

The Marriage of William Ashe

BY MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

CHAPTER XXIII

“HOW strange!” thought the Dean, as he once more stepped back into the street to look at the front of the Home Secretary’s house in Bruton Street. “He is certainly in town.”

For, according to the *Times*, William Ashe the night before had been hotly engaged in the House of Commons fighting an important bill, of which he was in charge, through committee. Yet the blinds of the house in Bruton Street were all drawn, and the Dean had not yet succeeded in getting any one to answer the bell.

He returned to the attack, and this time a charwoman appeared. At sight of the Dean’s legs and apron she dropped a curtsy, or something like one, informing him that they had workmen in the house and Mr. Ashe was “staying with her ladyship.”

The Dean took the Tranmores’ number in Park Lane and departed thither, not without a sad glance at the desolate hall behind the charwoman, and at the darkened windows of the drawing-room overhead. He thought of that May day two years before, when he had dropped in to lunch with Lady Kitty; his memory, equally effective whether it summoned the detail of an English chronicle, or the features of a face once seen, placed firm and clear before him the long-chinned fellow at Lady Kitty’s left, to whose villainy that empty and forsaken house bore cruel witness. And the little lady herself,—what a radiant and ethereal beauty! Ah me! ah me!

He walked on in meditation, his hands behind his back. Even in this May London, the little Dean was capable of an abstracted spirit, and he had still much to think over. He had his appointment with Ashe. But Ashe had written—evidently in a press of business—from the House, and had omitted to mention his

temporary change of address. The Dean regretted it. He would rather have done his errand with Lady Kitty’s injured husband on some neutral ground, and not in Lady Tranmore’s house.

At Park Lane, however, he was immediately admitted.

“Mr. Ashe will be down directly, sir,” said the butler, as he ushered the visitor into the commodious library on the ground floor which had witnessed for so long the death-in-life of Lord Tranmore. But now Lord Tranmore was bedridden up-stairs, with two nurses to look after him, and to judge from the aspect of the tables piled with letters and books, and from the armful of papers which a private secretary carried off with him as he disappeared before the Dean, Ashe was now fully at home in the room which had been his father’s.

There was still a fire in the grate, and the small Dean, who was a chilly mortal, stood on the rug, looking nervously about him. Lord Tranmore had been in office himself, and the room with its bookshelves filled with volumes in worn calf bindings, its solid writing-tables and leather sofas, its candlesticks and inkstands of old silver, slender and simple in pattern, its well-worn Turkey carpet and its political portraits,—“The Duke,” Johnny Russell, Lord Althorp, Peel, Melbourne,—seemed, to the observer on the rug, steeped in the typical habit and reminiscence of English public life.

Well, if the father, poor fellow, had been distinguished in his day, the son had gone far beyond him. The Dean ruminated on a conversation wherewith he had just beguiled his cup of tea at the Athenæum—a conversation with one of the shrewdest members of Lord Parham’s cabinet, a “new man,” and an enthusiastic follower of Ashe.

“Ashe is magnificent! At last our side has found its leader. Oh! Parham will disappear with the next appeal to the

country. He is getting too infirm! Above all, his eyes are nearly gone; his oculist, I hear, gives him no more than six months' sight, unless he throws up. Then Ashe will take his proper place, and if he doesn't make his mark on English history, I'm a Dutchman. Oh! of course that affair last year was an awful business,—the two affairs! When Parliament opened in February, there were some of us who thought that Ashe would never get through the session. A man so changed, so struck down, I have seldom seen. You remember what a handsome boy he was, up to last year even! Now he's a middle-aged man. All the same, he held on, and the House gave him that quiet sympathy and support that it can give when it likes a fellow. And gradually you could see the life come back into him,—and the ambition. By George! he did well in that trade-union business before Easter, and the bill that's on now,—it's masterly, the way in which he's piloting it through! The House positively likes to be managed by him; it's a sight worthy of our best political traditions. Oh yes, Ashe will go far; and, thank God, that wretched little woman—what has become of her, by the way?—has neither crushed his energy, nor robbed England of his services. But it was touch and go."

To all of which the Dean had replied little or nothing. But his heart had sunk within him; and the doubtfulness of a certain enterprise in which he was engaged had appeared to him in even more startling colors than before.

However, here he was. And suddenly, as he stood before the fire, he bowed his white head and said to himself a couple of verses from one of the psalms for the day:

Who will lead me into the strong city: who
will bring me into Edom?
O be thou our help in trouble: for vain is
the help of man.

The door opened; and the Dean straightened himself impetuously, every nerve tightening to its work.

"How do you do, my dear Dean?" said Ashe, enclosing the frail ascetic hand in both his own. "I trust I have not kept you waiting. My mother was with me.

Sit there, please: you will have the light behind you."

"Thank you. I prefer standing a little, if you don't mind,—and I like the fire."

Ashe threw himself into a chair, and shaded his eyes with his hand. The Dean noticed the strains of gray in his curly hair, and that aspect, as of something withered and wayworn, which had invaded the man's whole personality, balanced indeed by an intellectual dignity and distinction which had never been so commanding. It was as though the stern and constant wrestle of the mind had burnt away all lesser things,—the old easy grace, the old careless pleasure in life.

"I think you know," began the Dean, clearing his throat, "why I asked you to see me?"

"You wished, I think, to speak to me—about my wife," said Ashe, with difficulty.

Under his sheltering hand, his eyes looked straight before him into the fire.

The Dean fidgeted a moment, lifted a small Greek vase on the mantelpiece and set it down,—then turned round,—

"I heard from her ten days ago,—the most piteous letter. As you know, I had always a great regard for her. The news of last year was a sharp sorrow to me—as though she had been a daughter. I felt I must see her. So I put myself into the train and went to Venice."

Ashe started a little, but said nothing.

"Or rather to Treviso, for, as I think you know, she is there with Lady Alice."

"Yes, that I had heard."

The Dean paused again, then moved a little nearer to Ashe, looking down upon him.

"May I ask—stop me if I seem impertinent—how much you know of the history of the winter?"

"Very little!" said Ashe, in a low voice. "My mother got some information from the English consul at Trieste who is a friend of hers,—to whom, it seems, Lady Kitty applied; but it did not amount to much."

The Dean drew a small note-book from a breast pocket and looked at some entries in it.

"They seem to have reached Marinitza in November. If I understood aright, Lady Kitty had no maid with her?"

"No. The maid Blanche was sent home from Verona."

"How Lady Kitty ever got through the journey!—or the winter!" said the Dean, throwing up his hands. "Her health of course is irreparably injured. But that she did not die a thousand times over, of hardship and misery,—is the most astonishing thing! They were in a wretched village, nearly 4000 feet up, a village of wooden huts, with a wooden hospital. All the winter, nearly, they were deep in snow, and Lady Kitty worked as a nurse. Cliffe seems to have been away fighting, very often, and at other times came back to rest and see to supplies—"

"I understand she passed as his wife?" said Ashe.

The Dean made a sign of reluctant assent.

"They lived in a little house near the hospital. She tells me that after the first two months she began to loathe him, and she moved into the hospital to escape him. He tried at first to melt and propitiate her; but when he found that it was no use, and that she was practically lost to him, he changed his temper, and he might have behaved to her like the tyrant he is, but that her hold over the people among whom they were living, both on fighting-men and the women, had become by this time greater than his own. They adored her, and Cliffe dared not ill-treat her. And so it went on through the winter. Sometimes they were on more friendly terms than at others. I gather that when he showed his daredevil, heroic side she would relent to him, and talk as though she loved him. But she would never go back—to live with him; and that after a time alienated him completely. He was away more and more; and at last, she tells me, there was a handsome Bosnian girl,—and, well,—you can imagine the rest. Lady Kitty was so ill in March that they thought her dying, but she managed to write to this consul you spoke of at Trieste, and he sent up a doctor and a nurse. But this you probably know?"

"Yes," said Ashe, hoarsely. "I heard that she was apparently very ill when she reached Treviso, but that she had rallied under Alice's nursing. Lady Alice wrote to my mother."

"Did she tell Lady Tranmore anything

of Lady Kitty's state of mind?" said the Dean, after a pause.

Ashe also was slow in answering. At last he said,

"I understand there has been great regret for the past."

"Regret!" cried the Dean. "If ever there was a terrible case of the dealings of God with a human soul!"

He began to walk up and down impetuously, wrestling with emotion.

