranges were left in the string bag hanging from the rafters.

Then he went on his way, swinging down the steep

path with easy stride, less conscious of the steepness and his own good foothold than he had been a fortnight before.

Osraello dawned on him as a new place. Its white villas and bepalmed gardens and public walks; the cream and orange of the Casino, the unfinished state of the roads, and the new shops, dotted here and there at unexpected corners.

He did his simple shopping before he went to the Pension d'Argent, adding chocolates, oranges and dates to Madellena's sugar and shoes. It was too early for visitors to be about and too late for the busy people of the flower market. He saw no one he knew and his appearance attracted little attention, till he had passed the big hotel behind which his modest *pension* hid itself.

The Padrona greeted him first with dumb amazement and then with voluble excitement. He had paid for his room in advance and said he was going for an excursion in the mountains, but the Signora's ears were not closed to gossip; Guiseppe had a brother at the big hotel, and the doings of the visitors were not quite such private concerns as they may have imagined. The Signora had scented tragedy. Her soul had been torn between the glory of taking part in a drama of disappointed love, and the possible damage an open scandal might deal her pocket. She was at once relieved and disappointed by the young man's appearance.

His stay was the briefest. He collected his letters, one, a bill, the other, a circular, repacked his haversack, and removed his luggage to a small dark room in the rear of the house, unlet, and likely to remain unlet, and therefore his for a comparatively trifling sum, that gave the Padrona a handsome return for the accommodation.

He dismissed the discreet inquirer with the unvar-

nished truth that he was camping up in the mountains and that Madallena Cuiva was an accommodating neighbour, and again disappeared from the curious gaze of the *pension* and from the still more curious gaze of a young man who emerged from the back of the hotel, as he left the *pension*.

III

Visellia met him on the other side of the causeway. She was not wearing the peasant dress but a primrose-coloured gown. He imagined one would call it a tunic and skirt. Her olive skin and dark hair were intensified by the colour, and the glow of warm blood behind the sun-kissed skin, flaunted her tingling vitality before his questioning eyes.

He thought he had never taken careful survey of her before, thought he had often gazed at her with some mist before his eyes that had made her a shade unreal—illusive.

Now standing there, with only the narrow way separating them, he saw her as a most beautiful girl, surpassing his fading recollections of other women; more vital, more magnetic, surpassing his knowledge, if not his desires.

It was an hour before sunset, yet he hesitated to cross till she summoned him, calling to him in Italian to come to her. He crossed the narrow way looking neither to right nor left, but only at her waiting figure; she held out her hands and took his in greeting.

“You are welcome,” she said gravely.

They went silently along a faint track winding through the pine trees. On the northern side, through the red stems, the distant snowy peaks were lined against the sky, alluring and satisfying, filling the soul with strange longings, and as blessed as a glimpse of heaven itself.

On the southern side, the sea glittered and sparkled through the trees and melted into sky as a far-off horizon. From glimpses of distant headlands Hamberton saw they had turned a sharp angle and that the highest shoulder of the Osraello mountains had hunched itself between them and the east.

Suddenly the trees ceased, as an escort might halt at a palace gate. He saw before him at a little lower level a sunny clearing with four or five rough stone terraces flanking the southern slope. On the clearing stood a low, long, stone house, with two slightly projecting wings and a loggia connecting wing to wing on which the windows and doors opened. The windows were long lunettes, like quarters of oranges, all open, all green-shuttered; the walls were painted a warm cream. Before the house was a grassy space where two mimosas had been somehow coaxed to brave the cool air of the heights.

The whole place, however, was a veritable sun-trap, which perhaps accounted for the vines, which, now Lare and unsightly, twisted across a pergola on a lower terrace. Close round the house, hepaticas, primroses, narcissi, and anemones flowered in the winter sunshine, filling the air with a fragrance founded on pine.

Below the lowest terrace the tops of pine trees went down, down, till they seemed to drop into the sea itself. Not even the white ribbon of the Corniche Road was visible; and westward where Osraello nestled under the shoulder of the mountains, there was no sign of a town, or at the most a gleam of new white villas on the eastern hill.

Hamberton looked at it all and then at her. It needed only that interchange of looks to convey his appreciation

She led the way down the terraces. They were well cared for, the walls covered with peach and apricot trees; on the lowest terraces were rows of vegetables and herbs. Then came roses: not trim and orderly as down below in the market gardens, but growing in great bushes of fragrant beauty.

At either end of each terrace were little wooden seats, sheltered by trellis over which climbers grew, keeping off the too intrusive sun.

"You must see it in May," she told him, "but now, come home."

They went back by the twisting stone steps to the clearing, and so to the house.

On the steps of the loggia she paused and looked back at him.

"No one but my father and I have ever crossed the threshold," she said slowly, "you are the first stranger to enter."

Her face as she stood on the step above him was grave; her personality seemed suddenly enlarged, so that he felt abashed, of little account, and yet strangely exalted.

He stood, hat in hand, waiting.

Presently she moved aside, and he followed her in.

The long, narrow room was full of golden light. He imagined it was for this she had named the sunset hour for his visit, for the effect was magical, lending to the painted walls a colour that quickened the pulses. It caught the gilding on bound books, vivified the few pictures, and reflected itself on the polished curves of the three curious hanging lamps. At one end was a wide, open hearth, and a fire of pine cones glowed there now; on either side of it were deep cushioned seats with low tables beside them. A door between fireplace and windows led, he imagined, to the sleeping apartments.

At the other end of the room was a door leading to the kitchen and store rooms, which joined the left or eastern wing of the house. All round the room were low filled book-shelves, and a few curious vases or ornaments stood on them. His first rapid glance conceived them as a mere medley, but closer acquaintance revealed each as a perfect or unique specimen of its age, country or origin.

The floor was covered with Persian carpets, and beneath each of the lunette windows were seats filled with cushions.

She watched him with speculative eyes as he gazed at her home, sacred to her beyond all meaning of the word. She did not doubt him, but for one moment she was weighing the risk she had run, and knew it was now no risk, for not a vibration of the-air was troubled.

She fetched from a side table a silver cup on a tray, and filled it with wine. Very slowly she touched the cup with her lips and handed it to him without speaking, and he, likewise without word, took it and drank.

Suddenly she seemed again to fill the place with an enlarged personality, as if her soul expanded to take on the room, the house, the very glow of the gold and rosy light that shimmered on her. She spread out her hands gazing straight at the setting sun, and her voice seemed to come from depths as well as heights.

“My father, that which you told me has come to pass! Here, on the spot where you told me, he stands! Accept! Fulfil! O, Immortal Hope, hidden from the wise!”

Was it the blinding sunset that dazzled him? Could light strike music out of nothing? A voice filled space with deep harmonies?

He lost sense of form, of all material things for a breathless second, and flung out his hand, to find a solid wall behind him and the girl in the primrose dress holding out her hand for the silver cup and smiling at him.

"Now you are indeed my guest," she said, "let us sit down and talk."

They seated themselves by one of the long windows, he still dumb, amazed, and shaken by that momentary illusion.

She may have guessed as much, for she set herself to restore his confidence and impress on him a new revelation of herself.

"Do you live here alone?" he asked presently. It was the one incredible outside fact that troubled him.

"Alone?" She smiled a little wistfully. "As much as we are ever alone, once we have learnt to use our eyes and ears."

"Your father?"

"He travelled as far as man could go alone, and then, knowing it must be, went to the other country. He loved my mother, and she was there, so he was glad to go. He told me to continue my path and wait. I have done so."

"To wait for what?—For whom?" he whispered.

"For you, I think."

Her eyes were faintly puzzled, a little change passed over her serenity, as a cloud crosses a summer sky.

"Something has happened to me," she said softly. "I have always been quite certain of things before, known every step. Now—I am—blind! Geoffrey, is this to be afraid? Is fear uncertainty, not understanding? Must I learn before we reach the end?"

He caught her outstretched hands, all the magic and mystery of her melting into exquisite need—just

a lovely woman, suddenly afraid—needing him—and he loved her!

He sprang up and stood before her.

“Visellia, my Lady of the Heights! Love casts out fear. Can God be so good He has left you wanting something that even I can give you!”

Very slowly she rose and drew nearer him. His arms held her. He kissed her, and the whole beauty of the earth seemed linked in the touch of her lips.

The last rays of the sun flashed up in a fantastic glow. Again, did these rays make music on unseen instruments?

IV

Before the stars had again caught night in their silver net, Geoffrey walked blindly back across the causeway. He dared not look back, dared not pause. He had forbidden her to come even to the edge of her boundary; his first and only command to his Lady who had laid her magic and mystery down to drink of Love, and whose white ignorance of that wine was only to be measured by her shattering knowledge of all else life held.

She would have sat on the loggia steps by him, or on the wide window seats, and watched the stars born and watched them die without protest or thought of aught but the wonder of their new relationship, wherein she must find compensation for the loss of the serene certainty of her undivided personality.

Standing on the far edge of the causeway, he paused at last, and knew himself still trembling because of those words of hers when he forced himself to break the spell of their deep content.

She had said:

“Must those laws of little love, down below, touch our love, beloved?”

What had she meant? Did she speak from deep wisdom, or her profound ignorance?

What sort of love was this which had surged out of the sunset and wrapt them in a golden haze of music?

It was at least something he had never experienced before. He had for a moment—so it seemed to his bewildered mind, lost sight of his “Lady of the Heights,” and known only the melting haze, the harmonies, and an amazing sense of completeness.

One thing was clear; to leave her now was to cut himself in twain. His whole being ached to return to her this moment. The darkness seemed blacker without her, as the stars seemed more brilliant in her presence. Even now he could return. He knew she was still there watching the dim, far-off sea and spangled sky from the long ovals of the windows. They could watch the dawn come up and wave night back, as they had done before.

He would hold her dear hands, and forget the strange magic of her. She was his!

Almost his foot was on the causeway again—and then he turned swiftly, ran through the darkness, stumbling and blind, at risk of dashing himself against tree or boulder, yet blundering on with fear in his heart. Fear that lurked behind no tree or stone, but had root within himself, so deep down that even the strange music in the haze had not reached it!

Once in his own hut he clanged the door to, and leant against the wall, covering his face with his hands, and stayed there in the darkness for some minutes.

Gradually the obsession left him. He knew himself sane again, and master of his soul.

He sent the beams of his electric torch round the hut. It was all in order as he had left it. Why that should be worth note he did not know, but it comforted him for a moment. It had appeared to him as if some strange being must have found entry and broken or defaced the ordered cleanliness of his life.

He fell asleep, wrapped in the fur robe, with every vestige of the unreasonable storm gone, and he did not wake till after his accustomed hour.

V

Clarity and certainty of action was the gift of the new day. He was aware of it the moment he woke. He performed every task, chaining his thoughts down to them, that he might the sooner and more completely be free. Then he went to the causeway.

There was no stumbling now. Indeed, he had nearly forgotten that headlong flight of a few hours ago. If it crossed his mind, it was only as some folly belonging to far away, far below things, of no moment on the Heights!

She was waiting for him. They met half-way, and kissed on the narrow, perilous path.

Then they walked back through the pinewoods to her home.

"Geoffrey," she said, "was the world quite so beautiful yesterday, and the day before, and before that, and I so blind I did not know it?"

VI

Wonderful hours and days! He kept no count of them. Time was, indeed, of no moment up here. Visellia was an hourly revelation. He knew now he had once feared her, but that fear could not live in

the beautiful confidence and companionship which was theirs.

Her learning or knowledge still left him dumb with surprise, but she explained it lightly.

"It is only a matter of remembering," she said. "Being my father's child"—she did not explain that phrase—"I do remember what I am told, or what I read, or what I hear or see. Knowledge is within us and has only to be awakened; but sometimes the sleep is heavy."

"Heavy indeed with most of us," he agreed drily, and thought over her words when alone again.

Once only did he experience a shock, and a return of some sense of the abnormal in her home.

On the northern slope of the hill there was a little natural terrace, where the short turf pushed up in a green bay between the trees, and here was a long shelter or half-closed-in wooden hut.

"In summer," she told him, "when the sun's power was too great to face, they lived here."

It looked out to those magnetic white mountains, and the unfettered landscape between.

"He loved it, being in sight of *them*—so I buried his body here."

She indicated the short turf at their feet.

His old awe of her sprang to life for a moment.

She spoke so calmly—so unmoved. She crossed the turf with unfaltering feet.

She had buried him?

She had lived here alone—with the dead man so near her—for how long? . . . She had never said when he died.

Visellia continued to look towards the distant mountains.

"He could not go again to them, you see. He was lame—otherwise"

Hamberton had never known her leave a sentence unfinished before, and he did not press her to complete it. Unaccountably he shrank from closer knowledge of this unknown father who was responsible for the woman he was going to marry.

VII

He told her he must go to St. Geno and make arrangements for their wedding. Did she wish for a civil or religious ceremony, or both?

Visellia seemed perfectly indifferent.

"Does it include that?" she asked, with the naïve wonder of a child, and added—unlike a child—"I suppose the greater must always contain the lesser. And *he* married my mother! I will give you the papers. Arrange as you will, my Geoffrey. When that is done you will stay here, will you not? Even the little world down there cannot misunderstand, then!"

He quenched his misgivings.

She gave him a little metal box and its key and told him to open it. It contained the certificate of the marriage of Brassoni Romano, Doctor of Medicine to Marguerite Larodie, of Barne, in the Auvergues; a paper testifying to the birth of their daughter Visellia, and a short will bequeathing all the possessions of the father to her. Also papers concerning the purchase of the summit of Monte Negros. The latter paper and the will were dated, the others bore no decipherable date.

She watched him read them, without betraying interest or curiosity.

"Why is this in English?" he asked abruptly, looking up from the will.

"He said you would be English."

Hamberton dropped the papers on the table and stared at her; then he looked round the room.

"When did your father die?" he asked mechanically.

Visellia did not answer at once. He had a futile idea that she wanted to evade the question. It must be futile, of course! Yet she did evade it.

"I have been alone a long time. He had always told me that some day someone would come, and. . ."

Again the new trick of a broken sentence. He would have it finished this time.

"And what?"

"Make me happy," she said. "No, that is not what I meant to say, Geoffrey, but it will do because it is true. Why should you want to know *when* my father died? He is dead. Though he and I never use that word—but I am trying to be—ordinary—to belong a little to your world. Do I not do it properly, my beloved?"

She put her hands on his arms, standing there so near to him that the fragrance of her, like that of spring flowers banished his vague uneasiness.

No amount of trying could make her "ordinary," he told her. There was no one like her in the world!

A shadow crossed her eyes. "Are you sure? I am always hoping there are others—in different places—on the Heights?"

"Not like you. I do not know how I dare feel so sure you are mine, meant for me, or by what right I claim you!"

She laid cool fingers on his eyes.

"Your eyes—*see*," she whispered, "that is why!"

He did not go to St. Geno the next day, however.

He spent some of it writing to his lawyer, and drawing up a rough will. It crossed his mind to wonder what money Visellia had of her own. There was no mention of any in the simple will, yet he knew she bought all she required; she must, therefore, have money. He did not think she made any profit from the little domain; nevertheless he felt a delicacy in enquiring.

But that evening she volunteered the information, and it was the last shock to his sophisticated normal self.

They had been looking at books. He was amazed and delighted at the quality of them. All nations had contributed to the collection, but only the gems of each, and they were not invariably the recognised gems. There was a vast amount of poetry, more especially English poetry. Little known moderns, and here and there an entirely "unknown."

"One was always hoping to find a message," Visellia said, a little sadly. "Some of them seem so near. They send them still."

"I do not see Z—'s." He mentioned a well-known name.

"I think we burnt them," she told him as calmly as if she had said they had read them. "He did that when he thought it was not true. Being simple or not knowing does not matter, but being false is dangerous."

He opened a book at random, it bore the date 1920 printed on the first page.

"This," he said, "did he like it?" and then flushed, aware he had set a trap for her. She did not, however, appear to see it.

"That came quite recently. I have not looked at it yet. There is a man in London you see, who sends them."

"An agent?"

"Yes, every year I send him so much money and he sends books. That reminds me, you will need money, perhaps, for this marriage?"

Her lips parted into a delicious smile. It was as if she had said: "You will need money for your foible, your amusement."

He told her steadily that he had money of his own. Told her just what it represented a year in liras, told her he was settling it on her in case anything happened to him.

"What can happen now, that would not happen to both?" she questioned.

"Your father is dead," he reminded her.

"Yes, but *she* had died before. She did not know all he was able to teach me. We are together. But since you talk of money—come, I will show you mine! Is it not strange the way the world uses these little gold or silver tokens?"

She took a carrying lamp that was ready lighted, and opened the door beside the fireplace, beckoning him.

He hesitated a moment. He had never been through it before.

The door led into a tiny lobby with an entrance right and left and one between.

"That is my room," she said, waving her hand to the right. "That is the bath-room, and this my father's room."

She opened the door and went in.

Hamberton again paused; an extreme reluctance to cross the threshold had to be faced. But Visellia stood in the middle of the room, holding up the lamp.

It was a simple enough room, lined half way up with unpolished wood, a white wall above. A couch covered with rich rugs, stood in the middle of the

room. There were fitted cupboards on one side, and a wide table against a window. A statuette in dull silver occupied a niche in the wall, and an old Italian cabinet of ivory and ebony faced the foot of the bed.

Visellia knelt down by the window and set the lamp on the floor beside her.

"Look!" she said. "You must learn to open it."

She guided his fingers over the smooth panelling near the floor and pressed them. A piece of the polished flooring slid back and Hamberton cried:

"Good God! *Gold* here!"

The cavity—he could not gauge the depth—was full of gold—gold lira! He saw at once it was not a question of hundreds but thousands.

Visellia let a handful trickle through her fingers, indifferently.

"It is much less trouble than in a bank," she said. "I just take what I want."

"But, my dear, you have lived here *alone* with this treasure?"

She looked at him with surprise.

"My father made the place himself; besides the people would not steal from us, if that is what you are thinking of."

"But there is a fortune here!"

"Is there? There is enough I know."

"It should be invested for you."

For the first time he saw her frown, or was it that the lamp flickered?

"I do not like the word. It does not belong here. One needs these tokens—sometimes—so they are here. Take what you want."

He laughed, he could not help it. It seemed to him she was just a delicious child, playing at some

fairy tale, and he must humour her to a certain point.

"Dear, you are as generous as the fairies themselves, but this is yours. I will not ask you to do what you do not like doing. It shall stay here. How does it close?"

She showed him.

"You will not want money for this marriage?"

"It is my business. Ordinary women buy new clothes, Visellia. Do you want to do that?"

"Do you not like my dress?" She looked down gravely at the yellow gown.

"It is part of you."

"Then we will wait until it is soiled. And now I remember hearing that people make each other presents at weddings. I have read it somewhere, so I will make you a present." She gathered up a handful of liras and put them into her pocket as if they were so many pennies.

"Now!" she closed the trap and rose, holding the light up again. "It is a good room," she said softly. "My father slept well here, and dreamt of heavenly things. You must do the same. It will be your room, I will get it ready for you."

Her candid eyes met his without a shadow of question, doubt or embarrassment. There was nothing hid behind her words—she just stated the simple fact. It was her father's room, it would be his when he lived here beneath her roof, and with blinding certainty he found himself face to face with the fact that to her marriage was just that. That he would live under the same roof with her!

He faced the matter in his mind as he went back to his hut that night. How was he to meet it, how endure, or how combat it?

He realised he did not want to combat it. That in

some miraculous way he had outgrown even the most idealised dream of human marriage. To be with her, to touch her, to feel those cool lips on his allaying all fever, to wait and watch for those magical moments, of golden haze, music and an enveloping personality—that conquered space and time—that was marriage. That at least was what Visellia would give to him and he to her.

The next day he went down to St. Geno, stayed the night there, and the following morning he saw Marian.

VII

They were married before the British Consul in St. Geno. Legally and definitely married, both by British and Italian law. Hamberton saw to it there was no loop-hole by which trouble might enter in future years.

Visellia wore her primrose dress and silver belt. There had been a difficulty about a hat because she never wore anything but her peasant's handkerchief on her own splendid hair. She owned a fur hood, but agreed it was unsuitable, so they stopped at the first shop available and bought a motor veil, and she made a becoming, if unusual, head-dress of it.

The Consul was impressed, though he had been prepared to disapprove. He asked where Mr. and Mrs. Hamberton proposed living, and Hamberton's vague "somewhere in the mountains," was hardly satisfactory. He recommended a certain hotel in St. Geno, mentioned that a famous author was at present staying there, was obviously pleased to add, casually, that he had lunched with him.

"If he would break away from the Russian school, and write as his heart dictates, he would be nearly great," remarked Visellia unexpectedly.

The British Consul regarded her with mild surprise.

"Strange you say that," he remarked. "He did say he had read so much Russian stuff he could not get his own material through."

Hamberton insisted on a carriage back to Osraello. A sharp wind was blowing, and white clouds of dust obscured the road from time to time, and powdered the foliage, and set the passers-by coughing.

The visitors, wrapt in furs, shortened their walks, and hurried into the hotels and *pensions*, and the boredom of the constrained society of unchosen neighbours.

They dismissed the carriage at the foot of the salita leading to La Croix Verte, and as they collected the results of their shopping, Vardin passed them.

He turned—half stopped.

Hamberton knew there must be no hesitation.

"Let me introduce you to my wife, Mr. Vardin."

He saw the man start, saw a momentary panic drop to open undignified curiosity, but Hamberton had no intention of gratifying it.

Visellia, who had regarded him gravely, held out her hand and said in perfect English: "How do you do, Mr. Vardin. I am afraid you visitors cannot love Osraello on days like this."

Nothing could have been more commonplace, banal even, nothing more correct.

She turned up the salita and Hamberton followed her, aware that Vardin was still gazing after them; aware that that good gentleman had had the surprise

of his life, and that he, Geoffrey, had conferred on him the almost priceless benefit of a piece of unbelievable gossip.

CHAPTER V

THE EMPTY ROOM

One speaks casually of a room being empty. There are one or two impressions to be drawn therefrom. Either the room is empty of all furniture, its bare walls needing everything, or it is empty of all living consciousness; the presence of an animal may in this case be alluded to as "save for the dog, the cat, or canary," as the case may be.

When one comes to think of it, an empty room is, in one sense, non-existent, until we open the door.

Helena Tresham found, when she returned to her home, and again took up the work she had left in such good order, that there was an unmistakably empty room in her heart.

So she spent one evening exploring it, sitting in it and assuring herself it did not contain any other human than herself. She discovered that the room was dearer and more desirable than she had imagined, and she had not the strength (or the weakness) to collect the varied odds and ends that made it dear and shake them into the rubbish bin.

Rather—to carry our allegory farther—she dusted them carefully, set them in order, appraised their worth, and found an unexpected balance on the right side—her side!

This done, she closed the door and locked it, and put the key away so carefully that for a long time it was as good as lost.

Friends and relations at first asked her when the wedding would be, and where Geoffrey Hamberton was; and she would answer quite easily that, after all, they had felt they were not quite suited to each other.

"We each have another interest which absorbs us, too much to make marriage a success at present," she would say, always careful to add the "at present."

If the enquirer were one deserving further confidence, she might add:

"My interest is 'French Cardinals' just now." And perhaps, but rarely—a further addition: "His—'Metaphysics.'"

And friends and relations who had thought of Geoffrey Hamberton as a writer of short stories, or a poet, were a little confused; and some of them looked up "Metaphysics" in the dictionary, but none of them questioned her further.

Helena and her father took up their orderly, admirable life where they had dropped it. The empty room—locked, you must remember—did not interfere with them at all.

Mr. Tresham, however, unobtrusively watched Helena. He understood her rather better than most fathers understand their daughters, and he suspected the existence of the room, only he was not sure if the key were mislaid, lost, or deliberately hidden.

Mr. Lorimer sent her a sealed packet of letters, saying he had found them according to instructions, and again according to instructions forwarded them to her, and would be obliged for her receipt for the same.

This was on the day when she had dusted the room for the last time. She did it in the evening.

Marian Hamberton came back to England about a week later and called on Helena, who was cool to her,

Marian considered, in a most unaccountable way.

She asked Marian of her subsequent journeys; how much tennis she had played, where she was going that summer, and if she intended going to the Moseiwitsch Recital next week. Exactly as if Marian had been a stranger making a first call, instead of "very nearly" a sister-in-law!

Marian made a desperate effort, and dragged in Geoffrey's name. Whereupon Helena had said firmly and most decisively:

"I do not want to talk of Geoffrey, Marian, it would serve no purpose. We do not regard him from the same point of view."

Marian exclaimed eagerly:

"Oh, Helena, I haven't the slightest regard for him, he behaved abominably. I don't even think of him as my brother."

"Exactly!" said Helena. "Well, are you going to hear Moseiwitsch or not?"

It is impossible to be intimate with people who talk to you like that. Even Marian, holding on desperately to the last strand which remained between her and the little world she desired, had to desist. She called once or twice more, and then since Helena never returned her calls, began to realise it was a hopeless task. She laid the onus of her personal loss on Geoffrey's shoulders, and felt more deeply than ever how justified she was in repudiating him.

One cannot say she had an empty room in her heart, empty even to bare walls, because her brother had, at best, only occupied the corner of the one apartment her modest human outfit boasted.

Someone else besides Mr. Tresham watched Helena anxiously. He had watched and waited a little too long, some few years ago, and if circumstances had

appeared to forbid his waiting longer, he had still watched, from a distance.

"It has made a difference in her," he said abruptly to Mr. Tresham one day. His name—it has to be mentioned—was Clifford Pastens, and he had something to do with banking. He was well off, and forty years of age, and he looked as a Prime Minister ought to look, or any other minister of more spiritual duties; but he was certainly a most estimable banker.

"Your eyes are very sharp then, Pastens; most people think she is not touched by it."

"You, at all events, are not 'most people,' " said Pastens quietly.

"Nor you. I shall never quite understand the business. I was fond of Geoffrey, you know. I think I am fond of him now—or would be—if I were sure—" He paused.

"If you were sure he had not hurt her? I did not say he had, Tresham, only that it made a difference."

Tresham looked at his visitor. They were old friends and the difference in their age was bridged over by Pasten's air of accumulated responsibility which may have resulted from the business he followed. Banking is a serious thing.

Tresham knew how long Pastens had watched Helena, and he knew what was in his mind now—well, Pastens was a good fellow—and amazingly good looking.

"Don't hurry matters," he said kindly. "Give her plenty of time; wait a little."

"I waited too long once," returned the other, a little wistfully.

Helena went to the Moseiwitsch concert. She went to a great many concerts, and to very few plays. Plays, she found, had a trick of reminding her vaguely of a lost—or mislaid, key. Music she enjoyed intel-

lectually, and it was a refreshing change from the rather sordid, and occasionally tawdry company of the French Cardinals.

Her work took her a good deal to the London Library, and quite often to the British Museum. She had, indeed, regular days at both places.

Since Pastens' club was in the vicinity of the London Library, it was not so very surprising to encounter him on her journeys there, generally on her return between four and five o'clock. It was more surprising to meet him in the neighbourhood of the British Museum.

"Mr. Tresham said he thought you were here to-day," he offered, as if it were an adequate explanation for his appearance.

She was rather thoughtful on the way back, and through tea, which she permitted him to give her.

She worked less strenuously after that, and was not so regular in her days at either the London Library or the British Museum, and she went out a great deal more, to her father's secret satisfaction. He liked going out himself to the right place, liked escorting her. She was something of which he could be proud. Helena could look very regal with her dead gold hair, and firmly chiselled face. Greek in feature and form, he considered. Also she knew how to dress.

He had arrived at the age when too many friends had "dropped out" for Society to mean much to him personally, but he endeavoured to take an interest in his daughter's younger circle, and avoid the reproof of being a back number. But his chief interest lay in discovering in what direction Helena had changed, for since she never changed towards him, he could only discover whether alterations really existed, by watching her with others.

She flung herself a little more impetuously into small social pleasures. She took her work a shade less seriously, and she avoided the rather deep discussions which hitherto had been a mental relaxation to her.

Presently he added to these inconspicuous items the fact she avoided plays except of the lightest variety, and poetry was at a discount. He wondered vaguely whether Pastens could have added to the list, but refrained from questioning him.

Pastens walked back from church by Helena's side one Sunday and said, apparently apropos of nothing:

"At least there was no idealism in that service, Miss Tresham."

She nearly stopped, and after a perceptible silence remarked:

"I wonder why you said that?"

"I should like to help you if I could, you know. Something solidly good in the way of life with no illusions tacked on! Isn't that what you are looking for?"

"I suppose so, but I do not know how you discovered it."

"You did not think me quick enough? I haven't many illusions about men and women, Miss Tresham, I have to have—insight!"

She instinctively quickened her step, and he had at least sufficient insight to interpret that.

"I do not exercise it unduly without permission," he protested humbly, "in this case I was only trying to find a reason for your attendance at that particular church."

She laughed quite frankly.

"You're discovering what I did not know myself! I expect you are right. It's a plain, practical church,

a nice level sort of service that does not ask too much of one."

"Neither drags one to the heights of the High, or plunges one to the depths of the Low, in fact!"

She again quickened her step, and he changed the subject.

Even his insight never reached the empty room which could be forgotten on the level, but when one walked "down hill" one was apt to remember the key was lost, and when one walked "up," one began to wonder where it was hidden. And all she wanted to do was not to think about it at all!

CHAPTER VI

THE HUMAN CALL

I

Spring, miraculous and divinely beautiful, passed over the summit of the hills and summer came after her, slow paced with flaming sword. One understood the tanned-lined faces and the thinness of the toilers.

The bigger hotels closed down. The Casino dropped its striped awnings and most of the new experimental shops put up their shutters.

Such visitors as frequented the Ligurian coast were of Italian origin, and they chose places with sand and good bathing facilities. Osraello's dirty, pebbly beach offered no attractions. The natives continued their lives, were born, married, made money or lost it, and behaved as if the winter influx was of no real account whatever in the natural order of existence.

But it was terrifically and fiercely hot on the sun-baked terraces of the narrow sea-board.

Up on the Heights at the edge of the pine woods there was occasionally a breeze, and at even, on the northern side, the air blew from the distant mountains, greener now, or purple, but still faintly snow-crowned; and, whereas down below, powdery white dust covered palm and tree, up here, though the grass was burned, and earth showed thirsty cracks, what was green, *was* green, and the pines continued to incense the air.

