

## PART III

### CHAPTER XIII

The weeks that followed seemed both brief and long to Tom. The separation he felt keenly, though as a breathing spell the interval was even welcome in a measure. Since the days at Montreux he had been living intensely, swept along by a movement he could not control: now he could pause and think a moment. He tried to get the bird's-eye view in which alone details are seen in their accurate relations and proportions. There was much that perplexed his plain straightforward nature. But the more he thought, the more puzzled he became, and in the end he resigned himself happily to the great flow of life that was sweeping him along. He was distinctly conscious of being 'swept along.' What was going to happen would happen. He wondered, watched and waited. The idea of Egypt, meanwhile, thrilled him with a curious anticipation each time he thought of it. And he thought of it a good deal.

He received letters from Warsaw, but they told nothing of her life there: she referred vaguely to duties whose afflicting nature he half guessed now and the rest was filled with loving solicitude for his welfare. Even through the post she mothered him absurdly. He felt his life now based upon her. Her love was indispensable to him.

The last letters—from Vienna and Trieste—were full of a tenderness most comforting, and he felt relief that she had 'finished with Warsaw,' as he put it. His own last letter was timed to catch her steamer. 'You have all my love,' he wrote, 'but you can give what you can spare to Tony, as he's in Egypt by now, and tell him I shall be out a month from to-day. Everything goes well here. I'm to have full charge of the work at Assouan. The Firm has put everything in my hands, but there won't be much to do at first, and I shall be with you at Luxor a great deal. I'm looking forward to Egypt too—immensely. I believe all sorts of wonderful things are going to happen to us there.'

He was very pleased with himself, and very pleased with her, and very pleased with everything. The wave of his life was rising still triumphantly.

He kept her Warsaw letters and reread them frequently. She wrote admirably. Mrs. Haughstone, it seemed, complained about everything, from the cabin and hotel room 'which, she declares, are never so good as my own,' to her position as an invited guest, 'which she accepts as though she favoured me by coming, thinking herself both chaperone and indispensable companion. How little some people realise that no one is ever really indispensable!' And the first letter from Egypt told him to come out quickly and 'help me keep her in her place, as only a man can do. Tony wonders why you're so long about it.' It pleased him very much, and as the time approached for leaving, his spirits rose; indeed, he reached Marseilles much in the mood of a happy, confident boy who has passed all exams, and is off upon a holiday most thoroughly deserved.

There had been time for three or four letters from Luxor, and he read them in the train as he hurried along from Geneva towards the south, leaving the snowy Jura hills behind him. 'Those are the blue mountains we watched from Montreux together in the spring,' he said to himself, looking out of the window. 'Soon, in Egypt, we shall watch the Desert and the Nile instead.' And, remembering that dream—like, happy time of their earliest acquaintance, his heart beat in delighted anticipation. He could think of nothing else but her. Those Montreux days seemed years ago instead of a brief six months. What a lot he had to tell her, how much they would have to talk about. Life, indeed, was rich and full. He was a lucky man; yet—he deserved it all. Belief

and confidence in himself increased. He gazed out of the window, thinking happily as the scenery rushed by. . . . Then he came back to the letters and read them over yet once again; he almost knew them now by heart; he opened his bag and read the Warsaw letters too. Then, putting them all away, he lay back in his corner and tried to sleep. The express train seemed so slow, but the steamer would seem slower still. . . . Thoughts and memories passed idly through his brain, grew mingled and confused; his eyes were closed; he fell into a doze: he almost slept—when something rose into his drowsy mind and made him suddenly wakeful.

What was it? He didn't know. It had vanished as soon as it appeared. But the drowsy mood had passed, the desire to sleep was gone. There was impatience in him, the keen wish to be in Egypt—immediately. He cursed the slow means of travel, longed to be out there, on the spot, with her and Tony. Her last letters had been full of descriptions of the place and people, of Tony and his numerous friends, his kindness in introducing her to the most interesting among them, their picnics together on the Nile and in the Desert, visits to the famous sites of tomb and temple, in particular of an all-night bivouac somewhere and the sunrise over the Theban hills. . . . Tom, as he read it all, felt this keen impatience to be sharing it with them; he was out of it; oh, how he would enjoy it all when he got there! The words 'Theban hills' called up a vivid and stimulating picture in particular.

But it was not this that chased the drowsy mood and made him wakeful. It was the letters themselves, something he had not noticed hitherto, something that had escaped him as he first read them one by one. Indefinable, it hid between the lines. Only on reading the series as a whole was it noticeable at all. He wondered. He asked himself vague questions.

Opening his bag again, he went through the letters in the order of their arrival; then put them back inside the elastic ring with a sensation of relief and a happy sigh. He had discovered the faint, elusive impression that had made him wakeful, but in discovering it had satisfied himself that it was imagination—caused by the increasing impatience of his impetuous heart. For it had seemed to him that he was aware of a change, though so slight as to be scarcely perceptible, and certainly not traceable to actual words or sentences. It struck him that the Warsaw letters felt the separation more keenly, more poignantly, than the Egyptian letters. This seemed due rather to omissions in the latter than to anything else that he could name, for while the Warsaw letters spoke frequently of the separation, of her longing to see him close, those from Luxor omitted all such phrases. There were pleas in plenty for his health, his comfort, his welfare and success—the Mother found full scope—but no direct expression of her need for him. This, briefly, was the notion he had caught faintly from 'between the lines.'

But, having run it to earth, he easily explained it too. At Warsaw she was unhappy; whereas now, in Egypt, their reunion was almost within sight: she felt happier, too, her unpleasant duties over. It was all natural enough. 'What a sentimental donkey a man is when he's in love!' he exclaimed with a self-indulgent smile of pleased forgiveness; 'but the fact is—when she's not by me to explain—I could imagine anything!' And he fell at length into the doze his excited fancy had postponed.

After leaving Marseilles his impatience grew with the slowness of the steamer. The voyage of four days seemed interminable. The sea and sky took on a deeper blue, the air turned softer, the sweetness of the south became more marked. His exhilaration increased with every hour, the desire to reach his destination increasing with it. There was an intensity about his feelings he could not entirely account for. The longing-to see Egypt merged with the longing to see Lettice. But the two were separate. The latter was impatient happiness, while the former struck a slower note—respect and wonder that contained a hint of awe.

Somewhere in this anticipatory excitement, too, hid drama. And his first glimpse of the marvellous old land did prove dramatic in a sense. For when a passenger drew his attention to the white Alexandrian harbour floating on the shining blue, he caught his breath a moment and his heart gave a sudden unexpected leap. He saw the low-lying coast, a palm, a mosque, a minaret; he saw the sandy lip of—Africa.

That shimmering line of blue and gold was Egypt. . . . He had known it would look exactly thus, as he now saw it. The same instant his heart contracted a little. . . . He leaned motionless upon the rail and watched the coast-line coming nearer, ever nearer. It rose out of the burning haze of blue and gold that hung motionless between the water and the air. Bathed in the drenching sunlight, the fringe of the great thirsty Desert seemed to drink the sea. . . .

His entry was accompanied by mingled emotions and sensations. That Lettice stood waiting for him somewhere behind the blaze of light contributed much; yet the thrill owned a more complex origin, it seemed. To any one not entirely callous to the stab of strange romance and stranger beauty, the first sight of Egypt must always be an event, and Tom, by no means thus insensitive, felt it vividly. He was aware of something not wholly unfamiliar. The invitation was so strong, it seemed to entice as with an attraction that was almost summons. As the ship drew nearer, and thoughts of landing filled his mind, he felt no opposition, no resistance, no difficulty, as with other countries. There was no hint of friction anywhere. He seemed instantly at home. Egypt not merely enticed—she pulled him in.

‘Here I am at last!’ whispered a voice, as he watched the noisy throng of Arabs, Nubians, Soudanese upon the crowded wharf. He delighted in the colour, the gleaming eyes, bronze skins, the white caftans with their red and yellow sashes. The phantasmal amber light that filled the huge, still heavens lit something similar in his mind and thoughts. Only the train, with its luxurious restaurant car, its shutters to keep out the dust and heat, appeared incongruous. He lost the power to think this or that. He could only feel, and feel intensely. His feet touched Egypt, and a deep glow of inner happiness possessed him. He was not disappointed anywhere, though as yet he had seen nothing but a steamer quay. Then he sent a telegram to Lettice: ‘Arrived safely. Reach Luxor eight o’clock to-morrow morning’; and, having slid through the Delta country with the flaming sunset, he had his first glimpse of the lordly Pyramids as the train drew into Cairo. Dim and immense he saw them across the swift-falling dusk, shadowy as forgotten centuries that cannot die. Though too distant to feel their menace, he yet knew them towering over him, mysterious, colossal, unintelligible, the sentinels of a gateway he had passed.

Such was the first touch of Egypt on his soul. It was as big and magical as he had known it would be. The magnificence and the glamour both were there. Europe already lay forgotten far behind him, non-existent. Some one tapped him on the shoulder, whispered a password, he was—in. . . .

He dined in Cairo and took the night train on to Luxor, the white, luxurious *wagon lit* again striking an incongruous note. For he had stepped from a platform into space, a space that floated suns and constellations. About him was that sense of the illimitable which broods everywhere in Egypt, in sand and sky, in sun and stars; it absorbed him easily, small human speck in a toy train with electric lights and modern comforts! An emotion difficult to seize gripped his heart, as he slid deeper and deeper into the land towards Lettice. . . . For Lettice also was involved in this. With happiness, yet somehow, too, with tears, he thought of her waiting for him now, expecting him, perhaps reading his telegram for the twentieth time. Through a mist of blue and gold she seemed to beckon to him across the shimmer of the endless yellow sands. He saw the little finger he had kissed. The dear face smiled. But there was a change upon it somewhere, though a change

too subtle to be precisely named. The eyelids were half closed, and in the smile was power; the beckoning finger conveyed a gesture that was new—command. It seemed to point; it had a motion downwards; about her aspect was some flavour of authority almost royal, borrowed, doubtless, from the regal gold and purple of the sky's magnificence.

Oddly, again, his heart contracted as this changed aspect of her, due to heightened imagination, rose before the inner eye. A sensation of uncertainty and question slipped in with it, though whence he knew not. A hint of insecurity assailed his soul—almost a sense of inferiority in himself. It even flashed across him that he was under orders. It was inexplicable. . . . A restlessness in his blood prevented sleep. . . . He drew the blind up and looked out.

There was no moon. The- night was drowned in stars. The train rushed south towards Thebes along the green thread of the Nile; the Lybian desert keeping pace with it, immense and desolate, death gnawing eternally at the narrow strip of life. . . . And again he knew the feeling that he had stepped from a platform into space. Egypt lay spread *below* him. He fell towards it, plunging, and as he fell, looked down—upon something vaguely familiar and half known. . . . An underlying sadness, inexplicable but significant, crept in upon his thoughts.

They rushed past Bedrashein, a straggling Arab village where once great Memphis owned eighteen miles of frontage on the stately river; he saw the low-mud huts, the groves of date-palms that now marked the vanished splendour. They slid by in their hundreds, the spectral desert gleaming like snow between the openings. The huge pyramids of Sakkhâra loomed against the faint western afterglow. He saw the shaft of strange green light they call zodiacal.

And the sadness in him deepened inexplicably—that strange Egyptian sadness which ever underlies the brilliance. . . . The watchful stars looked down with sixty listening centuries between them and a forgotten glory that dreamed now among a thousand sandy tombs. For the silent landscape flying past him like a dream woke emotions both sweet and painful that he could not understand—sweet to poignancy, exquisitely painful.

Perhaps it was natural enough, natural, too, that he should transfer these in some dim measure to the woman now waiting for him among the ruins of many-gated Thebes. The ancient city, dreaming still beside the storied river, assumed an appearance half fabulous in his thoughts. Egypt had wakened imagination in his soul. The change he fancied in Lettice was due, doubtless, to the transforming magic that mingled an actual present with a haunted past. Possibly this was some portion of the truth. . . . And yet, while the mood possessed him, some joy, some inner sheath, as it were, of anticipated happiness slipped off him into the encroaching yellow sand—as though he surrendered, not so much the actual happiness, as his right to it. A second's helplessness crept over him; another Self that was inferior peeped up and sighed and whispered. . . . He was aware of hidden touches that stabbed him into uneasiness, disquiet, almost pain. . . . Some outer tissue was stripped from his normal being, leaving him naked to the tang of extremely delicate shafts, buried so long that interpretation failed him.

The curious sensation, luckily, did not last; but this hint of a familiarity that seemed both sweet and dangerous, made it astonishingly convincing at the time. Some aspect of vanity, of confidence in himself distinctly weakened. . . .

It passed with the spectral palm trees as the train sped farther south. He finally dismissed it as the result of fatigue, excitement and anticipation too prolonged. . . . Yes, he dismissed it. At any rate it passed. It sank out of sight and was forgotten. It had become, perhaps, an integral portion of his being. Possibly, it had always been so, and had been merely waiting to emerge. .

But such intangible and elusive emotions were so new to him that he could not pretend to deal with them. There is a stimulus as of ether about the Egyptian climate that gets into the mind, it is

said, and stirs unwonted dreams and fantasies. The climate becomes mental. His stolid temperament was, perhaps, pricked thus half unintelligibly. He could not understand it. He drew the blind down. But before turning out the light, he read over once again the note of welcome Lettice had sent to meet him at the steamer. It was brief, but infinitely precious. The thought of her love sponged all lesser feelings completely from his mind, and he fell asleep thinking only of their approaching meeting, and of his marvellous deep joy.

#### CHAPTER XIV

On reaching Luxor at eight o'clock in the morning, to his keen delight an Arab servant met him with an unexpected invitation. He had meant to go first to his hotel, but Lettice willed otherwise, everything thought out beforehand in her loving way. He drove accordingly to her house on the outskirts of the town towards Karnak, changed and bathed in a room where he recognised with supreme joy a hundred familiar touches that seemed transplanted from the Brown Flat at home—and found her at nine o'clock waiting for him on the verandah. Breakfast was laid in the shady garden just beyond.

It was ideal as a dream. She stood there dressed in white, wearing a big sun-hat with little roses, sparkling, radiant, a graceful fairy figure from the heart of spring. 'Here's the inevitable fly-whisk, Tom,' was the first thing she said, and as naturally as though they had parted a few hours before, 'it's to keep the flies away, and to keep you at your distance too!' And his first remark, escaping him impulsively in place of a hundred other things he had meant to say, was, 'You look different; you've changed. Lettice, you're far more lovely than I knew. I've never seen you look like that before!' He felt his entire being go out to her in a consuming flame. 'You look perfectly divine.' Sheer admiration took his breath away. 'I believe you're Isis herself,' he laughed in his delight, 'come back into her own!'

'Then you must be Osiris, Tom!' her happy voice responded, 'new risen from his sandy tomb!'

There was no time for private conversation, for Mrs. Haughstone appeared just then and enquired politely after his health and journey. 'The flies are awful,' she mentioned, 'but Lettice always insists on having breakfast out of doors. I hope you'll be able to stand it.' And she continued to flutter her horse-hair whisk as though she would have liked to sweep Egypt itself from the face of the map. 'No wonder the Israelites were glad to leave. There's sand in everything you eat and flies on everything you see.' Yet she said it with what passed in her case for good nature; she, too, was evidently enjoying herself in Egypt.

Tom said that flies and sand would not trouble him with such gorgeous sunlight to compensate, and that anyhow they were better than soot and fogs in London.

'You'll be tired of the sun before a week is over,' she replied, 'and long to see a cloud or feel a drop of rain.' She followed his eyes which seemed unable to leave the face and figure of his hostess. 'But it all agrees wonderfully with my cousin. Don't you find her looking well? She's quite changed into another person, *I* think,' the tone suggesting that it was not altogether a change that she herself approved of. 'We're all different here, a little. Even Mr. Winslowe's improved enormously. He's steadier and wiser than he used to be.' And Tom, laughing, said he hoped he would improve, too, himself.

The comforting hot coffee, the delicious rolls, the cool iced fruit, and, above all, Lettice beside him at last in the pleasant shade, gave Tom such high spirits that the woman's disagreeable personality produced no effect. Through the gate in the stone wall at the end of the garden, beneath masses of drooping bougainvillea, the Nile dreamed past in a sheet of golden haze; the

Theban hills, dipped in the crystal azure of the sky, rose stern and desolate upon the horizon; the air, at this early hour, was fresh and keen. He felt himself in some enchanted garden of the ancient world with a radiant goddess for companion. . . . There was a sound of singing from the river below—the song of the Nile boatman that has not changed these thousand years; a quaint piping melody floated in from the street outside; from the farther shore came the dull beating of a native tom-tom; and the still, burning atmosphere held the mystery of wonder in suspension. Her beauty, at last, had found its perfect setting.

‘I never saw your eyes so wonderful—so soft and brilliant,’ he whispered as soon as they were alone. ‘You’re very happy.’ He paused, looking at her. ‘That’s me, isn’t it? Lettice, say it is at once.’ He was very playful in his joy; but he longed eagerly to hear her admit that his coming meant as much to her as it meant to him.

‘I suppose it must be,’ she replied, ‘but it’s the climate too. This keen dry air and the sunshine bring all one’s power out. There’s something magical in it. You forget the years and feel young—against the background of this old land a lifetime seems like an afternoon, merely. And the nights—oh, Tom, the stars are too, too marvellous.’ She spoke with a kind of exuberance that seemed new in her.

‘They must be,’ he rejoined, as he gazed exultantly, ‘for they’re all in you, sun, air, and stars. You’re a perfect revelation to me of what a woman—’

‘Am I?’ she interrupted, fluttering her whisk between her chair and his. ‘But now, dear Tom, my headstrong boy, tell me how you are and all about yourself, your plans, and everything else in the world besides.’ He told her what he could, answered all her questions, declared he and she were going to have the time of their lives, and behaved generally, as she told him, like a boy out of school. He admitted it. ‘But I’m hungry, Lettice, awfully hungry.’ He kept reminding her that he had been starving for two long months; surely she was starving too. He longed to hear her confess it with a sigh of happy relief. ‘My arms and lips are hungry,’ he went on incorrigibly, ‘but I’m tired, too, from travelling. I feel like putting my head on your breast and going sound asleep.’ ‘My boy,’ she said tenderly, ‘you shall.’ She responded instantly to that. ‘You always were a baby and I’m here to take care of you.’ He seized her hand and kissed it before she could draw it away. ‘You must be careful, Tom. Everything has eyes in Egypt; the Arabs move like ghosts.’ She glanced towards the windows. ‘And the gossip is unbelievable.’ She was quiet again now, and very gentle; it struck him how calm and sweet she was towards him, yet that there was a delightful happy excitement underneath that she only just controlled. He was aware of something wild in her just out of sight—a kind of mental effervescence, almost intoxication she deliberately suppressed.

‘And so are you—unbelievable,’ he exclaimed impetuously; ‘unbelievably beautiful. This is your country with a vengeance, Lettice. You’re like an Egyptian queen—a princess of the sun!’

He gazed critically at her till she lowered her eyes. He realised that, actually, they were not visible from the house and that the garden trees were thick about them; but he also received a faint impression that she did not want, did not intend, to allow quite the same intimacy as before. It just flashed across him with a hint of disappointment, then was gone. His boyish admiration, perhaps, annoyed her. He had felt for a second that her excuse of the windows and the gossip was not the entire truth. The merest shadow of a thought it was. He noticed her eyes fixed intently upon him. The same minute, then, she rose quietly and rustled over to his chair, kissed him on the cheek quickly, and sat down again. ‘There!’ she said playfully as though she had guessed his thoughts, ‘I’ve done the awful thing; now you’ll be reasonable, perhaps!’ And whether or not she had divined his mood, she instantly dispelled it—for the moment. . . .

They talked about a hundred things, moving their chairs as the blazing sunshine found them out, till finally they sat with cushions on the steps of stone that led down to the river beneath the flaming bougainvillea. He felt the strange touch of Egypt all about them, that touch of eternity that floats in the very air, a hint of something deathless and sublime that whispers in the sunshine. Already he was aware of the long fading stretch of years behind. He thought of Egypt as two vast hands that held him, one of tawny gold and one of turquoise blue—the desert and the sky. In the hollow of those great hands, he lay with Lettice—two tiny atoms of sand. . . .

He watched her every movement, every gesture, noted the slightest inflection of her voice, was aware that five years at least had dropped from her, that her complexion had grown softer, a shade darker, too, from the sun; but, above all, that there was a new expression, a new light certainly, soft and brilliant, in her eyes. It seemed, briefly put, that she had blossomed somehow into a fuller expression of herself. An overflowing vitality, masked behind her calmness, betrayed itself in every word and glance and gesture. There was an exuberance he called joy, but it was, somehow, a new, an unexpected joy. She was, of course, aware of his untiring scrutiny; and presently, in a lull, keeping her eyes on the river below them, she spoke of it. 'You find me a little changed, Tom, don't you? I warned you that Egypt had a certain effect on me. It enflames the heart and 'But a very wonderful effect,' he broke in with admiration. 'You're different in a way—yes—but *you* haven't changed—not towards me, I mean.' He wanted to say a great deal more, but could not find the words; he divined that something had happened to her, in Warsaw—probably, and he longed to question her about the 'other' who was her husband, but he could not, of course, allow himself to do so. *M* intuitive feeling came to him that the claim upon her of this other was more remote than formerly. His dread had certainly lessened. The claims upon her of this 'other' seemed no longer—dangerous. . . . He wondered. . . . There was a certain confusion in his mind.

'You got my letter at Alexandria?' she interrupted his reflections. He thanked her with enthusiasm, trying to remember what it said—but without success. It struck him suddenly that there was very little in it after all, and he mentioned this with a reproachful smile. 'That's my restraint,' she replied. 'You always liked restraint. Besides, I wasn't sure it would reach you.' She laughed and blew a kiss towards him. She made a curious gesture he had never seen her make before. It seemed unlike her. More and more he registered a difference in her, as if side by side with the increase of spontaneous vitality there ran another mood, another aspect, almost another point of view. It was not towards him, yet it affected him. There seemed a certain new lightness, even irresponsibility in her; she was more worldly, more human, not more ordinary by any means, but less 'impersonal.' He remembered her singular words: 'It enflames the heart.' He wondered—a little uneasily. There seemed a new touch of wonder about her that made him aware of something commonplace, almost inferior, in himself. . . .

At the same time he felt another thing—a breath of coldness touched him somewhere, though he could not trace its origin to anything she did or said. Was it perhaps in what she left unsaid, undone? He longed to hear her confess how she had missed him, how thrilled she was that he had come: but she did not say these passionately desired things, and when he teased her about it, she showed a slight impatience almost: 'Tom, you know I never talk like that. Anything sentimental I abhor. But I live it. Can't you see?' His ungenerous fancies vanished then at once; at a word, a smile, a glance of the expressive eyes, he instantly forgot all else.

'But I *am* different in Egypt,' she warned him playfully again, half closing her eyelids as she said it. 'I wonder if you'll like me—quite as well.'

'More,' he replied ardently, 'a thousand times more. I feel it already. There's mischief in you,' he went on watching the half-closed eyes, 'a touch of magic too, but very human magic. I love it.' And then he whispered, 'I think you're more within my reach.'

'Am I?' She looked bewitching, a being of light and air.

'Everybody will fall in love with you at sight.' He laughed happily, aware of an enchantment that fascinated him more and more, but when he suddenly went over to her chair, she stopped him with decision. 'Don't, Tom, please don't. Tony'll be here any minute now. It would be unpleasant if he saw you behaving wildly like this! He wouldn't understand.'

He drew back. 'Oh, Tony's coming—then I must be careful!' He laughed, but he was disappointed and he showed it: it was their first day together, and eager though he was to see his cousin, he felt it might well have been postponed a little. He said so.

'One must be natural, Tom,' she told him in reply; 'it's always the best way. This isn't London or Montreux, you see, and—'

'Lettice, I understand,' he interrupted, a trifle ashamed of himself. 'You're quite right.' He tried to look pleased and satisfied, but the truth was he felt suddenly—stupid. 'And we've got lots of time—three months or more ahead of us, haven't we?' She gave him an expressive, tender look with which he had to be contented for the moment.

'And by the by, how is old Tony, and who is his latest?' he enquired carelessly.

'Very excited at your coming, Tom. You'll think him improved, I hope. I believe I'm his latest,' she added, tilting her chin with a delicious pretence at mischief. And the gesture again surprised him. It was new. He thought it foreign to her. There seemed a flavour of impatience, of audacity, almost of challenge in it.

'Finding himself at last. That's good. Then you've been fishing to some purpose.'

'Fishing?'

'Rescuing floating faces.'

She pouted at him. 'I'm not a saint, Tom. You know I never was. Saints are very inspiring to read about, but you couldn't live with one—or love one. Could you, now?'

He gave an inward start she did not notice. The same instant he was aware that it was her happy excitement that made her talk in this exaggerated way. That was why it sounded so unnatural. He forgot it instantly.

They laughed and chatted as happily as two children—Tom felt a boy again—until Mrs. Haughstone appeared, marching down the river bank with an enormous white umbrella over her head, and the talk became general. Tom said he would go to his hotel and return for lunch; he wanted to telephone to Assouan. He asked where Tony was staying. 'But he knew I was at the Winter Palace,' he exclaimed when she mentioned the Savoy. 'He found some people there he wanted to avoid,' she explained, 'so moved down to the Savoy.'

Tom said he would do the same; it was much nearer to her house, for one thing: 'You'll keep him for lunch, won't you?' he said as he went off. 'I'll try,' she promised, 'but he's so busy with his numerous friends as usual that I can't be sure of him. He has more engagements here than in London,'—whereupon Mrs. Haughstone added, 'Oh, he'll stay, Mr. Kolverdon. I'm sure he'll stay. We lunch at one o'clock, remember.'