"Did she give you any explanation," said Ashe, presently, in a voice scarcely audible—"of their meeting at Verona? You know, my mother believed—that she had broken with him—that all was saved. Then came a letter from the maid, written at Kitty's direction, to say that she had left her mistress—and they had started for Bosnia."

"No; I tried. But she seemed to shrink with horror from everything to do with Verona. I have always supposed that fellow in some way got the information he wanted—bought it no doubt—and pursued her. But that she honestly meant to break with him I have no doubt at all."

Ashe said nothing.

"Think," said the Dean, "of the effect of that man's sudden appearance—of his romantic and powerful personality—your wife alone, miserable—doubting your love for her—"

Ashe raised his hand, with a gesture of passion.

"If she had had the smallest love left for me, she could have protected herself! I had written to her—she knew—"

His voice broke. The Dean's face quivered.

"My dear fellow—God knows—" He broke off. When he recovered composure, he said:

"Let us go back to Lady Kitty. Regret is no word to express what I saw. She is consumed by remorse night and day. She is also still—as far as my eyes can judge—desperately ill. There is probably lung trouble, caused by the privations of the winter. And the whole nervous system is shattered."

Ashe looked up. His aspect showed the effect of the words.

"Every provision shall be made for her," he said, in a voice muffled and difficult. "Lady Alice has been told al-

ready to spare no expense,—to do everything that can be done.”

“There is only one thing that can be done for her,” said the Dean.

Ashe did not speak.

“There is only one thing that you or any one else could do for her,” the Dean repeated, slowly, “and that is to love—and forgive her!” His voice trembled.

“Was it her wish that you should come to me?” said Ashe, after a moment.

“Yes. I found her at first very despairing,—and extremely difficult to manage. She regretted she had written to me, and neither Lady Alice nor I could get her to talk. But one day”—the old man turned away, looking into the fire, with his back to Ashe, and with difficulty pursued his story—“one day, whether it was the sight of a paralyzed child that used to come to Lady Alice’s lace-class, or some impression from the service of the mass, to which she often goes in the early mornings with her sister, I don’t know, but she sent for me—and—and broke down entirely. She implored me to see you, and to ask you if she might live at Haggart, near the child’s grave. She told me that, according to every doctor she has seen, she is doomed, physically. But I don’t think she wants to work upon your pity. She herself declares that she has much more vitality than people think, and that the doctors may be all wrong. So that you are not to take that into account. But if you will so far forgive her as to let her live at Haggart, and occasionally to go and see her, that would be the only happiness to which she could now look forward, and she promises that she will follow your wishes in every respect, and will not hinder or persecute you in any way.”

Ashe threw up his hands in a melancholy gesture. The Dean understood it to mean a disbelief in the ability of the person promising to keep such an engagement. His face flushed—he looked uncertainly at Ashe.

“For my part,” he said, quickly, “I am not going to advise you for a moment to trust to any such promise.”

Rising from his seat, Ashe began to pace the room. The Dean followed him with his eyes, which kindled more and more.

“But,” he resumed, “I none the less

urge and implore you to grant Lady Kitty’s prayer.”

Ashe slightly shook his head. The little Dean drew himself together.

“May I speak to you—with a full frankness? I have known and loved you from a boy. And”—he stopped a moment, then said simply—“I am a Christian minister.”

Ashe, with a sad and charming courtesy, laid his hand on the old man’s arm.

“I can only be grateful to you,” he said, and stood waiting.

“At least you will understand me,” said the Dean. “You are not one of the small souls. Well—here it is! Lady Kitty has been an unfaithful wife. She does not attempt to deny or cover it. But in my belief she loves you still, and has always loved you. And when you married her, you must, I think, have realized that you were running no ordinary risks. The position and antecedents of her mother,—the bringing up of the poor child herself,—the wildness of her temperament, and the absence of anything like self-discipline and self-control, must surely have made you anxious? I certainly remember that Lady Traumore was full of fears.”

He looked for a reply.

“Yes,” said Ashe, “I was anxious. Or rather I saw the risks clearly. But I was in love, and I thought that love could do everything.”

The Dean looked at him curiously—hesitated—and at last said:

“Forgive me. Did you take your task seriously enough?—did you give Lady Kitty all the help you might?”

The blue eyes scanned Ashe’s face. Ashe turned away, as though the words had touched a sore.

“I know very well,” he said, unsteadily, “that I seemed to you and others a weak and self-indulgent fool. All I can say is, it was not in me to play the tutor and master to my wife.”

“She was so young, so undisciplined,” said the Dean, earnestly. “Did you guard her as you might?”

A touch of impatience appeared in Ashe.

“Do you really think, my dear Dean,” he said, as he resumed his walk up and down, “that one human being has, ultimately, any decisive power over another?”

If so, I am more of a believer in—fate—or liberty—I am not sure which—than you.”

The Dean sighed.

“That you were infinitely good and loving to her we all know.”

“‘Good’—‘loving’?” said Ashe, under her breath, with a note of scorn. “I—”

He restrained himself, hiding his face as he hung over the fire.

There was a silence, till the Dean once more placed himself in Ashe’s path. “My dear friend—you saw the risks, and yet you took them! You made the vow ‘for better, for worse.’ My friend, you have, so to speak, lost your venture! But let me urge on you that the obligation remains!”

“What obligation?”

“The obligation to the life you took into your own hands,—to the soul you vowed to cherish,” said the Dean, with an apostolic and passionate earnestness.

Ashe stood before him, pale, and charged with resolution.

“That obligation—has been cancelled,—by the laws of your own Christian faith, no less than by the ordinary laws of society.”

“I do not so read it!” cried the Dean, with vivacity. “Men say so, ‘for the hardness of their hearts.’ But the divine pity which transformed men’s idea of marriage could never have meant to lay it down that in marriage alone there was to be no forgiveness.”

“You forget your text,” said Ashe, steadily. “‘Saving for the cause—’”

His voice failed him.

“Permissive!” was the Dean’s eager reply,—“permissive only. There are cases, I grant you,—cases of impenitent wickedness,—where the higher law is suspended, finds no chance to act,—where relief from the bond is itself mercy and justice. But the higher law is always there. You know the formula—‘It was said by them of old time—But I say unto you’—and then follows the new law of a new society. And so in marriage. If love has the smallest room to work—if forgiveness can find the narrowest foothold—love and forgiveness are imposed on—demanded of—the Christian!—here as everywhere else. Love and forgiveness,—not penalty and hate!”

“There is no question of hate—and—I doubt whether I am a Christian,” said Ashe, quietly, turning away.

The Dean looked at him a little askance—breathing fast.

“But you are a *heart*, William!” he said, using the privilege of his white hairs, speaking as he might have spoken to the Eton boys of twenty years before—“Aye, and one of the noblest. You gathered that poor thing into your arms—knowing what were the temptations of her nature, and she became the mother of your child. Now—alas! those temptations have conquered her. But she still turns to you—she still clings to you—and she has no one else. And if you reject her, she will go down unforgiven and despairing to the grave.”

For the first time Ashe’s lips trembled. But his speech was very quiet and collected.

“I must try and explain myself,” he said. “Why should we talk of forgiveness? It is not a word that I much understand, or that means much to men of my type and generation. I see what has happened in this way. Kitty’s conduct last year hit me desperately hard. It destroyed my private happiness, and but for the generosity of the best friends ever man had, it would have driven me out of public life. I warned her that the consequences of the Cliffe matter would be irreparable, and she still carried it through. She left me for that man,—and at a time when by her own action it was impossible for me to defend either her or myself. What course of action remained to me? I *did* remember her temperament, her antecedents, and the certainty that this man, whatever might be his moments of heroism, was a selfish and incorrigible brute in his dealings with women. So I wrote to her, through this same consul at Trieste. I let her know that if she wished it, and if there were any chance of his marrying her, I would begin divorce proceedings at once. She had only to say the word. If she did not wish it, I would spare her and myself the shame and scandal of publicity. And if she left him, I would make additional provision for her which would ensure her every comfort. She never sent a word of reply, and I have taken no steps. But as soon as I heard she was at Treviso I

wrote again,—or rather this time my lawyers wrote, suggesting that the time had come for the extra provision I had spoken of, which I was most ready and anxious to make.”

He paused.

“And this,” said the Dean, “is all? This is, in fact, your answer to me?”

Ashe made a sign of assent.