Except in early morning and late evening, the house in the clearing was too sun-drenched to be habitable. Hamberton and Visellia lived much in the open shelter on the northern slope. Geoffrey had got over his reluctance to tread the green turf beneath which the late Dr. Romano lay. He would not have expressed himself to Visellia like that, and perhaps he ceased to consciously think so himself. At all events they slept peacefully there in the open air, or not infrequently slept most of the hot day, living, walking and moving through nights lit by a moon that illumined even the dark track of the woods.

The beds of the streams, where in spring the waters had danced and foamed, and made music were nearly empty now. Here and there a secret spring existed, and mosses and flowers crowded round it and two human beings luxuriated in the exquisite coolness.

Through the spring, at least through the early months following his strange marriage, Geoffrey had done little but continue the magical life of his first three weeks. He had slept in the room and on the bed of that mysterious man whose spirit brooded over the place. He had shared in the simple house duties, worked with Visellia on the terraces, tending roses or fruit, or planting vegetables. He had been profoundly ignorant of gardening, but she was very patient, though it seemed to her a strange thing that any direction once given was not immediately absorbed into the intelligence.

Occasionally he or Visellia went down to Osraello, but Madellena was the general link between them and the outer world. Sometimes she would bring back a letter, or a parcel of books. Geoffrey found there were agents in more countries than England, who sent more books than poetry, though always books of a certain kind, dealing with metaphysics, scientific research, travels, occasionally novels.

Visellia had a trick of sitting with her fingers between the leaves of a book and looking straight before her; sometimes, after sitting thus quite a long time, she would open the book and read it, but that did not happen often.

Once or twice a year, she told Geoffrey, she sent boxes of books back whence they came, otherwise the house would not have contained them.

Life still held small details and features like these. A kind of "dress" to an existence that went on steadily as the beating of a heart, an existence for which Geoffrey could find no name. The nearest simile that he could make was that his soul had been cast up on an island of perpetual peace, where life was so easy that neither heavy toil, nor effort were needed, and yet by vitality and not languour, energy and not idleness, was the sum total of existence.

Never he felt, since the world began was there such a companion as Visellia, responding to his every mood, and filling his every need. Wrapping him in a sense, not of security, but of power. It was life devoid of fear. He even ceased to fear himself.

He read, and she sometimes re-read with him, the garnered books, and though he did not know it, he read what she selected, passing from one to another and hardly realising the ordered procession of strange facts.

His memory deepened, or his power of absorption increased—perhaps it was the same thing.

Above all there were those rare moments when that amazing haze seemed to hide her and reveal her at once, when her personality expanded and took on the beauty of world, its music, its scent, its colour, and even himself.

He could, however, hardly have borne to take so

much, had he not felt he was giving her something she also desired.

She knew the high altitude of life, all that was born of the striving spirit, but she knew nothing of the wide range of aims and motives that guided and thrust men forward in those walks of life between peasant and philosopher.

Her knowledge of history was philosophic rather than political; she knew the rise and fall of great dynasties, the trend of race towards freedom and liberty; racial characteristics, and the eternal struggle for self aggrandisement, in countries as in individuals. But of the rise and fall of thrones and ministers, the clash of wars, political crises, and detailed incidents that seem to change the destinies of men, she had no knowledge; a child in any government school could have instructed her.

Her sense of time also offered difficulties. Artaxerxes was to her as living an entity of Louis XIV or Henry VIII. She had, in short, a kind of cosmic knowledge of the world, and an appreciation of vast movement behind these on the human stage. Geoffrey had taken an historical degree. Indeed it was through this study he had first met Helena Tresham. He dragged out his little faggots of knowledge now, and spread them before Visellia, humbly enough.

She would invariably pick out the essential, central fact of his stores, rejecting all else; occasionally demolish for him the theories of the schools with a sweeping statement of what he could only call 'cosmic facts'!

Sometimes he would find her looking at him with gravely questioning eyes, and now and again, a vague something surged up, creating for a moment a sudden sharp cleavage between them, bridged instantly by some tenderly human touch on her side.

One such occasion was when he mentioned the War. He was turning over a slim volume of war verses lately arrived, and read her one.

It was a terribly and pitifully true one, and his voice was a little bitter as he read.

"Yes, that's what it did for many of us!" he remarked at the end.

She regarded him gravely.

"You were in the war then? In France was it not? I heard something."

He gazed at her, speechless for a moment:

"Surely, even here, you must have known!"

"That men were fighting? Yes—What for, this time?"

He tried to tell her, to explain—broke off and asked her if she had read no books?—English, French, Italian, no literature that did not touch on it. It was inexplicable.

She shook her head. "If they dwelt on that I should not have read them. Of what use? It is over. Just another of the awful mistaken blunders, falls! Humanity will pick itself up again, as it always has done."

He tried to explain to her, that it was worse than any other war had ever been.

"It must be, for mankind has ascended a little, so there is more space—*both* ways."

"There must be some meaning behind it," he insisted. "If all that horror was for nothing, and war a mere blundering of the official world, I think I should go mad."

"But there *is* meaning behind everything. How could there *not* be? This war was only the fruit of ages of wrong thinking, that came to fruition; now, mankind starts again as it were, with a clean slate."

"On which it is writing the old alphabet," he said bitterly.

She rose and stood before him and laid her hand over his eyes.

"My Geoffrey, the alphabet may be the same but it will spell different words, neither you or I know what words are being written, but I *do* know, and you *should* know, that the world has gone into another classroom. There will be errors, mistakes, failures, success, the same pupils even, just the same, but it is another class."

The touch of her hand healed his momentary fever. It did more, for the thought of war and its black horror seemed to fall and withdraw from him, into dim distance, where even memory could not peer.

One other slight event disturbed the even beauty of life.

Hamberton in common with every visitor to Italy, and not Italy alone, deplored the lack of singing birds and the continual slaughter of them by the peasants.

He had been struck by the amount of birds, however, which frequented Visellia's woods, and at first had been amazed by their fearlessness. Little by little he had grown so accustomed to seeing them eat from her hand, and perch on her shoulder that the unusualness of it faded. One day when they were on a distant hillside, they saw a man stalking a little finch, with all the care and caution he might have used to stalk a tiger. The bird came to rest on a tree and he fired as it rose again. Its outspread wings seemed to carry it on, till it dropped at their feet. Dead, so Hamberton thought. Visellia said nothing, but stooped and picked it up gently, and held it against her.

The man concluded he had missed it and went downhill. The two walked on together. Visellia continued the subject they had been discussing, which was merely the constructing of a bathing pool below a little cascade in the lower woods. It was Geoffrey's idea.

They turned homewards, and Visellia still carried the bird. It lay between her hands without movement. Geoffrey thought its eyes were glazed, but later he felt he must have been mistaken.

When they had re-crossed the causeway, she paused and opened her hands. With a rush of wings the little atom of pulsing life, swept through the air. Visellia watched its undulating flight with a little contented smile.

"It was not wounded then?" he asked incredulously.

She looked at him.

"Does not the Book of all Wisdom say 'Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing?'. These created things may not die before their time."

Hamberton was suddenly convinced that the bird had been hit, more, that it had been dead when she picked it up. He let the distance between them widen. Misgivings again assailed him; when they came out of the clearing she waited for him.

"My Geoffrey, are you afraid of the man who was killing birds?"

"Afraid?" He looked at her with bewilderment, perhaps a little indignant.

"Then why fear one who does *not* kill them? Life is a gift, my friend, and the Giver uses many channels"

Then quite gaily she added: "Come quickly, and measure out the bathing pool. How good to have a man to do all the hard work for me! How have I lived without you, my beloved!"

II

Hamberton had walked far along the crest of the hills, till he was level with Corrodi, and could look down on St. Geno itself, spread out in the autumn sunshine.

It represented a different world to that in which he now lived. He remembered the friendly English Consul who had smoothed away the many formalities for his marriage.

He did not need to review any thoughts as to the success or failure of that momentous step. There was no standard by which he could measure his life with Visellia. If, now and again, something approaching the abnormal struck his consciousness, as in the matter of the wounded bird, he had learnt to regard such episodes as a child regards the affairs and doings of the "grown ups"; manifestation of a wider range and vision than was his.

But looking down on the distant town, a curious longing seemed to surge up the steep hill to him.

How would the old life of which it spoke, savour now? On the Heights he was ever aware of a colossal ignorance; he was indeed a child and as indifferent as a child to the fact, but he visioned himself down there amongst his fellows, and he was no longer a child. He was conscious of growth, also of a desire to test the same.

In some inexplicable manner, his position in the world, and his attitude towards his fellow men would be totally different to what it had been not quite a year ago.

He moved on restlessly, but he could not shake off the thought. Down there in the world of men and women lay the proving of himself, the measure by

which he could reckon his gain—and yet St. Geno was out of reach!

That was the first stirring in him of restlessness, and the first break in his perfect content.

A week or so later he went down to Osraello with their own and Madellena's mule, for she was ill and Visellia would stay with her, and someone must do the shopping.

The animals gave him little trouble, but half-way down a sense of the incongruity of it made him laugh. What would Vardin say if he met him? He almost wished he might do so, and then remembered that Vardin would not be there, or any English visitors. He might have felt relieved but he was aware instead of disappointment.

The heavy autumn rain had swept the rough path bare to the rock in places, but the mules did not falter in their step, or break in on the many memories the road held for him. Here, at such a point, he had first seen the beautiful "peasant girl"! There, he had gathered oxalis for Helena; there, was the track by which he had branched off and climbed to La Croix Verte.

The olive harvest was gathered now and the vine leaves were turning russet and gold. On the rose terraces men, women and children worked busily. Voices came to him, and on the walls, brown-eyed little ones sat, who accosted the mules by name, and eyed him with curiosity. He was too shy to stop and speak to them, though he longed to do so. Their brown faces and twinkling eyes seemed amazingly attractive.

Further down a man asked him for a light, and they exchanged a few words. The autumn had been surprisingly fine so far. Osraello was expecting a good winter season; they were even opening another

hotel there, that had been closed through the dismal years of war. Yes, the big hotel up past the Pension d'Argent.

Meaningless, but friendly gossip.

Hamberton glanced up towards the mentioned hotel as he went on. It was a big erection standing at the edge of the "bluff" which rose behind his old *pension*. He thought the situation attractive, and the view must be superb.

He did his shopping in the odd little dark rooms, which were essentially the people's shops. Bought macaroni and maize flour, the inevitable coffee and matches. Collected a case of books for themselves and a sack of charcoal for Madellena, and ate his lunch on the deserted piazza before a little café.

The day was young, he need not hurry back. His mules were in stall. He would go up and look at the new hotel.

He found the place still in the hands of workmen. The long corridors—there is little architectural variety in these great caravanserais—were being painted the yellow of mimosa, with great sprays of pink almond blossom stencilled across them, while the ceiling of the dining-room was blue with silver stars!

No one seemed to mind his wandering about. He exchanged remarks with the workmen, who apparently took him for one of the small proprietors of the district; but presently a bustling young man with a truculent air came up. He did not in so many words ask Hamberton his business, but he implied as much.

Hamberton said frankly that he lived in the neighbourhood, and was interested to hear the hotel was to be reopened. He hoped he was not intruding.

The young man had more insight than the workmen.

Also he was not Italian. He would probably have said he came from Switzerland. He looked Hamberton up and down, and spoke in English with a French accent.

He would be happy to show Monsieur the hotel. No expense had been spared. A funicula railway was to be built to obviate the steep climb from the town. The lifts were of the newest construction, and really Monsieur must see the bath rooms!

"Monsieur," saw them. Saw also the super-elegant suite at the eastern end of the corridor, bathed in morning sunlight, and yet with so cleverly contrived balconies and windows that even the sunset was visible!

"If Monsieur had friends?"—a booklet was put into his hands.

It was true that they were already full up for the first three months, but he would always do his best!

Hamberton could not possibly have explained why he did not at once fly from the voluble Saxon, and his display of needless luxuries, and violent decoration, or why he did not say he had no friends at all likely to come to any place in which he might himself be found! He let the man run on with apparent interest, and at last, as he turned to go, he said without premeditation that he would like to bring his wife to see the place!

The young Saxon was charmed.

Hamberton swung off down the road, with a sudden clamouring of his senses.

Bring Visellia to see this blatant, crude expression of modern civilization! What on earth possessed him to say such a foolish thing?

He hurried back to the place where the mules were stabled. Spent a feverish half-hour arranging their burdens, with the help of a cross-eyed loafer,

and a stout woman with a shrill voice, and innumerable small children.

Just as he turned up the salita, a man coming down, stopped, and swept off his hat.

"M. Hamberton! But indeed then, you are still here?"

It was the late head waiter of the Grand Hotel des Rois. A man with a singularly beautiful face, one arm, and the manners of a duke! The visitors called him "Nicholas" which was not his name.

Hamberton stopped. He could do no less. Nicholas was evidently genuinely pleased to see him, and he spoke English. Better English than the young man at the hotel, if less perfect than Visellia's

"I was enquiring for you at the Pension d'Argent. The Signora could tell me nothing," said Nicholas.

The mules were continuing their course unattended. Hamberton had plenty of excuse for avoiding the interview, but he hung a little in his step. Nicholas solved the doubt by turning and taking the upward path with him.

Nicholas had an uncanny insight into people's minds, or he would not have been a head waiter! He knew Hamberton wanted to talk to someone; wanted moreover to talk English, and so he talked English, and walked up the salita beside him.

"You will be at the Grand Hotel again, I suppose this season?" Hamberton inquired.

Nicholas said "no," that he had not worked well with the management there.

"Osraello will not be itself without you."

"I shall be in Osraello. I am going to the Hotel des Montagnes."

Hamberton paused. "Ah! I went up just now to see it. You think well of it?"

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders.

"It is well planned. One cannot judge more until one sees how it is managed. There are many points the visitors know nothing about, but for which the head waiter gets blamed! Some managements economise on food, some on fires, some on service—that perhaps is the worst, for with an overworked staff one can do nothing! I have hopes of the Hotel des Montagnes, however. Will you not be paying us a visit, sir?"

"I?—but I live here!"

He nearly stammered in his surprise. It was a more preposterous idea than merely showing Visellia the hotel. How could he, who lived on the Heights, leave Visellia, and come down to the absurd place?

"Your good lady might like the change," suggested Nicholas placidly.

Hamberton turned and looked at him sharply. Nicholas was staring before him with so bland an expression, and so unmoved a demeanour, that he was convinced he was not so innocent—or ignorant—as he appeared.

They had reached a point where the path ran between the outer walls of a little villa and its garden. It was the dwelling of one of the palm gardeners, a utilitarian soul who wasted nothing, and was inclined to let Nature provide such decoration to life as she thought necessary. The mules had paused; two small boys were giving them some refreshment in the shape of hard crusts.

Nicholas paused also.

"I am going in here," he said. "Think it over, Mr. Hamberton. Dr. Romano's daughter should find it quite an interesting experience!"

He raised his hat with great courtesy, and was turning in at the unpainted gate.

Hamberton stopped him.

"You knew Dr. Romano?" he enquired quickly.

Nicholas looked at the pines overhead, at the broken path and dilapidated wall, anywhere but at Hamberton.

"My father knew him," he said at last. "He was a Roumanian, too."

"He has been dead some years?" Hamberton regretted the question as soon as asked. It savoured of disloyalty, but an impulse had urged it before he perceived this.

Nicholas still stood blandly before him.

"Yes, some time."

His voice was expressionless, and though he still paused, he offered no further information.

Hamberton quitted him a little abruptly, collected the mules and went on up the road at as quick a pace as the animals permitted. He was most curiously and unreasonably disturbed.

Nicholas still did not enter the house, but stood looking after him. A good-looking woman with bronze hair, and a pink dress, came out and greeted him.

"Nitri Raccio will be pleased," she said, and then asked at what he was looking.

"I walked up with the English gentleman, Mr. Hamberton," he said. "He asked me whether Dr. Romano had not been dead some time."

She turned her head sharply.

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'yes, some time'! Of what use to say more? He has a beautiful wife, though I do not envy him. Did you ever see the doctor, Lucille?"

"I? No, you forget we have only been here six years."

She looked round a little apprehensively. "One never speaks of them here, M. Nicholas. It is not wise. We all know that Maria Romano is a good woman, and it is wiser to ask nothing." She instinctively crossed herself.

III

Hamberton was aware of a strange beating of his heart as he climbed, also the road seemed unaccountably steep as he had occasionally found it formerly.

He kept seeing visions of the yellow walls of the hotel with the pink almond-blossom stencilled on them, and he heard Nicholas's slightly insidious voice:

"Mrs. Hamberton might like the change."

Mrs. Hamberton! He realised he never thought of her so; never connected her in any way with life down in Osraello or St. Geno. The little formalities of their marriage day seemed far off, and unreal.

It would, of course, be impossible to take Visellia to stay at the hotel, but he could imagine she would create something of a sensation there. Had she ever been to Mentone—Genoa—Rome?

They seldom spoke of cities. He had tried to describe Paris to her, and London. She had been interested, had wished to assimilate his knowledge of them, he had thought.

For the first time he began to consider seriously what they mostly spoke about.

It was difficult, because if one eliminates the world of men and women there would seem such narrow bounds, but he was never aware of that.

Through the wonderful summer nights they had talked often of the stars. He could not remember

that she had made definite statements, but he was aware that he now held definite and quite unorthodox views with regard to them.

And they talked often of life, of the life force manifesting itself in continuous change—of the properties of green things, of air, rain, water, snow—the wind! Visellia had wonderful ideas with regard to them. Fancies, he had supposed them at the time, now he was aware that such fancies had grown into facts for him, too. Beautiful, satisfying facts, but not facts acceptable down there. He turned instinctively as this thought came to him, and looked towards Osraello.

If these things were really true and beautiful as he believed, they should be as true and possible in Osraello as in the heights. Visellia in the world of men and women would be indeed a revelation!

It was a very disturbed Hamberton, who, having unladen his remaining mule, and put it in stall, made his way into the house in the clearing.

IV

If Visellia noticed any change in Geoffrey, she made no comment on it. She asked after the people she had seen in the humble shops where they dealt, told him, in reply to his own enquiries, that Madellena had recovered, and informed him that the last heavy rains had loosened the wall of the lowest terrace.

He watched her prepare the evening meal. For some reason she never permitted him to assist with this. He frequently could not define its items, but it was always as satisfying to the palate as to the appetite. Fruit and vegetables, variously prepared were, as he imagined, its foundation. He had become quite indifferent to the non-presence of meat. Visellia

never ate it, but at first provided him with it, once a day. Little by little, without thinking about it, he had grown to dislike it, and it slipped out of their simple menu.

As she moved quietly about in the little kitchen (he could see her through the open door), he heard her chant the curious little refrain; the same she had sung that night in the hut, when she had found him by the bank of the stream.

His mind leapt back, as across a chasm.

The reason for his coming here, the hunger and thirst for right understanding of Life's mystery that had driven him from his own world, and was still unfulfilled, was almost forgotten. She had told him—most certainly she had told him—that she knew it, and yet he had not learnt it!

Did it consist in the worship of Beauty and Love, and the deliberate rejection of the world?

Surely that was not the answer.

The pull of the world of men and women, which had caught at him to-day, was real and poignant. A rush of recollection, needs, and desires swept over him like a terrifying wind, impressing on him with irresistible force that he had something to do for, and with the world; some message to deliver to it.

He sprang up and called to her.

“Visellia!”

She stood before him, the calm, beautiful woman of his first recollection. Something had gone, and something had been gained, but he could find no words to express it, nor even the sudden overwhelming desire which so shook him.

“You wish to return to your own world?” she said very gently. “That is natural. I have wondered when it would call to you.”

The sound of her voice reassured him that her love was alive, ardent and undiminished.

"I cannot go without you, Visellia."

She drew back. He almost fancied she shivered.

"Take care, beloved. You do not know the risk. Go back yourself for a time, and return when you will."

He felt she was pleading, and with no certainty of victory, or assurance of wisdom.

He caught her hands.

"I will not go without you. I believe you *should* go. *You* need nothing, my most perfect woman, and yet I feel as if the need the world has of you will be a final crown for you. We will go together. It will not be so good as here. We shall see ugly things and hard things, but we shall learn the worth of what we have."

"Why did you come to me in the first place, Geoffrey?"

"Because I felt you could solve life's problems for me. Everything was like a mist about me, even Love. Nothing was clear or clean."

"You have never asked me for the solution."

Her eyes held his with intense earnestness.

"I have learnt," he said slowly, "that some knowledge is not made known in words, but by experience."

She was plainly relieved at his answer, but still she tried to hold him off. For the first time he saw sadness in her eyes.

"Geoffrey, I warn you there is danger. You—we—may lose each other down there, amongst the men and women of earth. I shall be just a peasant woman. I am ignorant of all that is simple and clear to them. My knowledge will count as nothing, and you, too, may come to see me with their eyes."

He laughed.

"My 'Lady of the Heights,' that is a risk of the imagination!"

"Yes. Imagination is a vital force."

"I mean that it is a risk that does not exist."

"It does, Geoffrey. Unless you are very sure of yourself, that is what will happen. You will see me not with your own vision, but with their eyes. Think, think—are you sure of yourself?"

"I knew you, the first time you passed me, as different from all women in the world. Is it likely that their blindness—if they are so blind—could darken all I have learnt of you since?"

She went slowly to the windows and looked out, standing with her arms hanging straight down, her head turned slightly upwards in the attitude of one listening. He could not see her face.

He bore with the silence awhile. He remembered rather than re-experienced his old awe of her, and a sense of something behind her, or deep within her, that he had never touched. The preposterousness of her idea consoled him. She could never be like other women, but other women, inspired by the wonder of her, would approach nearer her.

He crossed over to her, and she turned. Her face, always grave and serene in repose, was grave without serenity, but there was resolve there, the resolve of one who plays with big stakes.

"My Geoffrey, I will go with you, but do not take me utterly out of reach of our home here. Take me to your little world of men and women in Osraello, first. After all, you have seen something of my world. It's only fair I should see something of yours."

Joy welled up in his heart. He had not imagined he had wanted this thing so greatly.

It should be as she wished. Osraello first, the rest would follow! He blessed Nicholas for voicing the

idea; he was amazed at its sudden fruition.

As to his aim, the reason of his excursion into these regions? If the answer to that lay in the perfect restful love and companionship which he had found, then it would prove itself down there, transforming the mundane world!

He gave Visellia a very human kiss.

V

The night was dark. The pines of Monte Negros were lost in the thickness of it. The wind carried the restless sighs of the sea up to them, and they echoed the long cadences.

The ground was wet with heavy rain, and no little wood creatures seemed to stir.

Only northward the heaviness of the skies was a little lightened; one could imagine a faint ghost-like whiteness on the horizon, as if early snows had re-touched the far-off mountains, yet so faint that it was an illusion, for no eye could see so far to-night.

Through the darkness there came a woman, a mere moving shape, cut out of the material of night itself. She moved swiftly and surely between the crowded stems, as if night and day were one to her. At the mountain edge above the little terrace she stopped and her cloak fell back. A faint glimmer of gold was like starlight caught in woods. She stood there, faintly luminous in the darkness gazing out to the north.

Presently she sank on her knees, and stretched out her arms.

“The test, the test, my Father! Give me Power and Strength to meet it! Let not fear destroy our Immortal Hope!”

The whispered words were like the sougning of the wind in the pines.

For long hours the figure knelt there motionless in the darkness, until a little change crept over the sky, and the ghostly gleam on the horizon became a reality and no illusion.

Dawn had hung out all her banners before the little plateau became solitary again.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. HAMBERTON

Nicholas, the new head waiter of a new hotel—or at least of a new management—gazed out of the dining-room window into the garden

The garden of the Hotel des Montagnes lacked the formal order of that of the Grand Hotel des Rois. The paths had been roughly coated with small granite, the green grass cut, and the worst weeds removed, but tangled thickets of palms and cactus, oranges and lemons, and exuberant unpruned roses occupied many corners, hiding, more or less, piles of debris and forgotten rubbish.

The wide terrace on which the hotel was built was of brick, and some hotel-like decoration in the shape of urns and small figures were placed on the walls, and seats with striped awnings were dotted about.

Nicholas regarded it all with grave misapprehension; he did not believe that the kind of guests the hotel wished to attract would appreciate the picturesque disorder. Some guests might prefer it, but hardly those who would consider it obligatory to face the steep climb up and down to the Casino every night. Nicholas considered the management was inclined to cater for the wrong people. The Hotel des Montagnes was less suited for a gay cosmopolitan crowd than for the staid and more open-air English, who indeed were, for the time being, the chief residents.

Even the ultra-beautiful suite at the eastern end was taken by an Englishman, and would be occupied to-day.

His wife, however, was not English.

Nicholas, gazing out of windows, was thinking of Mrs. Hamberton whom he had never seen, but of whom he had heard more than her young husband suspected.

Those friends of his in the villa on the Croix Verte salita, had inherited the little terrain through three generations. They knew all there was to know of the countryside by tradition, as well as personal knowledge; had known it when Osraello was merely a little fishing village, with no more than half a dozen ill-built terraces climbing up the slope; and the pink-walled villa was the most adventurous freehold, soaring above its neighbours.

The pines came lower down, then.

The old, old woman who sat in the sunniest corner of Nitri's home, remembered easily when a rumour had come that some stranger had bought the summit of Monte Negros, but it was many years after that that the said stranger had arrived, and built himself a house up there, with amazingly little commotion or excitement. Great cases had been carried up, but none of the men who carried them had crossed the narrow causeway themselves. The two men who worked with the stranger were from a distant country, silent and taciturn.

No one knew exactly when the Doctor—he was soon known as that—took his daughter home.

It was, however, a considerable number of years ago. No one knew either when the doctor had died, or where he was buried. He must have died in the nature of things; besides he ceased to come down to the little town, growing and spreading along the

narrow sea-board. His daughter came instead. It was quite a long time before they realised it was his daughter. She was dressed like the country women, and she talked their patois. She spoke little with the people, but what intercourse she did have was always friendly, helpful and kind. The children adored her. Was anyone ill, it was a pleasure if "Maria" could be persuaded to cross the threshold. Moreover, in time, they began to notice that the patients she visited made quicker recoveries. But they did not say this to each other, any more than they discussed with each other the age of the woman who lived on the heights, and was the daughter of Dr. Romano on whose terraces one did not trespass.

But nobody ever spoke ill of either the late Doctor or his daughter, and most, loved her.

Nicholas considered these matters, running over them in his mind. It was, of course, no business of his, nevertheless, he was undeniably "intrigued" by it.

There was also the question of Hamberton himself, the dreamy young Englishman, who had never stayed at the Hotel des Rois, but was nevertheless quite well-known there. There was the charming English lady to whom he had been engaged, and there was this surprising marriage.

The truth might very well be that Nicholas (which was not his name), had a keen eye, and a tendency to romance which was not altogether incompatible with his onerous profession.

A head waiter has certain idle hours on his hands, and they need not be occupied by the consideration of vintages, the vagaries of guests, and petty meanesses of managements.

He turned from the window and sauntering through the hotel, reached the east suite, which he entered.

It was well fitted, was indeed what Nicholas, in a rather lordly manner termed "comfortable," and the management, "luxurious." The decoration was more subdued than in the rest of the hotel.

He cast a critical eye around, approved more or less—managements seldom earned his unqualified approval—wandered out again to the garden where he gathered some sprays of mimosa and having set them in a vase, ordered a waiter to take them to the east suite. He thought with satisfaction how much better his mimosa would look against the pale, grey walls, than the painted almond blossom of the management, against the vivid yellow of the corridor.

Nicholas, earlier in life, had been waiter in an hotel which did not have painted yellow walls—not painted at all, indeed.

He knew quite well how things should be.

A few minutes later the Hambertons arrived.

They came in a fiacre, like any other guests, and they came from St. Geno, and they had luggage.

Nicholas took in all these things as he stood a little back, watching the fussy secretary, whom he already hated, welcome them.

They assumed a dual personality directly they crossed the threshold. They were "The Inhabitants of the Regal Suite," and they were the simple and rather retiring couple who took a suite because they were just a little afraid of other people.

Those "other" people were gathered together for tea in the hall. They all seemed to desire to convey the impression they were not in the least interested in the new arrivals, and lamentably failed in the desire.

The secretary waved waiters and porters about in a masterful way, and ushered them towards the lift.

So they passed Nicholas, and he saw for the first

time, Maria, the daughter of Dr. Romano.

He looked quite gravely and earnestly at her. She was clad in grey. It was not, so Nicholas considered, a unique gown, such as she should have worn, but she wore it with distinction.

And she was beautiful! Oh, quite indisputably that! Aged?—Twenty-five—thirty? He stretched his imagination.

Hamberton saw him, and stopped, holding out his hand.

“You see your words bore fruit, M. Nicholas! Visellia, this is M. Nicholas upon whom everybody’s comfort depends.”

She, too, held out her hand, and though Nicholas should have known his place far too well to do so, he did take it, and the secretary noted, and the guests stared.

“Madam, I hope, will be happy here,” said Nicholas gravely.

“I hope so, M. Nicholas. It is at all events something new to me.”

She passed on.

Nicholas returned to the dining-room, entirely oblivious of the secretary’s expression.

Twenty-five—thirty? He made rapid calculations. Oh, impossible! His cousin’s child was now sixteen. Ten years since that illness of hers. A very beautiful woman, certainly.

II

It was four days before the hotel discovered that the Hambertons were no strangers to Osraello, or that Mrs. Hamberton was less a stranger than her husband.

The clientèle of the Hotel des Montagnes were mostly newcomers, still uninitiated in the disputes, scandals, and social legends of the place; but on the fourth day a family, decoyed from the original luxuries of the older establishment, arrived at the newer splendour.

They were enthusiastic as to its superiority over its rival, for during the previous season they had had many bitter disputes with the management there, and Nicholas had been aware of it.

That was during the time of the great Tresham-Hamberton scandal. Though they were personally unacquainted with the principal people concerned, that did not prevent them bubbling with the excitement of possessing first-hand (or nearly first-hand) knowledge of the affair, nor from communicating the same in strict confidence, to their already confidential acquaintances in the lounge.

"Imagine Mr. Hamberton bringing her *here!*" they whispered among themselves. "Of course, it's not the Hotel des Rois, but still *everyone* knows."

If everyone did not know, it was not their fault!