And in his room at the hotel Tom found a dozen signs of tenderness and care that increased his happiness; there were touches everywhere of her loving thought for his comfort and well-being—flowers, his favourite soap, some cigarettes, one of her own deck-chairs, books, and even a big box of crystallised dates as though he was a baby or a little boy. It all touched him deeply; no other woman in the world could possibly have thought out such dear reminders, much less

have carried them into effect. There was even a writing-pad and a pen-holder with the special nib he liked. He laughed. But her care for him in such trivial things was exquisite because it showed she claimed the right to do them.

His heart brimmed over as he saw them. It was impossible to give up any room, even a hotel room, into which she had put her sweet and mothering personality. He could do without Tony's presence and companionship, rather than resign a room she had thus prepared for him. He engaged it permanently therefore. Then, telephoning to Assouan, he decided to take the night train and see what had to be done there. It all sounded most satisfactory; he foresaw much free time ahead of him; occasional trips to the work would meet the case at present. .

Happier than ever, he returned to a lunch in the open air with her and Tony, and it was the gayest, merriest meal he had ever known. Mrs. Haughstone retired to sleep through the hotter hours of the afternoon, leaving the trio to amuse themselves in freedom. And though they never left the shady garden by the Nile, they amused themselves so well that tea was over and it was time for Tom to get ready for his train before he realised it. Tony and Madame Jaretska drove him to his hotel, and afterwards to the station, sitting in the compartment with him until the train was actually moving. He watched them standing on the platform together, waving their hands. He waved his own. 'I'll be back to-morrow or the next day,' he cried. Emotions and sensations were somewhat tangled in him, but happiness certainly was uppermost.

'Don't forget,' he heard Tony shout. . . . And her eyes were on his own until the trees on the platform hid her from his sight behind their long deep shadows.

## CHAPTER XV

The first excitement of arrival over, he drew breath, as it were, and looked about him. Egypt delighted and amazed him, surpassing his expectations. Its effect upon him was instantaneous and profound. The decisive note sounded at Alexandria continued in his ears. Egypt drew him in with golden, powerful arms. In every detail it was strange, yet with the strangeness of a predetermined welcome. It was not strange to *him*. The thrill of welcome made him feel at home. He had come back. . . .

Here, at Assouan, he was aware of Africa, mystic, half-monstrous continent, lying with its heat and wonder just beyond the horizon. He saw the Southern Cross, pitched low above the sandy rim.

Yet Africa had no call for him. It left him without a thrill, an uninviting, undesirable land. It was Egypt that made the intimate and personal appeal, as of a deeply loved and half-familiar place. It seemed to gather him in against its mighty heart. He lay in some niche of comforting warm sand against the ancient mass that claimed him, tucked in by the wonder and the mystery, protected, even mothered. It was an oddly stimulated imagination that supplied the picture—and made him smile. He snuggled down deeper and deeper into this figurative warm bed of sand the ages had preordained. He felt secure and sheltered—as though the wonder and the mystery veiled something that menaced joy in him, something that concealed a notion of attack. Almost there seemed a whisper in the wind, a watchful and unclosing eye behind the dazzling sunshine: 'Surrender yourself to me, and I will care for you. I will protect you against yourself. . . . Beware!'

This peculiar excitement in his blood was somehow precisely what he had expected; the wonder and the thrill were natural and right. He had known that Egypt would mesmerise his soul exactly in this way. He had, it seemed, anticipated both the exhilaration and the terror. He

thought much about it all, and each time Egypt looked him in the face, he saw Lettice too. They were inseparably connected, as it were. He saw her brilliant eyes peering through the great tawny visage. Together they bade him pause and listen. . . . The wind brought up its faint, elusive whisper: 'Wait. . . We have not done with you. . . . Wait and listen! Watch. . . !'

Before his mind's eye the mighty land lay like a map, a blazing garden of intenser life that the desolation ill concealed. Europe seemed infinitely remote, the life he had been accustomed to unreal, of tepid interest, while the intimate appeal that Egypt made grew more insistent every hour of the day. It was Luxor, however, that called him peremptorily—Luxor where all that was dearest to him in life now awaited his return. He yearned for Luxor; Thebes drew him like a living magnet. Lettice was in Thebes, and Thebes also seemed the heart of ancient Egypt, its centre and its climax. 'Come back to us,' whispered the sweet desert wind; 'we are waiting. . . .' In Thebes seemed the focus of the strange Egyptian spell.

At all hours of the day and night, here in Assouan, it caught him, asking forever the great unanswerable questions. In the pauses of his strenuous work, in the watches of the night, when he heard the little owls and the weird barking of the prowling jackals; in the noontide heat, and in the cold glimmer of the quiet stars, he was never unconscious of its haunting presence, he was never beyond its influence. He was never quite alone. . . .

What did it mean? And why, did this hint of danger, of pain, of loneliness lurk behind the exhilaration and the peace? Wherein lay the essence of the enchantment this singular Egyptian glamour laid upon his very soul?

In his laborious way, Tom worked at the disentanglement, but without much success. One curious thought, however, persisted with a strange enough significance. It rose, in a sense, unbidden. It was not his brain that discovered it. It just 'came.'

For he was thinking of other wonderful countries 'he had known. He remembered Japan and India, both surpassing Egypt in colour, sunshine, gorgeous pageantry, and certainly equalling it in historical association and the rest. Yet, for him, these old lands had no spell, no glamour comparable to what he now experienced. The mind contains them, understands them easily. They are continuous with their past. The traveller drops in and sees them as they always have been. They are still, so to speak, going on comfortably as before. There is no shock of dislocation. They have not died. Whereas Egypt has left the world; Egypt is dead; there is no link with present things. Both heart and mind are aware of this deep vacuum they vainly strive to fill. That ancient civilisation, both marvellous and somewhere monstrous, breaking with beauty, burning with aspiration, mysterious and vital—all has vanished as completely as though it had not been. The prodigious ruins hint, but cannot utter. No reconstruction from tomb or temple can recall a great dream the world has lost. It is forgotten, swept away, there is no clue. Egypt has left the world. . . .

Yet, as he thought about it in his uninspired way, it seemed that some part of him still beat in sympathy with the pulse of the forgotten dream. Egypt indeed was dead, yet sometimes—she came back. . . . She came to revisit her soft stars and moon, her great temples and her mighty tombs. She stole back into the sunshine and the sand; her broken, ruined heart at Thebes received her. He saw her as a spirit, a persistent, living presence, a stupendous Ghost. . . .

And the idea, having offered itself, remained. Both he and Lettice somehow were associated with it, and with this elusive notion of return. They, too, were entangled in the glamour and the spell. They, too, had stolen back as from some immemorial lost dream to revisit the scenes of an intenser yet forgotten life. And Thebes was its centre the secretive and forbidding Theban Hills, with their desolate myriad sepulchres, its focus and its climax. .

Assouan detained him only a couple of days. He had capable lieutenants; there was delay, moreover, in the arrival of certain material; he could always be summoned quickly by telephone. He sent home his report and took the express train back to Luxor and to—her.

He had been too occupied, too tired at night, to do more than write a fond, short letter, then go to sleep; the heat was considerable; he realised that he was in Africa; the scenery fascinated him, the enormous tawny desert, the cataracts of golden yellow sand, the magical old river. The wonder of Philae, with its Osirian shrine and island sanctuary, caught him as it has caught most other humans. After the sheer bulk of the pyramids and temples, Philae bursts into the heart with almost lyrical sweetness. But his heart was fast in Thebes, and not all the enchantment of this desert paradise could seduce him. Moreover, one detail he disliked: the ubiquitous earthenware tom-tom that sounded day and night . . . he heard its sullen beating in his dreams.

Yet of one thing he was ever chiefly conscious—that he was impatient to be with Lettice, that his heart hungered without ceasing, that she meant more to him than ever. Her new beauty astonished him, there was a subtle charm in her presence he had not felt in London, her fresh spontaneous gaiety filled him with keen delight. And all this was his. His arrival gave her such joy that she could not even speak of it; yet he was the cause of it. It made him feel almost shy.

He received one characteristic letter from her. ‘Come back as quickly as you can,’ she wrote. Tony has gone down the river after his birds, and I feel lonely. Telegraph, and come to dinner or breakfast according to your train. I’ll meet you if possible. You must come here for all your meals, as I’m sure the hotel food is poor and the drinking water unsafe. This is open house, remember, for you both.’ And there was a delicious P.S. ‘Mind you only drink filtered water, and avoid the hotel salads because the water hasn’t been boiled.’ He kissed the letter. He laughed. Her tender thought for him almost brought the tears into his eyes. It was the tenderness of his own mother who was dead.

He reached Luxor in the evening, and to his delight she was on the platform; long before the train stopped he recognised her figure, the wide sun-hat with the little roses, the white serge skirt and jacket of knitted yellow silk to keep the evening chill away. They drove straight to her house; the sun was down behind the rocky hills and the Nile lay in a dream of burnished gold; the little owls were calling; there was singing among the native boatmen on the water; they saw the fields of brilliant green with the sands beyond, and the keen air from the desert wafted down the street of what once was great hundred-gated Thebes. A strangely delicate perfume hung about the ancient city. Tom turned to look at the woman beside him in the narrow-seated carriage, and felt as if he were driving through a dream.

‘I can stay a week or ten days at least,’ he said at last. ‘Is old Tony back?’

Yes, he had just arrived and telephoned to ask if he might come to dinner. ‘And look, Tom, you can just see the heads of the Colossi rising out of the haze,’—she pointed quickly—‘I thought we would go and show them you to-morrow. We might all take our tea and eat it in the clover. You’ve seen nothing of Egypt yet.’ She spoke rapidly, eagerly, full of her little plan.

‘All?’ he repeated doubtfully.

‘Yes, wouldn’t you like it?’

‘Oh, rather,’ he said, wondering why he did not say another thing that rose for a moment in his mind.

‘You must see everything,’ she went on spontaneously, ‘and a dragoman’s a bore. Tony’s a far better guide. He knows old Egypt as well as he knows his old birds.’ She laughed. ‘It’s too ridiculous—his enthusiasm; he’s been dying to explain it all to you as he did to me, and he does

it exactly like a museum guide who is a scholar and a poet too. And he is a poet, you know. I'd never noticed it before.'

'Splendid,' said Tom. He was thinking several things at once, among them that the perfumed air reminded him of something he could not quite recall. It seemed far away and yet familiar. 'I'm a rare listener too,' he added.

The King's Valley you really must do alone together,' she went on; 'I can't face it a second time—the heat, the gloom of it—it oppressed and frightened me a little. Those terrible grim hills—they're full of death, those Theban hills.'

'Tony took you?' he asked.

She nodded. 'We did the whole thing,' she added, 'every single Tomb. I was exhausted. I think we all were—except Tony.' The eager look in her face had gone. Her voice betrayed a certain effort. A darkness floated over it, like the shadow of a passing cloud.

'All of you!' he exclaimed, as though it were important. 'No bird-man ever feels tired.' He seemed to think a moment. There was a tiny pause. The carriage was close to the house now, driving-up with a flourish, and Tony and Mrs. Haughstone, an incongruous couple, were visible standing against the luminous orange sky beside the river. Tom pointed to them with a chuckle. 'All right,' he exclaimed, with a gesture as though he came to a decision suddenly, 'it shall be the Colossi tomorrow. There are two of them, aren't there—only two?'

'Two, yes, the Twin Colossi they call them,' she replied, joining in his chuckle at the silhouetted figures in the sunset.

'Two,' he repeated with emphasis, 'not three.' But either she did not notice or else she did not hear. She was leaning forward waving her hand to her other guests upon the bank.

There followed then the happiest week that Tom had ever known, for there was no incident to mar it, nor a single word or act that cast the slightest shadow. His dread of the 'other' who was to come apparently had left him, the faint uneasiness he had felt so often seemed gone. He even forgot to think about it. Lettice he had never seen so gay, so full of enterprise, so radiant. She sparkled as though she had recovered her girlhood suddenly. With Tony in particular she had incessant battles, and Tom listened to their conversations with amusement, for on no single subject were they able to agree, yet neither seemed to get the best of it. Tom felt unable to keep pace with- their more nimble minds. . . .

Tony was certainly improved in many ways, more serious than he had showed himself before, and extraordinarily full of entertaining knowledge into the bargain. Birds and the lore of ancient Egypt, it appeared, were merely two of his pet hobbies; and he talked in such amusing fashion that he kept Tom in roars of laughter, while stimulating Madame Jaretzka to vehement contradictions. They were much alone, and profited by it. The numerous engagements Lettice had mentioned gave no sign. Tony certainly was a brilliant companion as well as an instructive cicerone. There was more in him than Tom had divined before. His clever humour was a great asset in the longer expeditions. 'Tony, I'm tired and hot; please come and talk to me: I want refreshing' was never addressed to Tom, for instance, whose good nature could not take the place of wit. Each of the three, as it were, supplied what the other lacked; it was not surprising they got on well together. Tom, however, though always happy provided Lettice was of the party, envied his cousin fluid temperament and facile gifts—even in the smallest things. Tony, for instance, would mimic Mrs. Haughstone's attitude of having done her hostess a kindness in coming out to Egypt: 'I couldn't do it *again*, dear Lettice, even for *you*'—the way Tony said and acted it had a touch of inspiration.

Mrs. Haughstone herself, meanwhile, within the limits of her angular personality, Tom found also considerably improved. Egypt had changed her too. He forgave her much because she was afraid of the sun, so left them often alone. She showed unselfishness, too, even kindness, on more than one occasion. Tom was aware of a nicer side in her in spite of her jealousy and criticism, she was genuinely careful of her hostess's reputation amid the scandal-loving atmosphere of Egyptian hotel life. It amused him to see how she arrogated to herself the place of chaperone, yet Tom saw true solicitude in it, the attitude of a woman who knew the world towards one who was too trustful. He figured her always holding up a warning finger, and Lettice always laughingly disregarding her advice.

Her warnings to Lettice to be more circumspect were, at any rate, by no means always wrong. Though not particularly observant as a rule, he caught more than once the tail-end of conversations between them in which advice, evidently, had been proffered and laughed aside. But, since it did not concern him, he paid little attention, merely aware that there existed this difference of view. One such occasion, however, Tom had good cause to remember, because it gave him a piece of knowledge he had long desired to possess, yet had never felt within his rights to ask for. It merely gave details, however, of something he already knew.

He entered the room, coming straight from a morning's work at his own hotel, and found them engaged hammer and tongs upon some dispute regarding 'conduct.' Tony, who had been rowing Madame Jaretzka down the river, had made his escape. Madame Jaretzka effected hers as Tom came in, throwing him a look of comical relief across her shoulder. He was alone with the Irish cousin. 'After all, she *is* a married woman,' remarked Mrs. Haughstone, still somewhat indignant from the little battle.

She addressed the words to him as he was the only person within earshot. It seemed natural enough, he thought.

'Yes,' said Tom politely. 'I suppose she is.'

And it was then, quite unexpectedly, that the woman spoke to him as though he knew as much as she did. He ought, perhaps, to have stopped her, but the temptation was too great. He learned the facts concerning Warsaw and the—husband. That the Prince had ill-treated her consistently during the first five years of their married life could certainly not justify her freedom, but that he had lost his reason incurably, no longer even recognised her, that her presence was discouraged by the doctors since it increased the violence of his attacks, and that his malady was hopeless and could end only in his death—all this, while adding to the wonder of her faithful pilgrimages, did assuredly at the same time set her free. . . . The effect upon his mind may be imagined; it deepened his love, increased his admiration, for it explained the suffering in the face she had turned to sweetness, while also justifying her conduct towards himself. With a single blow, moreover, it killed the dread Tom had been haunted by so long—that this was that 'other' who must one day take her from him, obedient to a bigger claim.

This knowledge, as though surreptitiously obtained, Tom locked within his breast until the day when she herself should choose to share it with him.

He remembered another little conversation too when, similarly, he disturbed them in discussion this time it was Mrs. Haughstone who was called away.

'Behaving badly, Lettice, is she? Scolding you again?'

'Not at all. Only she sees the bad in every one and I see the good. She disapproves of Tony rather.'

'Then she will be less often deceived than you,' he replied laughingly. The reference to Tony had escaped him; his slow mind was on the general proposition.

‘Perhaps. But you can only make people better by believing that they *are* better,’ she went on with conviction—when Mrs. Haughstone joined them and took up her parable again:

‘My cousin behaves like a child,’ she said with amusing severity. ‘She doesn’t understand the world. But the world is hard upon ‘grown-ups who behave like children. Lettice thinks everybody good. Her innocence gets her misjudged. And it’s a pity.’

‘I’ll keep an eye on her,’ Tom said solemnly, ‘and we’ll begin this very afternoon.’

‘Do, Mr. Kolverdon, I’m glad to hear it.’ And as she said it, he noticed another expression on her face as she glanced down the drive where Tony, dressed in grey flannels and singing to himself, was seen sauntering towards them. She wore an enigmatic smile by no means pleasant. It gave him a moment’s twinge. He turned from her to Lettice by way of relief. She was waving her white-gloved hand, her eyes were shining, her little face was radiant—and Tom’s happiness came back upon him in a rising flood again as he watched her beauty. . . . He thought that Egypt was the most marvellous place he had ever known. Even Tony looked enchanted—almost handsome. But Lettice looked divine. He felt more and more that the woman in her blossomed into life before his very eyes. His content was absolute.

## CHAPTER XVI

With Tony as guide they took their fill of wonder. The principal expeditions were made alone, introducing Tom to the marvels of ancient Egypt which they already knew. On the sturdiest donkey Thebes could furnish, he raced his cousin across the burning sands, Madame Jartzka following in a sand-cart, her blue veil streaming in the cool north wind. They played like children, defying the tide of mystery that this haunted land pours against the modern human soul, while yet the wonder and the mystery added to their enjoyment, deepening their happiness by contrast.

They ate their *al fresco* luncheons gaily, seated by hoary tombs that opened into the desolate hills; kings, priests, princesses, dead six thousand years, listening in caverns underground to their careless talk. Yet their gaiety had a hush in it, a significance behind the sentences; for even their lightest moments touched ever upon the borders of an awfulness that was sublime, and all that they said or did gained this hint of deeper value—that it was set against a background of the infinite, the deathless.

It was impossible to forget that this was Egypt, the deposit of immemorial secrets, the storehouse of stupendous vanished dreams.

‘There was a majesty, after all, about their strange old gods,’ said Tony one afternoon as they emerged from the stifling darkness of a forgotten kingly tomb into the sunlight. ‘They seem to thunder still—below the ground—subconsciously.’ He was ever ready with the latest modern catchword. He flung himself down upon the sand, shaded from the glare by a recumbent column of granite exquisitely carved, then abandoned of the ages. ‘They touch something in one even today—something superb. Human worship hasn’t changed so fundamentally after all.’

‘A sort of ghostly deathlessness,’ agreed Lettice, making a bed of sand beside him. ‘I think that’s what one feels.’

Tony looked up. He glanced alertly at her. A question flashed a moment in his eyes, then passed unspoken.

‘Perhaps,’ Tony went on in a more flippant tone, ‘even the dullest has to acknowledge the sublime in their conceptions. Isis! Why, the very name is a poem in a single word. Anubis,

Nephtys, Horus—there's poetry in them all. They seem to sing themselves into the heart, as Petrie might have said—but didn't.

'The names *are* rather splendid,' Tom put in, as he unpacked the kettle and spirit-lamp for tea. 'One can't forget them either.'

There was a moment's silence, then Tony spoke again. He had lost his flippant tone. He addressed his remark to Lettice. Tom was aware that she was somehow waiting for it.

'Their deathlessness! Yes, you're right.' He turned an instant to look at the colossal structure behind them, whence the imposing figures of a broken Pharaoh and his Queen stared to the east across the shoulder of some granite Deity that had refused to crumble for three thousand years. 'Their deathlessness,' he repeated, lowering his voice, 'it's really startling.'

He looked about him. It was amazing how his little words, his gesture, his very atmosphere created a spontaneous expectancy—as though Thoth might stride sublimely up across the sand, or even Ra himself come blazing with extended wings and awful disk of fire.

Tom felt the touch of the unearthly as he watched and listened. Lettice—he was certain of it—shivered. He moved nearer and spread a rug across her feet.

'Don't, Tom, please! I'm hot enough already.' Her tone had a childish exasperation in it—as though he interrupted some mood that gave her pleasure. She turned her eyes to Tony, but Tony was busily opening sandwich packets with hands that—Tom thought—shared one quality at least of the stone effigies they had been discussing—size. And he laughed. The spell was broken. They fell hungrily upon their desert meal. . . .

Yet, it was odd how Tony had expressed precisely what Tom had himself been vaguely feeling, though unable to find the language for his fancy—odd, too, that apparently all three of them had felt the same dim thing. No one among them was 'religious,' nor, strictly speaking, imaginative; poetical least of all in the regenerative, creative sense. Not one of the trio, that is, could have seized imaginatively the conception of an alien deity and made it live. Yet Tony's idle mood or idler words had done this very thing—and all three acknowledged it in their various ways. The flavour of a remote familiarity was manifest in each one of them—collectively as well.

Another time they sat by night in ruined Karnak, watching the silver moonlight bring out another world among the mighty pylons. It painted the empty and enormous aisles with crowding processions of lost ages. Speaking in whispers, they saw the stars peep down between the soaring forest of old stone; the cold desert wind brought with it a sadness, a mournful retrospect too vast to realise, the tragedy that such splendour left but a lifeless skeleton behind, a gigantic, soulless ruin. That such great prophecies remained unfulfilled was somewhere both terrible and melancholy. The immortal strength of these Egyptian stones conveyed a grandeur almost sinister. The huge dumb beauty seemed menacing, even ominous; they sat closer they felt dwarfed uncomfortably, their selves reduced to insignificance, almost threatened. Even Tony sobered as they talked in lowered voices, seated in the shadow of the towering columns, their feet resting on the sand.

'I'm sure we've sat here before just like this, the three of us,' he said in a lowered voice; 'it all seems like a dream to me.'

Madame Jaretzka, who was between them, made no answer, and Tom, leaning forward, caught his cousin's eye beyond her. . . . The scene in the London theatre flashed across his mind. He felt very happy, very close to them both, extraordinarily at one with them, the woman he loved best in all the world, the man who was his greatest friend. He felt truth, not foolishness, in Tony's

otherwise commonplace remarks that followed: 'I could swear I'd known you both before—here in Egypt.'

Madame Jaretzka moved a little, shuffling farther back so that she could lean against the great curved pillar. It brought them closer together still. She said no word, however.

'There's certainly a curious sympathy between the three of us,' murmured Tom, who usually felt out of his depth in similar talks, leaving his companions to carry it further while he listened merely. 'It's hard to believe that we meet for the first time now.'

He sat close to her, fingering her gauzy veil that brushed his face. There was a pause, and then Madame Jaretzka said, turning to Tony: 'We met here first anyhow, didn't we? Two winters ago, before I met Tom—'

But Tony said he meant something far older than that, much longer ago. 'You and Tom knew each other as children, you told me once. Tom and I were boys together too . . . but . . .'

His voice died away in Tom's ears; her answers also were inaudible as she kept her head turned towards Tony: his thoughts, besides, were caught away a moment to the days in Montreux and in London. . . . He fell into a reverie that lasted—possibly a minute, possibly several minutes. The conversation between them left him somehow out of it; he had little to contribute; they had an understanding, as it were, on certain subjects that neglected him. His mind accordingly left them. He followed his own thoughts dreamily . . . far away . . . past the deep black shadows and out into the soft blaze of moonlight that showered upon the distant Theban hills. . . . He remembered the curious emotions that had marked his entry into Egypt. He thought of a change in Lettice, at present still undefined. He wondered what it was about her now that lent to her gentle spirit a touch of authority, of worldly authority almost, that he dared not fail to recognise—as though she had the right to it. The flavour of uneasiness stole back. It occurred to him suddenly that he felt no longer quite at home with her *alone* as of old. Some one watched him; some one watched them both. . . .

It was as though for the first time he realised distance—a new distance creeping in upon their relationship somewhere. . . .

A slight shiver brought him back. The wind came moaning down the monstrous, yawning aisles against them. The overpowering effect of so much grandeur had become intolerable. 'Ugh! I'm cold,' he exclaimed abruptly. 'I vote we move a bit. I think—I'll move anyhow.'

Madame Jaretzka turned to him with a definite start; she straightened herself against the huge sandstone column. The moonlight touched her; it clothed her in gold and silver, the gold of the sand, the silver of the moon. She looked ethereal, ghostly, a figure of air and distance. She seemed to belong to her surroundings—another person somehow—faintly Egyptian almost.

'I thought you were asleep, Tom,' she said softly. She had been in the middle of an animated, though whispered, talk with Tony. She peered at him with a little smile that lifted her lip oddly.

'I was far away somewhere,' he returned, peering at her closely. 'I forgot all about you both. I thought, for a moment, I was quite—alone.'

He saw her start again. A significance he hardly intended had crept into his tone. Her face moved back into the shadow quickly beside Tony.

She teased Tom for his want of manners, then fell to caring for his comfort. 'It's icy,' she said, 'and you're in flannels. The sudden chill of these Egyptian nights is really treacherous,' and she took the rug from her lap and put it round his shoulders. As she did so, the strange appearance he had noted increased about her.

And Tom got up abruptly. 'No, Lettice dear, thank you; I think I'll move a bit.' He had said—'Lettice dear' without realising it, and before his cousin too. 'I'll take a turn and then come back for you. You stay here with Tony,' and he moved off somewhat briskly.

Then, instantly, the other two rose up like one person, following him to where the carriage waited. . . .

'They're frightening rather, don't you think—these ancient places?' she said presently, as they drove along past palms and the flat-topped houses of the felaheen. 'There's something watching and listening all the time.'

Tom made no answer. He felt suddenly unsure of something—almost unsure of himself, it seemed.

'One feels a bit lost,' he said slowly after a bit, 'and lonely. It's the size, I think.'

'Perhaps,' she rejoined, peering at him with half-lowered eyelids, 'and the silence.' She broke off then added, 'You can hear your thoughts too clearly.'