“Except,” he added, with emotion, “that I have heard, only to-day, that if Kitty wishes it, her old friend Miss French will go out to her at once, nurse her, and travel with her as long as she pleases. Miss French’s brother has just married, and she is at liberty. She is most deeply attached to Kitty, and as soon as she heard Lady Alice’s report of her state, she forgot everything else. Can you not persuade—Kitty”—he looked up urgently—“to accept her offer?”

“I doubt it,” said the Dean, sadly. “There is only one thing she pines for, and without it she will be a sick child crossed. Ah! well,—well! So to allow her to share your life again—however humbly and intermittently—is impossible?”

It seemed to the Dean that a shudder passed through the man beside him.

“Impossible,” said Ashe, sharply. “But not only for private reasons.”

“You mean your public duty stands in the way?”

“Kitty left me of her own free will. I have put my hand to the plough again,—and I cannot turn back. You can see for yourself that I am not at my own disposal,—I belong to my party, to the men with whom I act, who have behaved to me with the utmost generosity.”

“Of course Lady Kitty could no longer share your public life. But at Haggart—in seclusion?”

“You know what her personality is—how absorbing—how impossible to forget! No,—if she returned to me, on any terms whatever, all the old conditions would begin again. I should inevitably have to leave politics.”

“And that—you are not prepared to do?”

The Dean wondered at his own audacity, and a touch of proud surprise expressed itself in Ashe.

“I should have preferred to put it

that I have accepted great tasks and heavy responsibilities—and that I am not my own master.”

The Dean watched him closely. Across the field of imagination there passed the figure of one who “went away sorrowful, having great possessions,” and his heart—the heart of a child or a knight errant—burned within him.

But before he could speak again the door of the room opened, and a lady in black entered. Ashe turned towards her.

“Do you forbid me, William?” she said, quietly,—“or may I join your conversation?”

Ashe held out his hand and drew her to him. Lady Tranmore greeted her old friend the Dean, and he looked at her, overcome with emotion and doubt.

“You have come to us at a critical moment,” he said,—“and I am afraid you are against me.”

She asked what they had been discussing, though indeed, as she said, she partly guessed. And the Dean, beginning to be shaken in his own cause, repeated his pleadings with a sinking heart. They sounded to him stranger and less persuasive than before. In doing what he had done he had been influenced by an instinctive feeling that Ashe would not treat the wrong done him as other men might treat it; that, to put it at the least, he would be able to handle it with an ethical originality, to separate himself in dealing with it from the mere weight of social tradition. Yet now as he saw the faces of the mother and son together,—the mother leaning on the son’s arm,—and realized all the strength of the social ideas which they represented, even though, in Ashe’s case, there had been a certain individual flouting of them, futile and powerless in the end,—the Dean gave way.

“There—there!” he said, as he finished his plea, and Lady Tranmore’s sad gravity remained untouched. “I see you both think me a dreamer of dreams!”

“Nay, dear friend!” said Lady Tranmore, with the melancholy smile which lent still further beauty to the refined austerity of her face; “these things seem possible to you, because you are the soul of goodness—”

“And a pious old fool to boot!” said the Dean, impatiently. “But I am will-

ing—like St. Paul and my betters—to be a fool for Christ's sake. Lady Tranmore! are you or are you not a Christian?"

"I hope so," she said, with composure, while her cheek flushed. "But our Lord did not ask impossibilities. He knew there were limits to human endurance—and human pardon—though there might be none to God's."

"Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect," cried the Dean. "Where are the limits there?"

"There are other duties in life besides that to a wife who has betrayed her husband," she said, steadily. "You ask of William what he has not the strength to give. His life was wrecked, and he has pieced it together again. And now he has given it to his country. That poor guilty child has no claim upon it."

"But understand," said Ashe, interposing, with an energy that seemed to express the whole man,—“while I live, *everything*—short of what you ask,—that can be done to protect or ease her, shall be done.—Tell her that.”

His features worked painfully. The Dean took up his hat and stick.

"And may I tell her too," he said, pausing, "that you forgive her?"

Ashe hesitated.

"I do not believe," he said at last, "that she would attach any more meaning to that word than I do. She would think it unreal. What's done is done."

The Dean's heart leapt up in the typical Christian challenge to the fatal and the irrevocable. While life lasts the lost sheep can always be sought and found; and love, the mystical wine, can always be poured into the wounds of the soul, healing and re-creating! But he said no more. He felt himself humiliated and defeated.

Ashe and Lady Tranmore took leave of him with an extreme gentleness and affection. He would almost rather they had treated him ill. Yes, he was an optimist and a dreamer!—one who had indeed never grappled in his own person with the worst poisons and corrosions of the soul. Yet still, as he passed along the London streets—marked here and there by the newspaper placards which announced Ashe's committee triumphs of

the night before—he was haunted anew by the immortal words:

"One thing thou lackest," . . . "and come, follow me!"

Ah!—could he have done such a thing himself? or was he merely the scribe carelessly binding on other men's shoulders things grievous to be borne? The answering passion of his faith mounted within him,—joined with a scorn for the easy conditions and happy scholarly pursuits of his own life,—and a thirst, which in the early days of Christendom would have been a thirst for witness and for martyrdom.

Three days later the Dean,—a somewhat shrunken and diminished figure, in ordinary clerical dress, without the buckles and silk stockings that typically belonged to him,—stood once more at the entrance of a small villa, outside the Venetian town of Treviso.

He was very weary, and as he sought disconsolately through all his pockets for the wherewithal to pay his fly, while the spring rain pattered on his wide-awake, he produced an impression, as of some delicate, dragged thing, which would certainly have gone to the heart of his adoring wife could she have beheld it. The Dean's ways were not Sybaritic. He pecked at food and drink like a bird; his clothes never caused him a moment's thought; and it seemed to him a waste of the night to use it for sleeping. But none the less did he go through life finely looked after. Mrs. Winston dressed him, took his tickets, and paid his cabs, and without her it was an arduous matter for the Dean to arrive at any destination whatever. As it was, in the journey from Paris he had lost one of the two bags which Mrs. Winston had packed for him, and he looked remorsefully at the survivor as it was deposited on the steps beside him.

It did not, however, remain on the steps. For when Lady Alice's maid-housekeeper appeared, she informed the Dean, with a certain flurry of manner, that the ladies were not at home. They had gone off that morning—suddenly—to Venice, leaving a letter for him, should he arrive.

"*Fermate!*" cried the Dean, turning

towards the cab, which was trailing away, and the man, who had been scandalously overpaid, came back with alacrity, while the Dean stepped in to read the letter.

When he came out again, he was very pale, and in a great haste. He bade the man replace the bag and drive him at once to the railway station.

On the way thither he murmured to himself, "Horrible!—horrible!"—and both the letter and a newspaper which had been enclosed in it shook in his hands.

He had half an hour to wait before the advent of the evening train for Venice, and he spent it in a quiet corner, poring over the newspaper. And not that newspaper only, for he presently became aware that all the small, ill-printed sheets offered him by an old news-vender in the station were full of the same news, and some with later detail,—nay, that the people walking up and down in the station were eagerly talking of it.

An Englishman had been assassinated in Venice. It seemed that a body had been discovered early on the preceding morning floating in one of the small canals connecting the Fondamente Nuove with the Grand Canal. It had been stabbed in three places; two of the wounds must have been fatal. The papers in the pocket identified the murdered man as the famous English traveller, poet, and journalist, Mr. Geoffrey Cliffe. Mr. Cliffe had just returned from an arduous winter in the Balkans, where he had rendered superb service to the cause of the Bosnian insurgents. He was well known in Venice, and the terrible event had caused a profound sensation there. No clue to the outrage had yet been obtained. But Mr. Cliffe's purse and watch had not been removed.

The Dean arrived in Venice by the midnight train, and went to the hotel on the Riva whither Lady Alice had directed him. She was still up, waiting to see him, and in the dark passage outside Kitty's door she told him what she knew of the murder. It appeared that late that night a startling arrest had been made,—of no less a person than the Signorina Ricci, the well-known actress of the Apollo theatre, and of two men supposed to have been hired by her for the deed. This news was still unknown

to Kitty,—she was in bed, and her companion had kept it from her.

"How is she?" asked the Dean.

"Frightfully excited,—or else dumb. She let me give her something to make her sleep. Strangely enough, she said to me this morning on the way from Treviso, 'It is a woman!—and I know her.'"