"She's really remarkably good-looking for a peasant," they admitted, adding that some of "the people" really contrived to have "an air."

"What was Miss Tresham like?" asked Mrs. Mitchell curiously, watching the so-called peasant girl pass in her slow, dignified way down the corridor.

"Oh, beautiful! In quite a different sort of way. Most distinguished! A lady to the tips of her fingers!"

Mrs. Mitchell, who had a sense of humour, and whose interest in her fellows was genuine and human, smiled. She considered Mrs. Hamberton distinguished looking, whatever her origin, and thought it hard luck on her that the Waltmans should have happened to come to this hotel.

Mrs. Hamberton, however, was oblivious, or indifferent, to the curiosity she excited. She moved among them with no appearance of embarrassment, but with a calmly interested air that rather "intrigued" Mrs. Mitchell.

"Peasant girl! I don't believe it!" murmured this lady one afternoon. She was seated on the terrace, at one of the little tables with striped awnings. She was alone, and she generally had her solitary tea out here.

The Hambertons had just come in from a walk, apparently, and decided on the same programme; she could hear their voices, but not what they said, for they spoke Italian rather to her surprise. It was, she thought, the only thing that lent weight to the preposterous gossip. She did not know enough Italian to realise the evidence was all the other way.

Then the calm of the afternoon was interrupted by a riotous puppy who rolled down the steps from the upper terrace, followed by the almost equally rotund form of a small child, who landed, fortunately for herself, if not for the puppy, with her head on that animal!

It took a moment for the two to find their breaths and voices. When they did, it was difficult to determine which had most breath or voice to spare.

Mrs. Hamberton was first to the rescue. She set the child right way up, and gave a helping hand to the momentarily flattened puppy. The child's screams stopped miraculously, and the puppy ceased to yelp.

Visellia smoothed the ruffled head with both hands, smiling into tear-drenched eyes.

"I want Lolly," gasped the child. "Oh, I don't want Lolly to be broken!" She held out shaking little hands to the puppy.

Geoffrey put it into her arms, and it licked the

tears from its mistress's face, and wriggled ecstatically.

A nurse came flying down the steps.

"Oh, Cecilia! Miss Cecilia! I *said* you'd get into mischief, if you went down. You might have killed yourself!"

"I didn't," protested the child, "t'only a nasty stone hurted my foot, and I pushed Lolly, and I didn't mean to, and the nasty steps getted in my way, and we felled down. We wasn't hurted."

Visellia looked at the nurse.

"She is really unhurt," she said calmly, but the woman gave a sudden cry, and pointed dramatically to the child's left shoulder, where lay a large splash of blood.

Visellia kept her hand on the left side of the little head as if feeling for the injury, but she still smiled at the nurse.

"You will find no cut. It is a mere scratch, see!" She took out her handkerchief, and passed it over the stain. It must have been an extremely absorbent handkerchief for it wiped it off as if it were a smudge of paint.

Mrs. Mitchell, who hovered near, remarked that she thought it was only the puppy's feelings that were really hurt.

The nurse, after a hasty examination, thanked them and bore off the child and puppy, both entirely restored, and dancing along in cheerful fashion again.

"A storm in a tea-cup," said Geoffrey, smiling a little deprecatingly at Mrs. Mitchell.

"It was a wonderful escape," said that lady, "almost a miracle."

Mrs. Hamberton turned her grave eyes on the speaker.

"Children's lives are full of miracles, if one has eyes to see them," she said.

"In any case they both made too much noise for genuine disaster," put in Geoffrey. "The puppy should be elongated now! Our tea will be cold, Visellia."

They went back to their respective tables. Mrs. Mitchell changed her seat so that she could continue the conversation if they were affably inclined.

What she was chiefly thinking was, that no foreigner however clever, could have acquired the English accent of Mrs. Hamberton, except after years of living in that country; and it was only last winter, according to the Waltman's—Oh, preposterous!

She hazarded some remark, and they drifted into talk. Corrodi was the theme. She had been up there once, and wanted to go again to sketch, but was not sure whether the inhabitants were kindly disposed to artists.

Mrs. Hamberton assured her she would meet with no incivility.

"They may be interested, but they will not talk to you. They understand the artist is not to be interrupted."

"Alas! they may then at once perceive I am no artist, but a mere amateur!" sighed Mrs. Mitchell. "I just like to have mementos of places."

Geoffrey strolled off on some pretext. He wanted Visellia to take, and to make, her own impressions.

So far they had made no acquaintances. They dined down in the big dining-room, but had never sat anywhere but in their own room. He was not a man who made friends easily, and Visellia had no experience. He felt there was an opportunity for her.

When he returned half an hour later, Mrs. Mitchell

had gone in, but Visellia still sat there, in her undisturbed way. She was never restless or impatient, never apparently conscious of time, or in a hurry.

"I have promised to walk up to Corrodi to-morrow with her," she told him. "She is good, this country-woman of yours. She has three small children. The doctors sent her here for a change, but her heart is with them, therefore she does not make the speed she should to recover. Seeing the little one fall, shook her. She began to think what might happen to her babies."

Geoffrey, accustomed to the fine exactitude of her language, noticed Visellia employed the past tense in speaking of Mrs. Mitchell's anxiety.

Indeed, it was only when Mrs. Mitchell entered her own room that she thought again of the panic, born of an uncontrolled imagination, that had suddenly rushed on her after the little scene on the terrace. She found herself regarding it as foolish, futile, and having no bearing on possibility. She gave her attention instead to reconsidering Mrs. Hamberston's amazing statements with regard to herself.

'She had never been in England.'

'She had lived many years in Osraello.'

'She had never stayed in a big hotel before, so she could not give any opinions on this one.'

'She knew nothing about the war.'

'Never read the papers.'

'Considered Tolstoi had had vision, and lost it.'

'Did not paint, play or sew. She could cook, and garden.'

"She made things." This was vague.

It was a list that did credit to Mrs. Mitchell's power of covering the ground. She proved, however,

she was a lady of discretion, for she did not disclose an item of it that evening, to the many questioners as to the accident to the Ryders' child.

The episode was already magnified into that, in hotel phraseology.

II

The next evening the Hambertons sat in the lounge for the first time.

By now, all that the Waltman's knew, or did not know, about the Hambertons was common property; and as Mrs. Mitchell spent most evenings in her own room, there was no one to pick holes in the flimsy fabric of gossip, with the sharp point of actual experience.

"What are they all doing with their hands?" asked Visellia, when Geoffrey, having fetched a pile of illustrated papers, dropped into the chair beside her.

"Knitting, fancy work—all women do that, don't they?"

"I can embroider. Shall I do it, Geoffrey?"

"If you like, my dear. It seems more usual, but you have not got any."

"I can get it." She rose swiftly and went towards the stairs, passing the lift. She never used that if she could help it. A man who was just entering it, however, stood aside and offered, in bad Italian, to take her up.

She bowed in a dignified way and entered. It was an automatic lift, and he said, still in bad Italian:

"First floor, I believe. Your rooms are one end and mine the other."

She answered slowly, and as one seeking for words, that the corridors were very long.

One sentence in halting Italian. He was not a sufficiently apt pupil to realise her accent, but he did realise she made a grammatical error, the duplication indeed of his own.

He looked after her as she went towards the east suite. "Queer affair. Why on earth doesn't he get her a sort of governess or chaperon. She's worth taking some trouble with, since he's married her!"

When Visellia returned to the lounge, she had a strip of material in her hand, and some sewing silks.

Geoffrey watched her as she instantly set to work.

"I never knew you could sew."

"There is so little need, but sometimes it's amusing to make things, this way—and it seems other women do it."

A rather large lady let herself into a chair near them, with ominous creakings.

"The light is better here," she remarked in an asthmatical voice. "I hope you do not mind my sharing it."

They assured her no, and she drifted into conversation, and asked to see Visellia's work.

Visellia put it into her hands.

It was just a strip of wide ribbon of curious texture; already an intricate design was indicated in the few stitches done.

"But you have no pattern," objected the stout lady. She spoke in English.

Visellia looked towards Geoffrey with a puzzled expression.

"Pattern?"

"How do you know what you are going to do, as you work—what guides you?"

He offered the explanation timidly. It had never

before happened that she had failed to grasp a shade of meaning in any language.

"The pattern is in my head," she said. "I have only just to do it."

"Oh, I see. Memory! That's rather wonderful, my dear, and it's very pretty. You like sewing?"

She spoke in a kindly manner. She was indeed actuated by completely kindly feelings. She spoke a little loudly, and a little more slowly than usual because these foreigners, even if they do understand English, are often—well, just a little stupid.

Visellia looked at her and smiled. Encouraged in her Christian endeavour to make things more pleasant for the poor thing in her strange surroundings, Mrs. Woods contrived to utter little remarks on the merits of needlework, the amount of knitting she had done in the war, and such unmeaning sentences as become the seeds of hotel acquaintanceship.

Visellia, after a while, put down her work.

"You suffer from your throat?" she said quietly.

"Yes, indeed. It is a real affliction, but it's no use to complain. I've tried enough doctors. They can do nothing. They sent me here, but it is really no better here than anywhere else."

Mrs. Hamberton appeared to be thinking deeply. She leant her head on her hand and looked fixedly at the good lady.

"He should tell her not to stare at people," she thought, disconcerted by the steady gaze.

Visellia suddenly resumed her work.

"The little valley that runs up past Nitri, the palm grower's, holds a good air for throat trouble."

Mrs. Woods smiled.

"Indeed? I must remember. These local traditions have occasionally something in them."

"It is not a tradition, but I know it. Try walking there each day."

Mrs. Woods looked really surprised.

"Thank you. Perhaps I will. Do you know these parts then?"

It was here Visellia came to grief. She frowned a little. Geoffrey divined something wrong, was aware without discovering a cause.

Visellia said:

"I am sure you have been told I come from these parts. When one is not whole and wished to be so, it is necessary to be very sincere in little things. If you are that, and walk in the valley each day you will be well. You are so kind, but you must be quite true, too. I tell you because of your kindness."

Mrs. Woods lent back gasping. This came of being friendly to peasant girls set up above their station!

Sincere! Why it was the merest politeness to pretend that she knew nothing of Mrs. Hamberton's antecedents.

Visellia's beautiful slow voice cut across the thread of her indignation.

"Do not be offended with me. I was only thinking how you could most quickly be cured. I like your kindness. It does not seem so common a quality as I expected. Believe me it is always easier to get rid of physical troubles if one is extra careful to be particular in all one's dealings, just as some would say particular diet is good."

Mrs. Woods gathered up her knitting, her hands shaking a little, but unaccountably her worst anger had evaporated.

"I suppose you are a Christian Scientist, Mrs.

Hamberton. I had not thought their ideas had travelled so far."

"Are those one of the many new groups who have found a glimmer of light in the general ignorance?"

The old lady paused and tried to master her revived anger.

"I know nothing of them and wish to know nothing. What you call general ignorance seems to me a desirable thing."

"I include myself in it," returned this surprising "peasant girl" swiftly. "I hope you'll try the Little Valley. I would like you to get well."

Mrs. Woods bowed a stately good-night and passed on to her room, too upset to face further conversation that night.

It was certainly an unfortunate opening.

Hamberton sat watching his wife with some uneasiness. He was unusually aware of her physical beauty, her warm colour, the splendid line of her figure. He knew other men remarked her. A treasonable wish that she were more like other women in ways slipped into his mind. If not instantly dismissed, it was at once relegated to the remote corner of his consciousness.

Presently she said she would go to her rooms.

"Go and talk to the men," she said gently, "that is what we are here for, remember."

He obeyed her by wandering off to the billiard-room, wondering if, indeed, that were so, or if some other vague idea did not exist at the back of his mind, not altogether unconnected with that half recognised desire to convert Visellia into Mrs. Hamberton.

III

Every few days Visellia and Hamberton went up to the hill top, never to the House in the Clearing, that, without discussion, they avoided. One day they left Mrs. Mitchell sketching in Corrodi and wandered on to the bare hills behind St. Geno.

It was here Geoffrey told Visellia, diffidently, that he wanted to work—to write again.

"I feel at last I might have something worth saying," he explained hurriedly. "Of course, I don't know that I can say it properly, I may be wrong—but—I want to try. It's got to be said in—in verse—mètre."

He stammered a little, and glanced at her anxiously. Visellia nodded.

"Poetry? Yes it must be said in poetry. You must try anyhow, if you feel like that."

He came to a halt and looked out over the bare hills to the distant sea.

"What I feel is that I must make some visible show of all *you* have given me! To keep it inside one—not to give, nor produce, seems wrong."

He did not look at her. Her eyes were full of compassion and she put her hand on his arm.

"Write then, beloved—write beautifully—tell them what you have to tell—if you are sure you know enough."

He turned swiftly at that.

"Enough? One never knows enough! If one waited till then, nothing would be done at all. It's—it's a sort of debt. I expect you can hardly understand how one feels—people down there, I mean."

"But you are not down there. Yet I do understand. If you feel like that, do it. Tell me more. Your theme?"

He told her—haltingly at first, then warming to it, clarity coming to him in sheer attempt to express. He outlined his poem of Vision, its elusive mystery, its meaning, its value. Beautiful lines came to him. He heard the music of them, and was abashed.

"I don't feel as if it were mine at all," he concluded humbly, "it's just in the air!"

"Could you write it up here—or at home?" she asked. He shook his head.

"No—that's it. I do not feel the need, the pressure, except when I'm down there with men and women. Oh! I know it sounds absurd—and conceited—but there it is; I'm sorry for them—and I want to do something to make them see!—and, Visellia, it won't be easy work. It means a bit of a struggle. That's what I need—always did. I hate doing easy things."

"And the end—the aim?"

He looked at her. His face blanched a little.

"I don't know—except to make others see. Life's like that, isn't it? No matter how far up we go, the summit is in the clouds."

"But—there *is* a summit!" she said in a low voice.

"Even if we found it, it's no use to me alone." He spoke uneasily.

"The great explorers, who found new countries, were alone when they found them."

"And came back and told us!"

"Some of them."

"You think I have not climbed far enough?"

His dejection was evident and she caught his hand and held it to her.

"My beloved, you have climbed very far, farther than you know! In any case you must do this—tell what you know. It may be that *is* the answer. I am growing selfish. I was thinking of myself."

“It is as much yours as mine. Without you I am nothing. I could do nothing. *You* are my vision!”

They sat silently on a little bank—hand in hand—and the momentary shadow melted.

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. HAMBERTON INTERVENES

I

Mrs. Mitchell's interest in the Hambertons increased with longer acquaintance. She quite frankly liked Geoffrey, and was sufficiently interested in his wife to desire to learn what she really did feel towards her.

She spoke of them to no one else. She did not make friends easily, but when she did she was exceedingly loyal. To discuss the much discussed couple with the Waltmans, or Lady John Saltoun, who declared that given a good dress-maker and a little coaching, the Italian peasant girl would create a sensation in London and "make" her husband, would be impossible for her.

When Geoffrey took to devoting the morning hours to caging his wide-winged vision, Visellia was pleased to have the Englishwoman's company. She went to St. Geno with her: watched her buy presents and clothes, listened to her comments on life and also to all she cared to say of her home or children with unfeigned interest.

One day, after seeing a curious scrawl from one of the children, aged five, Visellia said:

"They make you happy, these little ones?"

Mrs. Mitchell took time to reply.

"One would not go on without them," she said slowly at last. "Nothing would be worth while. Don't you like children?"

"They are so beautiful!" Visellia murmured with a wistful strange smile. "The biggest mysteries in life! I think I fear them."

Mrs. Mitchell was almost shocked into protest.

Visellia went on.

"There is nothing I would not do for a child—except one thing—but it hurts so dreadfully when they are ill, unhappy, or in fear."

Mrs. Mitchell was glad she had not protested.

A few days after this, Nicholas, passing Mrs. Hamberton in the hall, stopped her. He made a pretext concerning their table, but having answered him, Mrs. Hamberton remained waiting and expectant.

"What did you wish to say, M. Nicholas?" she asked.

His impassive face showed some sign of emotion.

"Have you heard, Madam, that the little English child is very ill?"

There were several children in the hotel but only one "little one." Visellia said she had not heard.

"It is the influenza, but the Management do not want it known, naturally. She is completely isolated."

He looked rather fixedly at Mrs. Hamberton.

"Why do you tell me, M. Nicholas?"

"I think Madame knows. Agasino Nitri is my cousin."

He turned slowly away, leaving her standing there, looking out at the sunlit world.

At which moment the father of the child walked by.

Visellia stopped him, though she had never spoken to him before.

"The little one?" she questioned. "I have just heard she is ill?"

He drew himself up stiffly. What right had these intrusive foreigners to speak of his grief.

"I can see," she said swiftly. "She is then very ill! Would you let me see her, Sir?"

It was an incredible gaucherie; or worse, an outrage!

He answered her quickly and frigidly.

"Thank you, but no one but the doctors and nurses are admitted. Visitors, even friends, are out of the question."

She was not easily repulsed.

"I believe I could do something for her."

"We have excellent nurses——" He paused.

Perhaps the woman was used to helping the peasants round in hours of illness; it might be a kindly, if mistaken intention.

"Trained nurses. It is I'm afraid a serious case." He choked a little. It is one thing to realise a situation internally, another to express it. Her tactlessness infuriated him. . . . He raised his hat and passed on.

Visellia went slowly to her room. There was a pained look in her eyes—a look that was so strange to them that Geoffrey glancing at her as she entered, laid down his pen.

"What is it, dearest?"

"I do not understand your people, Geoffrey," she said wearily. "Even for their little ones they cannot step above their absurd social customs."

She told him what had happened, very evenly and quietly, but the look of puzzled pain on her face remained.

He saw, naturally enough, his fellow countryman's point of view, but he could not hope Visellia would see it. Besides——! He had a recollection of a wounded bird—only wounded of course!

"*Could* you help? Are you a Healer, Visellia? he asked.

"I am not a Healer—but sometimes the Life Force can be restored—you have read plenty of accounts of it in the Book of All Wisdom."

"But that's ages ago," he murmured weakly.

She bent her eyes on him.

"Ages? What are ages? Does the Life Force grow old, itself? Geoffrey, I *could* help the child. It has something to do in the world—and they will not let me see her!

She began to walk up and down. Never before had he seen her agitated or distressed, and for the moment it paralysed him.

"My father was right, the little power we have gathered is not enough. We are still at their mercy. They can stultify all we know—and yet, yet it's there! The child *must* live, Geoffrey, it *must* live. I saw that in its eyes that makes for life."

Suddenly she stopped and faced him.

"Geoffrey, be very kind to me; leave me for twelve hours quite to myself. Can you put me out of your mind? Not only not speak to me in words but in thought? Beloved, can you do it?"

"I can do whatever you ask, if you tell me it is needful."

"Very needful. Dear, from now, then—forget me, No, wait!"

She put her hand on his arm and all the golden measure of her love, her bewildering amazing love, seemed to wrap him round in a golden haze. There was no hotel, no sick child, no demand—only themselves, in space!

With a little sigh his eyes cleared; the haze melted.

There was no Visellia.

II

Hamberton asked Nicholas as to the child's health that evening. He dined alone, and for some reason the head waiter was particularly attentive to him.

The report was bad. Very bad indeed.

Hamberton glanced along to the Ryders' empty table.

"Mrs. Hamberton is dining upstairs, sir?" questioned Nicholas, fiddling with a bottle of claret, that was beneath his attention on ordinary occasions.

"Mrs. Hamberton is out," he answered vaguely. He was sure she was out. The door of her room was shut: had been shut since their interview that morning.

He remembered his promise and recalled his mind from consideration of Visellia's movements.

"I don't think you know Mr. Ryder, do you, sir?"

Hamberton said he did not; that he was sorry for them. Then on some unreasonable impulse he added:

"Mrs. Hamberton is greatly concerned about the child."

Whereupon Nicholas nodded gravely and went away.

III

Those who have nursed their sick amid the inconvenience and difficult atmosphere of an hotel, can appreciate the position of the unfortunate Ryders.

At first, perhaps, the difficulties distracted in some degree from their anxiety. Later, the anxiety had it all its own way. They struggled with difficulties and facts that fought, not against little conventions, but against the very internal economy of their happiness.

Frankly, the doctor gave no hope.

Mrs. Ryder resented the verdict with fierce passion; her husband with frozen despair. Neither could square this appalling, ruthless tragedy, with any creed, reason or philosophy. It was a solid, featureless rock towards which their lives were rushing to destruction.

The thing was so rapid, and uncalculated. It had no beginning. It had only evil.

He persuaded the worn-out, fierce-eyed mother to go and lie down. The night nurse was in charge—At the least change she would call her. He sat with the door into the baby's bedroom ajar. He could see the shaded light there, the figure of the night nurse, an Italian woman, highly recommended, found by Nicholas, whose friendship with their little child had been noticed by all the visitors.

He held a book in his hand, but he did not read. The doctor's last words, and his face, his dreadful professional face, had shattered his coherence of mind. If only his wife could sleep—till it was over!

Perhaps he himself slept—or dozed.

It seemed to him, at least, that he had entered, or would certainly see clearly into the adjoining room.

The nurse was sitting by the bed, eyes fixed on the still form, the white, shadowed little face . . . and then a door opening and the entrance of a woman. He wanted to tell her to go away. He wondered why the nurse did not turn her out, and then saw the nurse rise and bend over the bed with an expression on her face against which his whole soul rose in revolt. She was about to call, he knew that, and then the woman held up her hand and going to the bed, lent over it.

A dream, a dream! He struggled with himself. It must be a dream. He struggled to wake and be quit of the preying fear.

The woman, this intruder had the child in her arms—*his* child!

He was awake now! Standing at the door; he had flung it open, and she turned and looked at him, holding the child.

He stood, stupefied, knowing he should be doing something, snatching the small, still form from her; yet doing nothing.

The nurse knelt by the bed, praying.

The intruder pressed the child to her, kissed it, and began singing, a low chant—a soothing, strange sound like wind in pine trees—and still he did not move.

He never knew how long he stood watching. How long that low chant seemed to vibrate and fill the room, but presently the woman moved towards the bed, laid the child down—and faced him, smiling.

The nurse mechanically arranged the bed clothes.

The woman beckoned to him.

He shook off the spell at last and strode to the bed. He would face the worst!

The tiny face on the pillow was white no longer; there was colour on the lips, on the cheeks. The

shadows under the eyes were gone. The breath came quietly and steadily.

"It was not meant," said the woman beside him. "She has much to do, this baby of yours. Give her love, and more love, and more."

"Who are you?" he muttered.

"You would not let me come sooner. She just needed—new life. It is so easy with a child because the body is so pure."

She touched the little head—he made a motion to stop her and did not, but lent over the bed and listened to the quiet breathing. When he looked up the woman had gone.

"Who is she?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

The nurse crossed herself.

"She is Maria of the Hill. M. Nicholas knows her. The Signor is not angry? Look, the little one is sleeping peacefully. In the morning she will be well."

"But just now—before she came in," he had to say it. He did not want her to surmise.

The nurse did not turn her head.

"It is difficult, the light is so low. My eyes are . . . " she faltered.

Without another word he turned and went back to the sitting-room, shaking from head to foot.

IV

Hamberton, according to habit went for an early walk, returning at the hour when busy waiters were scuttling up and down the corridor bearing precariously balanced trays of *petit déjeuner*!

The doctor's motor had just driven off, and a

nurse and a porter were looking after it with vaguely troubled faces.

When he entered, Nicholas was loitering near the lift, an altogether unprecedented occurrence at this hour. He looked at Hamberton as he was passing in a curious manner, so that he felt compelled to stop.

The nurse came in, and ran upstairs.

Nicholas spoke suddenly.

"The little one is better. She will live. Will you tell Mrs. Hamberton that I fear the night nurse is not a discreet woman."

Having said that, he went back abruptly through the dining-room door leaving Hamberton bewildered and vaguely uneasy.

The child was better—good! The cloud that had undoubtedly hung over the hotel was lifted and what need was there for uneasiness?

Why should the nurse's indiscretion or discretion affect Visellia?

In the corridor he met Mr. Ryder, and stopped him.

"Nicholas tells me there is good news this morning, Mr. Ryder. We shall all rejoice with you, I am sure."

Ryder gave him the same curious look as Nicholas had done.

"Thank you, Mr. Hamberton. Did you know your wife came to see her last night?"

Hamberton started. His vague uneasiness deepened.

"I did not know it. She was much concerned. There is no need to say so generally, is there? If—if the child is better?"

"That is precisely what I wanted to convey. It

is not I who will say anything. I have not even told my wife."

"You may be certain we shall say nothing."

There was a little pause. Ryder seemed about to speak, thought better of it, bowed and turned away.

Yet Hamberton knew for a certainty that this man owed his child's life to Visellia.

Speak of it! He did not even want to know about it! It reopened that gulf between him and her that he had nearly forgotten. It broke the even thread of their life amongst their fellows. Worst of all, it meant if that night nurse was not discreet, that the tale would be all over the hotel. Publicity, questions, wonder, curiosity!

He had already forgotten that his first desire to bring Visellia down to the world was in order that it might know and wonder of her, and the knowledge that was hers.

V

On the terrace a small child romped with a puppy, boisterously happy. A motor, being stacked with luggage was at the door, and a nurse in uniform was talking to a nurse in plain clothes.

Hamberton and Visellia could see the terrace from their balcony. The child looked the picture of health.

Below their window two indiscreet ladies chatted, unconscious how voices travel in that clear air. They, too, watched the child.

"That her! Oh, impossible, unless people exaggerated unpardonably!"

"Well they say now—a miracle—a Healer——"

The rest was lost.

Then an impatient:

"Oh, absurd! I think these so-called miracles are most misleading!"

Visellia smiled, and looked at Geoffrey.

All that had so far passed between them on the matter were his first words to her three mornings ago.

"The child is better," he had said abruptly, seeing her standing at her bedroom door.

"I know." Her voice was very gentle. "It had to be done, Geoffrey. Let us go out, up the hill."

That was all.

To-day with the cheerful baby on the terrace, the piled up luggage, the echo of gossip, the affair seemed to take on another aspect.

Hamberton was about to speak when there came a knock at the door and Mr. Ryder himself, entered.

He closed the door behind him. His face was rather white and his manner a little stiff, like that of an Englishman who has nerved himself to an unwelcome task.

He turned to Visellia.

"You must think it strange that I have not been to see you—and—thank you——" he said awkwardly.

She intervened swiftly.

"I understood. It is much better sometimes just to accept and—not understand."

"I did not tell my wife, that is all. She was not in a condition to stand more——"

"Of course. Do not be troubled, Mr. Ryder."

"It seems so abominably ungrateful—and wrong—not to want to know more," then he added with an appreciable effort, "My mother, who is a most devout and orthodox Christian, will assuredly put

it down to her special prayers."

"What else should it be, or should she think?"

"We are going away because Cecilia is so well. It makes it difficult here—after so much——" he stammered confusedly.

"I think it is quite wise of you. Cecilia will be well, as I told you, Mr. Ryder."

He looked at her with puzzled doubt. His gratitude, halting in a way, held something faintly hostile to the woman who had upset the strictly material atmosphere in which he lived, and assuredly wished to go on living.

"There are things for which we can't say 'thank you'. I feel you understand, Mrs. Hamberton. Frankly, I don't, and I don't think I want to."

"You understand your mother's ideas with a little effort," she suggested, "Cecilia is well. That is all you need consider."

Mr. Ryder hesitated, stammered, and held out his hand.

"It's not all—but thanks—awfully! Good-bye!"

He was gone, as abruptly as he came.

The two looked at each other in silence.

"Are you going to work, my Geoffrey?"

"How can I work till I've got all that out of my head!"

There was the faintest trace of irritation in his voice.

"You too? Oh, Geoffrey, I would not have interfered if the doctors could have done it—but they failed, so I *had* to!"

"And you are apologising for it! My dear, dear woman, we are all brutes, not worthy of a word with you!"

She put her hand on his lips.
"Do not say things like that. Let us forget it, Geoffrey!"

VI

But Hamberton could not forget.

The secret knowledge and power of her, came between him and his work, making that seem of no account; too futile and human to be worth doing.

He told himself it was folly. That in these days scores of people had curious powers and exercised them. That Faith worked wonders. Still he failed to find Visellia like other women, and that fact was accentuated down here amongst his fellow creatures.

Their position in the hotel became difficult. When Visellia passed through the lounge, heads were turned to look at her. Not a few thin-faced, eager-eyed women took violent occasion to approach her. She received their advances with friendly interest, but the moment they dragged the conversation round to Healing, Psychic Phenomena or allied subjects she ceased to be interested.

One lady, however, determined she would gain her point. She was a thin-lipped woman with a peevish manner, too engrossed in her own misfortunes to even find sympathy with the cause of them.

"I have always felt that if I could meet the right person, my unfortunatc daughter could be cured," she said; "I don't believe in operations, and they are so costly, and it's such a barbarous idea in these days when we know the power of mind over matter."

"I think that has been known quite a long time," said Visellia calmly.

"But you know what I mean. Mind applied to little things. That is new."

"Is your daughter's health a little thing?"

"It is ruining my life! I simply *had* to come away now, because being with her for so long upsets me. If only *you* could assist us, dear Mrs. Hamberton! I *feel* how strong a power you have, and I *do* understand, you see!"

Visellia gave her a slow penetrating look.

"I cannot help you," she said gravely. "but the operation would save your daughter. It may need great sacrifice on your part. The world charges for the use of its knowledge, I know. Probably the money your holiday must cost you would nearly cover it! Something must always be given."

The lady got red, and drew herself up.

"I think, Mrs. Hamberton, *that* is a matter entirely for my decision! Of course, I would pay any fee in reason if you wish."

Visellia rose.

"I am not a doctor," she said quietly. "I have told you all I know. The operation would save your daughter, if you can bring enough love and sacrifice to bear upon it, but I fear you are too poor this way."

She bowed gravely and moved away. The other sprang up, her face scarlet, now.

"And what did the Ryders pay you, then?"

Visellia paused a second, looked at her with a curious smile, and went on without replying.

VII

When Mrs. Mitchell left, the Hambertons moved on to St. Geno. It was Visellia's suggestion. There

was a vague idea of working on towards Rome, when Geoffrey's poem was sufficiently advanced.

In St. Geno there was less temptation to climb back to the High Hills. Geoffrey himself was immersed in his task now. Its difficulties, combined with his own intensely critical attitude towards his own work, absorbed him.