Tom was sitting back amid a bundle of rugs she had wrapped him in; Tony, beside her, on the front seat, seemed in a gentle doze. They drove the rest of the way in silence, dropping Tony first at the Savoy, then going on to Tom's hotel. She insisted, although her own house was in the opposite direction. 'And you're to take a hot whisky when you get into bed, remember, and don't get up to-morrow if you feel a chill.' She gave him orders for his health and comfort as though he were her son. Tom noticed it, told her she was divinely precious to him, and promised faithfully to obey.

'What do you think about Tony?' he asked suddenly, when they had driven alone for several minutes. 'I mean, what impression does he make on you? How do you *feel* him?'

'He's enjoying himself immensely with his numerous friends,' she replied at once. 'He grows on one rather. He's a dear, I think.' She looked at him, then turned away again. 'Don't you, Tom?'

'Oh, rather. I've always thought so. I told you first long ago, didn't I?' He made no reference to the exaggeration about the friends. 'And I think it's wonderful how well we—what a perfect trio we are.'

'Yes, isn't it?'

They both became thoughtful then. There fell a pause between them, when Tom broke in abruptly once again:

'But—what do *you* feel? Because *I* think, he's half in love with you, if you want to know.' He leaned over and whispered in her ear. The words tumbled out as though they were in a hurry. 'It pleases me immensely, Lettice; it makes me feel so proud of you and happy. It'll do him a world of good, too, if he loves a woman like you. You'll teach him something.' She smiled shyly and said, 'I wonder, Tom. Do you really think so? He certainly seems fond of me, but I hadn't thought quite that. You think everybody must fall in love with me.' She pushed him away with a gentle yet impatient pressure of her arm, indicating the Arab coachman with a nod of her head. 'Take care of him, Lettice: he's a dear fellow; don't let him break his heart.'

Tom began to flirt outrageously; his arm crept round her, he leaned over and stole a kiss—and to his amazement she did not try to stop him. She did not seem to notice it. She sat very still—a stone statue in the moonlight.

Then, suddenly, he realised that she had not replied to his question. He promptly repeated it therefore. 'You put me off with what *he* feels, but I want to know what *you* feel,' he said with emphasis.

‘But, Tom, I’m not putting you off, as you call it—with anything,’ and there was a touch of annoyance in her tone and manner.

‘Tell me, Lettice; it interests me. You’re such a puzzle, d’you know, out here.’ His tone unconsciously grew more earnest as he spoke.

Madame Jaretska broke into a little laugh. ‘You boy!’ she exclaimed teasingly, ‘you’re trying to heighten his value so as to increase your own by contrast. The more people you can find in love with me, the more you’ll be able to flatter yourself.’

Tom laughed with her, though he did not quite understand. He had never heard her say such a thing before. He accepted the cleverness she gave him credit for, however. ‘Of course, and why shouldn’t I?’ And he was just going to put his original question in another form—had already begun it, in fact—when she interrupted him, putting her hand playfully over his mouth for a second: ‘I do think Tony’s a happy entertaining sort of man,’ she told him, ‘even fascinating in a certain kind of way. He’s very stimulating to me. And I feel—don’t you, Tom?’—a slight change—was it softness?—crept into her tone—‘a sort of beauty in him somewhere?’

‘Yes, p’raps I do,’ he assented briefly; ‘but, I say, Lettice darling, you mischievous Egyptian princess.’

‘Be quiet, Tom, and take your arm away. Here’s the hotel in sight.’ And yet, somehow, he fancied that she preferred his action to the talk.

‘Tell me this first,’ he went on, obeying her peremptory tone: ‘do you think it’s true that we three have been together before like that—as Tony said, I mean? It’s a funny thing, but I swear it sounded true when he said it.’ His tone was earnest again. ‘It gave me the creeps a bit, and, d’you know, you looked so queer, so wonderful in the moonlight—you looked un-English, foreign—like one of those Egyptian figures come to life. That’s what made me cold, I think.’ His laughter died away. He was grave suddenly. He sighed a little and moved closer to her. ‘That’s—what made me get up and leave you,’ he added abruptly.

‘Oh, he’s always saying that kind of thing,’ she answered quickly, moving the rug for him to get out as the carriage slowed up before the brilliantly lit hotel. She made no reference to his other words. There’s a lot of poetry in Tony too—out here.’

‘Said it before, has he?’ exclaimed Tom with genuine astonishment. ‘All three of us or—or just you and him? Am *I* in the business too?’ He was now bubbling over with laughter again for some reason; it all seemed comical, almost. Yet it was a sudden, an emotional laughter. His emotion—his excitement surprised him even at the time.

‘All three of us—I think,’ she said, as he held her hand a moment, saying good-bye. ‘Yes, all three of us, of course. Now good-night, you inquisitive and impertinent boy, and if you have to stay in bed to-morrow we’ll come over and nurse you all day long.’ He answered that he would certainly stay in bed in that case—and watched her waving her hand over the back of the carriage as she drove away into the moonlight like a fading dream of stars and mystery and beauty. Then he took his telegrams and letters from the Arab porter with the face of expressionless bronze, and went up to bed.

‘What a strange and wonderful woman!’ he thought as the lift rushed him up: ‘out here she seems another being, and a thousand times more fascinating.’ He felt almost that he would like to win her all over again from the beginning. ‘She’s different to what she was in England Tony’s different too. And so am I, I do believe!’ he exclaimed in his bedroom, looking at his sunburned face in the glass a moment. ‘We’re all different!’ He felt singularly happy, hilarious, stimulated—a deep and curious excitement was in him. Above all there was high pride that she

belonged to him so absolutely. But the analysis he had indulged in England vanished here. He forgot it all. . . . He was in Egypt with her . . . now.

He read his letters and telegrams, only half realising at first that they called him back to Assouan. 'What a bore,' he thought; 'I simply shan't go. A week's delay won't matter. I can telephone.'

He laid them down upon the table beside him and walked out on to his balcony. Responsibility seemed less in him. He felt a little reckless. His position was quite secure. He was his own master. He meant to enjoy himself. . . . But another, deeper voice was sounding in him too. He heard it, but at first refused to recognise it. It whispered. One word it whispered 'Stay . . .

There was no sleep in him; with an overcoat thrown across his shoulders he watched the calm Egyptian night, the soft army of the stars, the river gleaming in a broad band of silver. Hitherto Lettice had monopolised his energies; he had neglected Egypt, whose indecipherable meaning now came floating in upon him with a strange insistence. Lettice came with it too. The two beauties were indistinguishable.

A flock of boats lay motionless, their black masts hanging in mid-air; all was still and silent, no voices, no footsteps, no movements anywhere. In the distance the desolate rocky hills rolled like a solid wave along the horizon. Gaunt and mysterious, they loomed upon the night. They were pierced by myriad tombs, those solemn hills; the stately dead lay there in hundreds—he imagined them looking forth a moment like himself across the peace and silence of the moonlit desert. They focussed upon Thebes, upon the white hotel, upon a modern world they could not recognise—upon his very windows. It seemed to him for a moment that their ancient eyes met his own across the sand, across the silvery river, and, as they met, a shadowy gleam of recognition passed between them and himself. At the same time he also saw the eyes he loved. They gazed through half-closed eyelids the Eastern eyes of his early boyhood's dream. He remembered again the strange emotion of the day he first arrived in Egypt, weeks ago. . . .

And then he suddenly thought of Tony, and of Tony's careless remark as they sat in ruined Karnak together 'I feel as if we three had all been here before.'

Why it returned to him just now he did not know for some reason unexplained the phrase revived in him. Perhaps he felt an instinctive sympathy towards the poet's idea that he and *she* were lovers of such long standing, of such ancient lineage. It flattered his pride, while at the same time it disturbed him. A sense of vague disquiet grew stronger in him. In any case, he did not dismiss it and forget—his natural way of treating fancies. 'Perhaps,' he murmured, 'the bodies she and I once occupied lie there now—lie under the very stars their eyes—our own—once looked upon.

It was strange the fancy took such root in him. He stood a long time gazing at the vast, lonely necropolis among the mountains. There was an extraordinary stillness over that western bank, where the dead lay in their ancient tombs. The silence was eloquent, but the whole sky whispered to his soul. And again he felt that Egypt welcomed him; he was curiously at home here. It moved the deeps in him, brought him out; it changed him; it brought out Lettice too—brought out a certain power in her. She was more of a woman here, a woman of the world. She was more wilful, and more human. Values had subtly altered. Tony himself was altered. . . . Egypt affected them all three. . . .

The vague uneasiness persisted. His mood changed a little, the excitement gradually subsided; thought shifted to a minor key, subdued by the beauty of the southern night. The world lay in a mysterious glow, the hush was exquisite. Yet there was expectancy that glow, that hush were

ready to burst into flame and language. They covered secrets. Something was watching him. He was dimly aware of a thousand old forgotten things. . . .

He no longer thought, but felt. The calm, the peace, the silence laid soothing fingers against the running of his blood; the turbulent condition settled down. Then, through the quieting surface of his reverie, stole up a yet deeper mood that seemed evoked partly by the mysterious glamour of the scene, yet partly by his will to let it come. It had been a long time in him; he now let it up to breathe. It came, moreover, with ease, and quickly.

For a gentle sadness rose upon him, a sadness deeply hidden that he suddenly laid bare as of set deliberation. The recent play and laughter, above all his own excitement, had purposely concealed it—from others possibly, but certainly from himself. The excitement had been a mask assumed by something deeper in him he had wished—and tried—to hide. Gently it came at first, this sadness, then with increasing authority and speed. It rose about him like a cloud that hid the stars and dimmed the sinking moon. It spread a veil between him and the rocky cemetery on those mournful hills beyond the Nile. In a sense it seemed, indeed, to issue thence. It emanated from their silence and their ancient tombs. It sank into him. It was penetrating—it was familiar—it was deathless.

But it was no mood of common sadness; there lay no physical tinge in it, but rather a deep, unfathomable sadness of the spirit an inner loneliness. From his inmost soul it issued outwards, meeting half-way some sense of similar loneliness that breathed towards him from these tragic Theban hills. . . .

And Tom, not understanding it, tried to shake himself free again; he called up cheerful things to balance it; he thought of his firm position in the world, of his proud partnership, of his security with her he loved, of his zest in life, of the happy prospect immediately in front of him. But, in spite of all, the mood crept upwards like a rising wave, swamping his best resistance, drowning all appeal to joy and confidence. He recognised an unwelcome revival of that earlier nightmare dread connected with his boyhood, things he had decided to forget, and had forgotten as he thought. The mood took him gravely, with the deepest melancholy he had ever known. It had begun so delicately; it became in a little while so determined, it threatened to overmaster him. He turned then and faced it, so to speak. He looked hard at it and asked of himself its meaning. Thought and emotion in him shuffled with their shadowy feet.

And then he realised that, in germ at any rate, the mood had lain actually a long time in him, deeply concealed—the surface excitement merely froth. He had hidden it from himself. It had been accumulating, gaining strength and impetus, pausing upon direction only. All the hours just spent at Karnak it had been there, drawing nearer to the surface; this very night, but a little while ago, during the drive home as well; before that even—during all the talks and out-door meals and expeditions; he traced its existence suddenly, and with tiny darts of piercing, unintelligible pain, as far back as Alexandria and the day of his arrival. It seemed to justify the vivid emotions that had marked his entry into Egypt. It became sharply clear now—this had been in him subconsciously since the moment when he read the little letter of welcome Lettice sent to meet him at the steamer, a letter he discovered afterwards was curiously empty. This disappointment, this underlying sadness he had kept hidden from himself: he now laid it bare and recognised it. He faced it. With a further flash he traced it finally to the journey in the Geneva train when he had read over the Warsaw and the Egyptian letters.

And he felt startled: something at the roots of his life was trembling. He tried to think. But Tom was slow; he could feel, but he could not dissect and analyse. Introspection with him invariably darkened vision, led to distortion and bewilderment. The effort to examine closely

confused him. Instead of dissipating the emotion he intensified it. The sense of loneliness grew inexplicably—a great, deep loneliness, a loneliness of the spirit, a loneliness, moreover, that it seemed to him he had experienced before, though when, under what conditions, he could not anywhere remember.

His former happiness was gone, the false excitement with it. This freezing loneliness stole in and took their places. Its explanation lay hopelessly beyond him, though he felt sure it had to do with this haunted and mysterious land where he now found himself, and in a measure with her, even with Tony too. . . .

The hint Egypt dropped into him upon his arrival was a true one—he had slipped over an edge, slipped into something underneath, below him—something past. But slipped *with her*. She had come back to fetch him. They had come back to fetch—each other . . . through pain. .

And a shadow from those sombre Theban mountains crept, as it were, upon his life. He knew a sinking of the heart, a solemn, dark presentiment that murmured in his blood the syllables of ‘tragedy.’ To his complete amazement—at first he refused to believe it indeed—there came a lump into his throat, as though tears must follow to relieve the strain; and a, moment later there was moisture, a perceptible moisture, in his eyes. The sadness had so swiftly passed into foreboding, with a sense of menacing tragedy that oppressed him without cause or explanation. Joy and confidence collapsed before it like a paper platform beneath the pressure of a wind. His feet and hands were cold. He shivered. . . .

Then gradually, as he stood there watching the calm procession of the stars, he felt the ominous emotion draw down again, retreat. Deep down inside him whence it came, it retired into a kind of interior remoteness that lay beyond his reach. It was incredible and strange. The intensity had made it seem so real. . . . For, while it lasted, he had felt himself bereft, lonely beyond all telling, outcast, lost, forgotten, wrapped in a cold and desolate misery that frightened him past all belief. The hand that lit his pipe still trembled. But the mood had passed as mysteriously as it came. It left him curiously shaken in his heart. ‘Perhaps this too’—thought murmured from some depth in him he could neither control nor understand—‘perhaps this too is—Egypt.’

He went to bed, emotion all smoothed out again, yet wondering a good deal at himself. For the odd upheaval was a new experience. Such an attack had never come to him before; he laughed at it, called it hysteria, and decided that its cause was physical he persuaded himself that it had a very banal cause—a chill, even a violent chill, incipient fever and over-fatigue at the back of it. He smiled at himself, while obeying the loving orders he had received, and brewing the comforting hot mixture with his spirit-lamp.

Then drinking it, he looked round the room with satisfaction at the various evidences of precious motherly care. This mother—love restored his happiness by degrees. His more normal, stolid, unimaginative self climbed back into its place again—yet with a touch of awkwardness and difficulty. Something in him was changed, or changing; he had surprised it in the act.

The nature of the change escaped him, however. It seemed, perhaps—this was the nearest he could get to it—that something in him had weakened, some sense of security, of confidence, of self-complacency given way a little. Only it was not his certainty of the mother-love in her: that remained safe from all possible attack. A tinge of uneasiness still lay like a shadow on his mind—until the fiery spirit chased it away, and a heavy sleep came over him that lasted without a break until he woke two hours after sunrise.

## CHAPTER XVII

He sprang from his bed, went to the open window and thrust his head out into the crystal atmosphere. It was impossible to credit the afflicting nightmare of a few hours ago. Gold lay upon the world, and the face of Egypt wore her great Osirian look.

In the air was that tang of mountain-tops that stimulated like wine. Everything sparkled, the river blazed, the desert was a sheet of burnished bronze. Light, heat, and radiance pervaded the whole glad morning, bathing even his bare feet on the warm, soft carpet. It was good to be alive. How could he not feel happy and unafraid?

The change, perhaps, was sudden; it certainly was complete. . . . These vivid alternations seemed characteristic of his whole Egyptian winter. Another self thrust up, sank out of sight, then rose again. The confusion seemed almost due to a pair of competing selves, each gaining the upper hand in turn—sometimes he lived both at once. . . . The uneasy mood, at any rate, had vanished with the darkness for nothing sad or heavy-footed could endure amid this dancing exhilaration of the morning. Born of the brooding night and mournful hills, his recent pain was forgotten.

He dressed in flannels, and went his way to the house upon the Nile soon after nine o'clock; he certainly had no chill, there was only singing in his heart. The curious change in Lettice, it seemed, no longer troubled him. And, finding Tony already in the garden, they sat in the shade and smoked together while waiting for their hostess. Lighthearted as himself, Tony outlined various projects, to which the other readily assented. He persuaded himself easily, if recklessly; the work could wait. 'We simply must see it all together,' Tony urged. 'You can go back to Assouan next week. You'll find everything all right. Why hurry off?' . . . How his cousin had improved, Tom was thinking; his tact was perfect; he asked no awkward questions, showed no inquisitiveness. He just assumed that his companions had a right to be fond of each other, while taking his own inclusion in the collective friendship for granted as natural too.

And when Lettice came out to join them, radiant in white, with her broad sun-hat and long blue veil and pretty gauntlet gloves, Tony explained with enthusiasm at the beauty of the picture 'She's come into her own out here with a vengeance,' he declared. 'She ought to live in Egypt always. It suits her down to the ground.' Whereupon Tom, pleased by the spontaneous admiration, whispered proudly to himself, 'And she is mine—all mine!' Tony's praise seemed to double her value in his eyes at once. So Tony, too, was aware that she had changed; had noted the subtle alteration, the enhancement of her beauty, the soft Egyptian transformation!

'You'd hardly take her for European, I swear—at a distance—now, would you?'

'N-no,' Tom agreed, 'perhaps you wouldn't—' at which moment precisely the subject of their remarks came up and threw her long blue veil across them both with the command that it was time to start.

The following days were one long dream of happiness and wonder spent between the sunlight and the stars. They were never weary of the beauty, the marvel, and the mystery of all they saw. The appeal of temple, tomb, and desert was so intimate—it seemed instinctive. The burning sun, the scented winds, great sunsets and great dawns, these with the palms, the river, and the sand seemed a perfect frame about a perfect picture. They knew a kind of secret pleasure that was satisfying. Egypt harmonised all three of them. And if Tom did not notice the change increasing upon one of them, it was doubtless because he was too much involved in the general happiness to see it separate.

There came a temporary interruption, however, in due course—his conscience pricked him. 'I really must take a run up to Assouan,' he decided. 'I've been rather neglecting things perhaps. A week at most will do it—and then for another ten days' holiday again!'

The rhythm broke, as it were, with a certain suddenness. A rift came in the collective dream. He saw details again—saw them separate. And the day before he left a trifling thing occurred that forced him to notice the growth of the change in Lettice. He focussed it. It startled him a little.

The others had not sought to change his judgment. But they planned an all-night bivouac in the desert for his return; they would sleep with blankets on the sand, cook their supper upon an open fire, and see the dawn. 'It's an exquisite experience,' said Tony. 'The stars fade quickly, there's a puff of warmer wind, and the sun comes up with a rush. It's marvellous. I'll get de Lorne and his sister to join us; he can tell stories round the fire, and perhaps she will get inspiration at last for her awful pictures.' Madame Jaretzka laughed. 'Then we must have Lady Sybil too,' she added; 'de Lorne may find courage to propose to her fortune at last.' Tom looked up at her with a momentary surprise. 'I declare, Lettice, you've grown quite worldly; that's a very cynical remark and point of view.'

He said it teasingly, but it was this innocent remark that served to focus the change in her he had been aware of vaguely for a long time. She was more worldly here, the ordinary 'woman' in her was more in evidence: and while he rather liked it—it brought her more within his reach, as it were, yet without lowering her—he felt also puzzled. Several times of late he had surprised this wholesome sign of sex in things she said and did, as though the woman—side, as he called it, was touched into activity at last. It added to her charm; at the same time it increased his burning desire to possess her absolutely for himself. What he felt as the impersonal—almost spiritually elusive—aspect of her he had first known, was certainly less in evidence. Another part of her was rising into view, if not already in the ascendant. The burning sun, the sensuous colour and beauty of the Egyptian climate, he had heard, could have this physiological effect. He wondered.

'Sybil has been waiting for him to ask her ever since I came out,' he heard her saying with a gesture almost of impatience. 'Only he thinks he oughtn't to speak because he's poor. The result is she's getting bolder in proportion as he gets more shy.'

They all laughingly agreed to help matters to a climax when Tom, looking up suddenly, saw Madame Jaretzka smiling at his cousin with her eyelids half closed in the way he once disliked but now adored. He wondered suddenly how much Tony liked her; the improvement in him was assuredly due to her, he felt; Tony had less and less time now for his other friends. It occurred to him for a second that the change in her was greater than he quite knew, perhaps. He watched them together for some moments. It gave him a proud sense of pleasure to feel that her influence was making a man out of the medley of talent and irresponsibility that was Tony. Tony was learning at last to 'find himself.' It must be quite a new experience for him to know and like a woman of her sort, almost a discovery. But with a flash—too swift and fleeting to be a definite thought—Tom was conscious of another thing as well—and for the first time: 'How she would put him in his place if he attempted any liberties with her!'

The same second he was ashamed that such a notion could ever have occurred to him: it was mean towards Tony, ungenerous towards her; and yet—he was aware of a distinct emotion, a touch of personal triumph in it somewhere. .

His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden tumult. There was a scurry; Tony flung a stone; Madame Jaretzka leaped upon a boulder, gathering her skirts together hurriedly, with a little scream. 'Kill it, Tony! Quick!' he heard her cry. And he saw then a very large and hairy spider crawling swiftly across the white paper that had wrapped their fruit and sandwiches, an ugly and distressing sight. 'It's a tarantula,' she screamed, half laughing, half alarmed, showing neat

ankles as she balanced precariously upon her boulder, 'and it's coming at me. Quick, Tony, another stone,' as he missed it for the second time, 'it's making for me! Oh, kill it, kill it!' Tony, still aiming badly, assured her it was not a tarantula, nor poisonous even; he knew the species well. 'It's quite harmless,' he cried, 'there's no need to kill it. It's not in a house—' And he flung another useless stone at it.

What followed happened very quickly, in a second or two at most. Tom saw it with sharp surprise, a curious distaste, almost with a shudder. It certainly astonished him, and in another sense it shocked him. He had done nothing himself because Lettice, he thought, was half in fun, making a diversion out of nothing. Only much later did it occur to him that she had turned instinctively to Tony for protection, rather than to himself. What caused him the unpleasant sensation, however, was that she deliberately stepped down from her perch of safety and kicked at the advancing horror. Probably her intention was merely to drive it away—she was certainly excited—but the result was that she set her foot upon the creature and crushed its life out with an instant's pressure of her dainty boot. 'There!' she cried. 'Oh, but I didn't mean to kill it! How frightful of me!'

He heard Tony say, 'Bravo, you *are* a brave woman! Such creatures have no right to live!' as he hid the disfigured piece of paper beneath some stones . . . and, after a few minutes' chatter, the donkey-boys had packed up the luncheon things and they were all on their way towards the next object of their expedition, as though nothing had happened. The entire incident had occupied a moment and a half at most. Madame Jaretzka was laughing and talking as before, gay as a child and pretty as a dream.

In Tom's mind, however, it went on happening—over and over again. He could not at once clean his mind of a disagreeable impression that remained. Another woman, any woman for that matter, might have done what she did without leaving a trace in him of anything but a certain admiration. It was a perfectly natural thing. The creature probably was poisonous as well as hideous; Tony merely said the contrary to calm her; moreover, he gave no help, and the insect was certainly making hurriedly towards her—she had to save and protect herself. There was nothing in the incident beyond an ugliness, a passing second of distress; and yet—this was what remained with him—it was not a natural thing for 'Lettice' to have done. Her intention, no doubt, was otherwise; there was miscalculation as well. She had only meant to frighten the scurrying creature. Yet at the same time the instinctive act issued, he felt, from another aspect, another part of her, a part that in London, in Montreux, lay unexpressed and unawakened. And it issued deliberately too. The exquisite tenderness that could not have put a fly to death was less in her. Egypt had changed her oddly. He was aware of something that made him shrink, though he did not use the phrase even to himself in thought; of something hard and almost cruel, though both adjectives lay far from clothing the faint sensation in his mind with definite words.

Tom watched her instinctively from that moment, unconsciously, that is; less with his eyes than with a little pair of glasses in his heart. There was certainly a change in her that he could not quite account for; the notion came to him once or twice that some influence was upon her, some power that was outside herself, modifying the sharp outlines of her first peculiar tenderness. These dear outlines blurred a trifle in the fierce sunlight of this desert air. He knew not how to express it even to himself, for it was too tenuous to seize in actual words.

He arrived at this partial conclusion anyhow: that he was aware of what he called the 'woman in her, but a very human woman—a certain wilfulness that was half wildness in it. There was a hint of the earthly, too, as opposed to spiritual, though in a sense that was wholesome, good, entirely right. Yet it was rather, perhaps, primitive than earthly in any vulgar meaning. . . . I had

been absent or dormant hitherto. She needed it; something—was it Egypt? was it sex?—had stirred it into life. And its first expression—surprising herself as much as it surprised him—had an aspect of exaggeration almost.

The way she raced their donkeys in her sand-cart on the way home, by no means sparing the whip, was extremely human, but unless he had witnessed it he could never have pictured it as possible—so utterly unlike the gentle, gracious, almost fastidious being he had known first. There was a hint of a darker, stronger colour in the pattern of her being now, partly of careless and abundant spirits, partly of this new primitive savagery. He noticed it more and more, it was both repellent and curiously attractive; yet, while he adored it in her, he also shrank. He detected a touch even of barbaric vanity, and this singular touch of the barbaric veiled the tenderness. He almost felt in her the power to inflict pain without flinching—upon another. .

The following day their time of gaiety was to end, awaiting only his return later from Assuan. Tony was going down to Cairo with some other friends. Tom would be away at least a week, and tried hard to persuade his cousin to come with him instead; but Tony had given his word, and could not change. Moreover, he was dining with his friends that very night, and must hurry off at once. He said his good-byes and went.

‘We’re very rarely alone now, are we, Lettice?’ Tom began abruptly the instant they were together. At the back of his mind rose something he did not understand that forced more significance into his tone than he intended. He felt very full—an accumulation that must have expression. He blurted it out without reflection. ‘Hardly once since I arrived two weeks ago, now I come to think of it.’ He looked at her half playfully, half reproachfully. ‘We’re always three,’ he added with the frank pathos of a boy. And while one part of him felt ashamed, another part urged him onward and was glad.

But the way she answered startled him.