The following day, when the Dean entered the dingy hotel sitting-room, a thin figure in black came hurriedly out of the bedroom beside it, and Kitty caught him by the hand.

"Isn't it horrible?" she said, staring at him with her changed, dark-rimmed eyes. "She tried once, in Bosnia. One of the Italians who came out with us—she had got hold of him.—Do you think—he suffered?"

Her voice was quite quiet. The Dean shuddered.

"One of the stabs was in the heart," he said. "But try and put it from you, Lady Kitty. Sit down." He touched her gently on the shoulder.

Kitty nodded.

"Ah, then," she said, "*then* he couldn't have suffered—could he? I am glad."

She let the Dean put her in a chair, and clasping her hands round her knees, she seemed to pursue her own thoughts.

Her aspect affected him almost beyond bearing. Ashe's brilliant wife?—London's spoilt child?—this withered, tragic little creature, of whom it was impossible to believe that, in years, she was not yet twenty-four? So bewildered in mind, so broken in nerve was she, that it was not till he had sat with her some time, now entering perforce into the cloud of horror that brooded over her, now striving to drag her from it, that she asked him about his visit to England.

He told her, in a faltering voice.

She received it very quietly, even with a little, queer, twisting laugh.

"I thought he wouldn't. Was Lady Tranmore there?"

The Dean replied that Lady Tranmore had been there.

"Ah, then of course there was no chance," said Kitty. "When one is as good as that, one never forgives."

She looked up quickly. "Did William say he forgave me?"

The Dean hesitated.

"He said a great deal that was kind and generous."

A slight spasm passed over Kitty's face.

"I suppose he thought it ridiculous to talk of forgiving. So did I—once."

She covered her eyes with her hands,—removing them to say impatiently:

"One can't go on being sorry every moment of the day. No, one can't! Why are we made so? William would agree with me there."

"Dear Lady Kitty!" said the Dean, tenderly, "God forgives—and with Him there is always hope and fresh beginning."

Kitty shook her head.

"I don't know what that means," she said. "I wonder whether"—she looked at him with a certain piteous and yet affectionate malice,—"*if you'd been as deep as I, whether you'd know.*"

The Dean flushed. The hidden wound stung again. Had he, then, no right to speak? He felt himself the elder son of the parable—and hated himself anew.

But he was a Christian, on his Master's business. He must obey orders, even though he could feel no satisfaction, or belief in himself,—though he seem to himself such a shallow and perfunctory person. He did his tender best for Kitty. He spent his loving, enthusiastic, pitiful soul upon her; and while he talked to her she sat with her hands crossed on her lap, and her eyes wandering through the open window to the forest of masts outside, and the dancing wavelets of the lagoon. When at last he spoke of the further provision Ashe wished to make for her, when he implored her to summon Margaret French, she shook her head. "I must think what I shall do," she said, quietly, and a minute afterwards with a flash of her old revolt—"He cannot prevent my going to Harry's grave!"

Early the following morning the murdered man was carried to the cemetery at San Michele. In spite of some attempt on the part of the police to keep the hour secret, half Venice followed the black-draped barca which bore that flawed poet and dubious hero to his rest.

It was a morning of exceeding beauty. On the mean and solitary front of the Casa dei Spiriti there shone a splendor of light; the lagoon was azure and gold;

the mainland a mist of trees in their spring leaf; while far away the cypresses of San Francesco, the slender tower of Torcello, and the long line of Murano,—and farther still the majestic wall of silver Alps,—greeted the eyes that loved them, as the ear is soothed by the notes of a glorious and yet familiar music.

Amid the crowd of gondolas that covered the shallow stretch of lagoon between the northernmost houses of Venice and the island graveyard there was one which held two ladies. Alice Wensleydale was there against her will, and her pinched and tragic face showed her repulsion and irritation. She had endeavored in vain to dissuade Kitty from coming; but in the end she had insisted on accompanying her. Possibly as the boat glided over the water amid a crowd of laughing, chattering Italians, the silent Englishwoman was asking herself what was to be the future of the trust she had taken on herself. Kitty in her extremity had remembered her half-sister's promise, and had thrown herself upon it. But a few weeks' experience had shown that they were strange and uncongenial to each other. There was no true affection between them,—only a certain haunting instinct of kindred. And even this was weakened or embittered by those memories in Alice's mind, which Kitty could never approach, and Alice never forget. What was she to do with her half-sister, stranded and dishonored as she was?—How content or comfort her?—How live her own life beside her?

Kitty sat silent, her eyes fixed upon the barca which held the coffin under its pall. Her mind was the scene of an infinite number of floating and fragmentary recollections; of the day when she and Cliffe had followed the *murazzi* towards the open sea; of the meeting at Verona; of the long winter, with its hardship and its horror; and that hatred and contempt which had sprung up between them. Could she love no one, cling faithfully to no one? And now the restless brain, the vast projects, the mixed nature, the half-greatness of the man, had been silenced,—crushed—in a moment, by the stroke of a knife. He had been killed by a jealous woman,—because of his supposed love for another woman, whose abhorrence, in truth, he had earned in a

few short weeks. There was something absurd mingled with the horror—as though one watched the prank of a demon.

Her sensuous nature was tormented by the thought of the last moment. Had he had time to feel despair—the thirst for life? She prayed not. She thought of the Sunday afternoon at Grosville Park, when they had tried to play billiards, and Lord Grosville had come down on them; or she saw him sitting opposite to her, at supper, on the night of the fancy ball, in the splendid Titian dress, while she gloated over the thoughts of the trick she had played on Mary Lyster;—or bending over her, when she woke from her swoon at Verona. Had she ever really loved him for one hour?—and if not, what possible excuse, before gods or men, was there for this ugly, self-woven tragedy into which she had brought herself and him,—merely because her vanity could not bear that William had not been able to love her, for long, far above all her deserts?

William! Her heart leapt in her breast. He was thirty-six—and she not twenty-four. A strange and desolate wonder overtook her, as the thought seized her of the years they might still spend on the same earth,—members of the same country, breathing the same air—and yet forever separate. Never to see him—or speak to him again!—the thought stirred her imagination, as it were, while it tortured her; there was in it a certain luxury and romance of pain.

Thus, as she followed Cliffe to his last blood-stained rest, did her mind sink in dreams of Ashe,—and in the dismal reckoning up of all that she had so lightly and inconceivably lost. Sometimes she found herself absorbed in a kind of angry marvelling at the strength of the old moral commonplaces.

It had been so easy and so exciting to defy them. Stones which the builders of life reject,—do they still avenge themselves in the old way? There was a kind of rage in the thought.

On the way home, Kitty expressed a wish to go into St. Mark's alone. Lady Alice left her there, and in the shadow of the atrium Kitty looked at her strangely, and kissed her.

An hour after Lady Alice had reached the hotel, a letter was brought to her.

In it Kitty bade her—and the Dean—farewell, and asked that no effort should be made to track her. "I am going to friends—where I shall be safe and at peace. Thank you both with all my heart. Let no one think about me any more."

Of course they disobeyed her. They made what search in Venice they could, without rousing a scandal, and Ashe rushed out to join it, using the special means at a minister's disposal. But it was fruitless. Kitty vanished like a wraith in the dawn; and the living world of action and affairs knew her no more.

CHAPTER XXIV

"WELL, I must have a carriage!" said William Ashe to the landlord of one of the coaching inns of Domo Dossola,—“and if you can't give me one for less, I suppose I shall have to pay this most ridiculous charge. Tell the man to put to at once.”

The landlord who owned the carriages, and would be sitting snugly at home while the peasant on the box faced the elements in consideration of a large number of extra francs to his master, retired with a deferential smile, and told Emilio to bring the horses.

Meanwhile Ashe finished an indifferent dinner, paid a large bill, and went out to survey the preparations for departure, so far as the pelting rain in the courtyard would let him. He was going over the Simplon, starting rather late in the day, and the weather was abominable. His valet Richard Dell kept watch over the luggage and encouraged the ostlers, with a fairly stoical countenance. He was an old traveller, and though he would have preferred not to travel in a deluge, he disliked Italy, as a country of sour wine, and would be glad to find himself across the Alps. Moreover, he knew the decision of his master's character, and being a man of some ability and education, he took a pride in the loftiness of the affairs on which Ashe was generally engaged. If Mr. Ashe said that he *must* get to Geneva the following morning, and to London the morning after, on important business,—why, he *must*, and it was no good talking about weather.