Visellia lost a shade of that strange dignity which had kept her apart from the ordinary crowd. She seemed almost pathetically anxious to understand it, and grasp their mode of thinking, at once so childish and so complex to her. She lost, too, a little of her wide confidence. Yet Geoffrey noted no change in his Lady of the Heights, until he overheard a few sentences one day in the garden.

Visellia had just gone into the hotel.

Two men, unaware of his vicinity, or relationship to her, passed by, and one remarked:

"That's a pretty woman!"

"So pretty that by Jove, Francis, I mean to stay and paint her if it keeps me here another month!"

A pretty woman!

The words struck Hamberton as so inappropriate, so inexcusably banal, that he went after her to mitigate his unreasonable annoyance by using his own eyes.

"Most inappropriate, absurdly so!"

Yet there was some faint change! She turned and saw his eyes fixed on her.

"Dear, am I at last getting like your people?"

He caught her in his arms. The very fact was significant, if he could have read it rightly.

"Never!" he declared. "You will never be. They are blind and foolish!"

"Are you ever lonely, Geoffrey, for the pine trees,

the solitude, the beauty of dawn, and the glory of sunset?"

"Sick for it sometimes, but I dare not take it yet. I must finish and make clear to myself what I have got—and I cannot, when I am *in* the glory, Visellia. Can you wait a little longer?"

"I am all yours," she said simply. "It is for you to deal with me down here. But of your poem, the end? Are you sure you know the end? The real end?"

His grasp on her hands loosened, his voice was low and uneven.

"No—not yet. But it will come—it is bound to come, so long as you are with me, my dear."

CHAPTER IX

ISELLIA OF THE VALLEY

I

Jenningsby the artist, was a large, expansive man of assured manner, considerable talent, and a quite definite knowledge of the same. Also he had considerable experience of women—fashionable women—portraiture of whom was the style of art he affected.

Mrs. Hamberton had excited his interest as an artist, and piqued his curiosity as a man, and he deliberately set about the task, first, of getting to know her, and secondly, of persuading her to sit for him. The latter usually did not present much difficulty with women, but when he proposed it to Mrs. Hamberton she did not rise to the insidious flattery. Instead she said with disconcerting frankness:

“I do not think your sight is good enough. You would not see me.”

He was so much in earnest that he passed over the disrespectful allusion to his glasses (as he thought), assured her that his sight was excellent, except for long distances. At which she had nodded with a curious little smile.

In the end, perhaps, because Hamberton himself wavered in his objection, she consented to sit for him.

Hamberton hardly knew why he had given in. His and Visellia's relationship was of so mystic a character that there was no room in it for that peculiar sense of close possession which is generally the male concept of marriage. His attitude was rather that of the man who had found the Dawn and wanted the world to appreciate its beauty.

There was probably a lurking desire in his heart that these dull-eyed men and women should realise the wonder of her beauty, and her rareness.

He did not like Jenningsby, but it was conceivable that Visellia might make him likable, and the effect of Jenningsby on Visellia was not worthy of consideration.

So one morning the artist arrived at their suite, with a porter bearing his paraphernalia. He examined the three rooms critically, and ruthlessly commandeered Hamberton's bedroom as having a north light. It communicated directly with the sitting-room, so Hamberton was able to continue his own work there, uninterrupted.

Visellia proved a model sitter. That is, she just "sat" with folded hands, looking straight before her, oblivious apparently of the artist and his work.

This was not to Jenningsby's liking, and on the third day when Hamberton's muse had momentarily deserted him, and Visellia sent him out to re-find it on the hills, Jenningsby intimated to his sitter that an artist could not hope to make a good portrait of a silent model.

"But you are only concerned with form, colour, and arrangement of light and shade. You can get that when I am silent, and I am used to sitting still and thinking."

"If I only knew what you were thinking about!" he sighed a little sentimentally.

She turned her beautiful head towards him.

"I was thinking of my husband's poetry."

It was like a cold douche to Jenningsby. The man's colossal vanity was ruffled, and beneath his vanity there was a little hard streak that saw to it that he was not ignored so completely, with impunity.

"That may help *his* muse," he said softly, "but surely it's only fair you should assist mine. I want to do justice to a beautiful woman."

"No human being can do that," was her rather surprising response. "It is an achievement to catch something of the hidden mystery of beauty."

"You consider beautiful women the highest work of Creation?"

He did not entirely disguise the sneer in his voice.

"It may depend on the definition of beauty,"

"Yes," he returned in a meaning tone.

She broke her pose again with a slow turn of her head in his direction.

"You admire a different type to mine," she remarked.

"What type? Oh, seer, prophetess, beautiful witch? Please turn your head back—yes, that's better."

"A fair woman with a fair, white skin, and all her colour in her lips and on her finger-tips. Exquisitely dressed. A woman who asks much of men, and gives little."

He was glad her pose prevented her seeing his perturbation. He bit his lips, fighting down his anger. How dare she! How, indeed, did she know? He understood she had never been to London. It was incredible that gossip should have spread so far, nor had he judged her the type of woman to listen to gossip. Probably every type of woman did. Women were women!

He felt a tinge of antagonism. She was either incredibly gauche or infernally daring—casual, indifferent! Everything other women were *not*, where he was concerned. Decidedly she needed a lesson. Beauty, especially her type, did not excuse a woman from the exercise of charm.

She should choose!

Jenningsby set himself to make love to her, very skillfully and discreetly. He was an adept at the game.

At the end of a week it seemed to him, she was, at least, interested in him. She would turn her head in that slow fashion of hers and look at him meditatively till he recalled her to her pose, but he was never quite sure of the expression in her eyes. They were too untroubled to please him.

One day she consented to go for a walk with him. She chose the direction and took him up through the old town, and out along a narrow path that ran between high walls to the crest of the first hill behind St. Geno.

It was a glorious day. The crystal clearness of the air, the sense of thrusting life was intoxicating. Jenningsby, a little puffed by the steep climb from the town, was slightly aggrieved by his companion's unwearied step and easy breathing.

She was more attractive in the open air, he considered. She seemed also more companionable. For the first time she spoke to him of Art.

He had thought of her as an ignorant, even as a stupid woman. She might indeed, he found, be ignorant of the modern schools, but of the masters of the past she certainly had knowledge though not invariably the knowledge he considered useful, or necessary.

Evidently she had read a good deal, and digested

what she had read, but it put an end to the absurd theory some people had had, that Mrs. Hamberton was of "the people," and of no education.

Still she puzzled him. He could not place her. She neither invited nor rejected his advances. She was aware of them he was certain.

"You will come to London, Mrs. Hamberton," he said, in a voice indicating the vast importance of such an event to him, personally.

"Possibly. It will be as Geoffrey likes."

He laughed, turned on the narrow path and confronted her with outspread hands.

"It will be, and *must* be, as *you* like, with any man."

"Unless I wish it otherwise."

He had expected protest, pretended unbelief. He was still so blind as to expect from her the tricks of his own little world.

"You have had great experience in managing we poor slaves of your will?"

"I have knowledge," she said quietly. "Others have had experience, and handed it on to me."

"Experience can never be truly passed on. Would you not prefer to gather your own?"

His voice was low, a curious excitement seized him. He hated her, her assurance, her untroubled eyes, her lack of fear. If she had enjoyed the game he might have pardoned her.

"I am experimenting, that is why we are here!"

He laughed.

"That's much better, my dear lady. Let us experiment a little further."

He flung his arm round her—Or would have done so!

She did not move, or shrink, or even say anything.

She just looked at him in a curious way, and his arm dropped.

He laughed a little awkwardly. There was no laughter in her eyes, not even scorn or anger, but the calm interest with which a scientist might observe some specimen of the insect world.

"Are there many men like you in the world?" she asked. "Men who understand nothing, see nothing, learn nothing?"

He was still crushed by a sense of strangeness—almost paralysed. He was afraid. He had a horrible idea that she was not human, a wraith of a woman only, and that if he put out his hand he would touch nothing, and that that nothingness would send him mad.

"Are there?" she repeated.

He found a halting tongue, and struggled to regain his grasp on plain facts.

"There are not many men who would be so generous under the circumstances."

"You are very angry with me because you cannot do as you like with me," she said meditatively. "You have never learnt that you can only deal with what you understand. To you I am invisible, as it were. Perhaps it is not your fault entirely. I have been waiting to be quite sure I had not misjudged you, Mr. Jenningsby. If you have those ugly thoughts of me in your heart you cannot possibly paint me. It is just as I said at first, your sight is not good enough."

Silently raging, and humiliated, Jenningsby followed her home. Her indifference inflamed his passions. She spoke calmly of everyday things, but he made poor response, and on reaching the town, suddenly left her.

When Hamberton went to his room that evening,

all the painting affairs, usually stacked on one side, had disappeared. Visellia said that Mr. Jenningsby was not finishing the portrait since it was unsatisfactory.

Hamberton, who had been secretly of the same opinion, was relieved.

Jenningsby left St. Geno, leaving behind him a vaguely ambiguous atmosphere towards Mrs. Hamberton, and a recurrence of the hardly considered rumour concerning her origin. He was a popular man and some idea that Mrs. Hamberton had not treated him well, found credit amongst certain ladies who would have been only too happy to "sit" to him, and whose confidence in his "sight" was touching.

II

The season was drawing to an end, but the terrace at Monte Carlo was still crowded, and the tables still thronged with devotees and casual visitors.

Hamberton wandered along the terrace, wondering vaguely why he had been such a fool as to yield to the Miltons' request "to make up" a motor party for the day, to a place which bored him so profoundly. The Miltons were still in the rooms, winning and losing five franc tokens with childish pleasure.

Visellia had stood by him watching them, for some time, and then suddenly asked him to take her into the air. He was rather horrified at her white face when they came out into the clear sunlight again. Also, if it had not been so impossible, he would have fancied she was leaning on him.

All she said was:

"Do they never let daylight in there?"

At her request he found a solitary seat, and left

her to make enquiries as to possible trains back. On returning, he had found the seat empty, and he was wandering disconsolately about, looking for a grey-clad figure in the gay crowd.

She wore grey he knew, but he was sure of no details, except that it had not the ultra-fashion-plate appearance of most of the dresses that passed him.

Perhaps he had mistaken the seat. He walked back again, vaguely uneasy.

A group was leaning over the balustrade interested in something on the pigeon-shooting grounds. He had been careful not to point this "attraction" of Monte Carlo to Visellia. The interest seemed unusual and fervent, and he half-reluctantly looked over himself.

A dispute was going on between the officials and someone who was speaking; as Hamberton looked, the group opened, and the "someone," who was Visellia, came through carrying a pigeon on her hands. The crowd pressed to the steps by which she was returning, and Hamberton pushed his way ruthlessly through them.

It seemed to him, in an incomprehensible manner, that he had to keep his eyes fixed very steadily on the grey figure or it would be lost to him, swallowed up in the gay crowd.

He was certainly angry. With the crowd, the place, the "sport," himself for being there, and Visellia.

His anger so blinded him, that for a moment he did lose sight of her and found himself touching another grey-clad figure on the arm, apologised, hurriedly turned, and got out of the press.

He saw her hurrying towards the seat where he had left her, and realised he had never seen her

hurry before. Also he perceived the interest of the crowd had evaporated. A man in front of him, wheeled round, saying to his companion:

"Only some silly, hysterical woman!"

He reached her at last. She did not look up, but gazed at the bird lying in her lap. He stood before her so as to shield her a little from curious eyes.

"Why didn't you stay here?" he began impatiently. "I began to think you were lost."

"I think I am," she said in a low voice. "Geoffrey, take me home."

Her face troubled him. She seemed almost another, weaker woman; moreover, she looked ill.

Ill? Visellia!

The grace and dignity of her were dimmed. He realised also he had spoken impatiently to her. Even felt anger!

She still held the pigeon as she rose to go with him, covering it with her scarf.

He told her there was a train in fifteen minutes, and that he had left a note with the chauffeur of their car to give the Miltons.

As they went, Visellia paused by a flowering shrub, and laid the dead pigeon down beneath it. She said nothing. Indeed she did not speak during the journey.

Hamberton watched her anxiously. The preposterous idea that she was ill would not be obliterated. He felt the gulf between the thought and his Lady of the Heights, but it was there, and the space narrowed from moment to moment.

Once in their own rooms, she flung open the windows looking towards the sunset, and presently she said:

"My Geoffrey, when one feels Life is *not* abundant and overflowing, when there are dark places in one's mind the sun cannot touch, is that being ill?"

He made her sit down, and her readiness, and the droop of her splendid figure shocked him from his last hold on his confidence of her infallible well-being.

"You are just overtired. It is quite a common thing!" He tried to utter the banal excuse to reassure her, and knew it futile.

"I have never been tired before, this kind of tiredness. Why should I be now? Was it because of that place, and those people? Geoffrey, I could not breathe there. My heart hardly seemed to beat. I felt not real—and afraid, and then—the pigeon died!"

She looked at him with strange, beseeching eyes.

"I wanted it to live. I wanted it to be 'real,' and I could do nothing for it. A *bird*, Geoffrey, that is so close to life! All the air round me was thick, nothing could get through. Just at first it was like that here, but I have got used to it. I should never get used to that. If I stayed there, I should not *be* at all. I should be *lost*."

"It is all my stupid fault," he murmured, kneeling by her and holding her hands. "To-morrow we will go up the hills and you will feel better. We ought not to have gone there. I should have known crowded places are not for you, my Lady of the Heights!"

III

But the next day it rained, and Visellia lay by the window, very still and white. The warm glow

had gone from her olive skin, and her stillness was not that of repose, but of lassitude.

The sparrows came, and clustered round the balcony, but came no nearer, though she held out her hand, and once Hamberton heard her calling softly.

He knew the desire in her heart, though he never named it; knew himself as a coward because he refused to read the look in her eyes. He feared lest she was indeed stricken with some common ill of ordinary men and women, and that it might declare itself when they were out of reach of the common human help.

He feared her utter ignorance of such ills and his own inefficiency. At the back of his mind there lurked the resemblance of the smooth turf on the northern terrace of the hill. All the wisdom, knowledge, and vitality of this strange father and daughter had not stayed off death!

Hamberton was indeed afraid as he had never been afraid before!

He suggested she should see a doctor, and her reply sent him out in wind and rain to fight the unfaceable fear.

She said:

“I want no doctor but you, Geoffrey. They would not understand.”

He raged at himself as he swung up the steep path behind the town, which led to the bare hills.

He struggled to get the position straight in his mind, to face the whole plane of his cowardice, and find whence it sprang.

Sheer physical dread of illness and his inability to cope with it? Had his thoughts, then, bridged the gulf between Visellia and the common weakness of the human race?

He deliberately visioned the House in the Clearing, and his Lady of the Heights, on his first visit to her.

Illness? Why, if he imagined it, it must be as a child imagined a bogey, bearing no relationship to fact!

No, there was something else behind this fear.

The wind swept round a corner and drove the rain into his face. The bare hill-side, the grey sea, and the town below in cloud and mist, offered little help. Nature was not his friend to-day, but a relentless mentor.

Did he himself fear to return to that wonderful life on Monte Negros? Was Visellia of the Valley nearer him than Visellia of the Heights?

As he reviewed them, the past weeks stretched out into interminable lengths of time, so that each step he went backward, seemed to bring him no nearer his goal. Still he came at last face to face with the unseen fear he had not recognised, and was dumbfounded before it.

If he took Visellia back to her own life would she indeed be again his Lady of the Heights, undimmed, his radiant inspiration? And if so, could he go on enduring that life, in order to keep the wonder and beauty of her undiminished?

He stumbled against a boulder. The driving rain had momentarily blinded him. He struggled round to the lee-side and found comparative shelter and quiet from the shrieking wind.

In that quiet he clearly, and suddenly realised, the decision he must make.

He had sought the woman of the mountains to

assuage his thirst, to solve the riddle of Life, and in the very beauty and glory of her he had forgotten his thirst, and his need.

He could go back. It was not too late.

Go back? Realise again that she was infinitely beyond his grasp? A seer, a mystic at whose feet he must sit humbly and comprehend step by step the answer to the riddle.

It meant renunciation of the common life. It meant living *on* the Heights. The straining of his humanity to its utmost tension!

He knew there was an alternative.

He could refuse that life once for all. It admitted no compromise. He could take her away from all that was abnormal and strange, take her back to England, keep her in green peace, prisoned in the normal. Teach her knowledge of *his* world, make of her a woman to be loved—to Love!

The bewildering certainty that this was possible for him, was like a lightened lamp in darkness.

With Visellia as his *wife* he could surely touch the highest heights of human happiness.

She was still the most desirable of women, the most adorable of companions—he would make her happy.

In the sudden light he saw it as an achievement worth doing. To teach her to love humanly, to see life from a new angle, to live in the Happy Valleys and forget her Heights.

It was a matter of acclimatisation, he told himself. The mistake was lingering here, in touch with the old. In hotels, when a home was needed. Amongst strangers, when she had first to understand the individual.

For long minutes this conception dominated him—set him, in a marvellous way, free, though he had known of no bonds.

A consciousness of the supremacy of his manhood, and his own right to protest and lead his wonderful woman of the mountain, filled, for the time, his horizon.

He moved out of the shelter of the stones and set his face homeward through the beating rain. He cared little. So long as he went with it, he was aware of no strain or effort.

He must get to work, of course. His poem must be for luxurious hours of freedom, but beyond that he must really work. Helena had been quite right—a married man must have employment. Why had he never seen this before?

The ordinary daily life of his fellows, became suddenly beautiful to him. The man producing, the woman distributing, the sacredness of employment, the equal sacredness of those blessed hours of relaxation.

He walked faster still—making pictures in his mind. The summer twilight, the winter's evenings, the ordered flow of it all. He saw that most clearly: those winter evenings, London, outside the soft curtains, fire-light flickering on bright wood and polished surfaces, and beside the fire—a woman, waiting for him—with the firelight flickering on her—fair hair!

He came to a sudden standstill. Possibilities were blotted out as if the storm had driven through his mind, quenched the fires, and dimmed all light with its driving mist!

It was to Helena with the fair hair that that ordered vision of life belonged!

Helena who waited in summer twilight, by winter firelight, Helena, of whom he had actually never thought through long months!

In the stormy chaos of his mind the two women confronted each other, and Visellia wore the dark gown and handkerchief of the peasant!

He turned abruptly up a steep track to the right. The water ran in a succession of little waterfalls off the rough stones. It was not a path at all, it was an old water course, difficult going—but the rain had ceased and he climbed onward and upward, intent on *not* thinking, until the driving mists had cleared in his mind as they were clearing in the physical world.

IV

It was very late when Hamberton regained the hotel—so late that some visitors were already hurrying out from dinner to seek the best places in the lounge, reviewing the food and their neighbours' behaviour with equal satisfaction.

Hamberton, wet, muddy and bearing marks of his mental and physical struggles, passed through them with unseeing eyes, ignored the lift and went straight upstairs.

There was purpose in his face, set resolve, and exhaustion in his eyes, and he went swiftly, without pause, to their rooms.

There was a fire on the hearth, and Visellia sat before it, reading—

Reading "The Times!"

The gravity of her face was not the outcome of serenity, it was the gravity that comes of troubled thoughts.

Hamberton, standing in the doorway a moment, saw that. He saw more—or felt more—

It might even be he saw less and felt less!

Where was his Lady of the Heights?

It was still a beautiful woman who sat waiting for him, but it was the reflection of a beauty that had been; it held the poignancy of memory, the ache of age.

He closed the door behind him, and met her long look with deeper passion than he had ever known.

It was relief that he read in her eyes—real human relief! She rose and came to him holding out her hands, trembling slightly.

“I knew something was happening—and I could not help,” she said brokenly, “only wait! What do they do, your women, who can only wait, my Geoffrey? I thought I could find it there—but I find no meaning.”

She half glanced at the fallen paper as he drew her nearer him, and thrilled to feel her hold to him as if for safety in dark waters.

But his purpose was fixed. He had seen his path, and made his choice. He released himself and went to his writing-table.

The labour of the past weeks was there in orderly pile; the rough drafts, the corrected and recorrected copy. He gathered it together, went swiftly to the fire and flung it to the flames, then he turned smiling, and this time he held out his hands.

“Visellia, will you take me back to-morrow to the House in the Clearing—to the Heights?”

CHAPTER X.

THE DESIRE OF ALL CREATION

I

Growth is always mysterious, secret. A point in space once empty, and then filled. Analogous to change, to decay, to death, and so to Life!

The scientist in the laboratory may trace the course of physical growth at least. The professor may apprehend it in the class rooms. But who shall measure it within the spirit of man? In those realms whose past is still uncharted by human knowledge?

Hamberton knew very little about his own mental processes, nothing of his spiritual ascent. Only at times he became simply and naturally aware that cloudy surmises which had crossed the wide sky of his imagination had become part of the solid foundation on which he built up life. It took time. He had much to unlearn, much to clear away before he could grasp again the sense of eternal beauty which he had accepted previously with the easy confidence of the child.

He learnt that recognition was not enough, that active perception was required, and he struggled humbly and persistently for such knowledge on the outside planes as he believed to be necessary, before he could tread the tracts of thoughts which were Visellia's familiar paths.

But every now and then he seemed to feel that inner knowledge advanced with outer steps, and the tracts were less remote.

He did not look back. He refused, indeed, to revision the Visellia of the Valley, lest the dimmed glory of those days should hide from him for a second of time, his recovered Lady of the Heights.

The nature of their daily life changed. It was more austere. There was heavier toil, deeper silence, more effort. The old ease and joy of it were gone, being no longer the desired end—Visellia had told him it must be so.

“There is something before both of us, for which we must prepare. I do not quite know when the call will come, but it will take us away from here. We can only achieve it together, my beloved, but the ultimate end is the secret desire of all creatures.”

He found himself discussing vast matters with her, and diving deep for truth beneath the veil of words which clothe the ancient philosophies.

The hours of physical toil, which balanced the mental efforts grew still more arduous. They went less and less frequently to Osraello for food, depending more and more on the produce of the terrace gardens and there the work was unceasing. Soil had to be fetched on the mule's back, manure, young plants, stone for repair. In the dry weather, incessant watering.

All this kept Hamberton physically fit. Fatigue became a mere desire for change of occupation, a resting of physical muscles, and exerting of mental fibre.

If ever thoughts of the far-off world flickered across his mind, or he caught himself repeating his own lines, gone up in smoke of sacrifice, he reso-

lutely put it all aside. He had given himself into Visellia's keeping. He must follow where she led. There was no turning back.

He grew almost unconscious of her outward presence or appearance. They were so united, that distance seemed obliterated.

He learnt to call the birds, and they, and the wood mice and squirrels would come to his hands as they did to Visellia's.

But he never learnt the strange little chant that was like the wind's sigh, the light of stars.

II

Autumn came, swift-footed over the mountains. Snow fell early, and the fairy range showed white against the blue sky, seemingly nearer and less dream-like.

He stood watching it one evening from the northern terrace.

Visellia came and put her hand on his arm.

"Very soon we shall go," she whispered.

He turned and caught her hand.

"Go where?"

"To the Heights! To Those who know!"

A subtle excitement surged through him. Her hand slipped from his, and she gazed towards the mountains with an ecstasy which was new to her.

She began her chant—the little chant he could not learn.

It seemed to divide them suddenly; to set a gulf between their souls. He felt himself on the brink of a precipice, and he flung a bridge of words across it with nervous haste.

“What do they know? Who are They?”

“Those who have achieved and not lost. They know the secret of Immortality!”

III

Immortality!

“That which has been, and was lost!”

To live, unchanged—to hold the eternal life principal prisoner to the will, and so pass beyond the touch of Time or Death!

The secret desire of all creation!

Far back, before our history begins, the goal of the Race had been achieved. It was no dream. It was the meaning of the Garden of Eden, of the Adamic, Spiritual Race who had passed from the human to a higher kingdom. The path had been there for mankind to tread, and the goal clear, and it had been lost! The Immortals had failed to keep the Law of Being and so the gods fell to earth, and Earth was moved to her Foundation!

The Fall!

But deep-rooted in the soul of man, the memory remained, the desire showing itself in the revolt from death, in dreams, visions which struggle to perpetuate themselves in Fame and conquer Time and not Death!

The secret Desire, speaking through every creed and philosophy, arming them for the struggle of Re-attainment.

Immortality! Immortal Life! Immortal Love!

M

IV

That night, when the three bronze lamps were lit, Visellia told Geoffrey of her father.

“I do not know his race; he said it was scattered throughout the world, and but few survived, but they knew each other. He came from Roumania, and his knowledge was of the East and of the West. You must not ask me his age, because his race live long. It would sound folly to you. He had drunk deep of the Wisdom of the Past, and he used it to illumine the Future, and so he found—Light!

“It was then he set out to wander through the world to seek his mate. She must be of his race, he thought, if he were to attain the full illumination he sought.

“I do not remember my mother. I only know he loved her, that they set out on the quest, and she—died, and he became—lame. He taught me all he knew, he trained me to gather more knowledge, and he told me to wait—‘Not alone but together.’ One purpose, one will, one courage. So will you learn the secret and achieve!”

She paused.

The warm radiance of the scented lamps, the silence of the room, the living presence of the woman held him in a spell. He lost grip of essentials.

This marvellous achievement was then her great adventure, in which he must follow her, as the body follows the commands of the soul.

Yet the full significance of all she had said did not well up in him from within the depths of his own consciousness. It sank into it from hers.

“Who are they? Where are they?”

“They live in the Heights, where the air is pure, and these are not always the greatest heights but always the most inaccessible. My father failed to reach the end, but we knew where they are to be found; that is the inviolate secret of our Race. From these Heights they watch over the destinies of men. They are the world’s Helpers. It is they who release or retain knowledge, who give dreams. Yet they may not interfere with the will of man, only, when that will is in accord with Divine Purpose they strengthen it.”

“Inaccessible heights!”

Those two words stood out from the rest, alluring him, as the difficult and unseen had always done.

“You say inaccessible,” he said slowly.

She was silent a moment, and when she spoke, her voice had lost its note of surety and command.

“Geoffrey, nothing is inaccessible if the will commands. But I acknowledge there is risk—others have failed. What we have to weigh is whether the End we seek is worth the risk! Think! Immortal Life! Victors not only of Time but Death!”

Again her passionate, deep conviction enfolded him and silenced the question in his heart.

He saw instead, every step that had led him to this point. His belief in some *tangible* gain to be taken from love. His perpetual struggle to live physically and morally on heights that appealed little to his fellows. His habit of measuring the worth of attainment by the difficulties of the way, and then this consummating experience resulting from his holiday in a little Italian town on the Ligurian coast.

What could he believe but that here was the answer

to his question, and the purpose towards which his life had been bent?

Was not Visellia herself the very visible form of the uncommunicable vision which had ever beckoned to him, which had made possible the shadow of death that had so nearly broken him in France?

To refuse now was to give the lie to his whole life. He did not fully understand, but when had he ever really understood the urging of the spirit? Had he not always pressed forward blindly, seeing only some hidden Glory in a mist, and unheeding the steep rocks over which he must climb? The Glory was there to be grasped!

“We will go—together!” he whispered.

That golden haze, so full of music and sweet comfort, closed round him and her and shut out the world.

If it were illusion, it was still worth while, for nothing the world counted real, compared with it.

But Geoffrey did not even know that that thought lurked in the dimmest corner of his mortal mind.

CHAPTER XI

THE SUMMIT

I

The long, narrow valley was snow-bound. At its entrance, where a few chalets and stables were huddled together, the snow was trampled and soiled, trodden to slush before the stable doors, but still lying in virginal whiteness across the hidden fields.

Behind the tiny village the land sloped up and up into the heart of the mountains. Bare, black, uninviting masses, whose height was dwarfed in the highness of the plateau from which they soared. Their grim scarred sides offered no attraction to climbers, and their surroundings none to visitors, even in summer.

A forgotten valley that wanted no one, and invited no one.

The little town of Briso, seven miles away by the steep and only available track, was the nearest life centre; though a few other such villages huddled unseen between the bare shoulders of the ridge.

In summer the population certainly increased, for the pasturage in the high valley was sweet, but it was early deserted. It ran north-east, and all through the winter lay in the shadow of its own walls. The few poor peasants who remained, lived hard lives and were hard, silent people.

Such was La Mulette.

The only house of any size in La Mulette was that

belonging to the owner of the saw-mill, on the southern slope of Mont Pilgras. It was also the inn; also the only "store." Very occasionally, in summer, a visitor arrived from Briso, recommended by a doctor in that unpretentious town, to cure some ill in the singularly pure air of La Mulette.

For the air was of rare purity, and the village, in spite of its insanitary homes, knew little of illness and much of time, since the average life was nearer 100 than 70. The mortality was amongst the infants. Those who survived the first winter, generally lasted out 90 more. But old age came quickly, and youth was short.

One February day when the greyness of the western horizon was faintly tinged with gold, a pack mule and two travellers, a man and a woman, arrived at the inn.

It was an unheard-of event, and an incredible request that these travellers made. The woman, to whom it was first proffered, stared blankly at them, and left them at the door, to seek for an efficient mind to grasp an unprecedented occurrence.

Michel Corberier came. He was a big man, with a thatch of iron-grey hair, unsmiling eyes, and a grim, lined face. He looked at the travellers and their mule and at the sky. Then he motioned to an open-mouthed boy standing near to take the mule to the stable, and beckoned the travellers to enter.

The long, low room into which he led them was lined with varnished pine, and heated by a big stove to a temperature that precluded superfluous clothing. There were benches round the walls, and two or three narrow tables. Near the stove, some women sat knitting. An amazing assortment of things hung from the ceiling and an open stairway led apparently to the sleeping apartments. At the far end of the

room, a half-open door led—to judge by the utensils littered round it, and the smell, direct to the cow stable.

Corberier said shortly to the girl who had gone to the door:

“Coffee.”

Then he indicated chairs to the visitors. It was the woman who addressed him. Her long cloak fell open, and he wondered faintly what an English gentleman did, travelling with a peasant woman.

Corberier had not always lived in La Muette.

The woman said, and she spoke in the dialect of the country:

“We would stay here a few days, if you can give us a room.”

Corberier shook his head.

“La Muette is no place for visitors. It leads nowhere. In winter we exist—that is all.”

“Still, we would stay. Dr. Royce, of Briso, recommended us to you.”