‘Tom dear, don’t scold me now. I *am* so tired.’ It was the tone that took his breath away. For the first time in their acquaintance he noticed something like exasperation. ‘I’ve been doing too much,’ she went on more gently, smiling up into his face: ‘I feel it. And that dreadful thing—that insect’—she shuddered a little—‘I never meant to hurt it. It’s upset me. All this daily excitement, and the sun, and the jolting of that rickety sand-cart—There, Tom, come and sit beside me a moment and let’s talk before you go. I’m really too done up to drive you to the station to-night. You’ll understand and forgive me, won’t you?’ Her voice was very soft. She was excited, too, talking at random rather. Her being seemed confused.

He took his place on a sturdy cushion at her feet, full of an exaggerated remorse. She looked pale, though her eyes were very sparkling. His heart condemned him. He said nothing about the ‘dreadful incident.’

‘Lettice, dearest girl, I didn’t mean anything. You have been doing far too much, and it’s my fault; you’ve done it all for me—to give me pleasure. It’s been too wonderful.’ He took her hand, while her other stroked his head. ‘You must rest while I’m away.’

‘Yes,’ she murmured, ‘so as to be quite fresh when you come back. You won’t be *very* long, will you?’ He said he would risk his whole career to get back within the week. ‘But, you know, I have neglected things rather—up there.’ He smiled fondly as he said ‘up there.’ She looked down tenderly into his eyes. ‘And I have neglected you—down here,’ she said. ‘That’s what you mean, boy, isn’t it?’ And for the first time he did not like the old mode of address he once thought perfect. There seemed a flavour of pity in it. ‘It *would* be nice to be alone sometimes, wouldn’t it, Lettice? Quite alone, I mean,’ he said with meaning.

‘We shall be, we will be—later, Tom,’ she whispered; ‘*quite* alone together.’ She paused, then added louder: ‘The truth is, Egypt—the air and climate—stimulates me too much; it makes me restless. It excites me in a way I can’t quite understand. I can’t sit still and talk and be idle as one does in sleepy, solemn England.’

He was explaining with laborious logic that it was the dryness of the air that exhausted the nerves a bit, when she straightened herself up and took her hand away. ‘Oh yes, Tom, I know, I know. That’s perfectly true, and everybody says that—I mean, everybody feels it, don’t they?’ She said it quickly, almost impatiently.

The old uneasiness flashed through him at that moment: it occurred to him, ‘I’m dull, I’m boring her.’ She was over-tired, he remembered then, her nerves on edge a trifle; it was natural enough; he would just kiss her and leave her to rest quietly. Yet a tiny sense of resentment, even of chill, crept over him. This impatience in her was new to him. He wondered an instant, then crushed back the words that tried to rise. He said goodbye, taking her in his arms for a moment with an overmastering impulse he could not check. Deep love and tenderness were in his heart and eyes. He yearned to protect and guide her—keep her safe from harm. He felt his older years, his steadier strength; he was a man, she but a little gentle woman. And the elemental powers of life were very strong. With a sudden impulsive gesture, then, that surprised him, she returned the embrace with a kind of vehemence, pressing him closely to her heart and kissing him repeatedly on the cheeks and eyes.

Tom had expected her to resist and chide him. He was bewildered and delighted; he was also puzzled—for the first second only. ‘You darling woman,’ he cried, forgetting utterly the suspicion, the uneasiness, the passing cold of a moment before. He marvelled that his heart could have let such fancies come to birth. Surely he had changed for such a thing to be possible at all! . . . Various impulses and emotions that clamoured in him he kept back with an effort. He was aware of clashing contradictions. Confidence was less in him. He felt curiously unsure of himself—also, in a cruel, subtle way—of her. There was a new thing in her—rising. Was it against himself somewhere? The tangle in his heart and mind seemed inextricable: he wanted to seize her and carry her away, struggling but captured, and at the same time—singular contradiction—to entreat her humbly, though passionately, to love him more, and to *show* more that she loved him. Surely there were two selves in him.

He moved over to the door. ‘Cataract Hotel, remember, finds me.’ He stood still, looking back at her.

She smiled, repeating the words after him. ‘And Lettice, you *will* write?’ She blew a kiss to him by way of answer. Then, charged to the brim with a thousand things he ached to say, yet would not, almost dared not say, he added playfully—a child must have noticed that his voice was too deep for banter and his breath came oddly:

‘And mind you don’t let Tony lose his head *too* much. He’s pretty far gone, you know, already.’

The same instant he could have bitten his tongue off to recall the words. Somewhere he had been untrue to himself, almost betrayed himself.

She rose suddenly from her sofa and came quickly towards him across the floor; he felt his heart sink a moment, then start hammering irregularly against his ribs. Something frightened him. For he caught in her face an expression he could not understand—the struggle of many strong emotions—anxiety and passion, fear and love; the eyes were shining, though the lids remained half closed; she made a curious gesture: she moved swiftly. He braced himself as against attack. He shrank. Her power over him was greater than he knew.

For he saw her in that instant as another person, another woman, foreign—almost Eastern; the barbaric primitive thing flamed out of her, but with something regal, queenly, added to it; she looked Egyptian; the Princess, as he called her sometimes, had come to life. And the same moment in himself this curious sense of helplessness appeared—he raged against it inwardly—as though he were in her power somehow, as though her little foot could crush him—too—into the yellow sand. . . .

A spasm of acute and aching pain shot through him; he winced; he wanted to turn and fly, yet was held rooted to the floor. He could not escape. It had to be. For oddly, mysteriously, he felt pain in her quick approach: she was coming to do him injury and hurt. The incident of the afternoon flashed again upon his mind—with the idea of cruelty in it somewhere, but a deep surge of strange emotion that flung wild sentences into his mind at the same instant. He tightly shut his lips, lest a hundred thoughts that had lain in him of late might burst into words he would later regret intensely. He must not avoid, delay, an inevitable thing. To resist was somehow to be untrue to the deepest in him—to something painful he deserved, and, paradoxically, desired too. What could it all mean? . . . He shivered as he waited—watching her come nearer.

She reached his side and her arms were stretched towards him. To his amazement she folded him in closely against her breast and held him as though she never could let him go again.' He stood there helpless; the revulsion of feeling took his strength away. He heard her breathless, yearning whisper as she kissed him: 'My Tom, my precious boy, I couldn't see a hair of your dear head injured—I couldn't see you hurt I Take care of yourself and come back quickly—do, *do* take care of yourself. I shall count the days—' she broke off, held his face between her hands, gazed into his astonished eyes, and kissed him with the utmost tenderness again, the tenderness of a mother who is forced to be separated from the boy she loves better than herself.

Tom stood there trembling before her, and no speech came to help him. The thing passed like a dream; the dread, the emotion left him; the nightmare touch was gone. Her self-betrayal his simple nature did not at once discern. He felt only her divine tenderness pour over him. A spring of joy rose bubbling in him that no words could tell. Also he felt afraid. But the fear was no longer for himself. In some perplexing, singular way, he felt afraid for her.

Then, as a sentence came struggling to his lips, a step was heard upon the landing. There was time to resume conventional attitudes of good-bye when Mrs. Haughstone appeared on the staircase leading to the hall. Tom said his farewells hurriedly to both of them, making his escape as naturally as possible. 'I've just time to pack and catch the train,' he shouted, and was gone.

And what remained with him afterwards of the curious little scene was the absolute joy and confidence those last tender embraces had restored to him, side by side with another thing that he was equally sure about, yet refused to dwell upon because he dared not—yet. For, as she came across the floor of the sunny room towards him, he realised two things in her, two persons almost. Another influence, he was convinced, worked in her strangely—some older, long-buried presentment of her interpenetrating, even piercing through, the modern self. She was divided against herself in some extraordinary fashion, one half struggling fiercely, yet struggling bravely, honestly, against the other. And the relationship between himself and her, though the evidence was so negligibly slight as yet, he knew had definitely changed. . . .

It came to him as the Mother and the Woman in her. The Mother belonged unchangeably to him: the Woman, he felt, was troubled, tempted, and afraid.

## CHAPTER XVIII

Afterwards, months, years afterwards, looking back upon these strange weeks of his brief Egyptian winter, Tom marvelled at himself; he looked back, as it were, upon the thoughts and emotions of another man he could not recognise. This illusion involved his two companions also, Madame Jaretska supremely, Tony slightly less, all three, however, together affected, all three changed.

As regards himself, however, there was always a part, it seemed, that remained unaffected. It looked on, it compared, it judged. He called it the Onlooker. . . .

Explanation lay beyond his reach; he termed it enchantment: and there he left it. Insight seemed only to operate with regard to himself: of *their* feelings, thoughts, or point of view he was uninformed. They offered no explanations, and he sought none.

The man honest with himself is more rare than a January swallow. He alone is honest who can state a case without that bias of exaggeration favourable to himself which is almost lying. Try as he may, his statement leans one way or the other. The spirit-level of absolute honesty is hard to find, and, of course, Tom was no exception. . . . Occasionally he recalled the 'spiral theory,' which once, at least, had been in the minds of all three—the notion that their three souls lived over a former episode together, but from a higher point, and with the bird's-eye view which brought in understanding. But if this offered a hint of that winter's inner spiritual structure, Tom certainly did not claim it as a true solution. The whole thing began so stealthily, and progressed so slowly yet so surely. . . .

He could only marvel at himself: he was so singularly changed—imagination so active, judgment alternately so positive and so faltering, every emotion so amazingly intensified. All the weakest and least admirable in him, the very dregs, seemed dragged up side by side with what was noblest, highest, and flung together in the rush and smother of the breaking Wave.

Events, in the dramatic meaning of the word, and outwardly, there were few perhaps, and those few meagre and unsensational. No one was shot or drowned, no one was hanged and quartered; the police were not called in; to outsiders there seemed no air or attitude of drama anywhere; but in three human hearts, thrown together as by chance currents of normal life, there came to pass changes of a spiritual kind, conflict between essential, primitive forces of the soul, battlings, temptings, aspirations, sacrifice, that are the truest drama always, because the inmost being, whether glorified or degraded, is thereby—changed.

In this fierce intensification of his own being, and in the events experienced, Tom recognised the rising of his childhood Wave towards the breaking point. The early premonition that had seemed causeless to his learned father, that stirred in his mother the deep instinct to protect, and that ever, more or less, hung poised above the horizon of his passing years, had its origin in the bed-rock of his nature. It was associated with memory and instinct; the native tendencies and forces of his being had dramatised their inevitable fulfilment in a dream. He recognised intuitively what was coming—and he welcomed it. The body shrank from pain; the soul held out her hands to it. . . .

Thus, looking back, he saw it mapped below him from a higher curve in life's ascending spiral. In the glare of a drenching sunshine that seemed hauntingly familiar, in the stupendous blaze of Egypt that knew and favoured it, the action lay spread out: but in darkness, too, an oppressive, suffocating darkness as of the grave, as of the bottom of the sea. The map was streaked with this alternate light and gloom of elemental kind. It passed swiftly, he went swiftly with it. A few short crowded weeks of the intensest pain and happiness he had ever known,—and the Wave, its crest reflected in its origin, fell with a drowning crash. He merged into his background, yet he did not drown: in due course he again—emerged.

The sense of rushing that accompanied it all was in himself apparently: heightened by the contrast of the divine stillness which is Egypt—the golden, hanging days, the nights of cool, soft moonlight, the sighing winds with perfume in their breath, the mournful palms that fringed the peaceful river, the calm of multitudinous stars. The grim Theban hills looked on; the ruined Temples watched and knew; there were listening ears within a thousand tombs. . . . And there was the Desert—the endless emptiness where everything had already happened, the place where, therefore, everything could happen again without affronting time and space—the Desert seemed the infinite background whence the Wave tossed up three little specks of passionate human action and reaction. It was the ‘sea,’ a sea of dust. Yet out of the dust wild roses blossomed eventually with a sweetness of beauty unknown to any cultivated gardens. . . .

And while he and his two companions made their moves upon this ancient chessboard of half-forgotten, half-remembered life, all natural things as well seemed raised to their most significant expression, sharing the joy and sadness, the beauty and the terror of his own experience. For the very scenery borrowed of his intensity, the familiar details urged a fraction beyond the normal, as though any moment they must break down into their elemental and essential nakedness. The pungent odour of the universal sand, the dust, the minute golden particles suspended in the flaming air, the marvellous dawns and sunsets, the mighty, awful pylons, and the heat—all these contributed their quota of wonder and mystery to what happened. Egypt inspired it, and was satisfied.

The sediment of his nature was drawn up, the rubbish floated before his eyes, he saw himself through the curtains of suspended dust—until the flood, retiring, left him high upon the shore, no longer shuffling with his earthly, physical feet.

In the train to Assouan, Tom still felt the clinging arms about his neck, still heard the loving voice, eager with tenderness for his welfare and his quick return. She needed him: he was everything to her. He knew it, oh he was sure of it. He thought of his work, and knew some slight anxiety that he had neglected it. He would devote all his energies to the interests of his firm: there should be no shirking anywhere; his ten days’ holiday was over. His mind fixed itself deliberately, though not too easily, on this alone.

He knew his own capacity, however, and that by concentration he could accomplish in a short time what other men might ask weeks to complete. Provided all was going well, he saw no reason why he could not be free again in a week at most. He knew quite well his value to the firm, but he knew also that he must continue to justify it. He was complacent, but, he hoped, not carelessly complacent. Tom felt very sure of himself again.

To his great relief he found things running smoothly. He examined every detail, interviewed all and sundry, supervised, decided, gave instructions. There was a letter from the London office conveying the formal satisfaction of the Board with results so far, praising especially certain reductions in cost he had judiciously effected; another private letter from the older partner referred confidently to greater profits than they had dared to anticipate; also there was a brief note from Sir William, the Chairman, now at Salonica, saying he might run over a little later and see for him self how the work was getting along.

Tom was supremely happy with it all. There was really very or him to do; his engineers were highly competent; they could summon him at a day’s notice from Luxor if anything went wrong. ‘But there’s no sign of difficulty, sir,’ was their verdict; ‘everything’s going like clockwork; the men working splendidly; it’s only a matter of time.’

It was the evening of the second day that Tom decided to go back to Luxor. He was eager for the promised bivouac they had arranged together. He had written once to say that all was well, but no word had yet come from her; she was resting, he was glad to think: Tony was away at Cairo with his friends; there might be a letter for him in the morning, but that could be sent after him. Joy and impatience urged him. He chuckled happily over his boyish plan; he would not announce himself; he would surprise her. He caught a train that would get him in for dinner.

And during his journey of six hours he rehearsed this pleasure of surprising her. She was lonely without him. He visualised her delight and happiness. He would creep up to the window, to the edge of the verandah where she sat reading, Mrs. Haughstone knitting in a chair opposite. He would call her name 'Lettice. . . .' Her eyes would lighten, her manner change. That new spontaneous joy would show itself. . . .

The sun was setting when the train got in, but by the time he had changed into flannels at his hotel the short dusk was falling. The entire western sky was gold and crimson, the air was sharp, the light dry desert wind blew shrewdly down the street. Behind the eastern hills rose a huge full moon, still pale with daylight, peering wisely over the enormous spread of luminous desert. . . . He drove to her house, leaving the *arabyieh* at the gates. He walked quickly up the drive. The heavy foliage covered him with shadows, and he easily reached the verandah unobserved; no one seemed about; there was no sound of voices; the thick creepers up the wooden pillars screened him admirably. There was a movement of a chair, his heart began to thump, he climbed up softly, and at the other end of the verandah saw—Mrs. Haughstone knitting. But there was no sign of Lettice—and the blood rushed from his heart.

He had not been noticed, but his game was spoilt. He came round to the front steps and wished her politely a good-evening. Her surprise once over and explanations made, she asked him, cordially enough, to stay to dinner. 'Lettice, I know, would like it. You must be tired out. She did not expect you back so soon; but she would never forgive me if I let you go after them.'

Tom heard the words as in a dream, and answered also in a dream—a dream of astonishment, vexation, disappointment, none of them concealed. His uneasiness returned in an acute, intensified form. For he learned that they were bivouacking on the Nile to see the sunrise. Tony had, after all, not gone to Cairo; de Lorne and Lady Sybil accompanied them. It was the picnic they had planned together against his return. 'Lettice wrote,' Mrs. Haughstone mentioned, 'but the letter must have missed you. I warned her you'd be disappointed—if you knew.'

'So Tony didn't go to Cairo after all?' Tom asked again. His voice sounded thin, less volume in it than usual. That 'if you knew' dropped something of sudden anguish in his heart.

'His friends put him off at the last moment—illness, he said, or something.' Mrs. Haughstone repeated the invitation to dine and make himself at home. 'I'm positive my cousin would like you to,' she added with a certain emphasis.

Tom thanked her. He had the impression there was something on her mind. 'I think I'll go after them,' he repeated, 'if you'll tell me exactly where they've gone.' He stammered a little. 'It would be rather a lark, I thought, to surprise them.' What foolish, what inadequate words!

'Just as you like, of course. But I'm sure she's quite safe,' was the bland reply. 'Mr. Winslowe will look after her.'

'Oh, rather,' replied Tom; 'but it would be good fun—rather a joke, you know—to creep upon them unawares,'—and then was surprised and sorry that he said it. 'Have they gone very far?' he asked, fumbling for his cigarettes.

He learned that they had left after luncheon, taking with them all necessary paraphernalia for the night. There were feelings in him that he could not understand quite as he heard it. But only one thing was clear to him—he wished to be quickly, instantly, where Lettice was. It was comprehensible. Mrs. Haughstone understood and helped him. 'I'll send Mohammed to get you a boatman, as you seem quite determined,' she said, ringing the bell 'you can get there in an hour's ride. I couldn't go,' she added, 'I really felt too tired. Mr. Winslowe was here for lunch, and he exhausted us all with laughing so that I felt I'd had enough. Besides, the sun—'

'They all lunched here too?' asked Tom.

'Mr. Winslowe only,' she mentioned, 'but he was a host in himself. It quite exhausted me—'

'Tony can be frightfully amusing, can't he, when he likes?' said Tom. Her repetition of 'exhausted' annoyed him furiously for some reason.

He saw her hesitate then she began to speak, but stopped herself; there was a curious expression in her face, almost of anxiety, he fancied. He felt the kindness in her. She was distressed. And an impulse, whence he knew not, rose in him to make her talk, but before he could find a suitable way of beginning, she said with a kind of relief in her tone and manner: 'I'm glad you're back again, Mr. Kelverdon.' She looked significantly at him. 'Your influence is so steady, if you don't mind my saying so.' She gave an awkward little laugh, half of apology, half of shyness, or of what passed with her for shyness. 'This climate—upsets some of us. It does something to the blood, I'm sure—'

'You feel anxious about—anything in particular?' Tom asked, with a sinking heart. At any other time he would have laughed.

Mrs. Haughstone shrugged her shoulders and sighed. She spoke with an effort apparently, as though doubtful how much she ought to say. 'My cousin, after all, is—in a sense, at least—a married woman,' was the reply, while Tom remembered that she had said the same thing once before. 'And all men are not as careful for her reputation, perhaps, as you are.' She mentioned the names of various people in Luxor, and left the impression that there was considerable gossip in the air. Tom disliked exceedingly the things she said and the way she said them, but felt unable to prevent her. He was angry with himself for listening, yet felt it beyond him to change the conversation. He both longed to hear every word, and at the same time dreaded it unspeakably. If only the boat would give him quickly an excuse. . . . He therefore heard her to the end concerning the unwisdom of Madame Jaretska in her careless refusal to be more circumspect, even—Mrs. Haughstone feared—to the point of compromising herself. With whom? Why, with Mr. Winslowe, of course. Hadn't he noticed it? No! Well, of course there was no harm in it, but it was a mistake, she felt, to be seen about always with the same man. He called, too, at such unusual hours. . . .

And each word she uttered seemed to Tom exactly what he had expected her to utter, entering his mind as a keenly poisoned shaft. Something already prepared in him leaped swiftly to understanding; only too well he grasped her meaning. The excitement in him passed into a feverishness that was painful.

For a long time he merely stood and listened, gazing across the river but seeing nothing. He said no word. His impatience was difficult to conceal, yet he concealed it.

'Couldn't you give her a hint perhaps?' continued the other, as they waited on the steps together, watching the preparations for the boat below. She spoke with an assumed carelessness that was really a disguised emphasis. 'She would take it from *you*, I'm sure. She means no harm; there is no harm. We all know that. She told me herself it was only a boy and girl affair. Still—'

'*She* said that?' asked Tom. His tone was calm, even to indifference, but his eyes, had she looked round, must certainly have betrayed him. Luckily she kept her gaze upon the moon-lit river. She drew her knitted shawl more closely round her. The cold air from the desert touched them both. Tom shivered.

'Oh, before you came out, that was,' she mentioned; and each word was a separate stab in the centre of his heart. After a pause she went on 'So you might say a little word to be more careful, if you saw your way. Mr. Winslowe, you see, is a poor guide just now: he has so completely lost his head. He's very impressionable—and very selfish—I think.'

Tom was aware that he braced himself. Various emotions clashed within him. He knew a dozen different pains, all equally piercing. It angered him, besides, to hear Lettice spoken of in this slighting manner, for the inference was unavoidable. But there hid below his anger a deep, dull bitterness that tried angrily to raise its head. Something very ugly, very fierce moved with it. He crushed it back. . . . A feeling of hot shame flamed to his cheeks.

'I should feel it an impertinence, Mrs. Haughstone,' he stammered at length, yet confident that he concealed his inner turmoil. 'Your cousin—I mean, all that she does is quite beyond reproach.'

Her answer staggered him like a blow between the eyes.

'Mr. Kolverdon—on the contrary. My cousin doesn't realise quite, I'm sure—that she may cause *him* suffering. She won't listen to me, but you could do it. *You* touch the mother in her.'

It was a merciless, keen shaft—these last six words. The sudden truth of them turned him into ice. He touched only the mother in her: the woman—but the thought plunged out of sight, smothered instantly as by a granite slab he set upon it. The actual thought was smothered, yes, but the feeling struggled horribly for breath; and another inference, more deadly than the first, stole with a freezing touch upon his soul.

He turned round quietly and looked at his companion. 'By Jove,' he said, with a laugh he believed was admirably natural, 'I believe you're right. I'll give her a little hint—for Tony's sake.' He moved down the steps. 'Tony is so—I mean he so easily loses his head. It's quite absurd.'

But Mrs. Haughstone did not laugh. 'Think it over,' she rejoined. 'You have excellent judgment. You may prevent a little disaster.' She smiled and shook a warning finger. And Tom, feigning amusement as best he might, murmured something in agreement and raised his helmet with a playful flourish.

Mohammed, soft of voice and moving like a shadow, called that the boat was ready, and Tom prepared to go. Mrs. Haughstone accompanied him half-way down the steps.

'You won't startle them, will you, Mr. Kolverdon?' she said. 'Lettice, you know, is rather easily frightened.' And she laughed a little. 'It's Egypt—the dry air—one's nerves—'

Tom was already in the boat, where the Arab stood waiting in the moonlight like a ghost.

'Of course not,' he called up to her through the still air. But, none the less, he meant to surprise her if he could. Only in his thought the pronoun insisted, somehow, on the plural form.

## CHAPTER XIX

The boat swung out into mid-stream. Behind him the figure of Mrs. Haughstone faded away against the bougainvillea on the wall; in front, Mohammed's head and shoulders merged with the opposite bank; beyond, the spectral palms and the shadowy fields of clover slipped into the great

body of the moon-fed desert. The desert itself sank down into a hollow that seemed to fling those dark Theban hills upwards—towards the stars.

Everything, as it were, went into its background. Everything, animate and inanimate, rose out of a common ultimate—the Sea. Yet for a moment only. There was this sense of preliminary withdrawal backwards, as for a leap that was to come. . . .

He, too, felt merged with his own background. In his soul he knew the trouble and tumult of the Wave—gathering for a surging rise to follow. . . .

For some minutes the sense of his own identity passed from him, and he wondered who he was. ‘Who am I?’ would have been a quite natural question. ‘Let me see; I’m Kolverdon, Tom Kolverdon.’ Of course! Yet he felt that he was another person too. He lost his grip upon his normal modern self a moment, lost hold of the steady, confident personality that was familiar. . . . The voice of Mohammed broke the singular spell. ‘Shicago, vair’ good donkey. Yis, bes’ donkey in Luxor—’ and Tom remembered that he had a ride of an hour or so before he could reach the Temple of Deir El-Bahri where his friends were bivouacking. He tipped Mohammed as he landed, mounted ‘Chicago,’ and started off impatiently, then ran against little Mohammed coming back for a forgotten—kettle! He laughed. Every third Arab seemed called Mohammed. But he learned exactly where the party was. He sent his own donkey-boy home, and rode on alone across the moon-lit plain.

The wonder of the exquisite night took hold of him, searching his heart beyond all power of language—the strange Egyptian beauty. The ancient wilderness, so calm beneath the stars; the mournful hills that leaped to touch the smoking moon; the perfumed air, the deep old river—each, and all together, exhaled their innermost, essential magic. Over every separate boulder spilt the flood of silver. There were troops of shadows. Among these shadows, beyond the boulders, Isis herself, it seemed, went by with audible footfall on the sand, secretly guiding his advance; Horus, dignified and solemn, with hawk-wings hovering, and fierce, deathless eyes—Horus, too, watched him lest he stumble. . . .

On all sides he seemed aware of the powerful Egyptian gods, their protective help, their familiar guidance. The deeps within him opened. He had done this thing before. . . . Even the little details brought the same lost message back to him, as the hoofs of his donkey shuffled through the sand or struck a loose stone aside with metallic clatter. He heard the lizards whistling. . . .

There were other vaster emblems too, quite close. To the south, a little, the shoulders of the Colossi domed awfully above the flat expanse, and soon he passed the Ramesseum, the moon just entering the stupendous aisles. He saw the silvery shafts beneath the huge square pylons. On all sides lay the welter of prodigious ruins, steeped in a power and beauty that seemed borrowed from the scale of the immeasurable heavens. Egypt laid a great hand upon him, her cold wind brushed his cheeks. He was aware of awfulness, of splendour, of all the immensities. He was in Eternity; life was continuous throughout the ages; there was no death. . . .