They rattled off through the streets of Domo Dossola, Dell in front with the

driver, under a water-proof hood and apron, Ashe in the closed landau behind, with a plentiful supply of books, newspapers, and cigars to while away the time.

At Isella, the frontier village, he took advantage of the custom-house formalities and of a certain lull in the storm to stroll a little in front of the inn. On the Italian side, looking east, there was a certain wild lifting of the clouds, above the lower course of the stream descending from the Gondo ravine; upon the distant meadows and mountain slopes that marked the opening of the Tosa valley, storm-lights came and went, like phantom deer chased by the storm-clouds; beside him, the swollen river thundered past, seeking a thirsty Italy; and behind, over the famous Gondo cleft, lay darkness and a pelting tumult of rain.

Ashe turned back to the carriage, bidding a silent farewell to a country he did not love; a country mainly significant to him of memories which rose like a harsh barrier between his present self and a time when he too fled life carelessly like other men, and found every hour delightful. Never, as long as he lived, should he come willingly to Italy. But his mother this year had fallen into such an exhaustion of body and mind, caused by his father's long agony, that he had persuaded her to let him carry her over the Alps to Stresa,—a place she had known as a girl and of which she often spoke,—for a Whitsuntide holiday. He himself was no longer in office. A coalition between the Tories and certain dissident Liberals had turned out Lord Parham's government in the course of a stormy autumn session, some eight months before. It had been succeeded by a weak administration, resting on two or three loosely knit groups,—with Ashe as leader of the Opposition. Hence his comparative freedom and the chance to be his mother's escort.

But at Stresa he had been overtaken by some startling political news—news which seemed to foreshadow an almost immediate change of ministry; and urgent telegrams bade him return at once. The coalition on which the government relied had broken down; the resignation of its chief—a “transient and embarrassed phantom”—was imminent; and it was practically certain, in

the singular dearth of older men on his own side, since the retirement of Lord Parham, that within a few weeks if not days Ashe would be called upon to form an administration. . . .

The carriage was soon on its way again, and presently in the darkness of the superb ravine that stretches west and north from Gondo, the tumult of wind and water was such that even Ashe's slackened pulses felt the excitement of it. He left the carriage, and wrapped in a water-proof cape, breasted the wind along the water's edge. Wordsworth's magnificent lines in the “Prelude,” dedicated to this very spot, came back to him, as to one who in these later months had been able to renew some of the literary habits and recollections of earlier years.

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light!

But here on this wild night were only tumult and darkness; and if Nature in this aspect were still to be held, as Wordsworth makes her, the Voice and Apocalypse of God, she breathed a power pitiless and terrible to man. The fierce stream below, the tiny speck made by the carriage and horses straining against the hurricane of wind, the forests on the farther bank climbing to endless heights of rain, the flowers in the rock crannies, lashed and torn, the gloom and chill which had thus blotted out a June evening—all these impressions were impressions of war, of struggle and attack, of forces unfriendly and overwhelming.

A certain restless and melancholy joy in the challenge of the storm, indeed, Ashe felt, as many another strong man has felt before him, in a similar emptiness of heart. But it was because of the mere provocation of physical energy which it involved; not, as it would have been with him in youth, because of the infinitude and vastness of nature, breathing power and expectation into man:

Effort, and expectation and desire,—
And something evermore about to be!

He flung the words upon the wind, which scattered them as soon as they were uttered, merely that he might give them a bitter denial, reject for himself, now and always, the temper they expressed. He had known it well, none

better!—gone to bed and risen up with it—the mere joy in the “mere living.” It had seasoned everything, twined round everything, great and small; a day’s trout-fishing or deer-stalking; a new book, a friend, a famous place; then politics, and the joys of power.

Gone! Here he was, hurrying back to England, to take perhaps in his still young hand the helm of her vast fortunes; and of all the old “expectation and desire,” the old passion of hope, the old sense of the magic that lies in things unknown and ways untrodden, he seemed to himself now incapable. He would do his best, and without the political wrestle life would be too trifling to be borne; but the relish and the savor were gone, and all was gray.

Ah!—he remembered one or two storm-walks with Kitty in their engaged or early married days,—in Scotland chiefly. As he trudged up this Swiss pass, he could see stretches of Scotch heather under drifting mist, and feel a little figure in its tweed dress flung suddenly by the wind and its own soft will against his arm. And then, the sudden embrace, and the wet, fragrant cheek, and her voice,—mocking and sweet!

Oh! God, where was she now? The shock of her disappearance from Venice had left in some ways a deeper mark upon him than even the original catastrophe. For who that had known her could think of such a being, alone, in a world of strangers, without a peculiar dread and anguish? That she was alive he knew, for her five hundred a year—and she had never accepted another penny from him since her flight—was still drawn on her behalf by a banking firm in Paris. His solicitors, since the failure of their first efforts to trace her after Cliffe’s death, had made repeated inquiries; Ashe had himself gone to Paris to see the bankers in question. But he was met by their solemn promise to Kitty to keep her secret inviolate. Madame d’Estrées supplied him with the name of the convent in which Kitty had been brought up; but the Mother Superior denied all knowledge of her. Meanwhile, no course of action on Kitty’s part could have restored her so effectually to her place in Ashe’s imagination. She haunted his days and

nights. So also did his memory of the Dean’s petition. Insensibly, without argument, the whole attitude of his mind thereto had broken down; since he had been out of office, and his days and nights were no longer absorbed in the detail of administration and Parliamentary leadership, he had been the defenceless prey of grief; yearning and pity and agonized regret, rising from the deep subconscious self, had overpowered his first recoil and determination; and in the absence of all other passionate hope, the one desire and dream which still lived warm and throbbing at his heart was the dream that still in some crowd, or loneliness, he might again, before it was too late, see Kitty’s face and the wildness of Kitty’s eyes.

And he believed much the same process had taken place in his mother’s feeling. She rarely spoke of Kitty; but when she did the doubt and soreness of her mind were plain. Her own life had grown very solitary. And in particular the old friendship between her and Polly Lyster had entirely ceased to be. Lady Tranmore shivered when she was named, and would never herself speak of her if she could help it. Ashe had tried in vain to make her explain herself. Surely it was incredible that she could in any way blame Mary for the incident at Verona? Ashe of course remembered the passage in his mother’s letter from Venice, and they had the maid Blanche’s report to Lady Tranmore, of Kitty’s intentions when she left Venice, of her terror when Cliffe appeared,—of her swoon. But he believed with the Dean that any treacherous servant could have brought about the catastrophe. Vincenzo, one of the gondoliers who took Kitty to the station, had seen the luggage labelled for Verona; no doubt Cliffe had bribed him; and this explanation was indeed suggested to Lady Tranmore by the maid. His mother’s suspicion,—if indeed she entertained it,—was so hideous that Ashe, finding it impossible to make his own mind harbor it for an instant, was harrowed by the mere possibility of its existence; as though it represented some hidden sore of consciousness that refused either to be probed or healed.

As he labored on against the storm, all thought of his present life and activ-

ities dropped away from him; he lived entirely in the past. "What is it in me," he thought, "that has made the difference between my life and that of other men I know—that weakened me so with Kitty?" He canvassed his own character, as a third person might have done.

The Christian, no doubt, would say that his married life had failed because God had been absent from it, because there had been in it no consciousness of higher law, of compelling grace.

Ashe pondered what such things might mean. "The Christian—in speculative belief—fails under the challenge of life as often as other men. Surely it depends on something infinitely more primitive and fundamental than Christianity?—something out of which Christianity itself springs? But this something,—does it really exist,—or am I only cheating myself by fancying it? Is it, as all the sages have said, the pursuit of some eternal good, the identification of the self with it,—the 'dying to live'? And is this the real meaning at the heart of Christianity?—at the heart of all religion?—the everlasting meaning, let science play what havoc it please with outward forms and statements?"

Had he, perhaps, *doubted the soul*?

He groaned aloud. "O my God, what matter that I should grow wise—if Kitty is lost and desolate?"

And he trampled on his own thoughts,—feeling them a mere hypocrisy and offence.

As they left the Gondo ravine and began to climb the zigzag road to the Simplon inn, the storm grew still wilder, and the driver with set lips and dripping face urged his patient beasts against a deluge. The road ran rivers; each torrent, carefully channelled, that passed beneath it brought down wood and soil in choking abundance; and Ashe watched the downward push of the rain on the high, exposed banks above the carriage. Once they passed a fragment of road which had been washed away; the driver, pointing to it, said something sulkily about "*frane*" on the "other side."