Corberier’s expressionless glance reviewed them again. The doctor was not a man he wished to offend, but to send him patients in winter was madness. His glance rested doubtfully on the man.

“We would pay well,” said this one quietly.

Corberier decided his first impression was right! An Englishman!

“For a night, perhaps we can manage,” he said, grudgingly. “but there is never too much food at La Muette in winter, and small comfort.”

The woman dropped her cloak, and she went towards the women seated near the stove. One was preparing the coffee, the others had stopped knitting,

and were watching. None had spoken. There was little speech in La Muette through the long, dark months.

One who did not knit was an old, old woman. Her shrivelled face bore no expression, her dim eyes seemed fixed on unseen things. The mind behind them was little concerned with M. Corberier's room—except that it held warmth.

Visellia went towards her, knelt down and touched her hands.

“Do you remember Dr. Romano?” she asked softly.

The silence in the room seemed to increase—but the interest quickened. Corberier stepped forward—then stood still again.

Very, very slowly, as if in an assumed voice that had travelled over wide stretches of time, the old woman said: “He left *her* here—he dared not take her. He did not find! It was long ago. I remember!”

Silence again.

Hamberton heard a woman whisper, uneasily:

“She had not spoken for days!”

Visellia rose and looked round. Their silence and their intent looks troubled her not at all. She turned to Corberier.

“I am Dr. Romano's daughter!”

Corberier's voice was stiff and harsh.

“*That* was when she was young. She is my grandmother's mother. His grand-daughter you may be.”

“If you will—but you live long here in La Muette—though you have forgotten why—and most certainly my father—or my grandfather if you will—came here.”

There was a window in the western end of the room. As Visellia spoke, the golden light which had touched the mountain top as they approached, seemed to increase—a strange radiance from unseen fire.

Corberier strode across the room and looked out. His face became less grim.

“That might mean the end of winter,” he muttered—and then turning to Hamberton, spoke sharply:

“What will you pay?”

Hamberton laid certain money on the table.

“For one week,” he said, “for bed and board.”

Corberier swept up the money. The girl who was making the coffee brought cups to the bare table.

“Tell Annette to prepare the guest-room,” he said abruptly. “I will send in wood. The stove first, mind.”

II

The hitherto unbroken snow of the upper valley bore tracks now—the tracks made by snow-shoes.

For three days Visellia and Geoffrey had exercised themselves on the white surface, skirting the edges of the inhospitable cliffs—adventuring up lonely little creeks and minute valleys. They spoke little.

The monotony, the whiteness and silence of the valley and the stupendous frown of the mountains did not invite speech. This was very different from the snowy smiling slopes where they had wintered, learning or re-learning the use of snow-shoes, acclimatising lungs and eyes to the keenness of air and whiteness of the upper world.

Here was given no glorious view to reward a climb—no laughter, or song, or dance to warm the heart through the long evenings.

The weather, however, had been tranquil. The bitter wind ceased to cut its way down the valley, and every evening there was the golden light on the western heights.

And every evening Corberier eyed it uneasily.

"It is too soon," he would mutter.

They sat in the long room with the others, Visellia knitting with the women; Geoffrey exchanging slow conversations with the host. Corberier told him something of life in La Mulette, stretching his sentences across wide minutes, leaving unbridged silences, which the silence itself completed.

The whole of the inhabitants of the place found occasion to visit Corberier in the course of those three days. There was a sense of wonder and distrust abroad.

On the fourth day, the little greyness of the valley seemed broken by a gleam of light—not direct sunlight—another month must elapse before the morning sun could reach La Mulette for a brief fifteen minutes, but the sky above the valley was less grey—almost blue. Visellia looked at it, at the eastern barriers, and at Geoffrey.

"To-day," she said very softly, "by the third valley."

Though one purpose had led them, though one will had united them through that strange winter—yet her words came with a shock to Hamberton.

The strange enterprise to which he was committed would not bear analysis in those earlier months on the sunny slopes. Here, in the cold remoteness, it had grown more real, but still a distant thing.

It must be before spring melted the wide pastures of winter—before the summer sun set even that high pure air quivering with loosened life—so Visellia had

said, and he had accepted her words.

But spring was far off, and summer a dream!

He looked at her. There was a curious radiance about her to-day. The morning light, perhaps, accounted for it. They were standing on a little humped-up shoulder of hill, strewn with boulders. There were no houses, or human beings in sight but themselves.

It was still early; half the village had been asleep as they passed through it. The children and aged slept long and late.

"To-day!" he repeated, and looked round.

"Last night," she said *they* called me. Geoffrey, think of it! We shall meet *them*—Those who knew! They will tell us the answer to our desire. The secret desire that eats at the heart of the world, you and I will know—*attain*! For us no sleep beneath the grave—no stepping back into the unknown world—but Life itself shall be our captive—subject to us!"

She held out her arms to the valley.

"The long, long ages!" she murmured, "Oh the long ages, that men have hoped and struggled!"

It was at that moment he knew they were not united but separate, that he followed *her*, not her aim—that he had failed to grasp the whole measure of her purpose.

Immortality, achieved through knowledge, patience endurance, peril. He could not grasp the meaning of the word—

Yet he was going with her—going, with that secret knowledge in his heart that her great quest was not his.

He dared not face it as a real, practical thing. It was still a vision that would melt away at touch!

But to Visellia it was the realest, most sure thing in the world, and she counted on him, needed him in some unfathomable way.

He would not fail her! He would follow, though Death and not Life were the reward!

They had made certain plans for the final expedition. Certain things to be taken, certain to be left. These were Hamberton's concern. Visellia had never looked back mentally since the day they had left Monte Negros.

It was he who returned to La Muctte now, and to their room. He packed what he required in a knapsack, took from his inner pocket a letter addressed to Dominic Bessington, and placed it in his one small suit-case.

If they returned he would destroy it.

If they returned!

He came suddenly to a stand-still in the middle of the room.

An invisible hand seemed to have torn a rent in the mist in which he moved.

He deliberately refused to look through. To do so was to repudiate all the wonderful life with Visellia, and deny reality to his own experiences. Whatever it meant to him, the quest was to her the real, sole purpose of her life, and surely noble beyond human arguments.

He clutched at the strange knowledge, the vast truths that had been laid out before his eyes, and absorbed, so he had believed, with his own brain and heart.

Even if that knowledge was from outer and not inner consciousness, so that he still failed to grasp the reality of the adventures, he could still less deny it,

or turn his back on it. For she needed him.

He repeated over and over again certain phrases he had learnt, certain truths he did know as truths, though beyond human grasp.

Then he continued his arrangements more calmly.

There was a knock at the door and Corberier came in, frowning, and staring at him.

"The food you ordered is ready," he said abruptly. "You make a long expedition?"

"It may be. The weather is good."

He stopped his preparations and looked fixedly at the other.

"The weather is treacherous up here. See!"

Corberier caught Hamberton's arms and pulled him to the window which looked northward.

A pathway of blue stretched like a canopy over the snowy valley, but in the west, the jagged outline of the peaks of those formidable summits gloomed against grim greyness.

"Bad weather comes. Because the sun shines in Briso it does not shine on La Mulette. I counsel you to return to Briso. It is best."

Hamberton said gravely.

"We cannot return yet. But you have done your duty. You stand acquitted. I will see to it."

He smiled back into the sombre eyes.

Corberier turned and went away.

Hamberton finished his preparations, and resisted with fierce resolution the desire to stand, wondering what might transpire before he again saw the plain wood-lined room, the wide bed, the suit-cases, and the homely details.

When he took the packets of food from Corberier's

wife, she looked at him curiously. The other women also stopped their work to look, but none spoke. Corberier was not in sight. But when Hamberton started off in the direction of the southern shoulder of the plateau, a boy who had been standing by the corner of a wall, ran back to the stable where Corberier was working. He did not stop working, but heard what the boy said with evident satisfaction—southward, not northward! That was well!

When Hamberton rejoined Visellia, she was standing as he had left her, gazing up at the mountains. The sun shone on her, not the clear friendly sunlight of their southern home, or the cheerful inspiring brilliance that brightened the snowy slopes far across the barrier that now shut them in, but still—sunlight! Austere, rather pitiless, giving little warmth, but a reminder of better things.

They divided the load between them, and then coming again round the shoulder, skirted the eastern barrier as it ran north, by means of the upland meadows. If the boy had seen the two figures skimming over the white surface and reported thereon, Corberier might have been less satisfied.

Up the valley they went, Visellia leading. Geoffrey followed as a man in a dream.

Somewhere in his brain, a little hammer kept beating out the words "It is real, real, real!" and then after endless repetition, "It is a dream, dream, dream!"

Visellia wore a short brown sports dress, and a leather cap, gaiters and gloves. He tried to discover why he liked her so much in it. She moved so swiftly and easily in her show-shoes that he had some work to keep up with her. What was the difference between this and a hundred other such expeditions they had taken? She paused and turned, and he was almost blinded by the glory and exaltation in her face.

"My beloved!" she said, and held out her hand to take his, and then stood for a moment or so, looking upward to the far-off peaks.

After that the refrain in his brain did not vary from the original theme.

The long valley narrowed at the northern end, running up into the very heart of the range. Three white jagged peaks steepled the mass of it, and stood out against the back-ground of sky. Even from this altitude—and they were 5000 feet above sea level—the peaks looked more unapproachable and forbidding than any Geoffrey had seen, and he had done a good deal of climbing.

The sky had grown grey again, and bitter gusts of wind swept down at intervals from the heights, clouds of loosened snow before it. Just ahead of them the valley stopped abruptly against a granite wall. La Murette was out of sight, for the valley had taken a bend two or three hundred yards back, through a narrow neck. They were hemmed in on every side by the ramparts which defied them.

Hamberton tried to draw Visellia into the shelter of a big isolated rock that stood at the entrance to a defile, down which the wind swept fitfully.

"That is our way," she said, pointing up it and resisting the pressure of his hand.

"We had better take some food first. It is rough going."

She turned to him with a curious look.

"Food? And so near?"

But she yielded. He made her sit down, out of the wind and put food in her hand. Her body seemed to obey without her brain perceiving it. The look of exultant wonder still blazed in her eyes. She seemed

to be listening with an intensity that was beyond strain. To him she appeared as the only living thing in that frozen world, and so living that her vitality stabbed the chill air with some vibrating unrest. He was himself unconscious of cold or fatigue, but he was part of her, as were her shoes, her snow-pole. He was carried on the winged personality that had absorbed him.

The gorge offering no ground for snow shoes, they strapped them on their backs and entered the steep narrow defile.

It was difficult to conceive of any green thing ever growing in this desolation. The white cloak of the snow filled every crevice and ledge, save where the steep slant of rock refused it shelter. It was slow, laborious work. The track, if it could be called as much, twisted and turned, till Hamberton could not have told in which direction the narrow entrance lay. Now it ran straight up over frozen slants of snow, now dipped down ice-covered rocks. Other defiles, and small glaciers branched off right and left, but Visellia never hesitated or faltered. She seemed conscious of only one way. Now and again they used their ice axes—but for the most part there was a faint indication of possible steps. Even Hamberton began to distinguish it as a vague “something” one could follow. Once they passed through a narrow tunnel, and the sky beyond seemed to bend in a threatening frown as they emerged. Sharp-cutting, falling snow met them. He tried to stop her.

“Visellia, the weather has changed.”

“Yes. There will be every hindrance possible. Are you afraid, Geoffrey?”

There was no scorn or wonder in her voice. It was as a mother might speak to a dear, and possibly

frightened, child—and like a child he said he was not afraid.

They must have gone on for a great length of time before he really grasped the fact that he was afraid. The track now ran on a narrow shelf of rock winding round the base of the central defile. He could not see the three peaks now, nothing but the ice-covered stones, and steps of snow mounting up and up to unseen places.

The wind buffeted them, and very soon the snow beat down, not with the softness of snow he had known dim years ago, but with such violence that it burnt. At last there was a black void before them, and Visellia stopped.

“This is the cave,” she said; “My father came thus far.”

She went in.

For a paralysing moment, it seemed to him the darkness had swallowed her up, and he flung out groping hands with a cry, felt her touch and presence, and asked no more.

The darkness lifted. He could see her at last, and the dim cave.

Visellia said dreamily.

“We may rest here.”

He took her pack, and his own, lit a spirit lamp adapted for this altitude, and found a thermos flask. He seemed to do these things automatically, because she expected them. He wondered vaguely why his fingers were not numb and aching, and why his hands did not shake.

He could make no guess as to how long ago it was since they entered the narrow defile at the head of the valley, but had he been told it was days ago, he

would have believed it. It must have been very many hours, for beyond the mouth of the cave, the sky seemed to be withdrawing even its greyness, and leaving a void.

They sat there, side by side, hand in hand, and he knew nothing of cold nor darkness. The solid earth had loosed its hold on him, and his nerve centres no longer vibrated to their full. He needed nothing, wanted nothing but the vital presence beside him whose mortality seemed to be quivering and melting in the white flame of some inward fire.

III

Hamberton never knew how long they were in the cave. From Corberier's reckoning they must have passed a night there, and by every human law, should have died of cold and exposure.

Geoffrey's memory after this always halted and stumbled among strange impressions and dreams. He could see, in flashes, pictures through a grey mist. The only foundations of life lay in his unity with her—his utter confidence. He understood her every wish. Words were meaningless, mere clumsy means of communicating futile things.

In this way he knew she meant him to leave their packs and snow shoes in the cave, for the first of the series of pictures he could recall was climbing a rocky icy slope, cutting notches for her feet with his axe.

The air here was curiously difficult to breath, considering the altitude was not extreme.

Every few steps they would pause and he would fill his slowly labouring lungs. Visellia however, seemed

to find no difficulty. The pauses and slow pace were for him.

The snow had ceased to fall, but the wind moaned and swept round them unceasingly. After a long lapse of time the blackness overhead melted, and over the edge of hurrying clouds a moon shone, cold and aloof.

They moved slowly, and ever upwards, through that desolate world. The track narrowed. On their left lay what he now knew as a glacier, and between it and the track there was an ever-widening rift. It lay, like a black wound, across the frozen whiteness and grey rocks gleaming in the moonlight.

There came a time when he found he feared this widening crevice, and had to fight to keep his eyes on Visellia moving slowly, with marvellously sure steps, ahead of him.

He was always certain that though he had feared, he had felt no uncertainty, since they left La Mulette, till the black gash presented itself. Now he had to close his ears to certain curious whispers that seemed to float up out of that unfathomable gulf, tempting him to look down.

And with fear and uncertainty, there came a sense of vast fatigue. It grew, minute by minute. He held on, but endeavour was stretching and stretching . . .

Was there ever a breaking-point?

The moon failed them. The hurrying bank of clouds engulfed it again; once more blinding snow swept down and the wind shrieked, clamoured and echoed to and fro behind, below, above, on every side! Choking and blinded he fell back against the steep ice, covered wall on his right, and called to her.

"A little farther, such a little way!" He heard her

urgent spirit saying it. "A few steps and then all this — fatigue, cold, fear — can never touch us again!"

Her hand found him. Her warm bare living hand. He felt its warmth through his frozen gloves.

The path widened, or the cliff fell back, and he knew there were little spaces of time when the snow did not fall. Now he saw, across the wide crevasse, a smooth slope, unbelievably white in the darkness. A slope going up and up, smooth, unbroken, virginal, it ran right up to the central peak of the La Murette group.

Yet later his memory refused to believe that the gusty snow, the darkness, the shouting wind, ever ceased.

Cold gained on his consciousness. An inward impulse urged him on, lest it should overtake him, and growing fear of the crevasse beat on the doors of his imagination. Every step seemed as if it must be the last, and once he lost sight of his guide.

At last Visellia halted on a jutting-out rock that hung over the abyss beside them.

His confusion of mind at this point never cleared. He believed that behind the driving clouds, the moon was shining calmly, and that that unutterably white slope across the black gash of darkness was unruffled by wind or driving snow, that there was stillness behind the storm if he could but reach it!

Also above the beat of his own pounding heart, he heard something else! The wind, the cold, the stark loneliness seemed to make a song—music!

Something familiar. A chant that Visellia sang!

His racked imagination dived with it, caught words, harmonies, incomplete, but there! His strained

eyes sought her through the storm, saw her standing there erect, her arms outstretched towards those ghostly peaks as a bird poised for flight, but motionless, so still that it seemed no wind, however mighty, could stir a hair of her upthrown head.

“We come, we come to claim our heritage! O Great Ones, receive us!”

Incredible, ghastly terror sprang on him. His human nature burst the imposed shackles. The chasm between them and the snow slope seemed to have widened to an abyss, and Visellia was about to throw herself across it.

She was mad with the madness of a fixed idea, and he had not realised it! She was being dragged to destruction by her own passionate faith!

He sprang forward, heedless of slippery rock and the death below, sprang and fell on his knees by her, clutching her.

“Visellia, no, no—wait! It is not there, what you seek! There is nothing but destruction .”

She bent to him unclasping his arms. Never had he known how divinely beautiful she was, or what light pulsed from her, and her voice was like running music, quenching darkness and storm.

“It is the way to Immortal Life! Quick my Geoffrey, courage! It waits us across the gulf, we can reach it together. Come!”

But he still clung to her. The last remnant of his wild faith and confidence in her was shattered to pieces, but his passionate human love remained, holding him from madness and destruction—or from superhuman achievement!

“Visellia, stay with me!”

A rushing thunder as if all the hollow of heaven had

gathered itself into a wave of sound and movement !
Snow, blinding, suffocating, a vast shout that echoed
down the tortuous gorge, and his outstretched arms
found—nothing !

CHAPTER XII

THE WHITE SLOPE

The sudden fierce storm which had temporarily wiped out the soiled whiteness round the little village of La Murette, passed in the night, and a still, bright dawn that touched the summits with pink instead of gold, took the earth in keeping.

The newly-fallen snow obliterated the tracks that skirted the upper pastures, and only the keen eyes of Corberier could discern, under the white surface, certain inequalities which he followed silently, followed in turn by four equally silent men. When they spoke they did so in subdued voices, and the eyes of all scanned the snowy fields, and clefts and ledges of the mountain sides; scanned with grim insistence and dread reluctance every humped up mound of white, and every inequality near the path.

Corberier looked at nothing of this; he plodded grimly on till they reached the head of the valley and paused beneath the solitary upstanding boulder.

"But there is no way out—it leads nowhere!" said one of the men, an Englishman.

"There is a way—*in*!" Corberier returned grimly, indicating a rocky defile behind the boulder, leading into the heart of the mountains.

From here the heavy mass of it seemed to bend over, shadowing the earth, laying a spell on the spirit.

Corberier routed vigorously in the snow with his alpenstock.

"They stopped here," he said, "they have gone *up*, but they have not come down!"

The man who had come up from Briso the evening before with Dominic Bessington, might have been of any nationality. Corberier believed him a Swiss. Bessington knew him to be an Englishman, but had doubted his knowledge at times. The other two men, servants of Corberier, who had lived in these solitudes all their lives, but had never entered the little gorge at whose foot they stood, betrayed no eagerness to embark on discovery now.

Still they entered the defile. Corberier first, then Bessington, then Dr. Royce, the two natives bringing up the rear.

It was slow going. The wind had in many places swept the ice-coated rocks bare, but they had no doubt of the track now, for here and there on the slippery surface were the marks of a recent ice-axe, and an ice-axe in unaccustomed hands.

Bessington stopped at one of the many turns, and spoke to his next companion.

"But a woman, doctor—a woman here!"

He glanced at the precipitous path.

The doctor answered:

"Not an *ordinary* woman, I think, Mr. Bessington."

He spoke quietly, but Corberier turned his head and keen expressive eyes on him, and muttered something under his breath.

They had bright daylight, good implements, and three at least of the five, were practised climbers, but it was long after noon when they reached a cave, and Corberier entered with a grunt of satisfaction. The

rest crowded round the entrance, forcing their eyes to pierce the gloom.

Snow shoes, two packs, a spirit lamp, the carefully collected fragments of a meal. That was all they found.

Bessington sensed their guide's disappointment. To him the abandoned packs spelt disaster. He came out of the cave and stood looking at the ledge that wound up and up, skirting the sheer wall of granite on their right. He spoke to the men and then turned to the Englishman.

"It is not worth while, all going on. A little further, there is a crevasse—close to the path—probably in the dark—" he muttered incoherently.

Bessington and the doctor quietly announced their determination to follow. He shrugged his shoulders, made no objection, but insisted on their being roped. The two men were to stay in the cave and wait.

The first bend of the path was only a few yards away, but it seemed to Bessington they took hours to reach it, and once turned, the winding course of a glacier slipping past them down another gorge was visible, with a yawning crack between it and the path.

Bessington said suddenly:

"Why is there a path here at all?"

His voice, though he spoke low, was caught in some curious echo, and went down, down, repeating itself in a far-off distance.

Corberier finished cutting a wider step on the ledge. Having finished it, he straightened out himself and turned his head to look at Bessington with that odd inscrutable look the latter had noticed in his manner from the first.

"It is better not to speak here," he said in a whisper, but even the whisper sighed itself away into the distance.

Nevertheless, a little further on, Corberier paused, and whispered again.

"I have been no further than this. One might wander for days here and find no way out—if the cold and *'that'* let one escape."

He pointed to the widening crevasse.

They continued their route and presently got out of the region of echo. The desolation bore them down like a heavy burden. In Bessington's mind the words, "The Valley of the Shadow of Death," formed, and held their own.

Dr. Royce seemed the least perturbed of the three. It was true, perhaps, that he was less personally interested than the others in the fate of the mad couple who had embarked on this crazy exploration of these unknown heights, but somehow Bessington knew his collected attitude did not spring from indifference, or lack of sensitiveness to the forbidding country. His presence there forbade the one conclusion, and the grave, searching look that swept the heights and defiles around them, forbade the others.

It seemed to Bessington they must have climbed for hours in a labyrinth of narrow passes and gorges, that twisted among the great bones of the mountains as veins through a human body.

Corberier doggedly held on his way, following the trace of the ice-axe.

The wind seemed to have swept these upper gorges free of snow, leaving only the rock bare and chill, with the chill of that which has never known the sun.

Always the black ribbon of the crevasse followed them and they it.

Corberier halted, and pointed ahead.

"We will go to that turn," he said, "then we will return, for it is useless. One might seek for a month in this maze."

And the next turn revealed a steep slope of whiteness, rising to a sharp, dazzling peak, standing clear against the blue; only the path where they stood was in a profound shadow. There, on the very edge of the crevasse, lay the figure of a man—*one* figure only!

They stood over him at last. Dr. Roycè and Corberier dragged him away from the extreme edge, and the doctor, bending over him, looked up suddenly and said:

"Alive!"

He whispered the word and looked at the two, at Bessington's blank incredulity, and Corberier's stolid scrutiny, and the latter said:

"I've heard it's hard—to die—here!"

They unroped, and Corberier went back for the men and needed things from the cave, having first covered Hamberton with the blanket he had carried. Dr. Royce occupied himself with the inanimate form, and since there was no room for another on the narrow path, Bessington stood on the out-jutting rock and gazed down into the blackness of the great crack and shivered.

Not *easy*?—Surely Death stretched out multitudinous hands here!

Royce came and stood by him, touched his arm and pointed.

Right up the steep slope of dazzling whiteness there were marks, strange marks, as if mighty wings had brushed the virgin snow!

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE HIGH DOWN

There are lives whose settings and desires run in so even and well-regulated a groove that one cannot picture untoward events dealing with them, still less their dealings with such events.

Helena Tresham's friends were in this position. Their dismay, when Destiny refused to consider her immune from ordinary trouble was mingled with a little indignation. They liked their Helena as she was. The perfectly regulated, pleasant phase of existence for which she stood, was for many a charming ideal held captive to serve as a desirable model for their own ambition.

Now, twice when this existence was at its zenith, it was rudely disturbed. First by that broken engagement, of which the less said the better, if one wanted to remain friends with Helena, and then by the sudden death of her father, a man who might reasonably have been expected to live out his orderly life for another twenty years.

Veronica Bessington was one of the people thus moved to curious indignation with some secret enemy who seemed to have violated Helena's birthright. She confessed as much to Mrs. Masters, her very good friend.

"When Madre—my mother—died we had known

for long it was coming, and *she* knew, and looked on it as the greatest adventure of all, and besides things were always happening to Madre—big things! Someone once said she was one of those who had no “abiding city.” But Mr. Tresham and Helena were so “abiding.” So entirely in their right place—familiar landmarks—and now——!”

She spread out her hands.

“Won’t Helena go on being a familiar landmark?”

“I fear not. That’s the point. Unless indeed she marries Mr. Pastens, which I don’t believe she will. The fact is Helena doesn’t know herself what to do, and that’s what makes one feel she’s shifted. Helena uncertain isn’t Helena at all!”

“Does she still care for Geoffrey Hamberton?”

“She doesn’t change easily.”

“You have just said she *has* changed.”

“Circumstances have changed. Oh, if I understood what was the matter, I shouldn’t be wanting you to see her. But I’m not like Madre was. I don’t *see* into people, and Dominic is only a man!”

“A man with very excellent sight!” laughed Patricia Masters, who was a connoisseur of men.

“Still, Helena wouldn’t talk to a man, and the only thing I can understand is that she needs to talk, and doesn’t feel there’s anyone she *can* talk to, so, Patricia darling, *if* I’m called away when she’s here, make the most of the time!”

“Machiavelli! Still, though I’ve known her many years, we have never been intimate friends. She may not want to talk to me.”

“That’s her look-out! She’s my friend, and I’ve got to give her an opportunity. If I don’t, she might be reduced to confiding in me, and I hate having to

be responsible, and looking into peoples' minds. I'm far too selfish!"

II

Oddly enough, Veronica *was* called away, and Patricia Masters sat looking at the black-clad figure opposite her, and decided Veronica was right. Helena had changed.

Presently they began to talk, and the change was emphasised at once, for the old Helena Tresham would never have done more than accept a situation without comment.

"Veronica is as transparent as glass!" she said. "But she's got insight. I do so want to talk with someone!" She hesitated a moment, and added slowly: "For the first time in my life!"

"It does help sometimes," Patricia agreed. "I'm quite used to it. Christopher is always talking at me! Please do so, too!"

And Helena did.

"My father's death seems to have taken the foundation from my world. I never realised he was that, or that I relied on him. I thought I was immensely independent and free, while all the time I was just the ordinary woman, relying on a man's support; and the question is am I going to go on holding to a man, or going to hold on to myself?"

"You knew Geoffrey. In my colossal ignorance, I thought I was a step beyond him in development—and the only claim I had to development was that I was capable of loving him even a little. His was the sort of soul that was always true to the highest thing he saw, and the trouble was his highest was out of range of my eyes altogether. So I thought it

a myth, but at least I knew *he* must follow it, myth or no, if he were to be himself. So I stood aside. May it count as a tiny minor virtue to me?"

She gave a faintly ironical smile.

"No," said Patricia quickly, "as a big major virtue! Go on!"

"The real trouble is that I could have seen something if I'd let myself; perhaps not near Geoffrey's heights, but considerably higher than the very level lands where I've chosen to walk. I could *then*—when I had him—but I'm not sure I can now, and what I've got to decide is, whether I'll keep to the level for good and all, or make a big break and see if I can get to any elevation worth reaching. Shall I go away out of all that has been my life, into a life of more simple things, simple people, and big skies and empty places? I've never had it. Perhaps it's only the desire for change; perhaps I have missed my chance, and it would be no good. I'm twenty-eight. I've had London and all it means, all my life. My work, brain-food, companionship of clever men and women. I've never been flung back on myself for more than an hour or two at a time. Now that can all go on; the way is open to me, but I couldn't do it without a man to rub off the rough corners. I'd want a house, security! And I can have it. One side of me says I'm a fool to hesitate, that security is everything. Is it?"

"It's a good thing—sometimes—when one has been insecure, but it isn't, and never can be, everything. Do you love him?"

Helena was silent a moment. A tired expression crept into her eyes.

"I like him more than I like anyone else. I could make him happy."

She did not add that he would never enter that

empty room, though she knew it.

“And, since security is not everything, what would the other possibility mean?”

“I would leave London, and go and live where there was more breathing-space. I know the place I want. I motored through it, going to Salisbury with the Herrons, once. A picture of it comes up in my mind whenever I think of it.”

“You would go on writing?”

“Oh, I suppose so—eventually. What I really want is time to think, somewhere where other people *don't* think, and what puzzles me is whether this is just a reaction of my mind, a passing desire to get away from things in general, or is it a genuine impulse towards some new understanding of life? I've lost my sense of values; the things I've wanted and looked up to, and had, don't seem worth while, but it may just be that I'm tired.”

“Put it to the proof.”

“You don't think it would be silly to do so?”

“One is entitled to gratify a whim which can harm nobody, but I don't think it's that. It's——” Patricia stopped. What degrees of frankness did their acquaintanceship warrant?

“It's what? Please say! I honestly want to know, Mrs. Masters.”

“Growing pains!” said Patricia softly. “I think, my dear, you are growing—*outgrowing* some things.”

Helena leant back in her chair, and gave a little sigh of relief.

“I hoped you'd say that,” she murmured. “I hate to be just tired, or upset, or capricious. Anyhow, in something new, I shan't think so much about myself.”

III

The river ran like a winding ribbon, through the green water-meadows, and on the other side of the wide valley, the land rose steeply to open down, wide stretches of virgin soil, never broken by plough from the long-ago days when the valley was a wide tidal river and strange ships anchored by the little village of Fording, and Overbridge was a rough track to the main ford, and joining Roman camp to camp on the high downs.

Now the village straggled in sleepy content across the valley, and needed no ford, for its many streams were bridged and banked, and the former river-bed was fertile and green, and life went on at an easy pace. Overbridge was even beginning to forget those newer camps that had left their mark on the bare countryside.

Above the village, on the western slope of a hill, there stood a small bungalow. It faced south-west, and the placid valley that had once been a river, spread out, and the silver stream spread with it, into a reedy mere that echoed the colours of the sunset. Beyond, undulating land of corn and roots, of stubble and ploughed field, copse and hidden hamlet, rose and fell to the ascending down.

If one followed the lane that passed the bungalow, one came out eventually on to the chief ridge of eastern down; where Rome had rested, and never a man had turned the sod, or broken the silence with click of chisel or trowel, where rabbits had played since rabbits were, where gorse and bramble and fantastic junipers fringed earth's mantle, and a myriad delicate flowers embroidered it.