He felt huge wings, and a hawk, disturbed by his passing, flapped silently away to another broken pillar just beyond. He seemed swept forward, the plaything of greater forces than he knew. There was no question of direction, of resistance: the Wave rushed on and he rushed with it. His normal simplicity disappeared in a complexity that bewildered him. Very clear, however, was one thing—courage; that courage due to abandonment of self. He would face whatever came. He needed it. It was inevitable. Yes—this time he would face it without shuffling or disaster. . . . For he recognised disaster—and was aware of blood. .

Questions asked themselves in long, long whispers, but found no answers. They emerged from that mothering background and returned into it again. . . . Sometimes he rode alone, but sometimes Lettice rode beside him: Tony joined them. . . . He felt them driven forward, all three together, obedient to the lift of the same rising wave, urged onwards towards a climax that was lost to sight, and yet familiar. He knew both joy and shrinking, a delicious welcome that it was going to happen, yet a dread of searing pain involved. A great fact lay everywhere about him in the night, but a fact he could not seize completely. All his faculties settled on it, but in vain—they settled on a fragment, while the rest lay free, beyond his reach. Pain, which was a pain at nothing, filled his heart; joy, which was joy without a reason, sang in him. The Wave rose higher, higher . . . the breath came with difficulty . . . the wind was icy . . . there was choking in his throat. . . .

He noticed the same high excitement in him he had experienced a few nights ago beneath the Karnak pylons—it ended later, he remembered, in the menace of an unutterable loneliness. This excitement was wild with an irresponsible hilarity that had no justification. He felt *exalté*. The wave, he swinging in the crest of it, was going to break, and he knew the awful thrill upon him before the dizzy, smothering plunge.

The complex of emotions made clear thought impossible. To put two and two together was beyond him. He felt the power that bore him along immensely greater than himself. And one of the smaller, self-asking questions issued from it: ‘Was this what *she* felt? Was Tony also feeling this? Were all three of them being swept along towards an inevitable climax?’ . . . This singular notion that none of them could help themselves passed into him. . . .

And then he realised from the slower pace of the animal beneath him that the path was going uphill. He collected his thoughts and looked about him. The forbidding cliffs that guard the grim Valley of the Kings, the haunted Theban hills, stood up pale yellow against the stars. The big moon, no longer smoking in the earthbound haze, had risen into the clear dominion of the upper sky. And he saw the terraces and columns of the Deir El-Bahri Temple facing him at the level of his eyes.

Nothing bore clearer testimony to the half-unconscious method by which the drama developed itself, to the deliberate yet uncalculated attitude of the actors towards some inevitable fulfilment, than the little scene which Tom’s surprise arrival then discovered. According to the mood of the beholder it could mean much or little, everything or nothing. It was so nicely contrived between concealment and disclosure, and, like much else that happened, seemed balanced exquisitely, if painfully, between guilt and innocence. The point of view of the onlooker could alone decide. At the same time it provided a perfect frame for another picture that later took the stage. The stage seemed set for it exactly. The later picture broke in and used it too. That is to say, two separate pictures, distinct yet interfused, occupied the stage at once.

For Tom, dismounting, and leaving his animal with the donkey-boys some hundred yards away, approached stealthily over the sand and came upon the picnic group before he knew it. He watched them a moment before he announced himself. The scene was some feet below him. He looked down.

Two minutes sooner, he might conceivably have found the party quite differently grouped. Instead, however, his moment of arrival was exactly timed as though to witness a scene set cleverly by the invisible Stage Manager to frame two similar and yet different incidents.

Tom leaned against a broken column, staring.

Young de Lorne and Lady Sybil, he saw, were carefully admiring the moonlight on the yellow cliffs. Miss de Lorne stooped busily over rugs and basket packages. Her back was turned to Tony and Madame Jaretzka, who were intimately engaged, their faces very close together, in the half-prosaic, half-poetic act of blowing up a gipsy fire of scanty sticks and crumpled paper. The entire picture seemed arranged as though intended to convey a 'situation.' And to Tom a situation most certainly was conveyed successfully, though a situation of which the two chief actors—who shall say otherwise?—were possibly unconscious. For in that first moment as he leaned against the column, gazing fixedly, the smoking sticks between them burst into a flare of sudden flame, setting the two faces in a frame of bright red light, and Tom, gazing upon them from a distance of perhaps some twenty yards saw them clearly, yet somehow did not—recognise them. Another picture thrust itself between: he watched a scene that lay deep below him. Through the soft blaze of that Egyptian moonlight, across the silence of that pale Egyptian desert, beneath those old Egyptian stars, there stole upon him some magic which is deathless, though its outer covenants have vanished from the world. . . . Down, down he sank into the forgotten scenes whence it arose. Smothered in sand, it seemed, he heard the centuries roar past him. . . .

He saw two other persons kneeling above that fire on the desert floor, two persons familiar to him, yet whom he could not wholly recognise. In that amazing second, while his heart stopped beating, it seemed as if thought in anguish cried aloud: 'So, there you are! I have the proof!' while yet all verification of the tragic 'you' remained just out of reach and undisclosed.

He did not recognise two persons whom he knew, while yet some portion of him keenly, fiercely searching, dived back into the limbo of unremembered time. . . . A thin blue smoke rose before his face, and to his nostrils stole a delicate perfume as of ambra. It was a picnic fire no longer. It was an Eastern woman he saw lean forward across the gleam of a golden brazier and yield a kiss to the lips of a man who claimed it passionately. He saw her small hands folded and clinging about his neck. The face of the man he could not see, the head and shoulders being turned away, but hers he saw clearly—the dark, lustrous eyes that shone between half-closed eyelids. They were highly placed in life, these two, for their aspect as their garments told it; the man, indeed, had gold about him somewhere and the woman, in her mien, wore royalty. Yet, though he but saw their hands and heads alone, he knew instinctively that, if not regal, they were semi-regal, and set beyond his reach in power natural to them both. They were high-born, the favoured of the world. Inferiority was his who watched them, the helpless inferiority of subordinate position. That, too, he knew . . . for a gasp of terror, though quickly smothered terror, rose vividly behind an anger that could gladly—kill.

There was a flash of fiery and intolerable pain within him. . . .

The next second he saw merely—Lettice!—blowing the smoke from her face and eyes, with an impatient little gesture of both hands, while in front of her knelt Tony—fanning a reluctant fire of sticks and paper with his old felt hat.

He had been gazing at a coloured bubble, the bubble had burst into air and vanished, the entire mood and picture vanished with it—so swiftly, so instantaneously, moreover, that Tom was ready to deny the entire experience.

Indeed, he did deny it. He refused to credit it. It had been, surely, a feeling rather than a sight. But the feeling having utterly vanished, he discredited the sight as well. The fiery pain had vanished too. He found himself watching the semi-comical picture of de Lorne and Lady Sybil flirting in dumb action, and Tony and Lettice trying to make a fire without the instinct or ability to succeed. And, incontinently, he burst out laughing audibly.

Yet, apparently, his laughter was not heard; he had made no actual sound. There was, instead, a little scream, a sudden movement, a scurrying of feet among the sand and stones, and Lettice and Tony rose upon one single impulse, as once before he had seen them rise in Karnak weeks ago. They stood up like one person. They looked about them into the surrounding shadows, disturbed, afflicted, yet as though they were not certain they had heard. . . .and then, abruptly, the figure of Tony went out. . . . it disappeared. How, precisely, was not clear, but it was gone into the darkness. . . .

And another picture—or another aspect of the first—dropped into place. There was an outline of a shadowy tent. The flap was stirring lightly, as though behind it some one hid—and watched. He could not tell. A deep confusion, as of two pictures interfused, was in him. For somehow he transferred his own self—was it physical desire? was it spiritual yearning? Was it love?—projected his own self into the figure that had kissed her, taking her own passionate kiss in return. He actually experienced it. He did this thing. He had done it—once before! Knowing himself beside her, he both did it and saw himself doing it. He was both actor and onlooker. . . .

There poured back upon him then, sweet and poignant, his love of an Egyptian woman, the fragrance of remembered tresses, the perfume of fair limbs that clung and of arms that lingered round his neck—yet that in the last moment slipped from his full possession. He was on his knees before her; he gazed up into her ardent eyes, set in a glowing face above his own; the face bent lower; he raised two slender hands, the fingers henna-stained, and pressed them to his lips. He felt their silken texture, the fragile pressure, her breath upon his face—yet all sharply withdrawn again before he captured them completely. There was the odour of long-forgotten unguents, sweet with a tang that sharpened them towards desire in days that knew a fiercer sunlight. . . . His brain went reeling. The effort to keep one picture separate from the other broke them both. He could not disentangle, could not distinguish. They intermingled. He was both the figure hidden behind the tent and the figure who held the woman in his arms. What his heart desired became, it seemed, that which happened. . . .

And then the flap of the tent flung open, and out rushed a violent, leaping outline—the figure of a man. Another—it seemed himself—rushed to meet him. There was a gleam, a long deep cry. . . . A woman, with arms outstretched, knelt close beside the struggling figures on the sand. He saw two huge, dark, muscular hands about a bent and yielding neck, blood oozing thickly between the gripping fingers, staining them . . . then sudden darkness that blacked out the entire scene, and a choking effort to find breath. . . . But it was his own breath that failed, choked as by blood and fire that broke into his own throat. . . . Smothered in sand, the centuries roared past him, died away into the distance, sank back into the interminable desert. . . . He found his voice this time. He shouted.

He saw again—Lettice, blowing the smoke from her face and eyes with an impatient little gesture of both hands, while Tony knelt in front of her and fanned a reluctant fire with his old felt hat. The picture—the second picture—had been instantaneous. It had not lasted a fraction of a second even.

He shouted. And this time his voice was audible. Lettice and Tony stood up, as though a single person rose. Both turned in the direction of the sound. Then Tony moved off quickly. Tom's vision had interpenetrated this very action even while it was actually taking place—the first time.

'Why—I do declare—if it isn't—Tom!' he heard in a startled woman's voice.

He came down towards her slowly. Something of the 'pictures' still swam in between what was next said and done. It seemed in the atmosphere, pervading the three of them. But it was

weakening, passing away quickly. For one moment, however, before it passed, it became overpowering again.

‘But, Tom—is this a joke, or what? You frightened me’—she gave a horrid gasp—‘nearly to death! You’ve come back—!’

‘It’s a surprise,’ he cried, trying to laugh, though his lips were dry and refused the effort. ‘I have surprised you. I’ve come back!’

He heard the gasp prolonged. Breathing seemed difficult. Some deep distress was in her. Yet, in place of pity, exultation caught him oddly. The next instant he felt suddenly afraid. There was confusion in his soul. For it was *he and she*, it seemed, who had been ‘surprised and caught.’ And her voice called shrilly:

‘Tony! Tony. . .!’

There was amazement in the sound of it—terror, relief, and passion too. The thin note of fear and anguish broke through the natural call. Then, as Tony came running up, a few sticks in his big hands—she screamed, yet with failing breath:

‘Oh, oh. . .! Who *are* you. . .?’

For the man she summoned came, but came too swiftly. Moving with uncertain gait, he yet came rapidly—terribly, somehow, and with violence. Instantaneously, it seemed, he covered the intervening space. In the calm, sweet moonlight, beneath the blaze of the steady stars, he suddenly was—there, upon that patch of ancient desert sand. He looked half unearthly. The big hands he held outspread before him glistened a little in the shimmer of the moon. Yet they were dark, and they seemed menacing. They threatened—as with some power he meant to use, because it was his right. But the gleam upon them was not of swarthy skin alone. The gleam, the darkness, were of blood. . . . There was a cry again—a sound of anguish almost intolerable. . . .

And the same instant Tom felt the clasp of his cousin’s hand upon his own, and heard his jolly voice with easy, natural laughter in it: ‘But, Tom, old chap, how ripping! You’re really back! This *is* a grand surprise! It’s splendid!’

There was nothing that called upon either his courage or control. They were overjoyed to see him, the surprise he provided proved indeed the success of the evening.

‘I thought at first you were Mohammed with the kettle,’ exclaimed Madame Jaretzka, coming close to make quite sure, and murmuring quickly—nervously as well, he thought—Oh, Tom, I *am* so glad,’ beneath her breath. ‘You’re just in time—we all wanted you so.’

Explanations followed; Tony’s friends had postponed the Cairo trip at the last moment; the picnic had been planned as a rehearsal for the real one that was to follow later. Tom’s adroitness in finding them was praised; he became the unwilling hero of the piece, and as such had to make the fire a success and prove himself generally the *clou* of the party that hitherto was missing. He became at once the life and centre of the little group, gay and in the highest spirits, the emotion accumulated in him discharging itself in the entirely unexpected direction of hilarious fun and gaiety.

The sense of tragedy he had gathered on his journey, if it muttered at all, muttered out of sight. He looked back upon his feelings of an hour before with amazement, dismay, distress—then utterly forgot them. The picture itself—the vision—was as though it had not been at all. What, in the name of common sense, had possessed him that he could ever have admitted such preposterous uneasiness? He thought of Mrs. Haughstone’s absurd warnings with a sharp contempt, and felt his spirits only rise higher than before. She was meanly suspicious about nothing. Of course he would give Lettice a hint: why not, indeed? He would give it then and

there before them all and hear them laugh about it till they cried. And he would have done so, doubtless, but that he realised the woman's jealousy was a sordid topic to introduce into so gay a party.

'You arrived in the nick of time, Tom,' Lettice told him. 'We were beginning to feel the solemnity of these surroundings, the awful Tombs of the Kings and Priests and people. Those cliffs are too oppressive for a picnic.'

'A fact,' cried Tony. 'It feels like sacrilege. They resent us being here.' He glanced at Madame Jaretzka as he said it. 'If you hadn't come, Tom, I'm sure there'd have been a disaster somewhere. Anyhow, one must feel superstitious to enjoy a place like this. It's the proper atmosphere!'

Lettice looked up at Tom, and added, 'You've really saved us. The least we can do is to worship the sun the moment he gets up. We'll adore old Amon-Ra. It's obvious. We must!'

They made themselves merry over a rather sandy meal. She arranged a place for him close beside her, and her genuine pleasure at his unexpected return filled him with a joy that crowded out even the memory of other emotions. The mixture called Tom Kelderdon asserted itself: he felt ashamed; he heartily despised his moods, wondering whence they came so strangely. Tony himself was quiet and affectionate. If anything was lacking, Tom's high spirits carried him too boisterously to notice it. Otherwise he might possibly have thought that she spoke a little sharply once or twice to Tony, neglecting him in a way that was not quite her normal way, and that to himself, even before the others, she was unusually—almost too emphatically—dear and tender. Indeed, she seemed so pleased he had come that a cynical observer, cursed with an acute, experienced mind, might almost have thought she showed something not far from positive relief. But Tom, too happy to be sensitive to shades of feminine conduct, was aware chiefly, if not solely, of his own joy and welcome.

'You didn't get my letter, then, before you left?' she asked him once; and he replied, 'The answer, as in Parliament, is in the negative. But it will be forwarded all right.' He would get it the following night. 'Ah, but you mustn't read it *now*,' she said. 'You must tear it up unread,' and made him promise faithfully he would obey. 'I wrote to you too,' mentioned Tony, as though determined to be left out of nothing. 'You'll get it at the same time. But you mustn't tear mine up, remember. It's full of advice and wisdom you badly need.' And Tom promised that faithfully as well. The reply was in the affirmative.

The bivouac was a complete success; all looked back upon it as an unforgettable experience. They declared, of course, they had not slept a wink, yet all had snored quite audibly beneath the wheeling stars. They were fresh and lively enough, certainly, when the sun poured his delicious warmth across the cloudless sky, while Tom and Tony made the fire and set the coffee on for breakfast.

Of the marvellous beauty that preceded the actual sunrise no one spoke; it left them breathless rather; they watched the sky beyond the hills change colour; great shafts of gold transfixed the violet heavens; the Nile shone faintly; then, with a sudden drive, the stars rushed backwards in a shower, and the amazing sun came up as with a shout. Perfumes that have no name rose from the desert and the fields along the distant river banks. The silence deepened, for no birds sang. Light took the world—and it was morning.

And when the donkey-boys arrived at eight o'clock, the party were slow in starting: it was so pleasant to lie and bask in the sumptuous bath of heat and light that drenched them. The night had been chilly enough. They were a tired party. Once home again, all retired with one accord to

sleep, remaining invisible, until the sun was slanting over Persia and the Indian Ocean, gilding the horizon probably above the starry skies of far Cathay.

But as Tom dozed off behind the shuttered windows in the hotel towards eleven o'clock, having bathed and breakfasted a second time, he thought vaguely of what Mrs. Haughstone had said to him a few hours before. It seemed days ago already. He was too drowsy to hold the thought more than a moment in his mind, much less to reflect upon it. 'It may be just as well to give a hint,' occurred to him. 'Tony *is* a bit too fond of her—too fond for his happiness, perhaps.' Nothing had happened at the picnic to revive the notion; it just struck him as he fell asleep, then vanished; it was a moment's instinct. The vision—it had been an instantaneous flash after all and nothing more—had left his mind completely for the time.

But Tom looked back afterwards upon the all-night bivouac as an occasion marked specially in memory's calendar, yet for a reason that was unlike the reasons his companions knew. He remembered it with mingled joy and pain, also with a wonder that he could have been so blind—the last night of happiness in his brief Egyptian winter.

## CHAPTER XX

He slept through the hot hours of the afternoon. In the cool of the evening, as he strolled along the river bank, he read the few lines Lettice had written to him at Assouan. For the porter had handed him half-a-dozen letters as he left the hotel. Tony's he put for the moment aside; the one from Lettice was all he cared about, quite forgetting he had promised to tear it up unread. It was short but tender—anxious about his comfort and well-being in a strange hotel 'when I am not there to take care of you.' It ended on a complaint that she was tired rather and spending my time at full length on a deck-chair in the garden.' She promised to write 'at greater length to-morrow.'

'Instead of which,' thought Tom with a boy's delight, 'I surprised her and we talked face to face.' But for the Arab touts who ran beside him, offering glass beads made in Birmingham, he could have kissed the letter there and then.

The resplendent gold on the river blinded him, he was glad to enter the darker street and shake off the children who pestered him for bakshish. Passing the Savoy Hotel, he hesitated a moment, then went on. 'No, I won't call in for Tony; I'll find her alone, and we'll have a cosy little talk together before the others come.' He quickened his pace, entered the shady garden, discovered her instantly, and threw himself down upon the cushions beside her deck-chair. 'Just what I hoped,' he said, with pleasure and admiration in his eyes, 'alone at last. That is good luck—isn't it, Lettice?'

'Of course,' she agreed, and smiled lazily, though some might have thought indifferently, as she watched him arranging the cushions.

He flung himself back and gazed at her. She wore a dress of palest yellow, and the broad-brimmed hat with the little roses. She seemed part of the flaming sunset and the tawny desert.

'Well,' he grumbled playfully, 'it is true, isn't it? Our not being alone often, I mean?' He watched her without knowing that he did so.

'In a way—yes,' she said. 'But we can't have everything at once, can we, Tom?' Her voice was colourless perhaps. A tiny frown settled for an instant between her eyes, then vanished. Tom did not notice it. She sighed. 'You baby, Tom. I spoil you dreadfully, and you know I do.'

He liked her in this quiet, teasing mood; it was often the prelude to more delightful spoiling. He was in high spirits. 'You look as fresh as a girl of sixteen, Lettice,' he declared. 'I believe

you're only this instant out of your bath and bed. D'you know, I slept like a baby too—the whole afternoon—'

He interrupted himself, for at that moment a cigarette-case on the sand beside him caught his eye. He picked it up—he recognised it. 'Yes—I wish you'd smoke,' she said the same instant, brushing a fly quickly from her cheek.

'Tony's,' he exclaimed, examining the case.

He noticed at the same time several burnt matches between his cushions and her chair.

But he'd love you to smoke them: I'll take the responsibility.' She laughed quietly. 'I'm sure they're good—better than yours; he's wickedly extravagant.' She watched him as he took one out, examining the label critically, then lighting it slowly and inhaling the smoke to taste it. There was a faint perfume that clung to the case and its contents.

'Ambra,' said Lettice, a kind of watchful amusement in her eyes. 'You don't like it!'

Tom looked up sharply.

'Is that it? I didn't know.'

She nodded. 'It's Tony's smell; haven't you noticed it? He always has it about him. No, no,' she laughed, noticing his expression of disapproval, 'he doesn't use it. It's just in his atmosphere, I mean.'

'Oh, is it?' said Tom.

'I rather like it,' she went on idly, 'but I never can make out where it comes from. We call it ambra—the fragrance that hangs about the bazaars: I believe they used it for the mummies; but the desert perfume is in it too. It's rather wonderful—it suits him—don't you think? Penetrating, and so delicate.'

What a lot she had to say about it! He made no reply. He was looking down to see what caused him that sudden, inexplicable pain—and discovered that the lighted match had burned his fingers. The next minute he looked up again—straight into her eyes.

But, somehow, he did not say exactly what he meant to say. He said, in fact, something that occurred to him on the spur of the moment. His mind was simple, possibly, yet imps occasionally made use of it. An imp just then reminded him: 'Her letter made no mention of the picnic, of Tony's sudden change of plan, yet it was written yesterday morning when both were being arranged.'

So Tom did not refer to the ambra perfume, nor to the fact that Tony had spent the afternoon with her. He said quite another thing—said it rather bluntly too: 'I've just got your letter from Assuan, Lettice, and I clean forgot my promise that I wouldn't read it.' He paused a second. 'You said nothing about the picnic in it.'

'I thought you'd be disappointed if you knew,' she replied at once. 'That's why I didn't want you to read it.' And she fell to scolding him in the way he usually loved,—but at the moment found less stimulating for some reason. He smoked his stolen cigarette with energy for a measurable period.

'You're the spoilt child, not I,' he said at length, still looking at her. 'You said you were tired and meant to rest, and then you go for an exhausting expedition instead.'

The tiny frown reappeared between her eyes, lingered a trifle longer than before, and vanished. She made a quick gesture. 'You're in a very nagging mood, Tom; bivouacs don't agree with you. She spoke lightly, easily, in excellent good temper really. 'It was Tony persuaded me, if you want to know the truth. He found himself free unexpectedly; he was so persistent; it's impossible to resist him when he's like that—the only thing is to give in and go.'

‘Of course.’ Tom’s face was like a mask. He thought so, at least, as he laughed and agreed with her, saying Tony was an unscrupulous rascal at the best of times. Apparently there was a struggle in him; he seemed in two minds. ‘Was he here this afternoon?’ he asked. He learned that Tony had come at four o’clock and had tea with her alone. We didn’t telephone because he said it would only spoil your sleep, and that a man who works as well as plays must sleep—longer than a younger man. Then, as Tom said nothing, she added, ‘Tony *is* such a boy, isn’t he?’

There were several emotions in Tom just then. He hardly knew which was the true, or at least, the dominant one. He was thinking of several things at once too: of her letter, of that faint peculiar odour, of Tony’s coming to tea, but chiefly, perhaps, of the fact that Lettice had not mentioned it,—but that he had found it out. . . .

His heart sank. It struck him suddenly that the mother in her sought to protect him from the pain the woman gave.

‘Is he—yes,’ he said absent-mindedly. And she repeated quietly, ‘Oh, I think so.’

The brief eastern twilight had meanwhile fallen, and the rapidly cooling air sighed through the foliage. It grew darker in their shady corner. The western sky was still a blaze of riotous colour, however, that filtered through the trees and shed a luminous glow upon their faces. It was a bewitching light—there was something bewitching about Lettice as she lay there. Tom himself felt a touch of that deep Egyptian enchantment. It stole in among his thoughts and feelings, colouring motives, lifting into view, as from far away, moods that he hardly understood and yet obeyed because they were familiar.

This evasive sense of familiarity, both welcome and unwelcome, swept in, dropped a fleeting whisper, and was gone again. He felt himself for an instant—some one else: one Tom felt and spoke, while another Tom looked on and watched, a calm, outside spectator. And upon his heart came a touch of that strange, rich pain that was never very far away in Egypt.

‘I say, Lettice,’ he began suddenly, as though he came to an abrupt decision. ‘This is an awful place for talk—these Luxor hotels—’ He stuck. ‘Isn’t it? You know what I mean.’ His laborious manner betrayed intensity, yet he meant to speak lightly, easily, and thought his voice was merely natural. He stared hard at the glowing tip of his cigarette.

Lettice looked across at him without speaking for a moment. Her eyelids were half closed. He felt her gaze and raised his own. He saw the smile steal down towards her lips.

‘Tom, why are you glaring at me?’

He started. He tried to smile, but there was no smile in him.

‘Was I, Lettice? Forgive me.’ The talk that was coming would hurt him, yet somehow he desired it. He would give his little warning and take the consequences. ‘I was devouring your beauty, as the *Family Herald* says.’ He heard himself utter a dry and unconvincing laugh. Something was rising through him; it was beyond control; it had to come. He felt stupid, awkward, and was angry with himself for being so. For, somehow, at the same time he felt powerless too.

She came to the point with a directness that disconcerted him. ‘Who has been talking about me?’ she enquired, her voice hardening a little; ‘and what does it matter if they have?’

Tom swallowed. There was something about her beauty in that moment that set him on fire from head to foot. He knew a fierce desire to seize her in his arms, hold her for ever and ever—lest she should escape him.

But he was unable to give expression in any way to what was in him. All he did was to shift his cushions slightly farther from her side.

'It's always wiser—safer—not to be seen about too much with the same man—alone,' he fumbled, recalling Mrs. Haughstone's words, 'in a place like this, I mean,' he qualified it. It sounded foolish, but he could evolve no cleverer way of phrasing it. He went on quicker, a touch of nervousness in his voice he tried to smother: 'No one can mistake *our* relationship, or think there's anything wrong in it.' He stopped a second, as she gazed at him in silence, waiting for him to finish. 'But Tony,' he concluded, with a gulp he prayed she did not notice, 'Tony is a little—'

'Well?' she helped him, 'a little what?'