This bad moment, however, proved to be the last and worst, and when they emerged upon the high valley in which stands the village of Simplon, the rain was already lessening and the clouds

rolling up the great sides and peaks of the Fletschhorn. Ashe promised himself a comparatively fine evening and a rapid run down to Brieg.

Outside the old Simplon posting-house, however, they presently came upon a crowd of vehicles of every description, of which the drivers were standing in groups with dripping rugs across their shoulders,—shouting and gesticulating.

And as they drove up, the news was thundered at them in every possible tongue. Between the hospice and Berizal two hundred metres of road had been completely washed away. The afternoon diligence had just got through by a miracle an hour before the accident occurred; before anything else could pass it would take at least ten or twelve hours' hard work, through the night, before the laborers now being requisitioned by the commune could possibly provide even a temporary passage.

Ashe in despair went into the inn to speak with the landlord, and found that unless he was prepared to abandon books and papers, and make a push for it over mountain paths covered deep in fresh snow, there was no possible escape from the dilemma. He must stay the night. The navvies were already on their way; and as soon as ever the road was passable he should know. For not even a future Prime Minister of England could Herr Ludwig do more.

He and Dell went gloomily up the narrow stone stairs of the inn to look at the bedrooms, which were low-roofed and primitive, penetrated everywhere by the roar of a stream which came down close behind the inn. Through the open door of one of the rooms Ashe saw the foaming mass, framed as it were in a window, and almost in the house.

He chose two small rooms looking on the street, and bade Dell get a fire lit in one of them, a bed moved out, an arm-chair moved in, and as large a table set for him as the inn could provide, while he took a stroll before dinner. He had some important letters to answer, and he pointed out to Dell the bag which contained them.

Then he stepped out into the muddy street, which was still a confusion of horses, vehicles, and men, and turning up a path behind the inn, was soon in

solitude. An evening of splendor! Nature was still in a tragic, declamatory mood—sending piled thunder-clouds of dazzling white across a sky extravagantly blue, and throwing on the high snow-fields and craggy tops a fierce flame-colored light. The valley was resonant with angry sound, and the village, now in shadow, with its slender, crumbling campanile, seemed like a cowering thing over which the eagle has passed.

The grandeur and the freshness, the free elemental play of stream and sky and mountain, seized upon a man in whom the main impulses of life were already weary, and filled him with an involuntary physical delight. He noticed the flowers at his feet, in the drenched grass which was already lifting up its battered stalks, and along the margins of the streams; deep blue columbines, white lilies, and yellow anemones. Incomparable beauty lived and breathed in each foot of pasture; and when he raised his eyes from the grass they fed on visionary splendors of snow and rock, stretching into the heavens.

No life visible. Except a line of homing cattle, led by a little girl with tucked-up skirt and bare feet. And—in the distance—the slender figure of a woman walking,—stopping often to gather a flower,—or to rest? Not a woman of the valley, clearly. No doubt a traveller weather-bound like himself at the inn. He watched the figure a little, for some vague grace of movement that seemed to enter into and make a part of that high beauty in which the scene was steeped; but it disappeared behind a fold of pasture, and he did not see it again.

In spite of the multitude of vehicles gathered about the inn there were not so many guests in the *salle-à-manger*, when Ashe entered it, as he had expected. He supposed that a majority of these vehicles must be return carriages from Brieg. Still, there was much clatter of talk and plates, and German seemed to be the prevailing tongue. Except for a couple whom Ashe took to be a Genevese professor and his wife, there was no lady in the room.

He lingered somewhat late at table, toying with his orange and reading a *Journal de Genève* captured from a neighbor, which contained an excellent

"London letter." The room emptied. The two Swiss handmaidens came in to clear away soiled linen and arrange the tables for the morning's coffee. Only at a farther table, a *couvert* for one person, set by itself, remained still untouched.

He happened to be alone in the room when the door again opened and a lady entered. She did not see him behind his newspaper, and she walked languidly to the farther table and sat down. As she did so, she was seized with a fit of coughing, and when it was over she leaned her head on her hands, gasping.

Ashe had half risen; the newspaper was crushed in his hand; when the Swiss waitress, whom the men of the inn called *Fräulein Anna*,—who was indeed the daughter of the landlord,—came back.

"How are you, madame?" she said, with a smile, and in a slow English, of which she was evidently proud.

"I'm better to-day," said the other, hastily. "I shall start to-morrow. What a noise there is to-night!" she added, in a tone both fretful and weary.

"We are so full,—it is the accident to the road, madame. Will madame have a *thé complet* as before?"

The lady nodded, and *Fräulein Anna*, who evidently knew her ways, brought in the tea at once, stayed chatting beside her for a minute, and then departed, with a long disapproving look at the gentleman in the corner who was so long over his coffee and would not let her clear away.

Ashe made a fierce effort to still the thumping in his breast and decide what he should do. For the guests there was only one door of entrance or exit, and to reach it he must pass close beside the newcomer.

He laid down his newspaper. She heard the rustling, and involuntarily looked round.

There was a slight sound,—an exclamation. She rose. He heard and saw her coming, and sat tranced and motionless, his eyes bent upon her. She came tottering, clinging to the chairs, her hand on her side, till she reached the corner where he was.

"William!" she said, with a little glad sob, under her breath,—*"William!"*

He himself could not speak. He stood there gazing at her, his lips moving with-

out sound. It seemed to him that she turned her head a moment, as though to look for some one beside him,—with an exquisite tremor of the mouth.

"Isn't it strange?" she said, in the same guarded voice. "I had a dream once,—a valley—and mountains—and an inn. You sat here—just like this—and—"

She put up her hands to her eyes a moment, shivered, and withdrew them. From her expression she seemed to be waiting for him to speak. He moved and stood beside her.

"Where can we talk?" he said, with difficulty.

She shook her head vaguely, looking round her with that slight frown, complaining and yet sweet, which was like a touch of fire on memory.

The waitress came back into the room.

"It is odd to have met you here!" said Kitty, in a laughing voice. "Let us go into the *Salon de Lecture*. The maids want to clear away. Please bring your newspaper."

Fräulein Anna looked at them with a momentary curiosity, and went on with her work. They passed into the passageway outside, which was full of smokers overflowing from the crowded room beyond, where the humbler frequenters of the inn ate and drank.

Kitty glanced round her in bewilderment. "The *Salon de Lecture* will be full too. Where shall we go?" she said, looking up.

Ashe's hand clenched as it hung beside him. The old gesture—and the drawn, emaciated face—they pierced the heart.

"I told my servant to arrange me a sitting-room up-stairs," he said, hurriedly, in her ear. "Will you go up first?—No. 10."

She nodded, and began slowly to mount the stairs, coughing as she went. The man whom Ashe had taken for a Genevese professor looked after her, glanced at his neighbor, and shrugged his shoulders. "Phthisique," he said, with a note of pity. The other nodded. "Et d'un type très-avancé!"

They moved towards the door and stood looking into the night, which was dark with intermittent rain. Ashe studied a map of the commune which hung on the

wall beside him, till at a moment when the passage had become comparatively clear he turned and went up-stairs.

The door of his improvised *salon* was ajar. Beyond it, his valet was coming out of his bedroom, with wet clothes over his arm. Ashe hesitated. But the man had been with him through the greater part of his married life, and was a good heart. He beckoned him back into the room he was leaving and the two stepped inside.

"Dell, my good fellow, I want your help. I have just met my wife here—Lady Kitty.—You understand.—Neither of us of course had any idea.—Lady Kitty is very ill. We wish to have a conversation—uninterrupted. I trust you to keep guard."

The young man, son of one of the Haggart gardeners, started and flushed, then gave his master a look of sympathy.

"I'll do my best, sir."

Ashe nodded and went back to the next room. He closed the door behind him. Kitty, who was sitting by the fire, half rose. Their eyes met. Then with a stifled cry he flung himself down, kneeling beside her, and she sank into his arms. His tears fell on her face, anguish and pity overwhelmed him.

"You may!" she said, brokenly, putting up her hand to his cheek and kissing him,—*"you may! I'm not mad or wicked now,—and I'm dying."*

Agonized murmurs of love, pardon, self-abasement, passed between them. It was as though a great stream bore them on its breast; an awful and majestic power enwrapped them, and made each word, each kiss, wonderful, sacramental. He drew himself away at last, holding her hair back from her brow and temples, studying her features, his own face convulsed.