Helena Tresham had lived for three weeks in her bungalow before she discovered the great Down was within such easy reach. After that she visited it

daily. It was the highest point for wide miles, and one saw north, east, south, and west to the distant boundaries of forest and plain, or faintly purple hills.

No one came there; even the sheep did not graze on the steep slopes. At first Helena shrank from the solitude. She had never known it before. If she had visited lonely places, it had been in company. She had never heard the silence that is music, felt the stillness that is ever pulsing with life, or breathed in time with Nature's rhythm.

She approached it all as a novice, humbly, uncertain of her own experience. She felt there was healing there, and that she needed it.

In those first weeks of her new life she learnt how greatly she required healing. She was amazed at her own loneliness, and at a sense of ills but vaguely suspected in her crowded life, now openly demanding attention.

More than once instinct bade her fly back and hide herself again in the multitudinous details of her former existence; but she had the wisdom and courage to recognise that there was no cure that way, that she must first understand the nature of her ill, that flight simply meant defeat.

She held to her plan of life in the little bungalow—the Shelter, it was called. An afore-time house-keeper and friend served her, and she made little duties for herself in house and garden; these fulfilled, she took a book as excuse, and her thoughts as unavoidable companions, into the open air, and, when she discovered it, to the high Down.

It was long before she learnt the nature of her hurt. Her father's death had been a great shock, and she only now measured the extent of her mental reliance on him. She was wavering before a quiet, persistent love, pressed on her by no words, but by

the weight of its own genuineness. It would be very easy to succumb, to drop back into the pleasant ways, and yet——?"

But what of this ill, this fret against life, this inner sense of failure. Would it not flavour the easy days, instead of permitting itself to be buried under details. What was it, and whence came it?

She tried to trace it back to such a month, and such a day, but the beginning seemed to be further off than she had imagined.

It was only after deliberate consideration she allowed herself to find the key of the Empty Room, and go in.

Geoffrey! That was it—she missed him!

She had fought against this conviction, circled round it, evaded it, but she faced it at last. Something in her missed Geoffrey Hamberton, and what that something was, strange ground to her, was a corner of herself that she had never quite explored.

Well, Geoffrey had married an Italian woman of uncertain antecedents. If a part of her wanted him, even ached for him as she had never in all her life ached for anything, it must learn to do without him. He was not hers!

She picked up a minute shell from the matted turf, and studied its fragile perfection. A tap of her finger would shatter it. Why did it vex her to think of an empty shell that had no life within it?

She lay still on the slope of the deep, Roman-cut fosse, and listened to the apparent far-off voice of the sea, surging up through the narrow belt of pines, that fringed the camp. Spring sunshine warmed the sheltered spot, and the spring wind, fresh and chill from the north, did not find it. In the stillness, some rabbits came out, and frolicked about.

Helena suddenly felt herself in an alien world, with no guide, no one to point the way, or explain the landscape. A hundred incoherent thoughts surged up, urging her again to flight. She would hasten back, write to an agent, re-let the little bungalow, get back to the shelter of big London, who did one's thinking for one—London, who presented no overwhelming vista of sky. In this wide country, colossal questions seemed to lie waiting, flinging imperious demands at her which she could not answer. She must escape. Her mind raced to catch the details, letters to agents, explanations to Martha, packing, the possibility of new tenants taking to new curtains and linoleums; matters with which she was admirably fitted to cope. A quick re-establishment—visitors—one visitor—marriage!

And so, inconsequently, she was at the door of the Empty Room again, and Geoffrey stood there, and would not let her in, no, nor admit the emptiness.

She sat upright and clasped her arms round her knees.

"Take it I love him, then," she insisted fiercely of that unknown corner of herself. "He is married, he has forgotten you: are you going to waste your life, and refuse the quite sanely happy, ordinary things that remain, on account of a man who is in love with someone else?"

But that new corner of herself whispered persistently that she did not yet know if that were all that remained.

Geoffrey! Geoffrey!

The sick longing for him, held at bay all these weary months, had to be fought in its accumulated strength, here and now.

What had pride to say in these matters, of which

love was the master? She had no blame for him, or for fate, very little even for herself. She had failed Geoffrey, but not wilfully; had failed him because her life, training, and environment had failed her, to blame which was to blame the dear companion and guide of all her days, now gone from her, and further back still. Through a mental haze, she seemed to see back—back along a road, leading smoothly to something or somewhere that was supremely unimportant, a path trodden by familiar feet, whose worst trouble was a misplaced pebble, or an unexpected shower.

She had left the easy beaten track of her forbears, and was treading quite another path that led on to a horizon she could not see for mist, up towards summits that she had never aspired to climb, and hardly to view. And she was driven along this new road by this unexplored corner of herself, where no voice but that of her lost lover had ever penetrated. But that had penetrated, and had stirred something to life which would never be stilled again, something urging, questing, immortal.

So she went back slowly to her new home, knowing that she was not going to write to her agent—not going to tell Martha she had altered her mind—not going to pack. Instead she would endure, and watch something come to birth which would change the whole course of existence.

IV

There was a shepherd who watched a lambing-fold along the lane that passed the Shelter. He was an old, bent man, with a weatherbeaten face fringed with straggling white hair—and the far-seeing eyes of those who live with wide spaces and under big

skies, and Helena used to talk with him and watch the burdened ewes, and the young feckless life, so joyous and lovable and absurd. Words that had been but words, poetic at best, swam into her mind, if not with new meaning, at least with wonder at the meaning.

Why, of all the lovely young life in the world, was a lamb taken as the Christian symbol? Or, were the lambs of the East different from these incarnations of babyhood and cheerfulness?

Meek? She watched two butting each other with playful ferocity, watched the greedy, relentless insistence, that took no denial from a bored mother and she refused to consider the future before them, or nearly refused.

One day she said to the shepherd who was feeding a "pet" or twin lamb, that she wondered he could bear to think the little things were all destined for the butcher.

"Not all o' them. They bean't goin' to the butcher's, they bean't—not half o' them. Vallyble they be. Why the strain be the best in th' county. Master did say I'd 'a fergot more about lambs than most shepherds e'er learnt!"

"You have cared for them all your life?"

"Since I were a lad o' sixteen—I be seventy-six now. Never did naught else. My fayther, he tried to make I a baker, he did, but no, I wanted summat alive to care fur. I were set on lambs, and lambs it were, and lambs it has been, and please God, lambs it'll be till I be out of it!"

She tried to grasp what it meant—sixty years of the same work, the bad weather, the good, the ceaseless care for the things that responded for a little moment, passed on, and began again, in constant

succession. She looked at his bent form, the manifold signs of rheumatism, and the hard cheeks, firm as apples, in spite of crossing wrinkles.

"Ah!" he said, nodding, divining her unspoken thought, "It's a hard life in bad weather, but most lives be hard sometimes. I don't reckon there be much difference in 'em. You'll be havin' your ups an' downs, too, miss! Dont 'ee make any mistake about that!"

"I don't," she said gravely.

He seemed for the first time to see her black dress.

"Havin' 'em, maybe. I spoke thoughtless-like, miss. No offence meant. But bad times, they do pass, like the weather."

He went on with his task in silence, but she did not move. Presently he spoke again:

"Lambs be queer critturs, they be! Don't seem to have no choice, they don't. They've got to go where I tells 'em, eat what I gives 'em, and sleep where I likes. Sort o' queer, bean't it? Got no choice! Pretty nigh the most helpless young critturs—worse nor a babby, I do say!"

A lamb came butting against him, and began nibbling his coat. He pushed it away with a little chuckling laugh.

"Eat my coat, an' all I got, wouldn't 'ee? Go to thy mother, I bean't agoin' to feed 'ee!"

Helena visited the sheepfold very often. She found it soothing; there seemed no perplexities there.

V ·

She learnt to do her own shopping in the broad, sleepy street which was the village. The street appeared to be the property of various dogs, of

amazing breeds, who occupied certain areas of it, and where friends were welcomed as friends, but aliens crossed the invisible frontier at their peril. Houses varying from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries elbowed one another, and with varied expressions watched through their curtained windows the drama of life, as it passed and re-passed; the old houses with a frank, whimsical curiosity discernible in their crooked features, the new, with prim, pretentious disregard, yet seeing not a whit the less.

Helena dealt at all the shops, because at each shop got more than the mere goods she bought. She came in touch with personalities that had never before swum within her ken. She became alive to other ambitions, standards and desires than those among which she had been reared. It was something of a shock to realise that these were by no means the aims or ambitions of multitudes of people who extracted quite as much savour from life as the few hundreds she had hitherto encountered. Yet they got through life with the same balance of joy and sorrow, the same ups and downs of temper, moods, love and hate, and the same—no, far greater courage, than that which coloured her own.

What was the gain, then, of her wider opportunities, education, knowledge? Did they all mean nothing, or was there something more, which she, and those she knew, had failed to extract from life? She thought of Geoffrey's irritating indifference—for it had irritated her—to all that seemed to her the cream of existence, thought also of his deep, absorbing love of life; life manifest in some way that had been hidden from her, and was now slowly unfolding itself.

She learnt to set Mrs. Cobworth's desire for a new shop, which her husband said was folly, when the old had served his father well enough, beside Mrs. Gerald

Paxton's sick impatience that Gerald would *not* see the unsuitability of a Bayswater address, when all their friends had moved to more aristocratic regions; to realise that Mrs. Gotton's silent grief at the defalcations of her son with regard to chapel, and his subsequent appearance in the church choir, was quite as real and poignant as the Montotters' anguish at their daughter's retirement into some sisterhood—that Mrs. Tate's bosom swelled with as much motherly pride when Doris Tate was selected to recite "The Better Land" at the Sunday-school concert, as did Lady Latimer's, when her daughter appeared in the latest artistic production at the Embassy Theatre. That Aaron Mason's dislike for Henry Camp, originating in some unprofitable commercial transaction, if more open, was not a bit less serious than the great Grimstone-Fecklethwaite quarrel which had made such difficulties for would-be hostesses the previous winter in Mayfair.

Life-values did not alter with the setting was what she learnt, and behind it all lay something that took no account of settings or values.

After a few weeks, people called on her, and she realised that she was indeed a stranger in the land, and spoke a strange language, and that there was no one to interpret for either side. She was afraid of them, and they thought her standoffish. She continued her friendship with old Malchin, the shepherd, however.

Friendship had been one of the pleasant recognised assets of her former life, and she was too fine in soul to credit the failure of this asset now, to her friends. It was not they who had nothing to give, but she who could not take. Intellectually she could appreciate them, but they could never communicate to her their vision.

That was it—Vision!

If one had vision, one could see the world not only as it was, but as it had been, and was meant to be—and this bred a divine discontent, a hunger for fulfilment of all that which blind souls like hers had labelled “dreams.” She had been content in a world which could barely spin in the universe, by reason of its burden.

For one black moment, when she realised this, the weight of the thought seemed to crush her to the earth. She knew she had never borne her share of that stupendous load; she had just accepted life, rejected idealism as futile.

Not utterly and entirely, perhaps. There had been streaks of illumination across the sky of her placid content. More than one such moment in Osraello; though she was often secretly ashamed of her quixotry towards Geoffrey. A truer woman would have fought for him, she thought.

It resolved itself into a question of values. Geoffrey valued his vision of some definite purpose working in the world, before even those intellectual rewards which had been the goals of her own life.

Meantime, from the top of the Down, she could watch spring passing across the earth with slow feet, and bringing to birth the pulsing life, which would ripen to beauty, and fall again into the long sleep—the eternal round.

For what purpose?

VI

Just when Helena had found a measure of peace, Pastens came down to see her. He was staying in

Winchester, and came over one morning, after sending a non-explanatory wire.

She did the honours of her tiny domain, gave him lunch, picked him daffodils, and then took him out to the high Down.

She was curious to see what effect it had on him; whether indeed it would affect him at all, other than its affording view that might become too popular if a bigger public learnt of its whereabouts.

He followed her along the rough lane, whose deep ruts made walking an acrobatic feat, at times, and though he did not complain, she felt his silent protest.

She asked him questions without end as to old pursuits, old friends, politics, anything and everything of human affairs that could keep him off the one affair which was his—and hers!

But once across the high road and on the springy turf, with the rising Down to breast, she failed in speech. London was too far-off. It meant no more to her than any of those villages down in the wide valley. He, too, was silent; he did not mean to say his say yet. He wanted to better gather where she stood, and what held her to this, to him, so desolate country. The waste of it appalled him. The country was all right—for a week-end—a sort of moral and mental bath for the fagged brain, even necessary for it, but for Helena, with her beautiful capacity for ordering life in a beautiful seemly manner, it was stagnation.

He voiced these sentiments at last, as they stood on the edge of a hollow, up whose precipitous sides fantastic junipers appeared to climb, a menagerie of oddities, surpassing even Rackham's grotesque dreams.

“When are you coming back to us, Helena?”

She was watching the great cloud-shadows sweeping over the earth, the sunshine chasing them, and turned slowly to look at him, instead.

He was quite good to look at, despite the slight greyness over the temples. What could he give her that she had not had already? She must not exchange her present life, except for some definite gain for this new self, that so insisted on its right to live.

They walked on a little way before she answered. Under the shelter of the gorse thicket, mauve and white violets were already in bloom, and minute flowers were pushing through the matted herbage; the gorse, too, was spreading golden sparks that would soon burst into flame, and delirious larks rushed heavenward.

If there was no London, no throbbing world of human beings, no clamorous publishers, no fierce clash of intellects, all this would still go on, steadily proceeding towards its goal.

Helena came to a standstill, and pointed to the fosse encompassing the top of the Down.

“Clifford,” she said, “Rome made that, and here where we stand, Rome stood, and there were the flowers and the gorse, and the hills; a wider river, perhaps, down there, and marshy lands with untouched down running to it. But it was this land, and Rome did stand here, and Rome had a goal—one must believe that. Where is she now? What is left of her spirit? But Nature persists, and is waiting for someone to comprehend *her* goal, *her* desire. When they fail, time wipes them away, and she begins again. Well, tell me what it is she wants! Tell me that, and I will go back with you, and work for it—

live for it—make it mine! But it must be the real end—the real goal.”

He was struck out of his depth, dismayed; he had no answer.

“We can only fulfil our little destinies to the best of our ability. I take it life is for that.”

“To fulfil ourselves? But that is not enough. The earth does more than fulfil herself. She is, and shows, something more.”

“You mean she has inherent beauty? I think the pagan atmosphere of your Rome has affected you!” He smiled indulgently. “These influences hold in places, sometimes. They may not be very wholesome.”

“Then we will go back!” She turned on her steps. A vague displeasure crossed her mind, much as a cloud-shadow crossed the greening wheat below.

“Summer and winter, autumn and spring, there is change, but something persists through it all; it only expresses another face of one truth. But in our life—*your* life——” she spoke a little defiantly, glancing at him as she did so, “we are afraid of any fundamental change. We want the joy of spring and the fulness of summer to go on for ever. Oh, I cannot explain, I don’t even understand myself, but I want my life to express more than myself, and I don’t know what the ‘more’ is. I hoped you could tell me.”

“I can,” he said, and his voice shook. “What you need is love. I’m sure it’s just that, Helena. You are not fulfilling yourself. Let me help you—together——”

He stopped, stammering; his hands sought hers, but hers were passive, though she looked at him intently.

“We should still fulfil ourselves,” she said slowly “Myself, yourself. Oh, it’s quite good. I wish I could be content with it, but I can’t. Don’t ask me, Clifford. It’s not generous, because I want so badly to give in. It’s the first time in my life I’ve stood out against anything I’ve wanted. If I give in, I can never come *here* again!”

“Come *here*?” he echoed in dull bewilderment.

“Here—to the High Down! Don’t you see it represents a certain attitude of mind to me. Life here is different, for example, from life down in the village—different from London. In some way, it’s higher up. I don’t like mountains, they frighten me, but this is different. It’s within touch, almost.”

He was more bewildered than ever. What had happened to his beautiful, sane, logical Helena, with her clear reason, and well-balanced mentality? Why this foolish confusion of altitudes of minds and places? He began to fear she was, or had been, really ill. If he could not persuade her to leave *this* place, he must get the Bessingtons, or Astons, or someone like that, to reason with her. His own self-interest in getting her back to London, was, perhaps too apparent. For the moment he was so alarmed, that he would have had her back at the cost of definite parting between them. He returned himself that night, not only without her, but with no clear understanding as to when they would meet again. For she had at last succeeded in making him realise that Helena of the High Down, and Helena of London, were two distinct persons, and that he, at least could never hope to reconcile the one with the other.

Pastens’ heart was sore, and he hated the High Down and Overbridge, and spent his week-ends at

P

Brighton or Paris, or on golf-links, where scenery was a mere decent background to life, instead of a positive, disturbing force.

CHAPTER II

PICKING UP THE THREADS

I

Marian Hamberton got engaged to a man who had lately accumulated plenty of this world's goods, and desired to go on accumulating them. As, however, mere money and mere goods, could not help him through the pitfalls of the society he wished to grace, he was content to take as wife, a girl with a pitiful four hundred a year, whom he first met at Dieppe. He took her at her own valuation, socially speaking, and knowing as little of the gradations of caste as he knew of Hepplewhite, he believed he had secured a bargain. Marian Hamberton was pretty, amusing, a good hostess, sufficiently decorous to have a solidly respectable set of friends of her own, and sufficiently modern to tolerate the intolerable: Jonathan Bonds was well content.

But four hundred a year was four hundred a year to Jonathan, and he saw to it that the absurd "dot" was not only there, but permanently there, and so made several discoveries.

First, that the four hundred could very easily be four-fifty, re-invested; secondly, that a hitherto unmentioned brother was co-trustee with a family lawyer of conservative principles, and that the aforementioned brother had an uncertain address abroad, and never answered letters.

Jonathan found Marian quite ready to share in his indignation that her trustees had practically deprived her of fifty pounds a year.

"It looks as if you should have been trustee for your brother," remarked Jonathan with ponderous humour.

Marian quite agreed, without any humour at all.

So they wrote to Osraello and waited three weeks, then, getting no answer Bonds decided that Nice would do as well as anywhere else for the honeymoon, and from there it would be pleasant motor run to Osraello. Once face to face with the objectionable brother, Bonds hoped to make short work of the ridiculous trusteeship.

So Marian married, and achieved practically all her ambitions by the ceremony, and since fulfilled ambitions have a mellowing effect, she thought less bitterly of Geoffrey. She could afford to be tolerant since she had gained two motor-cars, unlimited clothes, the right to the best hotels, best cuisine, best places in the train—all, in fact that a reasonable being *could* want, while he had lost even his place in the world—her world!

They went to Osraello when Christmas was over, stayed a night at the Grand Hotel des Rois, and enquired at the post-office for Mr. Hamberton's address.

They were shown a pile of letters, Marian's last and the lawyer's amongst them.

Mr. Hamberton had not called for weeks. They did not know where he lived, but it was up in the mountains.

The Pension d'Argent was more helpful. They learnt that Mr. and Mrs. Hamberton had actually

stayed at the Hotel des Montagnes last season.

So they lunched there, heard various rumours but no facts, except that the Hambertons had gone on to St. Geno, and returned later to their home. Nicholas was politely interested in Mrs. Bond's anxiety to find her brother, but he did little to relieve it. When they had gone he despatched a letter up the mountains to Madallena.

Perhaps that was why, when, having stumbled on the existence of Madallena by accident in a flower shop, the Bonds got so little repayment for their fatiguing excursion when they visited her.

Mr. Bonds began to entertain serious doubts of the sanity of his wife's brother before they reached even La Croix Verte, and Marian decided Madellena must be unusually stupid even for a peasant, since she seemed to know nothing of her neighbours, if indeed they were or had been her neighbours.

She recollected that an English gentleman had lived in the hut by "the telegraph," that he had married, and lived elsewhere—further away!

Madallena waved a vague hand.

She was a busy woman for her part, with no time to visit people; but the gentleman and his lady were kind. When they passed they would call on her, and do shopping for her down in Osraello. She missed them!

Her questioner's face fell.

"Then they are gone?"

Madallena said blandly that they had left before Christmas. She did not know for where. A pilgrimage she thought, perhaps to Switzerland. She was certain they were not back. She would give any message when she saw them.

The Bonds went back to Osraello, tired and rather cross.

The matter of the re-investments had to wait. It meant the loss of so much more good interest, as Jonathan told his wife. But he bought her a dress in Paris that represented the loss for one year, nevertheless.

II

The war date being written across every wall and yard of paint of the Bessington's home, its owners put it into the hands of decorators, and went to Switzerland.

They entreated Helena Tresham to go with them, but she was determined to see the round of the year in her country fastness without break or change.

The Bessingtons spent the winter in a villa near a famous resort, sharing the sun, and the keen, pure air, with a crowd of other happy, exuberant people, and though Bessington made periodical visits to England, Veronica remained. She had plenty of friends, and her small son and daughter flourished exceedingly.

In the spring, however, they made various excursions with a view to future visits, and presently the two found themselves in the little village of Poinzine which consisted of one brand new hotel, a few *pensions*, and some hundred or so of houses, whose inhabitants were chiefly occupied in the timber trade. There was a delectable little lake, abundant sunshine, and not too precipitous slopes.

The Bessingtons regretted the lateness of their "find," and lingered a week or so to explore Poinzine's possibilities.

Ski-ing was still possible in these altitudes, and they were by now sufficiently expert to go far, though Bessington insisted on a guide for long excursions.

One day their guide took them along a little-used route that wound up far into the mountains, and here they came on tracks not made by skis, but by snow-shoes. "Canadian" their guide explained, and added it was proof of the exceptionally calm weather, since they had been made a fortnight ago.

Bessington asked if snow-shoes were general about there.

Apparently they were something of an innovation. The lady and gentleman using these were very proficient. They had been there most of the winter, and Mrs. Hamberton was a wonderful climber.

"Did you say Hamberton?" exclaimed Bessington, suddenly swinging round, forgetting his skis, and coming to instant grief.

The guide righted him, and forgot to answer his question.

Veronica refused to allow her interest to upset her balance. She clung tenaciously to her pole.

"He *said* 'Hamberton'!" she assured her husband, as the guide dusted the snow from his shoulders.

"An Englishman, fair, not very tall, with an Italian wife?"

The guide nodded.

"The lady might have been Italian. She spoke English. They left a fortnight ago."

"What rotten luck!" Bessington grumbled, and meant it.

Veronica's only comment was made on the return journey, when she remarked, apparently apropos of nothing.

"Do you think we ought to let the Herrons know?"

"Why the Herrons?" demanded Dominic making the necessary "jump" at connection.

"When Theo Herron last wrote, she said that Marian and that man she married have been hunting for them all over the Riviera."

"I think I'll write to Lorimer. The last time I was in town he asked me if I'd heard from Hamberton; said he wanted to get in touch with him badly."

"Well, there isn't much to tell him anyhow."

Bessington, however, had collected a little more information when he wrote to the old lawyer, who was his man of business, as well as Hamberton's. He learnt that the Hambertons had left on foot, as they arrived, with a mule to carry their luggage. That they had gone south west, probably to Briso which lay at the foot of the Aldora range. That they were apparently going "over," instead of round, the intervening mountains. In the opinion of those Bessington questioned, the scheme was mad. Beyond these points the natives seemed reluctant to discuss them at all. Luckily, Bessington encountered a visitor who was rather more communicative.

"Rather an unusual couple, eh?" the visitor hazarded, uncertain of the quality of the admitted friendship. "She was a bit of a wonder. Quite unapproachable, though the people here——" he paused.

"Well?" insisted Bessington. "I don't know her, except as a good-looking woman."

“Good looking? I suppose one might call it that,” retorted the other drily. “She is a sort of doctor, isn’t she? Cured a girl down in the village—oh, people talk a lot of nonsense—but she is not ordinary.”

He could not be brought to fuller expression on the un-ordinariness of Mrs. Hamberton, but he spoke of Hamberton and his affection for high altitudes.

“He was always for going ‘up,’ ” he commented.

Bessington got an answer to his letter to Lorimer by the first possible post.

“If you can trace Mr. Hamberton further, I shall be deeply grateful. I am uneasy about his sister’s marriage, and the matter of the trusteeship. If you have leisure to make further enquiries please do so, and if advisable I will send over a man to take up the trail.”

Dominic suggested that Veronica should return to headquarters and the children, while he went on to Briso to track the truants down.

III

When Bessington arrived at Briso he found the town had so little to recommend it that he began to think this information was faulty. There seemed no English visitors there, no facilities for sport and the encircling mountains were bare and forbidding.

Briso, however, appeared to be something of a health resort. There was a large hospital there, and an experimental school, and the types of patients and singular diseases that drifted Briso-ward had little in common with the fashionable health resorts of Davos Platz or St. Moritz.

There were several *pensions* in the place, but not so many as to make Bessington's search difficult.

The Hambertons had stayed two nights at the Pension de l'Etoile, but they had left a week ago, vaguely, for the mountains

The proprietress was not communicative, but at last she said that Dr. Royce might know more.

For a second time Bessington was arrested by the chance mention of a name.

"Was Dr. Royce an Englishman?"

Madame was doubtful. He worked at the hospital. Her late visitors had gone to question him about La Mulette. La Mulette was up there. She vaguely intimated the jagged mountains on the north.

Bessington went to the hospital. He had heard of a Dr. Royce before, through the Herrons, friends of the Astons. Rather a singular doctor, dealing largely with psychic cases.

It proved to be the same man. The Herrons name was an introduction. And after a little desultory conversation, Bessington asked him frankly if he knew the Hambertons present address, and received a scrutinizing look. Bessington who was a judge of men told him what there was to tell, and ended with these words:

"I've never felt quite happy about this wife of his. Of course, she is no peasant girl; equally, of course, it was no ordinary case of a man losing his head over a pretty woman. He was always trying to understand things most people are happier for not

understanding, and probably the woman——” he halted.

The doctor nodded.

“Yes, possibly Mrs. Hamberton understood a great many things the average person does not know. Do you know of her parentage?”

Bessington gazed rather stolidly out of the window.

“It was really no business of mine, but Geoffrey and I were friends, and I made some enquiries before we left Osraello that year. She was said to be the daughter of a Dr. Romano, a Roumanian.”

Dr. Royce’s face changed. A flash of amazement crossed his open sympathy.

“Romano, a Roumanian! You are quite sure?”

“So they say. Do you know of him?”

“Yes. That accounts for her. I have been most abominably blind! I ought to have gone further into the matter, instead of letting them go to La Muette, of all places in the world!”

The general serene calm of his face had melted into perplexed gravity.

“I imagined they only wanted to test the quality of La Muette air. It’s peculiar, you know. Some of these high places are.”

He looked fixedly at his visitor.

Bessington replied quietly.

“Well, I’ll test it myself if Hamberton is still likely to be there. I’m not concerned with his reason for being there, but a man can’t escape mundane responsibility by living on mountain tops!”

"Not if one has irrevocably renounced the mundane?"

"Can anyone? Any human being?"

"What of monks and nuns?"

"They simplify, and call it renunciation! But I know nothing of these things, Dr. Royce. Still I'm going to La Mulette."

"I am going with you."

Bessington was amazed, and showed it.

"With your permission," added the doctor with an odd smile. "My friend Corberier up there may not be very communicative to a stranger, supposing your friends had—gone on." He hesitated perceptibly over the words.

"I gathered they would have to come back to go on, that La Mulette led nowhere."

The doctor did not answer that. He suggested starting early next morning, and they made the arrangement accordingly.

Bessington looked curiously at the dark mountains as he wandered through the dull streets. La Mulette was hidden. He did not much like the look of them and was not sorry he was to have a companion.

When he reached his hotel, a telegram was awaiting him from Veronica.

It ran:

"Wire just received from Helena as follows: 'Please learn Geoffrey's whereabouts, am very anxious'."

Bessington put the telegram into an envelope and sent it to the doctor.

He got the surprising answer in ten minutes.

“Can you be ready to start for La Mulette in an hour?”

CHAPTER III

THE WARNING

I

Helena Tresham watched the round of the year from the High Down: the glory of summer succeeded the green flush of spring, the flame of autumn faded to the purple and grey of winter.

She came to realise that never before in her life had she listened in silence to her own spontaneous and unbiased thought on any given subject. Where, indeed, in her life had there been silence and space for so small a voice to be heard? Always she had listened to others, to the particular "others," about her, and what had not reached her through their minds and voices, had been "blared" at her from newspapers and reviews. She had no single opinion uncoloured by environment, or undimmed by the ceaseless echo and vibrations from other minds.

To be quite still where there were no echoes, and to find within herself strange questions and strange answers welling up, was immensely engrossing and restful.

The only subject on which she found she echoed nothing from the outside world was Geoffrey Hamerton. Her estimate of him was a thing quite distinct from the estimate of her world. That world counted him fickle. She knew him as constancy itself.

It held he had treated her disgracefully, while she was conscious of her own failure. It labelled him idler and dreamer. She knew him as a strenuous seeker after something more substantial than dreams.

Such verses of Geoffrey's as she still preserved, she read and re-read, often failing to grasp their full significance, but perceiving at last they held a meaning beyond the broken suggestiveness of the lines.

II

It was Helena's second March in Overbridge. The High Down still cast its spell on her soul, and left her wondering vaguely at the many who knew nothing of that spell.

One day she found old Malchin, the shepherd, making a new fold under the lee of a fantastic hedge that stood out against the skyline like a frieze of grotesque animals making for the ark: the ark, a great rick at the end of the hedge.

He was working hard, looking every now and then at the sky with anxious eyes. It was a grey day, bitterly cold, and the most forward children of the spring seemed to shrink back into hiding, lamenting their forwardness!

"Yesterday was so lovely," she sighed in reply to the inevitable English weather-greeting.

Malchin shook his head.

"I don't like it. You lookee here, Miss. The sun be bright enough yestern but I did look at him with my eyes a-shaded—so, and what do I see but three black dots—same as t'were a mouth and two eyes.

Little 'uns, but there they be, and they do mean snow—never fails! We'll have it here, or hereabouts before the day's out!"

Helena hoped not, fervently, but Malchin said:

"Ah, you may go on hoping, a-hoping do cost naught, but I'll set up these shelters quick, all the same."

On the High Down Helena found it hard to hope, for the thick grey sky seemed to bend over the earth, and the cold air was cutting. She dragged her furs round her, however, determined to get to the top in case it really did snow sufficiently to prevent her making her daily pilgrimage.