'A little different, isn't he?'

Tom realised that he was producing the reverse of what he intended. Somehow the choice of words seemed forced upon him. He was aware of his own helplessness; he felt almost like a boy scolding his own wise, affectionate mother. The thought stung him into pain, and with the pain rose, too, a first distant hint of anger. The turmoil of feeling confused him. He was aware—by her silence chiefly—of the new distance between them, a distance the mention of Tony had emphasised. Instinctively he tried to hide both pain and anger—it could only increase this distance that was already there. At the same time he saw red. . . . Her answer, then, so gently given, baffled him absurdly. He felt out of his depth.

'I'll be more careful, Tom, dear—you wise, experienced chaperone.'

The words, the manner, stung him. Another emotion, wounded vanity, came into play. To laugh at himself was natural and right, but to be laughed at by a woman, a woman whom he loved, whom he regarded as exclusively his own, against whom, moreover, he had an accumulating grievance—it hurt him acutely, although he seemed powerless to prevent it. He felt his own stupidity increase.

'It's just as well, I think, Lettice.' It was the wrong, the hopeless thing to say, but the words seemed, in a sense, pushed quickly out of his mouth lest he should find better ones. He anticipated, too, her exasperation before her answer proved it: 'But, really, Tom, you know, I can look after myself rather well as a rule—don't you think?'

He interrupted her then, a mixture of several feelings in him—shame, the pain of frustrated yearning, perversity too. For, in spite of himself, he wanted to hear how she would speak of Tony. He meant to punish himself by hearing her praise him. He, too, meant to speak well of his cousin.

'He's a bit careless, though,' he blurted, 'irresponsible, in a way—where women are concerned. I'm sure he means no harm, of course, but—' He paused in confusion, he was no longer afraid that harm might come to Tony; he was afraid for her, but now also for himself as well.

'Tom, I do believe you're jealous!'

He laughed boisterously when he heard it. It was really comical, absurdly comical, of course. It sounded, too, the way she said it—ugly, mean, contemptible. The touch of shame came back.

'Lettice! But what an idea!' He gasped, turning round upon his other elbow, closer to her. But the sinking of his heart increased; he felt an inner cold. And a moment of deep silence followed the empty laughter. The rustle of the foliage alone was audible.

Lettice looked down sideways at him through half-closed eyelids; propped on his cushions beside her, this was natural: yet he felt it mental as well as physical. There was pity in her attitude, a concealed exasperation, almost contempt. At the same time he realised that she had never seemed so adorably lovely, so exquisite, so out of his reach. He had never felt her so seductively desirable. He made an impetuous gesture towards her before he knew it.

‘Don’t, Tom; you’ll upset my papers and everything,’ she said calmly, yet with the merest suspicion of annoyance in her tone. She was very gentle, she was also very cold—cold as ice, he felt her, while he was burning as with fire. He was aware of this unbridgeable distance between his passion and her indifference; and a dreadful thought leaped up in him with stabbing pain: ‘Her answer to Tony would have been quite otherwise.’

‘I’m sorry, Lettice—so sorry,’ he said brusquely, to hide his mortification. ‘I’m awfully clumsy.’ She was putting her papers tidy again with calm fingers, while his own were almost cramped with the energy of suppressed desire. ‘But, seriously,’ he went on, refusing the rebuff by pretending it was play on his part, ‘it isn’t very wise to be seen about so much alone with Tony. Believe me, it isn’t.’ For the first time, he noticed, it was difficult to use the familiar and affectionate name. But for a sense of humour he could have said ‘Anthony.’

‘I do believe you, Tom. I’ll be more careful.’

Her eyes were very soft, her manner quiet, her gentle tone untinged with any emotion. Yet Tom detected, he felt sure, a certain eagerness behind the show of apparent indifference. She liked to talk—to go on talking—about Tony. ‘Do you *really* think so, really mean it?’ he heard her asking, and thus knew his thought confirmed. She invited more. And, with open eyes, with a curious welcome even to the pain involved, Tom deliberately stepped into the cruel little trap. But he almost felt that something pushed him in. He talked exactly like a boy: ‘He—he’s got a peculiar power with women,’ he said. ‘I can’t make it out quite. He’s not good-looking—exactly—is he?’ It was impossible to conceal his eagerness to know exactly what she did feel.

‘There’s a touch of genius in him,’ she answered. ‘I don’t think looks matter so much—I mean, with women.’ She spoke with a certain restraint, not deliberately saying less than she thought, but yet keeping back the entire truth. He suddenly realised a relationship between her and Tony into which he was not admitted. The distance between them increased visibly before his very eyes.

And again, out of a hundred things he wanted to say, he said—as though compelled to—another thing.

‘Rather!’ he burst out honestly. ‘I should hate it if—you hadn’t liked him.’ But a week ago he would have phrased this differently—‘If *he* had not liked you.’

There were perceptible pauses between their sentences now, pauses that for him seemed breaking with a suspense that was painful, almost cruel. He knew worse was coming. He both longed for it yet dreaded it. He felt at her mercy, in her power somehow.

‘It’s odd,’ she went on slowly, ‘but in England I thought him stupid rather, whereas out here he’s changed into another person.’

‘I think we’ve all changed—somehow,’ Tom filled the pause, and was going to say more when she interrupted. She kept the conversation upon Tony.

‘I shall never forget the day he walked in here first. It was the week I arrived. You’ll laugh, Tom, when I tell you—’ She hesitated—almost it seemed on purpose.

‘How was it? How did he look?’ The forced indifference of the tone betrayed his anxiety.

‘Well, he’s not impressive exactly—is he?—as a rule. That little stoop—and so on. But I saw his figure coming up the path before I recognised who it was, and I thought suddenly of an Egyptian, almost an old Pharaoh, walking.’

She broke off with that little significant laugh Tom knew so well. But, comical though the picture might have been—Tony walking like a king,—Tom did not laugh. It was not ludicrous, for it was somewhere true. He remembered the singular inner mental picture he had seen above the desert fire, and the pain within him seemed the forerunner of some tragedy that watched too

close upon his life. But, for another and more obvious reason, he could not laugh; for he heard the admiration in her voice, and it was upon that his mind fastened instantly. His observation was so mercilessly sharp. He hated it. Where was his usual slowness gone? Why was his blood so quickly apprehensive?

She kept her eyes fixed steadily on his, saying what followed gently, calmly, yet as though another woman spoke the words. She stabbed him, noting the effect upon him with a detached interest that seemed indifferent to his pain. Something remote and ancient stirred in her, something that was not of herself to-day, something half primitive, half barbaric.

'It may have been the blazing light,' she went on, 'the half-savage effect of these amazing sunsets—I cannot say,—but I saw him in a sheet of gold. There was gold about him, I mean, as though he wore it—and when he came close there was that odd, faint perfume, half of the open desert and half of ambra, as we call it—' Again she broke off and hesitated, leaving the impression there was more to tell, but that she could not say it. She kept back much. Into the distance now established between them Tom felt a creeping sense of cold, as of the chill desert wind that follows hard upon the sunset. Her eyes still held him steadily. He seemed more and more aware of something merciless in her.

He sat and gazed at her—at a woman he loved, a woman who loved him, but a woman who now caused him pain deliberately because something beyond herself compelled. Her tenderness lay inactive, though surely not forgotten. She, too, felt the pain. Yet with her it was in some odd way—impersonal. . . . Tom, hopelessly out of his depth, swept onward by this mighty wave behind all three of them, sat still and watched her—fascinated, even terrified. Her eyelids were half closed again. Another look stole up into her face, driving away the modern beauty, replacing its softness, tenderness with another expression he could not fathom. Yet this new expression was somehow, too, half recognisable. It was difficult to describe—a little sterner, a little wilder, a faint emphasis of the barbaric peering through it. It was darker. She looked eastern. Almost, he saw her visibly change—here in the twilight of the little Luxor garden by his side. Distance increased remorselessly between them. She was far away, yet ever close at the same time. He could not tell whether she was going away from him or coming nearer. The shadow of tragedy fell on him from the empty sky. . . .

In his bewilderment he tried to hold steady and watch, but the soul in him rushed backwards. He felt, but could not think. The wave surged under him. Various impulses urged him into a pouring flood of words; yet he gave expression to none of them. He laughed a little dry, short laugh. He heard himself saying lightly, though with apparent lack of interest: 'How curious, Lettice, how very odd! What made him look like that?'

But he knew her answer would mean pain. It came just as he expected

'He *is* wonderful—out here—quite different—.' Another minute and she would have added 'I'm different, too.' But Tom interrupted hurriedly:

'Do you always see him—like that—now? In a sheet of gold—with beauty?' His tongue was so hot and dry against his lips that he almost stammered.

She nodded, her eyelids still half closed. She lay very quiet, peering down at him. 'It lasts?' he insisted, turning the knife himself.

'You'll laugh when I tell you something more, she went on, making a slight gesture of assent, 'but I felt such joy in myself—so wild and reckless—that when I got to my room that night I danced—danced alone with all my clothes off.'

'Lettice!'

‘The spontaneous happiness was like a child’s—a sort of freedom feeling. I *had* to shake my clothes off simply. I wanted to shake off the walls and ceiling too, and get out into the open desert. Tom—I felt out of myself in a way—as though I’d escaped—into—into quite different conditions—’

She gave details of the singular mood that had come upon her with the arrival of Tony, but Tom hardly heard her. Only too well he knew the explanation. The touch of ecstasy was no new thing, although its manifestation may have been peculiar. He had known it himself in his own lesser love affairs. But that she could calmly tell him about it, that she could deliberately describe this effect upon her of another man—! It baffled him beyond all thoughts or words. . . . Was the self-revelation an unconscious one? Did she realise the meaning of what she told him? The Lettice he had known could surely not say this thing. In her he felt again, more distinctly than before, another person—division, conflict. Her hesitations, her face, her gestures, her very language proved it. He shrank, as from some one who inflicted pain as a child, unwittingly, to see what the effect would be. . . . He remembered the incident of the insect in the sand. . . .

‘And I feel—even now—I could do it again,’ her voice pierced in across his moment of hidden anguish. The knife she had thrust again into his breast was twisted then.

It was time that he said something, and a sentence offered itself in time to save him. The desire to hide his pain from her was too strong to be disobeyed. He wanted to know) yet not, somehow, to prevent. He seized upon the sentence, keeping his voice steady with an effort that cut his very flesh: ‘There’s nothing impersonal exactly in *that*, Lettice!’ he exclaimed with an exaggerated lightness.

‘Oh no,’ she agreed. ‘But it’s only in England, perhaps, that I’m impersonal, as you call it. I suppose, out here, I’ve changed. The beauty, the mystery,—this fierce sunshine or something—stir—’ She hesitated for a fraction of a second.

‘The woman in you,’ he put in, turning the knife this time with his own fingers deliberately. The words seemed driven out by their own impetus; he did not choose them. A faint ghastly hope was in him—that she would shake her head and contradict him.

She waited a moment, then turned her eyes aside. ‘Perhaps, Tom. I wonder. . . .!’

And as she said it, Tom knew suddenly another thing as well. It stood out clearly, as with big printed letters that violent advertisements use upon the hoardings. Her new joy and excitement, her gaiety and zest for life—all had been caused, not by himself, but by another. Heavens! how blind he had been! He understood at last, and a flood of freezing water drenched him. His heart stopped beating for a moment. He gasped. He could not get his breath. His accumulating doubts hitherto unexpressed, almost unacknowledged even, were now confirmed.

He got up stiffly, awkwardly, from his cushions, and moved a few steps towards the house, for there stole upon her altered face just then the very expression of excitement, of radiant and spontaneous joy, he had believed until this moment were caused by himself. Tony was coming up the darkened drive. He was exactly in her line of sight. And a severe, embittered struggle then took place in a heart that seemed strangely divided against itself. He felt as though a second Tom, yet still himself, battled against the first, exchanging thrusts of indescribable torture. The complexity of emotions in his heart was devastating beyond anything he had ever known in his thirty-five years of satisfied, self-centred life. Two voices spoke in clear, sharp sentences, one against the other:

‘Your suspicions are unworthy, shameful. Trust her. She’s as loyal and true and faithful as yourself!’ cried the first.

And the second:

‘Blind! Can’t you see what’s going on between them? It has happened to other men, why not to you? She is playing with you; she has outgrown your love.’ It was the older voice that used the words.

‘Impossible, ridiculous!’ the first voice cried. ‘There’s something wrong with me that I can have such wretched thoughts. It’s merely innocence and joy of life. No one can take *my* place.’

To which, again, the second Tom made bitter answer. ‘You are too old for her, too dull, too ordinary! You hold the loving mother still, but a younger man has waked the woman in her. And you must let it come. You dare not blame. Nor have you the right to interfere.’

So acute, so violent was the perplexity in him that he knew not what to say or do at first. Unable to come to a decision, he stood there, waving his hand to Tony with a cry of welcome. His first vehement desire to be alone, to make an excuse, to get to his room and think, had passed: a second, a maturer attitude, conquered it: to take whatever came, to face it, in a word to know the worst. . . . And the extraordinary pain he hid by an exuberance of high spirits that surprised himself. It was, of course, the suppressed emotional energy finding another outlet. A similar state had occurred that ‘Karnak night’ of a long ten days ago, though he had not understood it then. Behind it lay the misery of loneliness that he knew in his very bones was coming.

‘Tony! So it is. I was afraid he’d change his mind and leave us in the lurch.’

Tom heard the laugh of happiness as she said it; he heard the voice distinctly—the change of tone in it, the softness, the half-caressing tenderness that crept unconsciously in, the faint thrill of womanly passion. Unconsciously, yes! he was sure, at least, of that. She did not know quite yet, she did not realise what had happened. Honest to the core, he felt her. His love surged up tumultuously. He could face pain, loss, death—or, as he put it, ‘almost anything,’ if it meant happiness to her. The thought, at any rate, came to him thus. . . . And Tom believed it.

At the same moment he heard her voice, close behind him this time. She had left her chair, meaning to go indoors and prepare for supper before Tony actually arrived. ‘Tom, dear boy,’ her hand upon his shoulder a moment as she passed, ‘you’re tired or something. I can see it. I believe you’re worrying. There’s something you haven’t told me—isn’t there now?’ She gave him a loving glance that was of purest gold. ‘You shall tell me all about it when we’re alone. You must tell me everything.’

The pain and joy in him were equal then. He was a boy of eighteen, aching over his first love affair; and she was divinely mothering him. It was extraordinary; it was past belief; another minute, had they been alone, he could almost have laid his head upon her breast, complaining in anguish to the mother in her that the woman he loved was gone: ‘I feel you’re slipping from me! I’m losing you . . .!’

Instead he stammered some commonplace unreality about his work at Assouan and heard her agree with him that he certainly must not neglect it—and she was gone into the house. The swinging curtains of dried grasses hid her a few feet beyond, but between them, he felt, stretched five thousand years and half a dozen continents as well.

‘Tom, old chap, did you get my letter? You promised to read it. Is it all right, I mean? I wouldn’t for all the world let anything—’

Tom stopped him abruptly. He wished to read the letter for himself without foreknowledge of its contents.

‘Eh? No—that is, I got it,’ he said confusedly, ‘but I haven’t read it yet. I slept all the afternoon.’

An expression of anxiety in Tony's face came and vanished. 'You can tell me to-morrow—frank as you like, mind,' he replied, to which Tom said quite eagerly, 'Rather, Tony: of course. I'll read your old letter the moment I get back tonight.' And Tony, merry as a sandboy, changed the subject, declaring that he had only one desire in life just then, and that was—food.

## CHAPTER XXI

The conflict in Tom's puzzled heart sharpened that evening into dreadful edges that cut him mercilessly whichever way he turned. One minute he felt sure of Lettice, the next the opposite was clear. Between these two certainties he balanced in secret torture, one factor alone constant—that his sense of security was shaken to the foundations.

Belief in his own value had never been thus assailed before; that he was indispensable had been an ultimate assurance. His vanity and self-esteem now toppled ominously. A sense of inferiority crept over him, as on the first day of his arrival at Alexandria. There seemed the flavour of some strange authority in her that baffled all approach to the former intimacy. He hardly recognised himself, for, the foundations being shaken, all that was built upon them trembled too.

The insecurity showed in the smallest trifles—he expressed himself hesitatingly; he felt awkward, clumsy, ineffective; his conversation became stupid for all the false high spirits that inflated it, his very manners gauche; he said and did the wrong things; he was boring. Being ill at ease and out of harmony with himself, he found it impossible to play his part in the trio as of old; the trio, indeed, had now divided itself—one against two.

That is, keenly, and in spite of himself, he watched the other two; he watched them as a detective does, for evidence. He became uncannily observant. And since Tony was especially amusing that evening, Lettice, moreover, apparently absorbed in his stimulating talk, Tom's alternate gaucheries and silence passed unnoticed, certainly uncommented. In schoolboy phraseology, Tom felt out of it. His presence was tolerated—as by favour. The two enjoyed a mutual understanding from which he was excluded, a private intimacy that was spiritual, mental,—physical.

He even found it in him for the first time to marvel that Lettice had ever cared for him at all. Beside Tony's brilliance he felt himself cheaper, almost insignificant. He felt old. . . . His pain, moreover, was twofold: his own selfish sense of personal loss produced one kind of anguish, but the possibility that *she* was playing false produced another. The first was manageable: the second beyond words appalling.

Against this background of emotional disturbance he watched the evening pass. It developed as the hours moved. Tony, he noticed, though so full of life, betrayed a certain malaise towards himself and avoided that direct meeting of the eye that was his characteristic. More and more, especially when Mrs. Haughstone had betaken herself to bed, and the trio sat in the cooler garden alone, Tom became aware of a subtle intimacy between his companions that resented all his efforts to include him too. It was, moreover—his heart warned him now,—an affectionate, a natural intimacy, built upon many an hour of intercourse while he was yet in England, and, worst of all, that it was secret. But more—he realised that the missing part of her was now astir, touched into life by another, and a younger, man. It was ardent and untamed. It had awakened from its slumber. He even fancied that something of challenge flashed from her, though without definite words or gesture.

With a degree of acute perception wholly new to him, he watched the evidence of inner proximity, yet watched it automatically and certainly not meanly nor with slyness. The evidence that was sheer anguish thrust itself upon him. His eyes had opened; he could not help himself.

But he watched himself as well. Only at moments was he aware of this—a kind of higher Self detached from shifting moods, looked on calmly and took note. This Self, placed high above the stage, looked down. It was a Self that never acted, never wept or suffered, never changed. It was secure, superb, it was divine. Its very existence in him hitherto had been unknown. He was now vividly aware of it. It was the Onlooker.

The explanation of his mysterious earlier moods offered itself with a clarity that was ghastly. Watching the happiness of these two, he recalled a hundred subconscious hints he had disregarded: the empty letter at Alexandria, her dislike of being alone with him, the increasing admiration for his cousin, a thousand things she had left unsaid, above all, the exuberance and radiant joy that Tony's presence woke in her. The gradual but significant change, the singular vision in the desert, his own foretaste of misery as he watched the Theban Hills from the balcony of his bedroom—all, all returned upon him, arranged in a phalanx of neglected proofs that the new Tom offered cruelly to the old. But it was her slight exasperation, her evasion when he questioned her, that capped the damning list. And her silence was the culminating proof.

Then, inexplicably, he shifted to the other side that the old, the normal Tom presented generously to the new. While this reaction lasted he laughed away the evidence, and honestly believed he was exaggerating trifles. The new zest that Egypt woke in her—God bless her sweetness and simplicity!—was only natural; if Tony stimulated the intellectual side of her, he could feel only pleasure that her happiness was thus increased. She was innocent. He could not possibly doubt or question, and shame flooded him till he felt himself the meanest man alive. Suspicion was no normal part of him. He crushed it out of sight, scotched as he thought to death. To lose belief in her would mean to lose belief in everybody. It was inconceivable. Every instinct in him repelled the vile suggestion. And while this reaction lasted his security returned.

Only it did *not* last; it merged invariably into its opposite again; and the alternating confidence and doubt produced a state of confused emotion that contained the nightmare touch in its most essential form. The Wave hung, poised above him—but would not fall—quite yet.

It was later in the evening that the singular intensity introduced itself into all they said and did, hanging above them like a cloud. It came curiously, was suddenly there—without hint or warning. Tom had the feeling that they moved amid invisible dangers, almost as though explosives lay hidden near them, ready any moment to bring destruction with a sudden crash—final destruction of the happy preexisting conditions. The menace of a thunder-cloud approached as in his childhood's dream; disaster lurked behind the quiet outer show. The Wave was rising almost audibly.

For upon their earlier mood of lighter kind that had preceded Mrs. Haughstone's exit, and then upon the more serious talk that followed in the garden, there descended abruptly this uncanny quiet that one and all obeyed. The contrast was most marked. Tom remembered how their voices hushed upon a given moment, how they looked about them during the brief silence following, peering into the luminous darkness as though some one watched them—and how Madame Jaretska, remarking on the chilly air, then rose suddenly and led the way into the house. Both she and Tony, he remembered, had been restless for some little time. 'It's chilly. We shall be cosier indoors,' she said lightly, and moved away, followed by his cousin.

Tom lingered a few minutes, watching them pass along the verandah to the room beyond. He did not like the change. In the open air, the intimacy he dreaded was less suggested than in the friendly familiarity of a room, her room; out of doors it was more diffused; he preferred the remoteness that the garden lent. At the same time he was glad of a moment by himself—though a moment only. He wanted to collect his thoughts and face things as they were. There should be no ‘shuffling’ if he possibly could prevent it.

He lingered with his cigarette behind the others. A red moon hung above the mournful hills, and the stars shone in their myriads. Both lay reflected in the quiet river. The night was very peaceful. No wind stirred. . . . And he strove to force the exquisite Egyptian silence upon the turmoil that was in his soul—to gain that inner silence through which the voice of truth might whisper clearly to him. The poise he craved lay all about him in the solemn stillness, in stars and moon and desert; the temple columns had it, the steadfast, huge Colossi waiting for the sun, the bleak stone hills, the very Nile herself. Something of their immemorial resolution and resistance he might even borrow for his little tortured self. . . before he followed his companions. For it came to him that within the four walls of her room all that he dreaded must reveal itself in such concentrated, visible form that he no longer would be able to deny it: the established intimacy, the sweetness, the desire, and—the love.

He made this effort, be it recorded in his favour, and made it bravely; while every minute that he left his companions undisturbed was a long-drawn torment in his heart. For he plainly recognised now a danger he knew not how he might adequately meet. Here was the strangeness of it: that he did *not* distrust Lettice, nor felt resentment against Tony. Why this was so, or what the meaning was, he could not fathom. He felt vaguely that Lettice, like himself, was the plaything of greater forces than she knew, and that her perplexing conduct was based upon disharmony in herself beyond her possible control. Some part of her, long hidden, had emerged in Egypt, brought out by the deep mystery and passion of the climate, by its burning, sensuous splendour: its magic drove her along unconsciously. There were two persons in her.

It may have been absurd to divide the woman and the mother as he did; probably it was false psychology as well; where love is, mother and woman blend divinely into one. He did not know: it seemed, as yet, they had not blended. He was positive only that while part of her was going from him, if not already gone, the rest, and the major part, was true and loyal, loving and marvellously tender. The conflict of these certainties left hopeless disorder in every corner of his being.

Tossing away his cigarette, he moved slowly up the verandah steps. The Wave was never more sensibly behind, beneath him, than in that moment. He rose upon it, it was under him, he felt its lift and irresistible momentum; almost it bore him up the steps. For he meant to face whatever came deliberately he welcomed the hurt; it had to come beyond the suffering beckoned some marvellous joy, pure as the dawn beyond the cruel desert. There was in him that rich, sweet pain he knew of old. It beckoned and allured him even while he shrank. Alone the supreme Self in him looked calmly on, seeming to lessen the part that trembled and knew fear.

Then, as he neared the room, a sound of music floated out to meet him—Tony was singing to his own accompaniment. Lettice, upon a sofa in the corner, looked up and placed a finger on her lips, then closed her eyes again, listening to the song. And Tom was glad she closed her eyes, glad also that Tony’s back was towards him, for as he crossed the threshold a singular impulse took possession of his legs and he was only just able to stop a ridiculous movement of shuffling with his feet upon the matting. Quickly he gained a sofa by the window and dropped down upon it, watching, listening. Tony was singing softly, yet with deep expression half suppressed

We were young, we were merry, we were very very wise,  
And the door stood open at our feast,  
When there passed us a woman with the West in her eyes,  
And a man with his back to the East.

O, still grew the hearts that were beating so fast,  
The loudest voice was still.  
The jest died away on our lips as they passed,  
And the rays of July struck chill.

He sang the words with an odd, emphatic slowness, turning to look at Lettice between the phrases. He was not yet aware that Tom had entered. The tune held all the pathos and tragedy of the world in it. 'Both going the same way together,' he said in a suggestive undertone, his hands playing a soft running chord; 'the man and the woman.' He again leaned in her direction. 'It's a pregnant opening, don't you think? The music I found in the very depths of me somewhere. Lettice, I believe you're asleep!' he whispered tenderly after a second's pause.

She opened her eyes then and looked meaningfully at him. Tom made no sound, no movement. He saw only her eyes fixed steadily on Tony, whose last sentence, using the Christian name so softly, rang on inside him like the clanging of a prison bell.

'Sing another verse first,' said Madame Jaretska quietly, 'and we'll pass judgment afterwards. But I wasn't asleep, was I, Tom?' And, following the direction of her eyes, Tony started, and turned round. 'I shut my eyes to listen better,' she added, almost impatiently. 'Now, please go on; we want to hear the rest.'

'Of course,' said Tom, in as natural a tone as possible. 'Of course we do. What is it?' he asked.

'Mary Coleridge—the words,' replied Tony, turning to the piano again. 'In a moment of aberration I thought I could write the music for it—' The softness and passion had left his voice completely.

'Oh, the tune is yours?'