"Where have you been? Why did you hide from me?"

"You forbade me," she said, stroking his hair. "And it was quite right. The dear Dean told me,—and I quite understood. If I'd gone to Haggart then, there'd have been more trouble. I should have tried to get my old place back. And now it's all over. You can give me all I want, because I can't live. It's only a question of months, perhaps weeks. Nobody could blame you, could they? Peo-

ple don't laugh when—it's death. It simplifies things so,—doesn't it?"

She smiled, and nestled to him again.

"What do you mean?" he said, almost violently. "Why are you so ill?"

"It was Bosnia first, and then—being miserable—I suppose. And Poitiers was very cold,—and the nuns very stuffy, bless them,—they wouldn't let me have air enough."

He groaned aloud while he remembered his winter in London, in the forlorn luxury of the Park Lane house.

"Where have you been?" he repeated.

"Oh! I went to the *Sœurs Blanches*,—you remember?—where I used to be. You went there, didn't you?"—he made a sign of miserable assent—"but I made them promise not to tell! There was an old mistress of novices there still who used to be very fond of me. She got one of the houses of the *Sacré Cœur* to take me in—at Poitiers. They thought they were gathering a stray sheep back into the fold, you understand, as I was brought up a Catholic—of sorts. And I didn't mind!" The familiar intonation, soft, complacent, humorous, rose like a ghost between them.—"I used to like going to mass. But this Easter they wanted to make me 'go to my duties'—you know what it means?—and I wouldn't. I wanted to confess"—she shuddered and drew his face down to hers again,—“but only once—to—you—and then,—well, then to die, and have done with it. You see, I knew you can't get on long with three-quarters of a lung. And they were rather tiresome—they didn't understand. So three weeks ago I drew some money out, and said goodbye to them. Oh! they were very kind, and very sorry for me. They wanted me to take a maid, and I meant to. But the one they found wouldn't come with me when she saw how ill I was,—and it all lingered on,—so one day I just walked out to the railway station and went to Paris. But Paris was rainy,—and I felt I must see the sun again. So I stayed two nights at a little hotel Maman used to go to—horrid place!—and each night I read your speeches in the reading-room,—and then I got my things from Poitiers, and started—"

A fit of coughing stopped her, coughing so terrible and destructive that he

almost rushed for help. But she restrained him. She made him understand that she wanted certain remedies from her own room across the corridor. He went for them. The door of this room had been shut by the observant Dell, who was watching the passage from his own bedroom farther on. When Ashe had opened it he found himself face to face as it were with the foaming stream outside. The window, as he had seen it before, was wide open to the waterfall just beyond it, and the temperature was piercingly cold and damp. The furniture was of the roughest, and a few of Kitty's clothes lay scattered about. As he fumbled for a light, there hovered before his eyes the remembrance of their room in Bruton Street, strewn with chiffons, and all the elegant and costly trifles that made the natural setting of its mistress.

He found the medicines and hurried back. She feebly gave him directions. "Now the strychnine!—and some brandy."

He did all he could. He drew some chairs together before the fire, and made a couch for her with pillows and rugs. She thanked him with smiles, and her eyes followed his every movement.

"Tell your man to get some 'milk!—And listen,"—she caught his hand. "Lock my door. That nice woman down-stairs will come to look after me, and she'll think I'm asleep."

It was done as she wished. Ashe took in the milk from Dell's hands, and a fresh supply of wood. Then he turned the key in his own door and came back to her. She was lying quiet, and seemed revived.

"How cozy!" she said, with a childish pleasure, looking round her at the bare white walls and scoured boards, warmed with the firelight. The bitter tears swam in Ashe's eyes. He fell into a chair on the other side of the fire and stared—seeing nothing—at the burning logs.

"You needn't suppose that I don't get people to look after me!" she went on, smiling at him again, one shadowy hand propping her cheek. And she prattled on about the kindness of the chambermaids at Vevey and Brieg, and how one of them had wanted to come with her

as her maid. "Oh, I shall find one at Florence if I get there—or a nurse. But just for these few days I wanted to be free! In the winter there were so many people about—so many eyes! I just pined to cheat them—get quit of them. A maid would have bothered me to stay in bed and see doctors—and you know, William, with this illness of mine you're so *restless!*"

"Where were you going to?" he said, without looking up.

"Oh! to Italy somewhere,—just to see some flowers again,—and the sun. Only not to Venice!"

There was a silence, which she broke by a sudden cry as she drew him down to her.

"William! you know—I was coming home to you, when that man—found me."

"I know.—If it had only been I who killed him!"

"I'm just—*Kitty!*" she said, choking,—"as bad as bad can be. But I couldn't have done what Mary Lyster did."

"Kitty—for God's sake!"

"Oh, I know it," she said, almost with triumph,—"*now I know it!* I determined to know—and I got people in Venice to find out. She sent the message—that told him where I was—and I know the man who took it. I suppose it would be pathetic if I sent her word that I had forgiven her. But I *haven't!*"

Ashe cried out that it was wholly and utterly inconceivable.

"Oh no!—she hated me because I had robbed her of Geoffrey. I had killed her life, I suppose,—she killed mine. It was what I deserved, of course; only just at that moment— If there is a God, William, how could He have let it happen so?"

The tears choked her. He left his seat, and kneeling beside her, he raised her in his arms, while she murmured broken and anguished confessions.

"I was so weak—and frightened. And *he* said it was no good trying to go back to you. Everybody knew I had gone to Verona—and he had followed me— No one would ever believe— And he wouldn't go—wouldn't leave me. It would be mere cruelty and desertion, he said. My real life was—with him. And I seemed—paralyzed. Who *had* sent that message? It never occurred to me—I felt as if

some demon held me—and I couldn't escape—"

And again the sighs and tears, which wrung his heart—with which his own mingled. He tried to comfort her; but what comfort could there be? They had been the victims of a crime as hideous as any murder; and yet—behind the crime—there stretched back into the past the preparations and antecedents by which they themselves, alack! had contributed to their own undoing. Had they not both trifled with the mysterious test of life?—he no less than she? And out of the dark had come the axe-stroke that ends weakness and crushes the unstepped, inconstant will.

After long silence, she began to talk in a rambling, delirious way of her months in Bosnia. She spoke of the *cold*,—of the high mountain loneliness—of the terrible sights she had seen—till he drew her, shuddering, closer into his arms. And yet there was that in her talk which amazed him; flashes of insight, of profound and passionate experience, which seemed to fashion her anew before his eyes. The hard peasant life, in contact with the soil and natural forces; the elemental facts of birth and motherhood, of daily toil and suffering; what it means to fight oppressors for freedom, and see your dearest—son, lover, wife, betrothed—die horribly amid the clash of arms; into this caldron of human fate had Kitty plunged her light soul; and in some ways Ashe scarcely knew her again.

She recurred often to the story of a youth, handsome and beardless, who had been wounded by a stray Turkish shot, in the course of the long climb to the village where she nursed. He had managed to gain the height, and then, killed by the march as much as by the shot, he had sunk down to die, on the ground floor of the house where Kitty lived.

"He was a stranger—no one knew him in the village—no one cared. They had their own griefs. I dressed his wound—and gave him water. He thought I was his mother, and asked me to kiss him. I kissed him, William,—and he smiled once—before the last hemorrhage. If you had seen the cold, dismal room—and his poor face!"

Ashe gathered her to his breast. And after a while she said, with closed eyes:

"Oh, what pain there is in the world, William!—what *pain*! That's what—I never knew."

The evening wore on. All the noises ceased down-stairs. One by one the guests came up the stone stairs and along the creaking corridor. Boots were thrown out; the doors closed. The strokes of eleven o'clock rang out from the village campanile; and amid the quiet of the now drizzling rain the echoes of the bell lingered on the ear. Last of all a woman's step passed the door; stopped at the door of Kitty's room, as though some one listened, and then gently returned. "Fräulein Anna!" said Kitty,—"she's a good soul."

Soon nothing was heard but the roar of the flooded stream on one side of the old narrow building, and the dripping of rain on the other. Their low voices were amply covered by these sounds. The night lay before them; safe and undisturbed. Candles burned on the mantelpiece, and on a table behind Kitty's head was a paraffin lamp. She seemed to have a craving for light.