Under shelter of the fence, she stood awhile, noting the difference between to-day's greyness and yesterday's.

Suddenly a devastating sense of stress and strain, of pitiless cold and engulfing blackness rushed over her, so that she fell back against a tree trunk, groping blindly for support; and then across the waste of lowering grey sky she seemed to see written in flame the words, Geoffrey! Geoffrey! Geoffrey! repeating fainter and fainter to the very horizon, and then deep down, out of a silence, deeper than that night, there came a call "Helena."

The vast distress faded out with the whispering call and imagined words, leaving her shaken and almost angrily bewildered.

What had she, Helena Tresham, to do with inexplicable phenomena like that? She had always kept clear of the foolish psychic amusements of the fashionable world. Psychic literature was a foreign language to her. For a few moments she struggled to tread down her growing conviction.

She shut her eyes and argued with herself, and then suddenly knew it was useless. This thing had happened. She was quite normal. She had not been thinking of Geoffrey. She was not given to panics, or absurd imaginations, yet this had happened!

She became aware of the cold again, and of drifting snow-flakes, and set her face for home, but it was not the cold she most desired to escape.

It was only when she had gone some way that the actual meaning of her experience gripped her. Geoffrey must be in danger of some sort! Active danger!

That would have been obvious to anyone else at once, she told herself with fierce wrath, but she, with her blind superiority to "the unusual" had taken five minutes to realise as much!

What could she do!

She did not even know where Geoffrey was! She had had to say as much in response to old Mr. Lorimer's apologetic enquiry which had so disturbed her a month or so ago. Apparently he had left Osraello and was probably in Switzerland.

Who would know, she wondered.

She quickened her step, stumbling over the ground, An insistent idea of haste drove her, haste that was unconscious of the increasing snow-flakes.

Who, in all her little circle, was likely to have kept in touch with Geoffrey, and yet never mention him to her? She ran over possible and impossible names, and remembered Dominic Bessington.

If anyone knew of Geoffrey's whereabouts, it would be Dominic, and if any friend could help

her in such an unreasonable mad impulse, Dominic would.

She would write at once.

But she did not write. The panic that had seized her on the Down, stood at her elbow again as she entered The Shelter, filling the tiny sitting-room with an ominous cold chill. She wrote out a telegram, and since she could not send Martha out this weather and the garden boy had long gone, she trudged down the long mile to the village, despatched her wire and returned, amazingly tired, even exhausted, but with the sense of panic lifted. She even ceased to be racked with anxiety and wonder. She had done what she had to do, however futile it might be, and she was at peace.

On the morning of the second day after she had despatched her wire, she received an answer:

“Geoffrey safe, unhurt, there had been an accident.”

Helena, without rhyme or reason, began to cry. It was utterly unlike her to do so, but these days she seemed to be always committing unusual actions!

CHAPTER IV

THE PATIENT

I

Geoffrey Hamberton lay for some days in Dr. Royce's house, hardly unconscious, yet hardly conscious. He took what was given him in the way of food, passively, but gave no indication of interest in the world; mostly lying still, with shut eyes, or staring out at four walls he did not see.

What he did see was a black crevasse, and a blinding light, revealing the blackness. What he heard was thunder that was music, what he felt was—nothingness!

Over all, crushing him to earth, was the knowledge of failure—utter failure, which meant loss!

The mornings and the evenings would bring no Visellia to him. He was utterly alone for always, so it seemed to him.

She had said that this stupendous thing she sought must be achieved together, and he had failed her—unless, of course, a still more unbearable load was to be his.

Although they did not know it, he watched Dr. Royce, and Bessington at times, trying to read

behind the kind sympathy in their faces, what they imagined must have happened, since he was safe, and his companion gone. But he never spoke of it; he asked nothing, and told nothing.

II

Bessington and the doctor discussed the situation at length, in its outer aspects. Royce agreed that he must be roused, but would not second Bessington's desire to remove him as speedily as possible from the sight of those forbidding mountains.

"He will leave, when he understands," Royce said quietly.

"But what is there to understand, except that he ought never to have taken a woman there, and that he's lost her, because he did?"

The doctor looked up, and met Bessington's eyes fixed on him in a curious manner. He returned the look with as exact a scrutiny.

"It might be she who took him," he remarked. "There is more in this tragedy than meets the eye, Mr. Bessington. La Muette does not attract casual visitors!"

"Who does it attract?" returned Bessington rather grimly. "Not me, for one!"

"No. But there are certain spots on the earth, which have curious properties. 'Pockets of ether,' as it were——" he hesitated. "Places then, if you will have it, where the etheric barrier between spirit and matter is very thin. These places are known to very few. La Muette is one of them, and I have reason to believe Dr. Romano knew this, and pre-

sumably his daughter. I know nothing about her beyond what you have told me, and what Corberier tells me; but she was evidently not an ordinary woman, and I think she meant to reach this place. Her father nearly lost his life in the same attempt, years ago!"

"What is to be gained by reaching it?"

"That I cannot tell you precisely."

Bessington glanced at him sharply. He was quite sure it should have been "will not," not "cannot."

The doctor went on slowly:

"It means gaining knowledge of a certain kind. There are supposed to be people who live in this borderland, and who know a great deal."

A sudden recollection of a steep bank of snow, going up, brushed with strange marks, flashed to Bessington's mind. He resisted it stoutly. He was not sure he wanted to understand Dr. Royce's cryptic remarks.

"Apparently she found death instead. We know very little of what happened. I have said this much, Mr. Bessington, to convince you that if you will leave your friend in my hands, I, at least, understand something about his case."

"Quite so. I am very grateful, Dr. Royce. If you cannot do something for him, I fear he will begin to regret that we ever found him, or that he is not with her."

Then Dr. Royce said a strange thing, or so Bessington thought.

"I think if he had been with her, they would both be here; or at least quite and entirely alive!"

Brighton or Paris, or on golf-links, where scenery was a mere decent background to life, instead of a positive, disturbing force.

CHAPTER II

PICKING UP THE THREADS

I

Marian Hamberton got engaged to a man who had lately accumulated plenty of this world's goods, and desired to go on accumulating them. As, however, mere money and mere goods, could not help him through the pitfalls of the society he wished to grace, he was content to take as wife, a girl with a pitiful four hundred a year, whom he first met at Dieppe. He took her at her own valuation, socially speaking, and knowing as little of the gradations of caste as he knew of Hepplewhite, he believed he had secured a bargain. Marian Hamberton was pretty, amusing, a good hostess, sufficiently decorous to have a solidly respectable set of friends of her own, and sufficiently modern to tolerate the intolerable: Jonathan Bonds was well content.

But four hundred a year was four hundred a year to Jonathan, and he saw to it that the absurd "dot" was not only there, but permanently there, and so made several discoveries.

First, that the four hundred could very easily be four-fifty, re-invested; secondly, that a hitherto unmentioned brother was co-trustee with a family lawyer of conservative principles, and that the aforementioned brother had an uncertain address abroad, and never answered letters.

Jonathan found Marian quite ready to share in his indignation that her trustees had practically deprived her of fifty pounds a year.

"It looks as if you should have been trustee for your brother," remarked Jonathan with ponderous humour.

Marian quite agreed, without any humour at all.

So they wrote to Osraello and waited three weeks, then, getting no answer Bonds decided that Nice would do as well as anywhere else for the honeymoon, and from there it would be pleasant motor run to Osraello. Once face to face with the objectionable brother, Bonds hoped to make short work of the ridiculous trusteeship.

So Marian married, and achieved practically all her ambitions by the ceremony, and since fulfilled ambitions have a mellowing effect, she thought less bitterly of Geoffrey. She could afford to be tolerant since she had gained two motor-cars, unlimited clothes, the right to the best hotels, best cuisine, best places in the train—all, in fact that a reasonable being *could* want, while he had lost even his place in the world—her world!

They went to Osraello when Christmas was over, stayed a night at the Grand Hotel des Rois, and enquired at the post-office for Mr. Hamberton's address.

They were shown a pile of letters, Marian's last and the lawyer's amongst them.

Mr. Hamberton had not called for weeks. They did not know where he lived, but it was up in the mountains.

The Pension d'Argent was more helpful. They learnt that Mr. and Mrs. Hamberton had actually

stayed at the Hotel des Montagnes last season.

So they lunched there, heard various rumours but no facts, except that the Hambertons had gone on to St. Geno, and returned later to their home. Nicholas was politely interested in Mrs. Bond's anxiety to find her brother, but he did little to relieve it. When they had gone he despatched a letter up the mountains to Madallena.

Perhaps that was why, when, having stumbled on the existence of Madallena by accident in a flower shop, the Bonds got so little repayment for their fatiguing excursion when they visited her.

Mr. Bonds began to entertain serious doubts of the sanity of his wife's brother before they reached even La Croix Verte, and Marian decided Madallena must be unusually stupid even for a peasant, since she seemed to know nothing of her neighbours, if indeed they were or had been her neighbours.

She recollected that an English gentleman had lived in the hut by "the telegraph," that he had married, and lived elsewhere—further away!

Madallena waved a vague hand.

She was a busy woman for her part, with no time to visit people; but the gentleman and his lady were kind. When they passed they would call on her, and do shopping for her down in Osraello. She missed them!

Her questioner's face fell.

"Then they are gone?"

Madallena said blandly that they had left before Christmas. She did not know for where. A pilgrimage she thought, perhaps to Switzerland. She was certain they were not back. She would give any message when she saw them.

The Bonds went back to Osraello, tired and rather cross.

The matter of the re-investments had to wait. It meant the loss of so much more good interest, as Jonathan told his wife. But he bought her a dress in Paris that represented the loss for one year, nevertheless.

II

The war date being written across every wall and yard of paint of the Bessington's home, its owners put it into the hands of decorators, and went to Switzerland.

They entreated Helena Tresham to go with them, but she was determined to see the round of the year in her country fastness without break or change.

The Bessingtons spent the winter in a villa near a famous resort, sharing the sun, and the keen, pure air, with a crowd of other happy, exuberant people, and though Bessington made periodical visits to England, Veronica remained. She had plenty of friends, and her small son and daughter flourished exceedingly.

In the spring, however, they made various excursions with a view to future visits, and presently the two found themselves in the little village of Poinzine which consisted of one brand new hotel, a few *pensions*, and some hundred or so of houses, whose inhabitants were chiefly occupied in the timber trade. There was a delectable little lake, abundant sunshine, and not too precipitous slopes.

The Bessingtons regretted the lateness of their "find," and lingered a week or so to explore Poinzine's possibilities.

Ski-ing was still possible in these altitudes, and they were by now sufficiently expert to go far, though Bessington insisted on a guide for long excursions.

One day their guide took them along a little-used route that wound up far into the mountains, and here they came on tracks not made by skis, but by snow-shoes. "Canadian" their guide explained, and added it was proof of the exceptionally calm weather, since they had been made a fortnight ago.

Bessington asked if snow-shoes were general about there.

Apparently they were something of an innovation. The lady and gentleman using these were very proficient. They had been there most of the winter, and Mrs. Hamberton was a wonderful climber.

"Did you say Hamberton?" exclaimed Bessington, suddenly swinging round, forgetting his skis, and coming to instant grief.

The guide righted him, and forgot to answer his question.

Veronica refused to allow her interest to upset her balance. She clung tenaciously to her pole.

"He *said* 'Hamberton'!" she assured her husband, as the guide dusted the snow from his shoulders.

"An Englishman, fair, not very tall, with an Italian wife?"

The guide nodded.

"The lady might have been Italian. She spoke English. They left a fortnight ago."

"What rotten luck!" Bessington grumbled, and meant it.

Veronica's only comment was made on the return journey, when she remarked, apparently apropos of nothing.

"Do you think we ought to let the Herrons know?"

"Why the Herrons?" demanded Dominic making the necessary "jump" at connection.

"When Theo Herron last wrote, she said that Marian and that man she married have been hunting for them all over the Riviera."

"I think I'll write to Lorimer. The last time I was in town he asked me if I'd heard from Hamberton; said he wanted to get in touch with him badly."

"Well, there isn't much to tell him anyhow."

Bessington, however, had collected a little more information when he wrote to the old lawyer, who was his man of business, as well as Hamberton's. He learnt that the Hambertons had left on foot, as they arrived, with a mule to carry their luggage. That they had gone south west, probably to Briso which lay at the foot of the Aldora range. That they were apparently going "over," instead of round, the intervening mountains. In the opinion of those Bessington questioned, the scheme was mad. Beyond these points the natives seemed reluctant to discuss them at all. Luckily, Bessington encountered a visitor who was rather more communicative.

"Rather an unusual couple, eh?" the visitor hazarded, uncertain of the quality of the admitted friendship. "She was a bit of a wonder. Quite unapproachable, though the people here——" he paused.

"Well?" insisted Bessington. "I don't know her, except as a good-looking woman."

“Good looking? I suppose one might call it that,” retorted the other drily. “She is a sort of doctor, isn’t she? Cured a girl down in the village—oh, people talk a lot of nonsense—but she is not ordinary.”

He could not be brought to fuller expression on the un-ordinariness of Mrs. Hamberton, but he spoke of Hamberton and his affection for high altitudes.

“He was always for going ‘up,’ ” he commented.

Bessington got an answer to his letter to Lorimer by the first possible post.

“If you can trace Mr. Hamberton further, I shall be deeply grateful. I am uneasy about his sister’s marriage, and the matter of the trusteeship. If you have leisure to make further enquiries please do so, and if advisable I will send over a man to take up the trail.”

Dominic suggested that Veronica should return to headquarters and the children, while he went on to Briso to track the truants down.

III

When Bessington arrived at Briso he found the town had so little to recommend it that he began to think this information was faulty. There seemed no English visitors there, no facilities for sport and the encircling mountains were bare and forbidding.

Briso, however, appeared to be something of a health resort. There was a large hospital there, and an experimental school, and the types of patients and singular diseases that drifted Briso-ward had little in common with the fashionable health resorts of Davos Platz or St. Moritz.

There were several *pensions* in the place, but not so many as to make Bessington's search difficult.

The Hambertons had stayed two nights at the Pension de l'Etoile, but they had left a week ago, vaguely, for the mountains

The proprietress was not communicative, but at last she said that Dr. Royce might know more.

For a second time Bessington was arrested by the chance mention of a name.

"Was Dr. Royce an Englishman?"

Madame was doubtful. He worked at the hospital. Her late visitors had gone to question him about La Mulette. La Mulette was up there. She vaguely intimated the jagged mountains on the north.

Bessington went to the hospital. He had heard of a Dr. Royce before, through the Herrons, friends of the Astons. Rather a singular doctor, dealing largely with psychic cases.

It proved to be the same man. The Herrons name was an introduction. And after a little desultory conversation, Bessington asked him frankly if he knew the Hambertons present address, and received a scrutinizing look. Bessington who was a judge of men told him what there was to tell, and ended with these words:

"I've never felt quite happy about this wife of his. Of course, she is no peasant girl; equally, of course, it was no ordinary case of a man losing his head over a pretty woman. He was always trying to understand things most people are happier for not

understanding, and probably the woman——” he halted.

The doctor nodded.

“Yes, possibly Mrs. Hamberton understood a great many things the average person does not know. Do you know of her parentage?”

Bessington gazed rather stolidly out of the window.

“It was really no business of mine, but Geoffrey and I were friends, and I made some enquiries before we left Osraello that year. She was said to be the daughter of a Dr. Romano, a Roumanian.”

Dr. Royce’s face changed. A flash of amazement crossed his open sympathy.

“Romano, a Roumanian! You are quite sure?”

“So they say. Do you know of him?”

“Yes. That accounts for her. I have been most abominably blind! I ought to have gone further into the matter, instead of letting them go to La Mulette, of all places in the world!”

The general serene calm of his face had melted into perplexed gravity.

“I imagined they only wanted to test the quality of La Mulette air. It’s peculiar, you know. Some of these high places are.”

He looked fixedly at his visitor.

Bessington replied quietly.

“Well, I’ll test it myself if Hamberton is still likely to be there. I’m not concerned with his reason for being there, but a man can’t escape mundane responsibility by living on mountain tops!”

"Not if one has irrevocably renounced the mundane?"

"Can anyone? Any human being?"

"What of monks and nuns?"

"They simplify, and call it renunciation! But I know nothing of these things, Dr. Royce. Still I'm going to La Muette."

"I am going with you."

Bessington was amazed, and showed it.

"With your permission," added the doctor with an odd smile. "My friend Corberier up there may not be very communicative to a stranger, supposing your friends had—gone on." He hesitated perceptibly over the words.

"I gathered they would have to come back to go on, that La Muette led nowhere."

The doctor did not answer that. He suggested starting early next morning, and they made the arrangement accordingly.

Bessington looked curiously at the dark mountains as he wandered through the dull streets. La Muette was hidden. He did not much like the look of them and was not sorry he was to have a companion.

When he reached his hotel, a telegram was awaiting him from Veronica.

It ran:

"Wire just received from Helena as follows: 'Please learn Geoffrey's whereabouts, am very anxious'."

Bessington put the telegram into an envelope and sent it to the doctor.

He got the surprising answer in ten minutes.

“Can you be ready to start for La Mulette in an hour?”

CHAPTER III

THE WARNING

I

Helena Tresham watched the round of the year from the High Down: the glory of summer succeeded the green flush of spring, the flame of autumn faded to the purple and grey of winter.

She came to realise that never before in her life had she listened in silence to her own spontaneous and unbiased thought on any given subject. Where, indeed, in her life had there been silence and space for so small a voice to be heard? Always she had listened to others, to the particular "others," about her, and what had not reached her through their minds and voices, had been "blared" at her from newspapers and reviews. She had no single opinion uncoloured by environment, or undimmed by the ceaseless echo and vibrations from other minds.

To be quite still where there were no echoes, and to find within herself strange questions and strange answers welling up, was immensely engrossing and restful.

The only subject on which she found she echoed nothing from the outside world was Geoffrey Hamberton. Her estimate of him was a thing quite distinct from the estimate of her world. That world counted him fickle. She knew him as constancy itself.

It held he had treated her disgracefully, while she was conscious of her own failure. It labelled him idler and dreamer. She knew him as a strenuous seeker after something more substantial than dreams.

Such verses of Geoffrey's as she still preserved, she read and re-read, often failing to grasp their full significance, but perceiving at last they held a meaning beyond the broken suggestiveness of the lines.

II

It was Helena's second March in Overbridge. The High Down still cast its spell on her soul, and left her wondering vaguely at the many who knew nothing of that spell.

One day she found old Malchin, the shepherd, making a new fold under the lee of a fantastic hedge that stood out against the skyline like a frieze of grotesque animals making for the ark: the ark, a great rick at the end of the hedge.

He was working hard, looking every now and then at the sky with anxious eyes. It was a grey day, bitterly cold, and the most forward children of the spring seemed to shrink back into hiding, lamenting their forwardness!

"Yesterday was so lovely," she sighed in reply to the inevitable English weather-greeting.

Malchin shook his head.

"I don't like it. You lookee here, Miss. The sun be bright enough yestern but I did look at him with my eyes a-shaded—so, and what do I see but three black dots—same as t'were a mouth and two eyes.

Little 'uns, but there they be, and they do mean snow—never fails! We'll have it here, or hereabouts before the day's out!"

Helena hoped not, fervently, but Malchin said:

"Ah, you may go on hoping, a-hoping do cost naught, but I'll set up these shelters quick, all the same."

On the High Down Helena found it hard to hope, for the thick grey sky seemed to bend over the earth, and the cold air was cutting. She dragged her furs round her, however, determined to get to the top in case it really did snow sufficiently to prevent her making her daily pilgrimage.

Under shelter of the fence, she stood awhile, noting the difference between to-day's greyness and yesterday's.

Suddenly a devastating sense of stress and strain, of pitiless cold and engulfing blackness rushed over her, so that she fell back against a tree trunk, groping blindly for support; and then across the waste of lowering grey sky she seemed to see written in flame the words, Geoffrey! Geoffrey! Geoffrey! repeating fainter and fainter to the very horizon, and then deep down, out of a silence, deeper than that night, there came a call "Helena."

The vast distress faded out with the whispering call and imagined words, leaving her shaken and almost angrily bewildered.

What had she, Helena Tresham, to do with inexplicable phenomena like that? She had always kept clear of the foolish psychic amusements of the fashionable world. Psychic literature was a foreign language to her. For a few moments she struggled to tread down her growing conviction.

She shut her eyes and argued with herself, and then suddenly knew it was useless. This thing had happened. She was quite normal. She had not been thinking of Geoffrey. She was not given to panics, or absurd imaginations, yet this had happened!

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What could she do!

She did not even know where Geoffrey was! She had had to say as much in response to old Mr. Lorimer's apologetic enquiry which had so disturbed her a month or so ago. Apparently he had left Osraello and was probably in Switzerland.

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“Geoffrey safe, unhurt, there had been an accident.”

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sumably his daughter. I know nothing about her beyond what you have told me, and what Corberier tells me; but she was evidently not an ordinary woman, and I think she meant to reach this place. Her father nearly lost his life in the same attempt, years ago!"

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"That I cannot tell you precisely."

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"It means gaining knowledge of a certain kind. There are supposed to be people who live in this borderland, and who know a great deal."

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"Apparently she found death instead. We know very little of what happened. I have said this much, Mr. Bessington, to convince you that if you will leave your friend in my hands, I, at least, understand something about his case."

"Quite so. I am very grateful, Dr. Royce. If you cannot do something for him, I fear he will begin to regret that we ever found him, or that he is not with her."

Then Dr. Royce said a strange thing, or so Bessington thought.

"I think if he had been with her, they would both be here; or at least quite and entirely alive!"

III

The next day Bessington asked Hamberton quite frankly if he wished to return with him, or stay in Briso, and Hamberton looked at him with frightened eyes.

"Go back—where? And to what?"

"It's just which you prefer," said Bessington hastily. "Royce is a good sort, and will look after you till you feel more fit, and I'll come back in a week or so, to see how you are. Meanwhile, if there's anything else I can do, tell me. Old Lorimer's been asking for you. Your sister's married, you know, and there are certain affairs to be seen to. You're her trustee, aren't you?"

He stopped, because the other's momentary interest had flickered out. He was gazing out of the window again.

Bessington made another effort—rather a bold one this time.

"Helena sent me a wire, asking me to find your whereabouts, as she was uneasy about you. It arrived just in time to hurry Royce and me up."

"Helena?" For a moment his interest quickened. "Why should she care?"

"Women are like that!" commented Bessington dryly. "I've let her know you're safe."

There was silence again. Bessington felt as if he were repeatedly dragging a man out of a bog, which sucked him back before he could get him to land. He made another attempt.

"Mr. Tresham is dead. Did you know it? She has gone to live in the country."

"I am sorry. She will miss him terribly." He spoke in a perfectly featureless voice, and then suddenly broke out: "Forgive me, Dominic, but nothing's real to me. I think I am still frozen. Mr. Tresham was always good to me, and I ought to mind. I wish I could."

"My dear fellow, it's only the result of exhaustion, and having been frozen."

"It's the result of failure," said Hamberton wearily. "I can't even try to explain to you. It sounds ungracious, but I think you'd forgive me if you understood."

Bessington was aware of profound pity, and of trouble beyond his help.

"I think you've no very clear idea of perspective at present, Geoff. Don't bother; I understand enough not to want explanations."

Bessington left next day. The doctor promised to keep him informed of his friend's progress.

IV

The weeks crept on. Energy of body returned before energy of mind, to all outward seeming. Dr. Royce pressed for no confidence, but as soon as he could walk without fatigue, took him with him to see his patients in the hospital. Curious patients some of them were, with curious complaints. Royce did all he could to arouse Hamberton's interest in them, and succeeded to some extent, but the look of tragic hopelessness remained graven on his face. He never mentioned his wife, or spoke of returning

to La Murette, but Royce would find him at times, seated on his balcony, gazing up at the jagged ridge with brooding eyes.

One day, finding him so occupied, or unoccupied, he said abruptly:

"You know the man in Number 6, whose mind is as set on living as his body on dying—rather an odd case, because it's generally the other way round."

Hamberton's answer rather surprised him.

"He told me he'd got to finish his invention. He believes it's supremely important, and that he *must* do it. That makes the difference!"

"Well, I think of sending him up to La Murette for a week. Many people can't stand the air there, but I believe he can; only he must not go alone, and I can't leave here just now. I wonder if you'd take him. He's a difficult soul, but he seems to like you."

Hamberton turned to him with incredulous eyes. His face flushed and then went white. He said nothing, but continued to look at the doctor.

Dr. Royce sat down on the edge of the wooden bannister, and spoke his mind.

"You sit and look at the place, Hamberton, and that's not particularly good for you. I've not said much because I am sure you know more than most men about life, and what lies below the surface, and what above it. You can't live on the surface, and I don't want you to be submerged, so it is time you thought of—above! Are you afraid of La Murette?"

"Yes." He spoke through clenched teeth.

"Then why sit and look at it? I assure you,

Hamberton, you've no reason to fear it. Cowards are not built out of your mental equipment."

"They are. That is precisely the trouble!" His tone was extremely bitter.

"A failure to rise beyond our human equipment is not necessarily cowardice," said the doctor quietly. "You were asked to do something that transcended the human, I imagine?"

Hamberton sat upright.

"How do you know so much?" he demanded.

"You have seen I am not a doctor working within ordinary limits. I am working here, near La Mulette, because I know something about the place—and its legends."

He said the word tentatively.

"Legends?"

"We give the name to traditions or myths, which are above or below our common perception. We say they have arisen out of simple incidents which we, with our superior learning could easily explain, if we could disentangle true from false. His voice was quietly ironical. "The difficulty is that *that* is just what we can't do, and the simple incidents *were* there in the first place—never forget that. But you know it as well as I do. He shot a sharp glance at him.

"Yes. I learnt a few things, or thought I did. The point is I did not follow them up."

"You followed very far."

"To fail in the end! That I personally failed is a very small matter; that I caused another to fail——"

He stopped abruptly, with a little gasp. The

doctor did not look at him.

"Hamberton, I know what Dr. Romano's beliefs were. They were founded, I am sure, on certain truths, but I am not sure that these truths were properly understood, or——" He hesitated perceptibly. — "or are legitimate," he concluded firmly.

There was a dead silence. He was conscious of sharp antagonism in the other, but it fell, resultless, against the ramparts of his wide humanity.

"I must believe in her goal!"

It was the first time he had referred to his lost companion. But that was not the reason. The eyes that met the doctor's were those of a man on the rack.

"The goal is legitimate. The road may be just a short cut, which perhaps, out of the width of time, very few men may have trod, and won through. But for the majority, it is not the appointed road."

There was silence again. Dr. Boyce knew it was no light job he had before him. The healing of a sick mind is a more delicate task than the healing of a sick body, and Hamberton's mind was very sick indeed. He went on diffidently.

"If you could at any time tell me your story, it might be a great help to others, and solve some problems. You may, of course, feel it's impossible. I do not press it. But without doubt you have been through a great experience, and I am a man who deals largely in the results of strange experiences, and thankful for enlightenment. Fruitless suffering is a poor thing. If you can ever bring yourself to see it in this light, you may be sure I shall be

grateful for your confidence."

Hamberton got up. His hands were shaking a little, and his voice was unsteady.

"Thank you; I expect you are quite right. If I can tell anyone, I'll tell you. I'll think it over."

He went out for a walk, up the grassy slope behind the hospital.

V

It was late when Hamberton returned, far later than the doctor approved, for the heavy shadows of the mountains lay like sombre heralds of night over the little town, and a chill wind blew down, from the snow.

Hamberton went straight to the doctor's room. A fire burnt cheerfully on the open hearth, and a shaded reading-lamp left the room in comfortable obscurity. The doctor laid down his book. Hamberton took a chair opposite him, and leant forward, elbows on knees, gazing into the fire.

"I'm going to tell you," he said abruptly. "It may be no good, but it can't make it worse."

And he told him the whole story.

The dusk outside had deepened to night, and the room was very still, when Hamberton finished. Doctor Royce piled some more wood on the fire,

thoughtfully. His experience was great, but he was at a loss to find words to meet the present case—words of healing, that is.

“Either I have been following a *Fata Morgana*, like a fool,” concluded Hamberton, “and meeting another soul, deluded like myself, have helped it to destruction by my folly, or I have stood at the brink of tremendous things, and failed from sheer fear, losing more than my own soul; not much of a choice of outlook, doctor!”

“You can put that construction on it if you will, but a more unbiassed mind might say you had followed a great vision to the edge of human endeavour, and—temporarily—lost sight of it.”

“There is the other alternative,” said Hamberton very quietly.

The doctor knew that he had reached the centre of the trouble.

VI

The following day Hamberton told the doctor he would go to La Muette, with the patient, Smollet, if he wished it.

The doctor hesitated a moment. What he had learnt of Hamberton's troubles somewhat altered matters, but on the whole he believed his bold experiment was worth the risk. That Hamberton had courage to face La Muette should be a refutation of his self-accusation of cowardice, and if he left Briso without doing so, it would always remain at the back of his mind as a black nightmare. Moreover, the doctor held that “service to others” was one of the best mental healers. He accepted the offer.

He must see himself to the patient's final installation, but he contrived to send Hamberton up in sole charge, saying he himself would follow later in the day.

During the journey up Hamberton was too occupied with preserving his charge's strength to remember his former ascent, except in brief snatches. The sick qualms the sight of Corberier and the inn brought him, were thus partially quenched by the querulous demands of Smollet, and when Dr. Royce arrived, he found the latter in bed, and Hamberton feeding him with beef-tea, and listening vaguely to bitter complaints that he was not to be outside instead of cooped up in a bedroom.

The doctor took charge of one patient, and sent the other out. Later on he joined him, and found him standing on a little boulder-strewn mound, out of sight of the inn.

The snow here, on the south side of the valley, had melted, and the bronze grass beginning to freshen to green. A few little snow-flowers clustered under the shelter of the rocks. Hamberton was facing south, his head turned resolutely away from La Murette.

The doctor congratulated him on his management of the difficult patient.

"You are the only person I've got him to tolerate," he said. "Everyone else argues with him. I hope you'll be able to stay awhile."

Hamberton did not answer this, but presently he asked a question.

"Is he going to get well?"

"Yes," said Royce. "I believe he is, if he holds on to his belief in the place."

Hamberton turned his head slowly. "Do *you* believe in it?"