His cousin nodded. There was a little frown between the watching eyes upon the sofa. 'Tom, you mustn't interrupt; it spoils the mood—the rhythm,' and she again asked Tony to go on. The difference in the two tones she used was too obvious to be missed by any man who heard them—the veiled exasperation and—the tenderness.

Tony obeyed at once. Striking a preliminary chord as the stool swung round, he said for Tom's benefit, 'To me there's tragedy in the words, real tragedy, so I tried to make the music fit it. Madame Jaretska doesn't agree.' He glanced towards her; her eyes were closed again; her face, Tom thought, was like a mask. Tony did not this time use the little name.

The next verse began, then suddenly broke off. The voice seemed to fail the singer. 'I don't like this one,' he exclaimed, a suspicion of trembling in his tone. 'It's rather too awful. Death comes in, the bread at the feast turns black, the hound falls down—and so on. There's general disaster. It's too tragic, rather. I'll sing the last verse instead.'

'I want to hear it, Tony. I insist,' came the command from the sofa. 'I want the tragic part.'

To Tom it seemed precisely as though the voice had said, 'I want to see Tom suffer. He knows the meaning of it. It's right, it's good, it's necessary for him.'

Tony obeyed. He sang both verses:

The cups of red wine turned pale on the board,  
The white bread black as soot.

The hound forgot the hand of his lord,  
She fell down at his foot.

Low let me lie, where the dead dog lies,  
Ere I sit me down again at a feast,  
When there passes a woman with the West in her eyes,  
And a man with his back to the East.

The song stopped abruptly, the music died away, there was an interval of silence no one broke. Tom had listened spellbound, haunted. He was no judge of poetry or music; he did not understand the meaning of the words exactly; he knew only that both words and music expressed the shadow of tragedy in the air as though they focussed it into a tangible presence. A woman and a man were going in the same direction; there was an onlooker. . . . A spontaneous quality in the words, moreover, proved that they came burning from the writer's heart, and in Tony's music, whether good or bad, there was this same proof of genuine feeling. Judge or no judge, Tom was positive of that. He felt himself the looker-on, an intruder, almost a trespasser.

This sense of exclusion grew upon him as he listened; it passed without warning into the consciousness of a mournful, freezing isolation. These two, sitting in the room, and separated from him by a few feet of coloured Persian rug, were actually separated from him by unbridgeable distance, wrapped in an intimacy that kept him inexorably outside—because he did not understand. He almost knew an objective hallucination—that the sofa and the piano drew slightly nearer to one another, whereas his own chair remained fixed to the floor, immovable—outside.

The intensity of his sensations seemed inexplicable, unless some reality, some truth, lay behind them. The bread at the feast turned black before his very eyes. But another line rang on with a sound of ominous and poignant defeat in his heart, now lonely and bereft: 'Low let me lie, where the dead dog lies . . .' To the onlooker the passing of the pair meant death. . . .

Then, through his confusion, flashed clearly this bitter certitude: Tom suddenly realised that after all he knew nothing of her real, her inner life; he knew her only through himself and in himself—knew himself in her. Tony, less self-centred, less rigidly contained, had penetrated her by an understanding sympathy greater than his own. She was unintelligible to him, but not to Tony. Tony had the key. . . . He had touched in *her* what hitherto had slept.

As the music wailed its dying cadences into this fateful silence, Tom met her eyes across the room. They were strong, and dark with beauty. He met them with no outer quailing, though with a sense of drenching tears within. They seemed to him the eyes of the angel gazing through the gate. He was outside. . .

He was the first to break a silence that had grown unnatural, oppressive.

'What was it?' he asked again abruptly. 'Has it got a name, I mean?' His voice had the cry of a wounded creature in it.

Tony struck an idle chord from the piano as he turned on his stool, 'Oh, yes, it's got a name. It's called "Unwelcome."' And Tom, aware that he winced, was also aware that something in his life congealed and stopped its normal flow.

'Tony, you *are* a genius,' broke in quickly the voice from the other side of the room; 'I always said so. Do you know, that's the most perfect accompaniment I ever heard.' She spoke with feeling, her tone full of admiration.

Tony made no reply. He strummed softly, swaying to the rhythm of what he played.

'I meant the setting,' explained Lettice, 'the music. It expresses the emotion of the words too, *too* exactly. It's wonderful!'

'I didn't know you composed,' put in Tom stupidly. He had to say something. He saw them exchange a glance. She smiled. 'When did you do it?'

'Oh, the other day in a sudden fit,' said Tony, without turning. 'While you were at Assouan, I think.'

'And the words, Tom; don't you think they're wonderful, too, and strange?' asked Lettice. 'I find them really haunting.'

'Y-es,' he agreed, without looking at her. He realised that the lyric, though new to him, was not new to them; they had discussed it together already; they felt the same emotion about it; it had moved and stirred them before, moved Tony so deeply that he had found the music for it in the depths of himself. It was an enigmatical poem, it now became symbolic. It embodied the present situation somehow for him. Tom did not understand its meaning as they did; to him it was a foreign language. But they knew the language easily. It betrayed their deep emotional intimacy.

'You didn't hear the first part?' said Tony.

'Not quite. You had just started—when I came in., Tom easily read the meaning in the question. And in his heart the name of the poem repeated itself with significant insistence: *Unwelcome!* It had come like a blow in the face when Tony mentioned it, bruising him internally. He was bleeding. . . . He watched the big, dark hands upon the keys as they moved up and down. It suddenly seemed they moved towards himself. There was power, menace in them—there was death. He felt as if they seized—choked him. . . . They grew stained. . . .

The voices of his companions came to him across great distance; there was a gulf between them, they on that side, he on this: he was aware of antagonism between himself and Tony, and between himself and Lettice. It was very dreadful; his feet and hands were cold; he shivered. But he gave no outer sign that he was suffering, and a desperate pride—though he knew it was but a sham, a temporary pride—came to his assistance. Yet at the same time—he saw red. He felt like a boy at school again.

In imagination, then, he visualised swiftly a definite scene:

'Tony,' he heard himself say, 'you're coming between us. It means all the world to me, to you it means only a passing game. If it means more, it's time for you to say so plainly—and let *her* decide.'

The situation seemed all cleared up; the clouds of tragedy dissipated, the dreadful accumulation of emotion, suspense, and hidden pain, too long suppressed, too intense to be borne another minute, discharged itself in an immense relief. Lettice at last spoke freely and explained: Tony expressed regret, laughing it all away with his accustomed brilliance and irresponsibility.

Then, horribly, he heard Tony give a different answer that was far more possible and likely: -

'I knew you were great friends, but I did not guess there was anything more between you. You never told me. I'm afraid I—I *am* desperately fond of her, and she of me. We must leave it—yes, to her. There is no other way.'

He was lounging on his sofa by the window, his eyes closed, while these thoughts flashed through him. He had never known such insecurity before; he felt sure of nothing; the foundations of his being seemed sliding into space. . . . For it came to him suddenly that he was a slave and that she was set upon a throne far, far beyond his reach. . . .

Across the room, lit only by a single lamp upon the piano, the voices of his companions floated to him, low pitched, a ceaseless murmuring stream. He had been listening even while busy with his own reflections, intently listening. They were still talking of the poem and the music, exchanging intimate thoughts in the language he could not understand. They had passed on to music and poetry at large—dangerous subjects by whose means innocent words, donning an easy

mask, may reveal passionate states of mental and physical kind—and so to personal revelations and confessions the apparently innocent words interpreted. He heard and understood, yet could not wholly follow because the key was missing. He could not take part, much less object. It was all too subtle for his mind. He listened. .

The moonlight fell upon his stretched-out figure, but left his face in shadow; opening his eyes, he could see the others clearly; the intent expression upon *her* face fascinated him as he watched. Yet before his eyes had opened, the feeling again came to him that they had changed their positions somehow, and the verification of this feeling was the first detail he then noticed. Tony's stool was nearer to the bass keys of the piano, while the sofa Lettice lay upon had certainly been drawn up towards him. And Tony leaned over as he talked, bringing their lips within whispering distance. It was all done with that open innocence which increased the cruelty of it. Tom saw and heard and felt all over his body. He lay very still. He half closed his eyes again.

'I do believe Tom's dropped asleep,' said Lettice presently. 'No, don't wake him,' as Tony half turned round, 'he's tired, poor boy!'

But Tom could not willingly listen to a private conversation.

'I'm not asleep,' he exclaimed, 'not a bit of it,' and noticed that they both were startled by the suddenness and volume of his voice. 'But I *am* tired rather,' and he got up, lit a cigarette, wandered about the room a minute, and then leaned out of the open window. 'I think I shall slip off to bed soon—if you'll forgive me, Lettice.'

He said it on impulse; he did not really mean to go; to leave them alone together was beyond his strength. She merely nodded. The woman he had felt so proudly would put Tony in his place—nodded consent!

'I must be going too in a moment,' Tony murmured. He meant it even less than Tom did. He shifted his stool towards the middle of the piano and began to strum again.

'Sing something more first, Tony; I love your ridiculous voice.'

Tom heard it behind his back; it was said half in banter, half in earnest; yet the tone pierced him. She used the private language she and Tony understood. The little sentence was a paraphrase that, being interpreted, said plainly: 'He'll go off presently; then we can talk again of the things we love together—the things he doesn't understand.'

With his face thrust into the cold night air Tom felt the blood go throbbing in his temples. He watched the moonlight on the sandy garden paths. The leaves were motionless, the river crept past without a murmur, the dark hills rose out of the distant desert like a wave. There was faint fragrance as of wild flowers, very tiny, very soft. But he kept his eyes upon the gliding river rather than on those dark hills crowded with their ancient dead. For he felt as if some one watched him from their dim recesses. It almost seemed that from those bleak, lonely uplands, silent amid the stream of hurrying life to-day, came his pain, his agony. He could not understand it; the strange, sinister mood he had known already once before stole out from the desolate Theban hills and mastered him again. Any moment, if he looked up, he would meet eyes—eyes that gazed with dim yet definite recognition into his own across the night. They would gaze up at him, for somehow he was placed above them. . . . He had known all this before, this very situation, these very actors—he now looked down upon it all, a scene mapped out below him. There were two pictures that yet were one.

'What shall it be?' the voice of Tony floated past him through the open window.

'The gold and ambra one—I like best of all,' her voice followed like a sigh across the air. 'But only once—it makes me cry.'

To Tom, as he heard it, came the shattering conviction that the words were not in English, and that it was neither Lettice nor his cousin who had used them. Reality melted; he felt himself—brain, heart, and body—dropping down through empty space as though towards the speakers. This was another language that they spoke together. *He* had forgotten it. . . . They were themselves, yet different. Amazement seized him. A familiarity, intense with breaking pain, came with it. Where, O where. . . .

He heard the music steal past him towards these Theban hills.

His heart was no longer beating; it was still. Life paused, as it were, to let the voice insert itself into another setting, out of due place, yet at the same time true and natural. An intolerable sweetness in the music swept him. But there was anguish too. The pain and pleasure were but one sensation. . . . All the melancholy blue and gold of Egypt's beauty passed in that singing before his soul, and something of transcendent value he had lost, something ancient it seemed as those mournful Theban hills, rose with it. It was offered to him again. He saw it rise within his reach—once more. Upon this tide of blue and of gold it floated to his hand, could he but seize it. . . . Emotion then blocked itself through sheer excess; the tide receded, the vision dimmed, the gold turned dull and faded, the music and the singing ceased. Yet an instant, above the pain, Tom had caught a flush of inexplicable happiness. Beyond the anguish he felt joy breaking upon him like the dawn. . . .

'Joy cometh in the morning,' he remembered, with a feeling as of some modern self and sanity returning. He had been some one else; he now was Tom again. The pain belonged to that 'some one else.' It must be faced, for the final outcome would be joy. . . .

He turned round into the room now filled with tense silence only.

'Tony,' he asked, 'what on earth was it?' His voice was low but did not tremble. The atmosphere seemed drawn taut before him as though it must any instant split open upon a sound of crying. He saw Lettice on her sofa, the lamplight in her wide-open eyes that shone with moisture. She looked at Tony, not at him. There was no decipherable expression on her face. That elusive Eastern touch hung mysteriously about her. It was all half fabulous.

Without turning Tony answered shortly: 'Oh, just a little native Egyptian song—very old—dug up somewhere, I believe,' and he strummed softly to himself as though he did not wish to talk more about it.

Lettice watched him for several minutes, then fixed her eyes on Tom; they stared at each other across the room; her expression was enigmatical, yet he read resolution into it, a desire and a purpose. He returned her gaze with a baffled yearning, thinking how mysteriously beautiful she looked, frail, elusive, infinitely desirable, yet hopelessly beyond his reach. . . . And then he saw the eyelids lower slightly, and a shadowy darkness like a veil fall over her. A smile stole down towards the lips. Terror and fascination caught him; he turned away lest she should reach his secret and communicate her own. She looked right through him. Words, too, were spoken, ordinary modern words, though he did not hear them properly: 'You're tired out . . . you know. There's no need to be formal where I'm concerned . . .' or something similar. He listened, but he did not hear; they were remote, unreal, not audible quite; they were far away in space. He was only aware that the voice was tender and the tone was very soft. .

He made no answer. The pain in her leaped forth to clasp his own, it seemed. For in that instant he knew that the joy divined a little while before was *her*, but also that he must wade through intolerable pain to reach it.

The spell was broken. The balance of the evening, a short half-hour at the most, was uninspired, even awkward. There was strain in the atmosphere, cross-purposes, these purposes unfulfilled, each word and action charged with emotion that was unable to express itself. A desultory talk between Tony and his hostess seemed to struggle through clipped sentences that hung in the air as though afraid to complete themselves. The unfinished phrases floated, but dared not come to earth; they gathered but remained undelivered. Tom had divined the deep, essential intimacy at last, and his companions knew it.

He lay silent on his sofa by the window, or nearly silent. The moonlight had left him, he lay in shadow. Occasionally he threw in words, asked a question, ventured upon a criticism; but Lettice either did not hear or did not feel sufficient interest to respond. She ignored his very presence, though readily, eagerly forthcoming to the smallest sign from Tony. She hid herself with Tony behind the shadowy screen of words and phrases.

Tony himself was different too, however. There was acute disharmony in the room, where a little time before there had been at least an outward show of harmony. A heaviness as of unguessed tragedy lay upon all three, not only upon Tom. Spontaneous gaiety was gone out of his cousin, whose attempts to be his normal self became forced and unsuccessful. He sought relief by hiding himself behind his music, and his choice, though natural enough, seemed half audacious and half challenging—the choice of a devious soul that shirked fair open fight and felt at home in subterfuge. From Grieg's *Ich liebe Dich* he passed to other tender, passionate fragments Tom did not recognise by name yet understood too well, realising that sense of ghastly comedy, and almost of the ludicrous, which ever mocks the tragic.

For Tony certainly acknowledged by his attitude the same threatening sense of doom that lay so heavy upon his cousin's heart. There was presentiment and menace in every minute of that brief half-hour. Never had Tom seen his gay and careless cousin in such guise: he was restless, silent, intense and inarticulate. 'He gives her what I cannot give,' Tom faced the situation. 'They understand one another. . . . It's not *her* fault. . . . I'm old, I'm dull. She's found a stronger interest. . . .

The bigger claim at last has come

They brewed their cocoa on the spirit-lamp, they munched their biscuits, they said good-night at length, and Tom walked on a few paces ahead, impatient to be gone. He did not want to go home with Tony, while yet he could not leave him there. He longed to be alone and think. Tony's hotel was but a hundred yards away. He turned and called to him. He saw them saying goodnight at the foot of the verandah steps. Lettice was looking up into his cousin's face. . . .

They went off together. 'Night, night,' cried Tony, as he presently turned up the path to his own hotel. 'See you in the morning.'

And Tom walked down the silent street alone. On his skin he still felt her fingers he had clasped two minutes before. But his eyes saw only—her face and figure as she stood beside his cousin on the steps. For he saw her looking up into his eyes as once before on the lawn of her English bungalow four months ago. And Tony's two great hands were laid upon her arm.

'Lettice, poor child . . .!' he murmured strangely to himself. For he knew that her suffering and her deep perplexity were somewhere, somehow almost equal to his own.

## CHAPTER XXII

He walked down the silent street alone. . . . How like a theatre scene it was! Supers dressed as Arabs passed him without a word or sign; the Nile was a painted back-cloth; the columns of the

Luxor Temple hung on canvas. The memory of a London theatre flitted through his mind. . . . He was playing a part upon the stage, but for the second time, and this second performance was better than the first, different too, a finer interpretation as it were. He could not manage it quite, but he must play it out in order to know joy and triumph at the other end.

This sense of the theatre was over everything. How still and calm the night was, the very stars were painted on the sky, the lights were low, there lay a hush upon the audience. In his heart, like a weight of metal, there was sadness, deep misgiving, sense of loss. His life was fading visibly; it threatened to go out in darkness. Yet, like Ra, great deity of this ancient land, it would suffer only a temporary eclipse, then rise again triumphant and rejuvenated as Osiris. . . .

He walked up the sweep of sandy drive to the hotel and went through the big glass doors. The huge brilliant building swallowed him. Crowds of people moved to and fro, chattering and laughing, the women gaily, fashionably dressed; the band played with that extravagant abandon hotels demanded. The contrast between the dark, quiet street and this busy modern scene made him feel it was early in the evening, instead of close on midnight.

He was whirled up to his lofty room above the world. He flung himself upon his bed; no definite thought was in him; he was utterly exhausted. There was a vicious aching in his nerves, his muscles were flaccid and unstrung; a numbness was in his brain as well. But in the heart there was vital energy. For his heart seemed alternately full and empty; all the life he had was centred there.

And, lying on his bed in the darkened room, he sighed, as though he struggled for breath. The recent strain had been even more tense than he had guessed—the suppressed emotion, the prolonged and difficult effort at self-control, the passionate yearning that was denied relief in words and action. His entire being now relaxed itself; and his physical system found relief in long, deep sighs.

For a long time he lay motionless, trying vainly not to feel. He would have welcomed instantaneous sleep—ten hours of refreshing, dreamless sleep. If only he could prevent himself thinking, he might drop into blissful unconsciousness. It was chiefly forgetfulness he craved. A few minutes, and he would perhaps have slipped across the border—when something startled him into sudden life again. He became acutely wakeful. His nerves tingled, the blood rushed back into the brain. He remembered Tony's letter—returned from Assouan. A moment later he had turned the light on and was reading it. It was, of course, several days old already:—

Savoy Hotel,  
Luxor.

DEAR OLD TOM—What I am going to say may annoy you, but I think it best that it should be said, and if I am all wrong you must tell me. I have seldom liked any one as much as I like you, and I want to preserve our affection to the end.

The trouble is this:—I can't help feeling—I felt it at the Bungalow, in London too, and even heard it *said* by some one—whom, possibly, you may guess—that you were very fond of her, and that she was of you. Various little things said, and various small signs, have strengthened this feeling. Now, instinctively, I have a feeling also that she and I have certain things in common, and I think it quite possible that I might have a bad effect on her.

I do not suppose for one moment that she would ever care for me, but, from one or two signs in her, I do see possibilities of a sort of playing with fire between us. One *feels* these things without apparent cause; and all I can say is that, absurd as it may sound, I *scent* danger. To put it quite frankly, I can imagine myself becoming sufficiently excited by her to lose my head a little, and to introduce an element of sex into our friendship which might have some slight effect on us both. I don't mean anything serious, but, given the circumstances, I can imagine myself playing the fool;

and the only serious thing is that I can picture myself growing so fond of her that I would not think it playing the fool at the time.

Now, if I am right in thinking that you love her, it is obvious that I must put the matter before you, Tom, as I am here doing. I would rather have your friendship than her possible excitement—and I repeat that, absurd as it may seem, I do scent the danger of my getting worked up, and, to some extent, infecting her. You see, I know myself and know the wildness of my nature. I don't fool about with women at all, but I have had affairs in my life and can judge of the utter madness of which I am capable, madness which, to my mind, *must* affect and stimulate the person towards whom it is directed.

On my word of honour, Tom, I am not in love with her now at all, and it will not be a bit hard for me to clear out if you want me to. So tell me quite straight: shall I make an excuse, as, for example, that I want to avoid her for fear of growing too fond of her, and go? Or can we meet as friends? What I want you to do is to be with us if we are together, so that we may try to make a real trinity of our friendship. I enjoy talking to her; and I prefer you to be with me when I am with her—really, believe me, I do.

Words make things sound so absurd, but I am writing like this because I feel the presence of clouds, almost of tragedy, and I can't for the life of me think why. I want her friendship and C motherly' care badly. I want your affection and friendship exceedingly. But I feel as though I were unconsciously about to trouble your life and hers; and I can only suppose it is that hard-working subconsciousness of mine which sees the possibility of my suddenly becoming attracted to her, suddenly losing control, and suddenly being a false friend to you both.

Now, Tom, old chap, you must prevent that—either by asking me to keep away, or else by making yourself a definite part of my friendship with her.

I want you to say no word to her about this letter, and to keep it absolutely between ourselves; and I am very hopeful—I feel sure, in fact—that we shall make the jolliest trio in the world.—  
Yours ever,

TONY.

Tom, having read it through without a single stop, laid it down upon his table and walked round the room. In doing so, he passed the door. He locked it, then paused for a moment, listening. 'Why did I lock it? What am I listening for?' he asked himself. He hesitated. 'Oh, I know,' he went on, 'I don't want to be disturbed. Tony knows I shall read this letter to-night. He might possibly come up—He walked back to the table again slowly. 'I couldn't *see* him,' he realised; 'it would be impossible!' If any one knocked, he would pretend to be asleep. His face, had he seen it in the glass, was white and set, but there was a curious shining in his eyes, and a smile was on the lips, though a smile his stolid features had never known before. '*I* knew *it*,' said the Smile, '*I* knew it long ago.'

His hand stretched out and picked the letter up again. But at first he did not look at it; he looked round the room instead, as though he felt that he was being watched, as though somebody were hiding. And then he said aloud, but very quietly:

'Light-blue eyes, by God! *The* light-blue eyes!'

The sound startled him a little. He repeated the sentence in a whisper, varying the words. The voice sounded like a phonograph.

'Tony's got light-blue eyes!'

He sat down, then got up again.

'I never, never thought of it! I never noticed. God! I'm as blind as a bat!'

For some minutes he stood motionless, then turned and read the letter through a second time, lingering on certain phrases, and making curious unregulated gestures as he did so. He clenched his fists, he bit his lower lip. The feeling that he was acting on a stage had left him now. This was reality.

He walked over to the balcony and drew the cold night air into his lungs. He remembered standing once before on this very spot, that foreboding of coming loneliness so strangely in his heart. 'It's come,' he said dully to himself. 'It's justified. I understand at last.' And then he repeated with a deep, deep sigh: 'God—how blind I've been! He's taken her from me! It's all confirmed. He's wakened the woman in her!'

It seemed, then, he sought a mitigation, an excuse—for the man who wrote it, his pal, his cousin, Tony. He wanted to exonerate, if it were possible. But the generous impulse remained frustrate. The plea escaped him—because it was not there. The falseness and insincerity were too obvious to admit of any explanation in the world but one. He dropped into a chair, shocked into temporary numbness.

Gradually, then, isolated phrases blazed into prominence in his mind, clearest of all—that what Tony pretended might happen in the future had already happened long ago. 'I can picture myself growing too fond of her,' meant 'I am already too fond of her.' That he might lose his head and 'introduce an element of sex' was conscience confessing that it had been already introduced. He 'scented danger . . . tragedy' because both were in the present—now.

Tony hedged like any other coward. He had already gone too far, he felt shamed and awkward, he had to put himself right, as far as might be, with his trusting, stupid cousin, so he warned him that what had already taken place in the past *might* take place—he was careful to mention that he had no self-control—in the future. He begged the man he had injured to assist him; and the method he proposed was that old, well-proved one of assuring the love of a hesitating woman—'I'll tell her I'm too fond of her, and go!'

The letter was a sham and a pretence. Its assurance, too, was unmistakable: Tony felt certain of his own position. 'I'm sorry, old chap, but we love each other. Though I've sometimes wondered, you never definitely told me that *you* did.'

He read once again the cruellest phrase of all: 'From one or two signs in her, I do see possibilities of a sort of playing with fire between us.' It was cleverly put, yet also vilely; he laid half the burden of his treachery on her. The 'introduction of sex was gently mentioned three lines lower down. Tony already had an understanding with her—which meant that she had encouraged him. The thought rubbed like a jagged file against his heart. Yet Tom neither thought this, nor definitely said it to himself. He felt it; but it was only later that he *knew* he felt it.

And his mind, so heavily bruised, limped badly. The same thoughts rose again and again. He had no notion what he meant to do. There was an odd, half-boyish astonishment in him that the accumulated warnings of these recent days had not shown him the truth before. How could he have known the Eyes of his Dream for months, have lived with them daily for three weeks—the light-blue eyes—yet have failed to recognise them? It passed understanding. Even the wavy feeling that had accompanied Tony's arrival in the Carpathians—the Sound heard in his bedroom the same night—had left him unseeing and unaware. It seemed as if the recognition had been hidden purposely; for, had he recognised it, he would have been prepared, he might even have prevented. It now dawned upon him slowly that the inevitable may not be prevented. And the cunning of it baffled him afresh: it was all planned consummately.

Tom sat for a long time before the open window in a state of half stupor, staring at the pictures his mind offered automatically. A deep, vicious aching gnawed without ceasing at his heart: each time a new picture rose a fiery pang rose with it, as though a nerve were bared. . . .

He drew his chair closer into the comforting darkness of the night. All was silent as the grave. The stars wheeled overhead with their accustomed majesty; he could just distinguish the dim river in its ancient bed; the desert lay watchful for the sun, the air was sharp with perfume.

Countless human emotions had these witnessed in the vanished ages, countless pains and innumerable aching terrors; the emotions had passed away, yet the witnesses remained, steadfast, unchanged, indifferent. Moreover, his particular emotion *now* seemed known to them—known to these very stars, this desert, this immemorial river; they witnessed now its singular repetition. He was to experience it unto the bitter end again—yet somehow otherwise. He must face it all. Only in this way could the joy at the end of it be reached. . . . He must somehow accept and understand. . . . This confused, unjustifiable assurance strengthened in him.