"Kitty!" said Ashe, suddenly bending over her, "understand! I shall never leave you again."

She started, her head fell back on his arm, and her brown eyes considered him.

"William!—I saw the *Standard* at Geneva. Aren't you going home—because of politics?"

"A few telegrams will settle that. I shall take you to Geneva to-morrow. We shall get doctors there."

A little smile played about her mouth—a smile which did not seem to have any reference to his words or to her next question.

"Nobody thinks of the book now, do they, William?"

"No, Kitty, no!—It's all forgotten, dear."

"Oh! it was abominable." She drew a long breath. "But I can't help it—I did get a horrid pleasure out of writing it,—till Venice,—till you left off loving me. Oh! William, William!—what a good thing it is I'm dying."

"Hush, Kitty—hush!"

"It gives one such an unfair advan-

tage, though, doesn't it? You can't ever be angry with me again. There won't be time. William dear!—I haven't had a brain like other people. I know it. It's only since I've been so ill—that I've been sane! It's a strange feeling—as though one had been *bled*—and some poison had drained away. But it would never do for me to take a turn and live! Oh no!—people like me are better safely under the grass. Oh, my beloved, my beloved!—I just want to say that all the time, and nothing else.—I've hungered so to say it!"

He answered her with all the anguish, all the passionate fruitless tenderness, and vain comfortings that rise from the human heart in such a strait. But when he asked her pardon for his hardness towards the Dean's petition, when he said that his conscience had tormented him thenceforward, she would scarcely hear a word.

"You did quite right," she said, peremptorily,—“quite right.”

Then she raised herself on her arm and looked at him.

"William!" she said, with a strange, kindled expression, "I—I don't think that I can live any more! I think—I'm dying—here—now!"

She fell back on her pillows, and he sprang to his feet, crying that he must go for Fräulein Anna and a doctor. But she held him feebly, motioning towards the brandy and strychnine. "That's all—you can do."

He gave them to her, and again she revived and smiled at him.

"Don't be frightened. It was a sudden feeling—it came over me—that this dear little room—and your arms—would be the end. Oh! how much best!—There!—that was foolish!—I'm better. It isn't only the lungs, you see; they say the heart's worst. I nearly went at Vevey, one night. It was such a long faint."

Then she lay quiet, with her hand in his, in a dreamy, peaceful state, and his panic subsided. Once she sent messages to Lady Tranmore—messages full of sorrow, touched also—by a word here, a look there—by the charm of the old Kitty.

"I don't deserve to die like this," she said once, with a half-impatient gesture.

"Nothing can prevent its being beautiful—and touching—you know; our meeting like this—and your goodness to me. Oh! I'm glad. But I don't want to glorify—what I've done.—*Shame!—Shame!*"

And again her face contracted with the old habitual agony, only to be soothed away gradually by his tone and presence, the spending of his whole being in the broken words of love.

Towards the morning, when, as it seemed to him, she had been sleeping for a time, and he had been, if not sleeping, at least dreaming awake beside her, he heard a little low laugh, and looked round. Her brown eyes were wide open, till they seemed to fill the small, blighted face; and they were fixed on an empty chair the other side of the fire.

"It's so strange—in this illness," she whispered,—“that it makes one dream—and generally kind dreams. It's fever—but it's nice.” She turned and looked at him. “Harry was there, William—sitting in that chair. Not a baby any more—but a little fellow—and so lively, and strong, and quick. I had you both—*both!*”

Looking back afterwards, also, he remembered that she spoke several times of religious hopes and beliefs—especially of the hope in another life—and that they seemed to sustain her. Most keenly did he recollect the delicacy with which she had refrained from asking his opinion upon them, lest it should trouble him not to be able to uphold or agree with her; while, at the same time, she wished him to have the comfort of remembering that she had drawn strength and calm, in these last hours, from religious thoughts.

For they proved indeed to be the last hours. About three the morning began to dawn, clear and rosy, with rich lights striking on the snow. Suddenly Kitty sat up, disengaged herself from her wraps, and tottered to her feet.

“I'll go back to my room,” she said, in bewilderment. “I'd rather.”

And as she clung to him, with a startled yet half-considering look, she gazed round her, at the bright fire, the morning light, the chair from which he had risen,—his face.

He tried to dissuade her. But she would go. Her aspect, however, was deathlike, and as he softly undid the doors, and half helped, half carried her across the passage, he said to her that he must go and waken Fräulein Anna and find a doctor.

“No—no.” She grasped him with all her remaining strength. “Stay with me.”

They entered the little room, which seemed to be in a glory of light, for the sun striking across the low roof of the inn had caught the foamy waterfall beyond, and the reflection of it on the white walls and ceiling was dazzling.

Beside the bed she swayed and nearly fell.

“I won't undress,” she murmured,—“I'll just lie down.”

She lay down with his help, turning her face to make a fond, hardly articulate sound, and press her cheek against his. In a few minutes it seemed to him that she was sleeping again. He softly went out of the room and down-stairs. There, early as it was, he found Fräulein Anna, who looked at him with amazement.

“Where can I find a doctor?” he asked her; and they talked for a few minutes, after which she went up-stairs beside him, trembling and flushed.

They found Kitty lying on her side, her face hidden entirely in the curls which had fallen across it, and one arm hanging. There was that in her aspect which made them both recoil. Then Ashe rushed to her with a cry, and as he passionately kissed her cold cheek, he heard the clamor of the frightened girl behind him. “Ach, Gott!—Ach, Gott!”—and the voices of others, men and women, who began to crowd into the narrow room.

THE END.

The End of the Journey

BY GRACE ELLERY CHANNING

THE train, a local, drew up to the primitive station with a ruder jolt and a shrieking whistle, and the woman got out. She stood a moment on the platform, looking off at the brown and dusty landscape,—it was summer and the land was dry,—her face, the while, arming silently for an approaching ordeal.

It had been a finely modelled face, to begin with; now it was as finely scored, with little lines here and there about the corners of the eyes and lips, as if the engraver Sorrow had followed the sculptor Life.

She had probably never been beautiful, but beautiful women would have exchanged with her for that something else which she was, and discerning women would have bartered their fine clothes for her secret of wearing simple ones. Her soft, excellently brushed hair was thinly veined with gray; her costume was a darker gray; her gloves, fitted to the long hands within, unfashionably dainty. In brief, a lady, before the word was spoiled. Equally unmistakably, a lady at odds with her present errand, whatever that might be. The patient restraint of the fine mouth narrowly controlled a complete impatience, and the very carriage of her body and the height at which she held her head seemed in a manner to protest against some inner compulsion,—the distaste was visible through all the weariness of her eyes, gazing from the brown hills to the browner plains at their feet.

There was no one to meet her—which was not surprising, since she knew no one.—and after a moment's doubtful consulting of landmarks she set off down a long road opposite the station, lifting her skirt in one hand to clear the ankle-deep adobe dust, while with the fingertips of the other she held—as we hold what we do not hold willingly—a small package, elaborately tied and sealed.

One house succeeded another at long intervals filled with straggling orange and lemon groves. At the eighth of these, and fully a quarter of a mile from the station, she hesitated a moment before passing through the opening in the neglected cypress hedge and up the narrow path towards the house, unpainted and low, with the wide Californian porch and running vines which render the commonplace of the West so much more tolerable than the commonplace of the East.

It was a spot not incapable of charm, for there were shade-trees and growing things, but the drought had been at work, and the air of barren living somehow diffused itself mutely through the patch of drying vegetables and the shrivelled leaves of the deciduous growth to the house beyond. Even the dustless peppers looked dusty, thin, and forlorn.

The woman stopped short midway of the path. Her lips twitched and a new look passed into her eyes—keyed to silent endurance. The fastidious distaste of the moment before deepened into a revolt of her whole being—a revolt of race,—smiting her to a sudden impulse of sharp anger, followed by pity as sharp.

“Poor boy!”—it was only a muttered sound, but she feared she had cried it aloud; and closing her lips again in their habitual line, she went on up the path, with a sigh like a suppressed sob, carrying her head an unconscious inch higher than before, her finger-tips tightening their protesting clutch.

Evidently she had been expected, for a younger woman appeared at the door and came out on the porch. For a moment they gazed at each other from the top and bottom of the steps before the elder woman spoke.

“You are Mrs. Hallette?”

“Yes,—and I expect you are his mother?”

“I am his mother.”