"I do. I've proved it, you see. Will you stay?"

Hamberton stayed. He played his role of nurse with immense conscientiousness, becoming in some degree interested not only in Smollet's daily progress, but in his intense, egotistical desire for life, though as far as Hamberton could judge, life had so far spelt nothing to him but work. Work and disappointment! He seemed to love no-one; he was not himself a loveable being, with his complete egoism and fierce intent to bend all who came within his ken to the service of his own recovery.

In an inarticulate way, Hamberton was grateful to him for the many qualities which made him so unattractive. They provided difficulties which it required an effort to meet.

Neither Corberier, nor the women—acting on Royce's direct command—spoke to him of the past, or indeed behaved other than as if he were a stranger in their midst.

The big guest-room which he and Visellia had occupied was empty, but one day as he passed, the door was open, and he went in. Corberier's wife saw him there, and hurried to her husband. The big man saw Smollet out in the sun, moving his chair, and he went slowly upstairs. Hamberton was still standing on the threshold, holding on to the lintels of the door. He called to him in his heavy, sullen way.

"The gentleman is wanting you, sir. He thinks the sun is off his chair."

Then he clattered downstairs again, but not before

he had seen the white, tense face with the dazed expression of one who had been a vast journey.

VII

It was after this little incident that Hamberton's interest in his patient took a more personal turn. He also bent his mind to his recovery. Dr. Royce found him improvising little tasks, and recording little triumphs that might have passed unheeded.

"It's magic—this air!" Smollet said, with his fierce emphasis, one day. "Sheer magic! If I can't live down there and work, I'll build myself a shanty up here. No, I shan't sit down; I'm going for a walk." And he went.

"Will it last?" Hamberton asked the doctor, on his next visit, when they had discussed the possibilities of leaving.

"I think so. It was a case of getting the system tuned again to the right key. It would be dangerous for him to stay here; the pitch is too high. One has to be born in it to endure it for long." He looked rather oddly at Hamberton as he spoke, and then added abruptly: "Hamberton, do you want to go up the valley before you leave? You can't go into the mountains because the snows are melting, but I'll go with you as far as we may, if you wish to."

"I've been," said Hamberton, "once or twice. I went as far as the entrance to the little gorge." He paused. "I thought I should at least feel her—be aware of her."

Dr. Royce looked his interest.

"I felt—abominably and fearfully alive—that's

all," said Hamberton quietly. "La Murette is no place for me, doctor. There's no answer here. I'm going back to England."

CHAPTER V

THE OLD DIMENSIONS

I

Hamberton brought Smollet back to England, cared for him assiduously through the journey, and parted from him at Charing Cross. They neither exchanged addresses, nor expressed any desire to meet again. Neither of them were the type nor the mood to gather in friends. Hamberton went to an hotel. He had nowhere else to go. He was uneasily aware he would have to see Mr. Lorimer. Also there was his sister—and he had forgotten her new name. He did not want to see anyone, yet was painfully aware of his own isolation. Having established himself in the quietest hotel he could remember, he went for a walk.

The noise, and the throng of people in the street bewildered and frightened him, and the air seemed difficult to breathe. He took refuge in the National Gallery. London appeared to be full to the extent that one extra individual—himself—had made the tide of passing human beings overflow.

Having regained his breath, he wandered vaguely through the rooms. The only picture that attracted his attention was El Greco's "Agony in the Garden."

He found himself wondering what El Greco had been through himself to understand so exactly what a nightmare the material world could be to those in mental anguish. Finally, unable to face the streets again, he took a taxi, and drove back to his hotel. He would have to see Lorimer before he could escape this suffocating throng of fellow-creatures. That meant answering questions, accepting sympathies perhaps—an unbearable idea. He could not face it.

After a prolonged struggle with himself, he rang up Bessington.

‘He was sorry to trouble him, but was it necessary for him to see Lorimer personally, or would a letter do?’

Bessington told him to wait at the hotel till he came, flung over his morning’s work, rushed round, and dragged Hamberton out to lunch.

“Why didn’t you let me know? I’d have met you,” he said reproachfully.

“I—I don’t want to bother people. If I need not see Lorimer, I shall be glad. It’s such a nuisance answering questions.”

“He won’t ask any. We’ll run down to his office after lunch.”

He went out and ‘phoned to that effect, and of the necessity of handling Hamberton gently. Mr. Lorimer was as enthusiastic in greeting as his client’s demeanour permitted, but it was difficult to be warm towards a man who treats you as if you were something not quite real, and your information as something too remote to warrant serious attention.

"We must let Mrs. Bonds know at once!" said Mr. Lorimer hastily.

Hamberton looked puzzled.

"Marian," put in Bessington quickly.

"She won't want to see me anyhow," Hamberton replied with faint satisfaction, which was instantly shattered by his lawyer.

"I assure you Mrs. Bonds is most anxious to see you. I should like to advise her at once, if you permit." He laid his hand on the telephone.

Bessington saw the other flinch visibly; nevertheless he made no protest.

They listened to Mr. Lorimer's 'phoning:

"Is that Mrs. Bonds?—Good morning!—I have some news for you; Mr. Hamberton is back, he's here now—arrived in London this morning. When would you be free?—Oh, yes, just as you like, of course: ah, well, in that case—yes, I'll keep him!" He hung up the receiver.

"Mrs. Bonds and her husband are coming here. They are just going away for the week-end, and do not want to miss you. I should explain to you that Mr. Bonds is anxious to make re-investments Your consent——" he launched into particulars.

Bessington noted with satisfaction that Hamberton gave efficient attention to business details. Before they were concluded, Marian and her husband arrived.

Marian was exquisitely dressed in grey; she had removed a coloured scarf in compliment to her deceased sister-in-law, and her prettiness was undeniable. Her husband, rather stout, with a round

face, black moustache, and slightly truculent air, followed her. Bessington saw the prominent eyes dart round anxiously till they rested on Hamberton, who stood by the window, and neither advanced, nor offered any greeting. Mr Bonds was a little taken aback. He had not visaged his brother-in-law in the least like this remote creature who faced them with such distant diffidence.

Remote! Bessington felt he had caught the word that expressed Hamberton. He *was* remote; he seemed removed from them all, a foreigner in the formal office, a stranger, an alien. Yes, distinctly Hamberton was remote!

Marian sailed in, aware of her prettiness, her beautiful gown, her entire success, prepared to be cordial—perhaps even sympathetic—to her erring brother. True, he was a bad business man, but that could be remedied, and he had lost that impossible wife of his. No doubt, he would feel cut up for a bit, Marian was prepared to be very kind. She had told her husband so on the way there.

“He might come and stay a few days, when we are back,” she said.

“That depends,” Bonds had replied heavily, “if he’s reasonable and sensible—and if people don’t mind meeting him.”

And Marian had said quickly:

“Oh, why should they? He married her, you know, and now he’s a widower, perhaps Helena——”

They arrived at Mr. Lorimer’s office before she finished her speculation.

She sailed towards him, holding out her hands.

“Geoffrey, you bad boy to lose us like that! You never even came to our wedding! But how ill you look—and I thought—but you aren’t even in mourning! Isn’t——?”

Something in Hamberton’s face stopped even her garrulous little tongue.

“I’m sorry if there were any difficulties, Marian. I ought to have left a power of attorney. May I offer late congratulations?”

He permitted her kiss with an effort.

It was not that he bore the least resentment for her former treatment of him. It was just that she appeared to him as a complete stranger, and it was inconceivable that she should wish to embrace him.

Marian, having greeted Bessington, hurriedly introduced her husband to them both. This was a real stranger. Hamberton was relieved that he did not even offer to shake hands. Bessington, watching them, wondered if there were one single inch of common ground in their respective make-ups. They were the antithesis of each other, and he believed Bonds sufficiently clever to be aware of it. Hamberton was indifferent, probably not aware, he thought.

Marian was explaining how they had motored over from Nice, and had failed to find them at Osraello, or S. Geno.

She spoke of Nicholas, the Hotel des Montagues, Maddalena.

"We never found any place where you could have lived," Bessington heard her say. "I can't think why you stayed there—and never even sent for your letters!"—then later—"We—Jonathan and I—are going to Lord Barnstaple's for the week-end. I thought, when we came back——"

Bonds coughed rather loudly.

"I think, my dear, we have no right to occupy Mr. Lorimer's time and office with purely private conversation, but, since we are here, and I shall be much occupied next week, perhaps your brother will be glad to discuss business. I have no doubt he could meet you somewhere, later."

Hamberton turned to him.

"If there is business to discuss, we had better discuss it, Mr. Bonds, for I shall not be in London long, I hope."

Marian chimed in.

"Oh, you mustn't run away, again! You must stay in town, and try and cheer up a bit, you poor old thing. It must have been pretty ghastly for you, but there's nothing like plenty of occupation for trouble!"

Bessington, without quite knowing how it was managed, found himself escorting Mrs. Bonds to her motor, and a fashionable tea-shop. He told Hamberton he would see him later at his hotel. Mr. Lorimer was left with the two men, and he realised that for some reason or other, Bond's attitude towards his brother-in-law was hostile.

II

Bonds, himself, would have been at a loss to explain his hostility. He was not a man of prejudices.

He was quite capable of disguising personal likes and dislikes, where his own interests were concerned, but though he considered his wife's interests his own, he simply could not disguise the impatient contempt this young man aroused in him. He was irritated, too, to recognise that Hamberton, if aware of his hostility, was quite indifferent to it. He was in no position to know that this indifference was only on a par with his indifference to all in a strange, remote world through which he walked with halting step; out of step, so to speak, with his fellows, never to be completely in step again.

They discussed the business in hand. Hamberton made short work of it all.

"It's a very simple matter, Mr. Bonds. I retire from the trusteeship, and you take my place. Mr. Lorimer can easily arrange that. Is there anything else?" He stood up.

Bonds choked a little. It was utterly unlike what he had expected, and he felt oddly outraged at the ease of it all.

"You are very indifferent to your sister's interests, Mr. Hamberton!" he rasped out, sharply.

Hamberton turned surprised eyes on him.

"You said just now I was indifferent as a trustee. Now you say I am so because I resign my trusteeship. To which course do you take exception? You can't have it both ways!"

"I am adequate, of course, to look after her, but it is your duty to see that I am. For all you know, I might be a scoundrel. Suppose she lost her money?"

Hamberton shook his head.

"It wouldn't be to your interest to do that. You are a man who makes money, not one who loses it."

Mr. Bonds got red. He should have felt complimented; instead he felt insulted.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Hamberton, that plenty of honest men make money, and plenty of scoundrels lose it."

"I didn't know I had disputed the point," said Hamberton wearily. "I am only trying to make you understand I recognise that you are a better business man than I am."

What more could any man want? Bonds had no excuse for rancour, no excuse whatever for his decided announcement to Marian that evening that he would not have that brother of hers staying with them for any money.

"He'd drive me crazy, with his damned superior airs!" said Mr. Bonds hotly. "A man who's behaved as he has, too!"

"Wouldn't he listen to reason?" asked Marian in some alarm.

"Oh, he was reasonable enough! Precious sight too reasonable!—If I wasn't your husband!—Don't know what it is about him—sort of detached, looking-on manner—remote—that's what he is! gives you an idea he's out of it! That money is not worth any bother!"

Bonds apparently had at least one link in common

with Dominic Bessington. He found Hamberton remote.

III

Bessington escaped from the tea-shop as soon as he decently could, did some 'phoning, and hurried back to the hotel. Hamberton was sitting in the lounge, doing nothing, not even expecting his friend. Bessington took him off to dine at Hampstead, since he refused to re-pack, and take up his abode there. Veronica was at her best, and Bessington flattered himself that it was a successful evening, until his guest was leaving.

"I can't come again, just yet," said Hamberton nervously. "You're both a thousand times too good to me; but I'm really better off with Marian and Bonds. They, at least, make me feel I've got hold of something they haven't. But you have all I've got without getting it, so to speak. You're the best friend a man ever had."

"Well, what are you going to do?" demanded the friend. It wasn't worth while discussing the qualities of friendship.

"I'm going to learn at what point I can find union with my fellows again." He looked at Bessington with the puzzled, bewildered look that the latter found so distressing. "There doesn't seem any point

of contact. It's as if I'd been living in a fourth dimension, and fallen back into three; and I've got to be among those who have never heard of a fourth dimension. Now you have. Oh, I can't explain, but I've got to be certain I was born in this three-sided world."

Bessington sat late over his pipe, pondering this cryptic utterance, and ultimately wrote to Dr. Royce. By the time he got an answer, Hamberton had left London. He would give no address; he merely promised to let his friend know from time to time where he was. Dr. Royce's answer when it came, gave some needed comfort to Bessington, who was sorely troubled at his own inability to help Hamberton.

The doctor wrote: "He must have time. Remember he still believes that whether that strange wife of his was deluded, or a great seer, he has to get reconciled to his own humanity before he can endure the friends who love his humanness. I am sure you need not fear that he will court disaster. That way was open to him at La Murette. I took my precautions there, but it never seemed to enter his head. What will cure him will be to learn he has something to give the world. Once the creative principle is stirred, in whatever way you will, the value and meaning of his experience will be clear to him. Incidentally do you remember why Jacob was lame? To wrestle with angels is dangerous work, even if one wins the blessing. I think Geoffrey Hamberton may go lame all his life. The story is worth attention."

Bessington was not conversant with the story, and

he found it out, read it, and was considerably bewildered at it.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROAD HOME

I

May crowned herself with blossoms. The hedgerows were like snowdrifts, and a riot of flowers carpeted wood, hill and meadow. The few highways lacked tar and motor traffic, and consequently were powdery with dust.

That scattered army of happy-go-lucky tramps that invade the country with the lengthening days, walked lightly, and found no hardships in their lot, though night might overtake them, with no shelter but a rick or thicket.

A man was walking along a lonely stretch of road that linked one county capital with another. Only the knapsack on his shoulder distinguished him from the genuine tramp, so dusty and worn were his clothes, and so purposeless his walk.

He consulted no milestone or finger-post; he just went on as he had for many days, taking an occasional by-road, stopping at night in whatever village he found himself, eating the indifferent fare served him without comment, talking, or more correctly, listening to the conversations of the countryside, with more interest than is usual in a passer-by. Anyone following

his footsteps would find that he lingered longest in a village where a funeral or christening was jogging the tongues and minds of the inhabitants, and that on Sundays he ceased to tramp, and sat through long, and often tedious services in dark little churches. The more primitive the church and teaching, the more Geoffrey Hamberton appreciated it.

In the minds, manners and morals of the people amongst which he now moved, he found nothing whatever to remind him of certain heights and depths of knowledge in which he had once walked with quick pulses, and high hopes.

He would have said he carried nothing of the past into this strange, vagabond life, yet in truth, as he walked the high-ways and by-ways, that past went with him in every step, in every glance at the good earth about him, in every interpreted sound of bird and beast. It was no dreamer who wandered through the southern counties that golden spring, no mere scholar either, but a very humane creature, with an insight into Nature, and an understanding of her moods that is given to few.

He was supremely unconscious of the unusualness of this in a man, bred in city and college, companioned chiefly by thinkers and dreamers.

He had walked thus for several weeks, zig-zagging across the country, before he realised that he was deceiving himself; and the past, far from being blotted out, was not past at all, but present, thrusting at him, regulating his thoughts and actions, when most he imagined he was free from any set intention, or high dreams.

He was in sympathy with mankind again, filled

with sorrow for its sorrow, with pity for its pettiness, and with love for its courage.

II

He came one day to a cross roads, where there was a small, solitary inn. A woman came out of the open door, and stood, looking up the road. There was a hard expression of stony grief on her face, and she took no heed of a possible customer.

Hamberton accosted her.

"Can I have a meal here?" he asked.

She took no notice, but continued to look along the road.

"That doctor!" she muttered. "He said he'd be here again by four—but—he'll be too late!"

"Someone is ill?"

She turned on him with an odd, savage movement.

"Yes, someone's ill—my child. He be four year old. A child of four bean't much matter, you think!"

"A child is always a great matter," returned Hamberton, loosening his pack. "Let me see him."

He was aghast when he had said the words. What good could he do? What did he know of childish illnesses? The woman evidently thought the same.

"Be 'ee a doctor?" she demanded sharply.

Hamberton shook his head. He wanted to unsay his words; instead he found himself repeating them.

"I have seen much of illness—I might help," he added.

The woman flung open the door, and stood aside for him to enter. The hard despair in her eyes was akin to anger. The door led, not into the tap-room, but into the kitchen itself, and there, on a bed made of two chairs and a stool, lay a child. Even to Hamberton's unaccustomed eyes, it looked mortally ill.

"If only Visellia were here!"

It was the first time he had caught himself thus thinking of her, of their human companionship, and shared emotions, and inconsequently with it came the prick of tears, that natural relief, so long denied him.

He stood looking at the child, conjuring up in his mind what she would do, and what would undoubtedly happen if she were there. The curious little chant rang in his ears so clearly, that he jerked his head up, and looked round.

The woman had ceased to watch him; she was gazing at the child. Suddenly she bent over it and put her hand on its forehead.

Hamberton was not very clear that he was actually in the room at all. He seemed to be seeing the whole thing through the medium of another personality, and he could certainly hear the chant. All the simple human longing for his lost Lady welled up in him as a spring wells up beneath ice, melting and dispersing it, letting in warmth and light to chill depths.

"I must'a' been mistook just now," the woman muttered. "Half daft I be with watching him day and night, and the house—and my husband at Weyhill Fair."

She looked curiously at the traveller, however, then caught up an extra blanket, and tucked it round the child.

"Doctor said if he took a change by four, he'd do," she said hoarsely. "I must 'a' been daft!"

"Tired out, probably," said Hamberton kindly. "Go to sleep. I'll watch till the doctor comes."

"Sleep!" She gave an odd laugh, and staggered to her feet, but the mere suggestion precipitated Nature's need. She dropped into a chair, meaning to protest against this surprising stranger's orders, and sleep overcame her, before she could frame words. Her head dropped on her arms, outstretched on the wooden table.

He continued to stand by the fire. Despite the heat outside, it burnt brightly, and a saucepan simmered on the hearth. He looked down at the child, about whom the mother had made so strange a mistake. He was a pretty little fellow, with fluffy, golden hair. Presently he stirred, and flung out a groping arm. Hamberton took the questing hand with awkward gentleness. His eyes pricked again suspiciously. He glanced round the room. It was kitchen and living-room in one. The dresser was set with blue plates, and various tins. A line across a corner carried garments awaiting the iron. The brick floor was none too even, and the rug before the fire obviously home-made.

The place was untidy; so was the worn, sleeping woman, asprawl across the table. The only entirely trim, complete and satisfied thing was the black and white cat before the fire. A simple battlefield where fierce passionate love had fought the grim enemy, and won!

Life and Death, and Love holding the balance between them. Which of the three was immortal, changeless, proceeding? Which transitory, the mere shadow of some stupendous power moving behind? Here in this room, in a palace, on a mountain-top, the same powers contending, the same hand holding the balance, the same mystery.

The sound of a motor outside drew him to the door. He watched the car stop, the unmistakable doctor descend, and hasten up the path.

"I think the child is better. The woman is asleep; she was very tired," said Hamberton as quietly as if it were an every-day thing that a passing tramp should give such information.

He picked up his knapsack, and adjusted it. The doctor looked at him curiously, and then went in. Three minutes later, he came out again, and looked up the road. A figure was breasting the long hill, going westward. He looked after it a moment, and then re-entered the inn. The woman, still drunk with sleep, or want of it, was tending the child and her eyes were no longer full of hard despair.

III

Whether one lived on the mountain-tops, or in the valleys, human existence did not differ much as to essentials. Though he walked to the ends of the earth, food, sleep and shelter would still govern it materially, and Love and Death still contend for the victory. He could never escape these factors. They would ever link him with the past, and await him in the future.

To what, after all, did the little harvest of knowledge he had gathered, amount? He had fiercely repudiated it as creating a barrier between himself and his fellow-beings—if he admitted it had any reality at all. What was the sum total of it?

He had learned to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable factions of faith and creeds.

He had learnt that a certain proportion of the human race had lost a great heritage of human knowledge, and losing it, had lapsed back, died indeed, into what we call life, and had never ceased to struggle to recover what they had lost.

He had learnt that life in essence is eternal; that death is not eternal; that immortality is, or should be, the goal of mankind.

But the very people of the soil knew as much, or something like it! He had heard it proclaimed in the most remote little church, in the smallest hamlet, where he had sought some food for his questing soul, that would link him again with his fellows, and blot out those dangerous—or illuminating—things learnt in the hot summer, on the mountain-tops.

He thought, with dull envy, of the mind who could dismiss these matters as not worthy of attention. To him there was no pathway between gigantic fraud, or stupendous truth.

One could never unlearn; he had to take that as a fundamental truth also. Had he gained nothing from all he had been through? Someone must make experiments, adventure, explore unknown territory. Men had given their lives to add to the heritage of mere earth. In the wider kingdom of mind, were there not also gallant explorers, running risks, exercising

inexhaustible courage and faith. The bones of pioneers still lay in the lonely places, but their courage and faith lived on, turning their apparent failures to success.

In his endeavour to escape the memory of those desolate heights above La Muette, had he not been taking the world's estimate as his own? He who knew so well that much of what the world labelled success was dry dust, and bleak nothingness.

Hamberton speculated upon all these things as he trudged along the lonely road. He was approaching the downland now. The villages were wider apart. He had forgotten the name of the next, if there were one.

As the hours slipped away and fatigue took step with them, a weariness kept in step also, with his thoughts.

All said and done, what did *his* knowledge, *his* success, *his* failure matter? What did *he* get out of it, who was tramping England to avoid the inevitable? Suppose he gave in, took up existence in one of these remote villages, worked in the fields, sunk his restless mind to the daily round of food, shelter, and sleep; drugged his memory.

Unconsciously his pace quickened, as if to escape a trap.

Then what remained? To walk on till he came to the sea? What on earth was it he wanted, and sought?

Not Visellia! He recognised that with dull wonder, and the recognition nearly did for him what the gloomy isolation of La Muette had not done—excited

an inarticulate rage with life that had tricked and fooled him at every turn.

He could not even be true to this great, this overwhelming love that had been given to him of all men on earth!

He turned off the road, and flung himself downwards on the turf, behind a gorse thicket. It was only in thinking of death, he was aware how far he was from it; how strong was the vitality that throbbed through him. Perhaps it was the legacy, the accursed parting gift of La Mulette.

Not to want her, when his life was empty for loss of her to feel the tie that had held them, was irrevocably broken; that even if the ends were in his hands, he would not attempt to re-tie them!

This was the worst depth he had sounded yet, and the gay joy of the spring died out in his heart.

Yet presently he got up, brushed the soil from his clothes and took to the road again.

Because a man has to go on, even if there is nowhere to go to—and no one!

IV

Helena stood in her sunny garden, trowel in hand. She had just planted out the last of her seedlings; she was hot, and her hands were grubby. She was very happy this warm, spring day. Content seemed to wrap her round like a mantle. She felt she had slipped

out of the main-stream of life, into a delectable side-stream, where was neither peril nor struggle. Each day was a purpose in itself.

This, she realised, was the gift of the countryside to her, this share in a belief that life is enough for life, and that one need ask no more of it.

All she had had, even that beautifully ordered existence which had slipped out of her grasp, was unsubstantial beside this. There had always been a necessity of doing something which would be given to the world, and of holding one's own in the stress and conflict of ideas.

Yet she was just conscious at times of a wish that she was fifteen years older, and more fully entitled to this restful content. She made desultory attempts to write, but her heart was not in it. She sat down to her desk with an effort, and was glad to remember that young cabbages must be planted, or lettuces shielded from the sun, or the thousand calls from the garden attended to.

If on occasions she stood in her garden and wondered what it was all for—this peace and beauty she had gathered round her—what it, or her life led to, she told herself she was at least doing no harm, and that her shelter was a week-end haven for many tired minds. They came, weary and fagged with the strain of life, and went back with soothed nerves, and quieter minds.

But they went back!

In her innermost mind, Helena knew the secret uneasiness that sometimes assailed her, was that there was no one who stayed. They were all birds of passage, affectionate, grateful, delighted to see

her, but she was of no real importance in their lives—or in anyone's life!

Clifford Pastens ceased to come.

She told herself steadily she was glad of it, since he represented all those things she had definitely renounced, but she also knew she missed him, missed being of vast importance to one special human being. At such moments she was on the verge of renouncing the peace she had won, of re-entering the arena, and dragging from it some prize to make life worth the effort. For after all, she was young, and there were prizes to be gained. She need not go lonely.

These thoughts, however, did not persist, and they never followed her out into the garden, though she occasionally took them with her to the High Down.

It was a tiny patch on her azure sea of content, no larger than a man's hand at first!

There was something familiar in the cloud too, though she was reluctant to recognise it. In the face of what Dominic Bessington had told her, how could she? To hold her life in thrall to a man who did not ask or require it, was not the part a self-respecting woman should play. She abhorred sentiment; was she then to be sentimental?

She was angry to find herself fighting the familiar battle. Dominic's story had not materially altered facts. Geoffrey had no need of her, even in his loss. She had not even written to him—Dominic had advised not. He had conveyed the idea of an isolation and grief as remote as those awful mountains—

something more profound than the mere loss of dear companionship—something in which a man's soul was involved.

She ached—she was sick with longing to help him. Her impotence was the cruellest torture she had ever known. She wanted to prove to him how much better she understood now that she, too, saw life was indeed a mystery across which the little deeds of man drifted like smoke.

V

“It goes on being beautiful all the time,” thought Helena, gazing westward, “and it does take a load of responsibility off one's shoulders to realize that. If earth depended for beauty on man's cities—garden or otherwise—or on man's attempt to organize the world, what a scrap-heap it would be!”

Nevertheless, Helena had almost made up her mind to desert her High Down—at least for a time. It was so hard to keep Geoffrey out of her thoughts here.

Bessington, after some hesitation, had let her know that Geoffrey was in England, but he had given no particulars beyond that. He refused indeed to take a hand in the game life was playing with two valued friends. He felt the issues were too big for him. Nevertheless, Helena, knowing Geoffrey in England, was restless even to the point of facing London in spring, rather than the empty downland that echoed her own thoughts back to her.

“I have idled enough; I must do something.” she told herself.

The trouble was there was nothing she wanted to do; nothing that she would not be doing in place of something which she might not do.

She intended every day to go to town, and see about things—a vague phrase which had not so far got her to the station, though she would go to bed, determined to catch the ten o'clock train next morning. And here she was again, on the empty down, aware of its emptiness, and terribly aware of the emptiness of existence.

And all the while, spring thrilled the earth with the joy of her singing.

And, although Helena did not know it, and he did not know it, a man was moving across those empty spaces towards her, who could fill them all, and burden her with that to do which would tax her woman's soul to its utmost capacity.

VI

The road lay grey and straight between its green borders. Hamberton hesitated. On the one hand lay a delectable mazy wood, with cool green paths leading into its depths; on the other, the open, springy turf, curving up to the blue, flecked with gorse and feathered with junipers. The sun blazed down, yet all the time, a breeze—the enticing breath

of spring itself—ran in silent swiftness down the slope, calling him.

He left the road, and went on towards the high crest of the Down. He was in the mood to follow any faint attraction that suggested any one thing as more desirable than another, in this unescapable desert of a world.

The may blossomed white and pink in the thickets, and never had such gorse blazed across the earth as in that miraculous spring. His unstaple mood pursued him: a few hours ago the thought of Visellia was a dull, meaningless pain, because he felt no need of her. Now, again his mood called for her, and for the first time since his loss, save for that moment in the little inn, he was really conscious of her, felt her keeping step with spring itself, across the thyme — and milk-wort-strewn Down. Even that little haunting chant seemed to quiver through the dancing air. Yet how tired he was, how unutterably tired of the long, fruitless journey, and the empty spaces.

He came through a low thicket to the crest of the Down, and faced the wide horizon, but he did not see it, because his eyes fell first on a figure standing on the edge of a deep fosse, and he stood still, looking, not speaking, not moving—waiting for some incredible event.

The low chant swept up to him from the pine-trees more and more clearly. The figure turned towards him, and also stood still.

So he and Helena met again. The incredible event was born.

CHAPTER VII

SOLUTION

For a long time Hamberton would not go to Helena's home, but stayed in the village, and climbed daily to the Down, to meet her at the top. For Helena's life no longer held empty spaces; her work was there to her hand, and the doing of it surpassed the joy of spring.

She wrote to Bessington as follows:

"He needs so much more than I can give him; but then no-one else can give him anything at all. He is like a man who has walked on such dizzy heights that he cannot comprehend the safe ground beneath his feet. It is useless to press him to make plans. At present his one desire is to live here, in a little house he has seen on the other side of our Down. Then he thinks we can go on meeting. Oh, I realise the absurdity of it; but when a man's been through all he has, its no use expecting him to look on life from an ordinary standpoint. He needs me, but just how much, or how little he does not yet know, any more than I do. But I am happy helping him; happier than I have ever been in my life."

Later on she wrote :

“He talks freely now of all kinds of things; and though I sometimes fail to follow him, I think the saying of them helps him. Yesterday he spoke of his old passionate desire to learn what lay behind existence.

“‘I found its the same mystery that lies before it,’ he said. ‘Life and Death; Death and Life. Its not easy to say which is which, after all. The life we once had we seek through death, but long ago we lost that life in death.’”

Another day, he said :

“‘To see there is mystery, to have faith in ultimate illumination, is what really matters. Isn't it said “Faith is the substance of things hoped for?” Well. Vision is the light by which we see them. And once we catch a glimmer of that light, we've got to follow.’”

“I wish he could do something with his thoughts!”

There was a third letter.

“I have big news for you.

“Lately, Geoffrey has always been on the Down before me, and he has talked very little. To-day he began quoting something, half under his breath—wonderful lines. They seemed to open doors, and made my heart beat. They expressed so exactly and clearly, all the things he has been trying to say. Even I could understand. When he stopped, I said ‘yours?’ and he answered, ‘I suppose they are

mine; I've got to put them down, anyhow, what has been shown me. I've *got* to do it. I come up here at dawn, and its all waiting for me.' And then—very apologetically, the dear!—as if I might be hurt—he said would I come in the afternoon instead of morning; as he could then work longer, and he'd come and read them to me in the evening, if I liked.

“If I liked!

“But isn't it splendid, Dominic?”

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