Yet this last feeling was so delicate that he scarcely recognised its intense vitality. The cruder sensations blinded him as with thick, bitter smoke. He was certain of one thing only—that the fire of jealousy burned him with its atrocious anguish . . . an anguish he had somewhere known before.

Then presently there was a change. This change had begun soon after he drew his chair to the balcony, but he had not noticed it. The effect upon him, nevertheless, had been gradually increasing.

The psychological effects of sound, it would seem, are singular. Even when heard unconsciously, the result continues; and Tom, hearing this sound unconsciously, did not realise at first that another mood was stealing ever him. Then hearing became conscious hearing—listening. The sound rose to his ears from just below his balcony. He listened. He rose, leaned over the rail, and stared. The crests of three tall palms immediately below him waved slightly in the rising wind. But the fronds of a palm-tree in the wind produce a noise that is unlike the rustle of any other foliage in the world. It was a curious, sharp rattling that he heard. It was *the* Sound.

His entire being was at last involved—the Self that used the separate senses. His thoughts swooped in another direction—he suddenly fixed his attention upon Lettice. But it was an inner attention of a wholesale kind, not of the separate mind alone. And this entire Self included regions he did not understand. Mind was the least part of it. The ‘whole’ of him that now dealt with Lettice was far above all minor and partial means of knowing. For it did not judge, it only saw. It was, perhaps, the soul.

For it seemed the pain bore him upwards to an unaccustomed height. He stood for a moment upon that level where she dwelt, even as now he stood on this balcony looking down upon the dim Egyptian scene. She was beside him; he gazed into her eyes, even as now he gazed across to the dark necropolis among the Theban hills. But also, in some odd way, he stood outside himself. He swam with her upon the summit of the breaking Wave, lifted upon its crest, swept onward irresistibly.

No halt was possible . . . the inevitable crash must come. Yet she was with him. They were involved together. . . . The sea! . . .

The first bitterness passed a little, the sullen aching with it. He was aware of high excitement, of a new reckless courage; a touch of the impersonal came with it all, one Tom playing the part of a spectator to another Tom—an onlooker at his own discomfiture, at his own suffering, at his own defeat.

This new exalted state was very marvellous; for while it lasted he welcomed all that was to come. ‘It’s right and necessary for me,’ he recognised; ‘I need it, and I’ll face it. If I refuse it I prove myself a failure—again. Besides . . . *she needs it too!*’

For the entire matter then turned over in his mind, so that he saw it from a new angle suddenly. He looked at it through a keyhole, as it were—the extent was large yet detailed, the picture distant yet very clearly focussed. It lay framed within his thoughts, isolated from the rest of life,

isolated somehow even from the immediate present. There was perspective in it. This keyhole was, perhaps, his deep, unalterable love, but cleansed and purified. . . .

It came to him that she, and even Tony, too, in lesser fashion, were, like himself, the playthings of great spiritual forces that made alone for good. The Wave swept all three along. The attitude of his youth returned; the pain was necessary, yet would bring inevitable joy as its result. There had been cruel misunderstanding on his part somewhere that misunderstanding must be burned away. He saw Lettice and his cousin helping towards this exquisite deliverance somehow. It was like a moment of clear vision from a pinnacle. He looked down upon it. . . .

Lettice smiled into his eyes through half-closed eyelids. Her smile was strangely distant, strangely precious: she was love and tenderness incarnate; her little hands-held both of his. . . . Through these very eyes, this smile, these little hands, his pain would come; she would herself inflict it—because she could not help herself; she played her inevitable role as he did. Yet he kissed the eyes, the hands, with an absolute self-surrender he did not understand, willing and glad that they should do their worst. He had somewhere dreadfully misjudged her; he must, he would atone. This passion burned within him, a passion of sacrifice, of resignation, of free, big acceptance. He felt joy at the end of it all—the joy of perfect understanding . . . and forgiveness . . . on both sides. . . .

And the moment of clear vision left its visible traces in him even after it had passed. If he felt contempt for his cousin, he felt for Lettice a deep and searching pity—she was divided against herself she was playing a part she had to play. The usual human emotions were used, of course, to convey the situation, yet in some way he was unable to explain she was—*being* driven. In spite of herself she must inflict this pain. . . . It was a mystery he could not solve. . . .

His exaltation, naturally, was of brief duration. The inevitable reaction followed it. He saw the situation again as an ordinary man of the world must see it. . . . The fires of jealousy were alight and spreading. Already they were eating away the foundations of every generous feeling he had ever known. . . . It was not, he argued, that he did not trust her. He did. But he feared the insidious power of infatuation, he feared the burning glamour of this land of passionate mirages, he feared the deluding forces of sex which his cousin had deliberately awakened in her blood—and other nameless things he feared as well, though he knew not exactly what they were. For it seemed to him that they were old as dreams, old as the river and the menace of these solemn hills. . . . From childhood up, his own trust in her truth and loyalty had remained unalterably fixed, ingrained in the very essence of his being. It was more than his relations with a woman he loved that were in danger: it was his belief and trust in Woman, focussed in her self symbolically, that were threatened. . . . It was his belief in Life.

With Lettice, however, he felt himself in some way powerless to deal; he could watch her, but he could not judge . . . least of all, did he dare prevent. . . . *Her* attitude he could not know nor understand.

There was a pink glow upon the desert before he realised that a reply to Tony's letter was necessary; and that pink was a burning gold when he knew his answer must be of such a kind that Tony felt free to pursue his course unchecked. Tom held to his strange belief to 'Let it all come,' he would not try to prevent; he would neither shirk nor dodge. He doubted whether it lay in his power now to hinder anything, but in any case he would not seek to do so. Rather than block coming events, he must encourage their swift development. It was the best, the only way; it was the right way too. He belonged to his destination. He went into his own background.

The sky was alight from zenith to horizon, the Nile aflame with sunrise, by the time the letter was written. He read it over, then hurriedly undressed and plunged into bed. A long, dreamless sleep took instant charge of him, for he was exhausted to a state of utter depletion.

Dear Tony—I have read your letter with the greatest sympathy—it was forwarded from Assouan. It cost you a good deal, I know, to say what you did, and I'm sure you mean it for the best. I feel it like that too—for the best.

But it is easier for you to write than for me to answer. Her position, of course, is an awfully delicate one; and I feel—no doubt you feel too—that her standard of conduct is higher than that of ordinary women, and that any issue between us—if there is an issue at all!—should be left to her to decide.

Nothing can touch my friendship with her; you needn't worry about *that*. But if you can bring any added happiness into her life, it can only be welcomed by all three *of* us. So go ahead, Tony, and make her as happy as you can. The important things are not in our hands to decide in any case; and, whatever happens, we both agree on one thing—that her happiness is the important thing.—  
Yours ever,

TOM.

### CHAPTER XXIII

He was wakened by the white-robed Arab housemaid with his breakfast. He felt hungry, but still tired; sleep had not rested him. On the tray an envelope caught his eye—sent by hand evidently, since it bore no stamp. The familiar writing made the blood race in his veins, and the instant the man was gone he tore it open. There was burning in his eyes as he read the pencilled words. He devoured it whole with a kind of visual gulp—a flash; the entire meaning first, then lines, then separate words.

Come for lunch, or earlier. My cousin is invited out, and Tony has suddenly left for Cairo with his friends. I shall be lonely. How beautiful and precious you were last night. I long for you to comfort me. But don't efface yourself again—it gave me a horrid, strange presentiment—as if I were losing you—almost as if you no longer trusted me. And don't forget that I love you with all my heart and soul. I had such queer, long dreams last night—terrible rather. I must tell you. *Do* come.—Yours, L.

P.S. Telephone if you can't.

Sweetness and pain rose in him, then numbness. For his mind flung itself with violence upon two sentences: he was 'beautiful and precious'; she longed for him to 'comfort' her. Why, he asked himself was his conduct beautiful and precious? And why did she need his comfort? The words were like vitriol in the eyes.

Long before reason found the answer, instinct—swift, merciless interpreter—told him plainly. While the brain fumbled, the heart already understood. He was stabbed before he knew what stabbed him.

And hope sank extinguished. The last faint doubt was taken from him. It was not possible to deceive himself an instant longer, for the naked truth lay staring into his eyes.

He swallowed his breakfast without appetite . . . and went downstairs. He sighed, but something wept inaudibly. A wall blocked every step he took. The devastating commonplace was upon him—it was so ordinary. Other men . . . oh, how often he had heard the familiar tale! He tried to grip himself. 'Others . . . of course . . . but *me!*' It seemed impossible.

In a dream he crossed the crowded hall, avoiding various acquaintances with unconscious cunning. He found the letter-box and—posted his letter to Tony. 'That's gone, at any rate!' he

realised. He told the porter to telephone that he would come' to lunch. 'That's settled too!' Then, hardly knowing what blind instinct prompted, he ordered a carriage . . . and presently found himself driving down the hot, familiar road to—Karnak. For some faultless impulse guided him. He turned to the gigantic temple, with its towering, immense proportions—as though its grandeur might somehow protect and mother him.

In those dim aisles and mighty halls brooded a Presence that he knew could soothe and comfort. The immensities hung still about the fabulous ruin. He would lose his tortured self in something bigger—that beauty and majesty which are Karnak. Before he faced Lettice, he must forget a moment—forget his fears, his hopes, his ceaseless torment of belief and doubt. It was, in the last resort, religious—a cry for help, a prayer. But also it was an inarticulate yearning to find that state of safety where he and she dwelt secure from separation—in the 'sea.' For Karnak is a spiritual experience, or it is nothing. There, amid the deep silence of the listening centuries, he would find peace; forgetting himself a moment, he might find—strength.

Then reason parsed the sentences that instinct already understood complete. For Lettice—the tender woman of his first acquaintance—had obviously experienced a moment of reaction. She realised he was wounded at her hands. She felt shame and pity. She craved comfort and forgiveness—his comfort, his forgiveness. Conscience whispered. As against the pain she inflicted, he had been generous, long-suffering—therefore his conduct was 'beautiful and precious.' Tony, moreover, had hidden himself until his letter should be answered—and she was 'lonely.'

With difficulty Tom suppressed the rising bitterness of contempt and anger in him. His cousin's obliquity was a sordid touch. He forgot a moment the loftier point of view; but for a short time only. The contempt merged again in something infinitely greater. The anger disappeared. *Her* attitude occupied him exclusively. The two phrases rang on with insistent meaning in his heart, as with the clang of a fateful sentence of exile, execution—death:

'How beautiful you were last night, and precious . . . I long for you to comfort me. . . .'

While the carriage crawled along the sun-baked sand, he watched the Arab children with their blue-black hair, who ran beside it, screaming for bakshish. The little faces shone like polished bronze; they held their hands out, their bare feet pattered in the sand. He tossed small coins among them. And their cries and movements fell into the rhythm of the song, whose haunting refrain pulsed ever in his blood: 'We were young, we were merry, we were very very wise. . . .'

They were soon out-distanced, the palm-trees fell away, the soaring temple loomed against the blazing sky. He left the *arabyieh* at the western entrance and went on foot down the avenue of headless rams. The huge Khonsu gateway dropped its shadow over him. Passing through the Court with its graceful colonnades, and the Chapel, flanked by cool, dark chambers, where the Sacred Boat floated on its tide-less sea beyond the world, he moved on across the sandy waste of broken stone again, and reached in a few minutes the towering grey and reddish sandstone that was Amon's Temple.

This was the goal of his little pilgrimage. Sublimity closed round him. The gigantic pylon, its shoulders breaking the sky four-square far overhead, seemed the prodigious portal of another world. Slowly he passed within, crossed the Great Court where the figures of ancient Theban deities peered at him between the forest of broken monoliths and lovely Osiris pillars, then, moving softly beneath the second enormous pylon, found himself on the threshold of the Great Hypostyle Hall itself.

He caught his breath, he paused, then stepped within on tiptoe, and the hush of four thousand years closed after him. Awe stole upon him; he felt himself included in the great ideal of this older day. The stupendous aisles lent him their vast shelter; the fierce sunlight could not burn his

flesh; the air was cool and sweet in these dim recesses of unremembered time. He passed his hand with reverence over the drum-shaped blocks that built up the majestic columns, as they reared towards the massive, threatening roof. The countless inscriptions and reliefs showered upon his sight bewilderingly.

And he forgot his lesser self in this crowded atmosphere of ancient divinities and old-world splendour. He was aware of kings and queens, of princes and princesses, of stately priests, of hosts and conquests; forgotten gods and goddesses trooped past his listening soul; his heart remembered olden wars, and the royalty of golden days came back to him. He steeped himself in the long, long silence in which an earlier day lay listening with ears of stone. There was colour; there was spendthrift grandeur, half savage, half divine. His imagination, wakened by Egypt, plunged backwards with a sense of strange familiarity. Tom easily found the mightier scale his aching heart so hungrily desired. It soothed his personal anguish with a sense of individual insignificance which was comfort. . . .

The peace was marvellous, an unearthly peace the strength unwearied, inexhaustible. The power that was Amon lingered still behind the tossed and fabulous ruin. Those soaring columns held up the very sky, and their foundations made the earth itself swing true. The silence, profound, unalterable, was the silence in the soul that lies behind all passion and distress. And these steadfast qualities Tom absorbed unconsciously through his very skin. . . .

The Wave might fall indeed, but it would fall into the mothering sea where levels must be restored again, secure upon unshakable foundations. . . . And as he paced these solemn aisles, his soul drank in their peace and stillness, their strength of calm resistance. Though built upon the sand, they still endured, and would continue to endure. They pointed to the stars.

And the effect produced upon him, though the adjective was not his, seemed spiritual. There was a power in the mighty ruin that lifted him to an unaccustomed level from which he looked down upon the inner drama being played. He reached a height; the bird's-eye view was his; he saw and realised, yet he did not judge. The vast structure, by its harmony, its power, its overmastering beauty, made him feel ashamed and mortified. A sense of humiliation crept into him, melting certain stubborn elements of self that, grown out of proportion, blocked his soul's clear vision. That he must stand aside had never occurred to him before with such stern authority; it occurred to him now. The idea of sacrifice stole over him with a sweetness that was deep and marvellous. It seemed that Isis touched him. He looked into the eyes of great Osiris, . . . and that part of him that ever watched—the great Onlooker—smiled.

His being, as a whole, remained inarticulate as usual; no words came to his assistance. It was rather that he attained—as once before, in another moment of deeper insight—that attitude towards himself which is best described as impersonal. Who was *he*, indeed, that he should claim the right to thwart another's happiness, hinder another's best self-realisation? By what right, in virtue of what exceptional personal value, could he, Tom Keverdon, lay down the law to this other, and say, 'Me only shall you love . . . because I happen to love you . . . ?'

And, as though to test what of strength and honesty might lie in this sudden exaltation of resolve, he recognised just then the very pylon against whose vast bulk *they* had rested together that moonlit night a few short weeks before . . . when he saw two rise up like one person . . . as he left them and stole away into the shadows.

'So I knew it even then—subconsciously,' he realised. 'The truth was in me even then, a few days after my arrival. . . . And they knew it too. She was already going from me, if not already gone. . . . !'

He leaned against that same stone column, thinking, searching in his mind, feeling acutely. Reactions caught at him in quick succession. Doubt, suspicion, anger clouded vision; pain routed the impersonal conception. Loneliness came over him with the cool wind that stirred the sand between the columns; the patches of glaring sunshine took on a ghastly whiteness; he shivered. . . . But it was not that he lost belief in his moment of clear vision, nor that the impersonal attitude became untrue. It was another thing he realised: that the power of attainment was not yet in him . . . quite. He could renounce, but not with complete acceptance. . . .

As he drove back along the sandy lanes of blazing heat a little later, it seemed to him that he had been through some strenuous battle that had taxed his final source of strength. If his position was somewhat vague, this was due to his inability to analyse such deep interior turmoil. He was sure, at least, of one thing—that, before he could know this final joy awaiting him, he must first find in himself the strength for what seemed just then an impossible, an ultimate sacrifice. He must forget himself—if such forgetfulness involved the happiness of another. He must slip out. The strength to do it would come presently. And his heart was full of this indeterminate, half-formed resolve as he entered the shady garden and saw Lettice lying in her deck-chair beneath the trees, awaiting him.

## CHAPTER XXIV

Events, however slight, which involve the soul are drama; for once the soul takes a hand in them their effects are permanent and reproductive. Not alone the relationship between individuals are determined this way or that, but the relationships of these individuals towards the universe are changed upon a scale of geometrical progression. The results are of the eternal order. Since that which persists—the soul—is radically affected, they are of ultimate importance.

Had the strange tie between Tom and Lettice been due to physical causes only, to mental affinity, or to mere sympathetic admiration of each other's outward strength and beauty, a rupture between them could have been of a passing character merely. A pang, a bitterness that lasted for a day or for a year—and the gap would be filled again by some one else. They had idealised; they would get over it they were not indispensable to one another; there were other fish in the sea, and so forth.

But with Tom, at any rate, there was something transcendental in their intimate union. Loss, where she was concerned, involved a permanent and irremediable bereavement—no substitute was conceivable. With him, this relationship seemed foreordained, almost prenatal—it had come to him at the very dawn of life; it had lasted through years of lonely waiting; no other woman had ever threatened its fixed security, and the sudden meeting in Switzerland had seemed to him reunion rather than discovery. Moreover, he had transferred his own sense of security to her; had always credited her with similar feelings; and the suspicion now that he had deceived himself in this made life tremble to the foundations. It was a terrible thought that robbed him of every atom of self-confidence. It affected his attitude to the entire universe.

The intensity of this drama, however, being interior, caused little outward disturbance that casual onlookers need have noticed. He waved his hat as he walked towards the corner where she lay, greeting her with a smile and careless word, as though no shadow stood between them. A barrier, nevertheless, was there he knew. He *felt* it almost sensibly. Also—it had grown higher. And at once he was aware that the Lettice who returned his smile with a colourless 'Good morning, Tom, I'm so glad you could come,' was not the Lettice who had known a moment's reaction a little while before. He told by her very attitude that now there was lassitude, even

weariness in her. Her eyes betrayed none of the excitement and delight that another could wake in her. His own presence certainly no longer brought the thrill, the interest that once it did. She was both bored and lonely.

And, while an exquisite pain ran through him, he made a prodigious effort to draw upon the strength he had felt in Karnak a short half-hour ago. He struggled bravely to forget himself. 'So Tony's gone!' he said lightly, 'run off and left us without so much as a word of warning or good-bye. A rascally proceeding, I call it! Rather sudden, too, wasn't it?'

He sat down beside her and began to smoke. She need not answer unless she wanted to. She did answer, however, and at once. She did not look at him; her eyes were on the golden distance. It had to be said; she said it. 'He's only gone for two or three days. His friends suddenly changed their minds, and he couldn't get out of it. He said he didn't want to go—a bit.'

How did she know it, Tom wondered, glancing up over his cigarette? And how had she read his mind so easily?

'He just popped in to tell me,' she added, 'and to say good-bye. \*Je asked me to tell you.' She spoke without a tremor, as if Tom had no right to disapprove.

'Pretty early, wasn't it?' It was not the first time either. 'He comes at such unusual hours—he remembered Mrs. Haughstone's words.

'I was only just up. But there was time to give him coffee before the train.'

She offered no further comment; Tom made none; he sat smoking there beside her, outwardly calm and peaceful as though no feeling of any kind was in him. He felt numb perhaps. In his mind he saw the picture of the breakfast-table beneath the trees. The plan had been arranged, of course, beforehand.

'Miss de Lorne's coming to lunch,' she mentioned presently. 'She's to bring her pictures—the Deir-el-Bahri ones. You must help me criticise them.'

So they were not to be alone even, was Tom's instant thought. Aloud he said merely, 'I hope they're good.' She flicked the flies away with her horse-hair whisk, and sighed. He caught the sigh. The day felt empty, uninspired, the boredom of cruel disillusion in it somewhere. But it was the sigh that made him realise it. Avoiding the subject of Tony's abrupt departure, he asked what she would like to do that afternoon. He made various proposals; she listened without interest. 'D'you know, Tom, I don't feel inclined to do anything much, but just lie and rest.'

There was no energy in her, no zest for life expeditions had lost their interest; she was listless, tired. He felt impatience in him, sharp disappointment too; but there was an alert receptiveness in his mind that noted trifles done or left undone. She made no reference, for instance, to the fact that they might be frequently alone together now. A faint hope that had been in him vanished quickly. . . .

He wondered when she was going to speak of her letter, of his conduct the night before that was 'beautiful and precious,' of the 'comfort' she had needed, or even of the dreams that she had mentioned. But, though he waited, giving various openings, nothing was forthcoming. That side of her, once intimately precious and familiar, seemed buried, hidden away, perhaps forgotten. This was not Lettice—it was some one else.

'You had dreams that frightened you?' he enquired at length. 'You said you'd tell them to me.' He moved nearer so that he could watch her face.

She looked puzzled for a second. 'Did I?' she replied. She thought a moment. 'Oh yes, of course I did. But they weren't much really. I'd forgotten. It was about water or something. Ah, I remember now—we were drowning, and you saved us.' She gave a little unmeaning laugh as she said it.

'Who were drowning?'

'All of us—me and you, I think it was—and Tony—'

'Oh, of course.'

She looked up. 'Tom, why do you say "of course" like that?'

'It was your old idea of the river and the floating faces, I meant,' he answered. 'I had the feeling.'

'You said it so sharply.'

'Did I!' He shrugged his shoulders slightly. 'I didn't mean to.' He noticed the beauty of her ear, the delicate line of the nostrils, the long eyelashes. The graceful neck, with the firm, slim line of the breast below, were exquisite. The fairy curve of her ankle was just visible. He could have knelt and covered it with kisses. Her coolness, the touch of contempt in her voice made him wild. . . . But he understood his rôle; and—he remembered Karnak.

A little pause followed. Lettice made one of her curious gestures, half impatience, half weariness. She stretched; the other ankle appeared. Tom, as he saw it, felt something in him burst into flame. He came perilously near to saying impetuously a hundred things he had determined that he must not say. He felt the indifference in her, the coolness, almost the cruelty. Her negative attitude towards him goaded, tantalised. He was full of burning love, from head to foot, while she lay there within two feet of him, calm, listless, unresponsive, passionless. The bitter pain of promises unfulfilled assailed him acutely, poignantly. Yet in ordinary life the situation was so commonplace. The 'strong man would face her with it, have it out plainly; he would be masterful, forcing a climax of one kind or another, behaving as men do in novels or on the stage.

Yet Tom remained tongue-tied and restrained; he seemed unable to take the lead; an inner voice cried sternly No to all such natural promptings. It would be a gross mistake. He must let things take their course. He must not force a premature disclosure. With a tremendous effort, he controlled himself and smothered the rising fires that struggled towards speech and action. He would not even ask a single question. Somehow, in any case, it was impossible.

The subject dropped; Lettice made no further reference to the letter.

'When you feel like going anywhere, or doing anything, you'll let me know,' he suggested presently. 'We've been too energetic lately. It's best for you to rest. You're tired.' The words hurt and stung him as though he were telling lies. He felt untrue to himself. The blood boiled in his veins.

She answered him with a touch of impatience again, almost of exasperation. He noticed the emphasis she used so needlessly.

'Tom, I'm *not* tired—not in the way *you* mean. It's just that I feel like being quiet for a bit. *Really* it's not so remarkable! Can't you understand?'

'Perfectly,' he rejoined calmly, lighting another cigarette. 'We'll have a programme ready for later—when Tony gets back.' The blood rushed from his heart as he said it.

Her face brightened instantly, as he had expected—dreaded; there was no attempt at concealment anywhere; she showed interest as frankly as a child. 'It was stupid of him to go, just when we were enjoying everything so,' she said again. 'I wonder how long he'll stay—'

'I'll write and tell him to hurry up,' suggested Tom. He twirled his fly-whisk energetically.

'Tell him we can't get on without our *dragoman*,' she added eagerly with her first attempt at gaiety and then went on to mention other things he was to say, till her pleasure in talking about Tony was so obvious that Tom yielded to temptation suddenly. It was more than he could bear. 'I strongly suspect a pretty girl in the party somewhere,' he observed carelessly.

‘There is,’ came the puzzling reply, ‘but he doesn’t care for her a bit. He told me all about her. It’s curious, isn’t it, how he fascinates them all? There’s something very remarkable about Tony—I can’t quite make it out.’

Tom leaned forward, bringing his face in front of her own, and closer to it. He looked hard into her eyes a moment. In the depths of her steady gaze he saw shadows, far away, behind the open expression. There was trouble in her, but it was deep, deep down and out of sight. The eyes of some one else, it seemed, looked through her into his. An older world came whispering across the sunlight and the sand.

‘Lettice,’ he said quietly, ‘there’s something new come into your life these last few weeks— isn’t there?’ His voice grated—like machinery started with violent effort against resistance. ‘Some new, big force, I mean? You seem so changed, so different.’ He had not meant to speak like this. It was forced out. He expressed himself badly too. He raged inwardly.

She smiled, but only with her lips. The shadows from behind her eyes drew nearer to the surface. But the eyes themselves held steady. That other look peered out of them. He was aware of power, of something strangely bewitching, yet at the same time fierce, inflexible in her . . . and a kind of helplessness came over him, as though he was suddenly out of his depth, without sure footing. The Wave roared in his ears and blood.

‘Egypt probably—old Egypt,’ she said gently, making a slow gesture with one hand towards the river and the sky. ‘It must be that.’ The gesture, it seemed to him, had royalty in it somewhere. There was stateliness and dignity—an air of authority about her. It was magnificent. He felt worship in him. The slave that lies in worship stirred. He could yield his life, suffer torture for days to give her a moment’s happiness.

‘I meant something personal, rather,’ he prevaricated.

‘You meant Tony. I know it. Didn’t you, Tom?’

His breath caught inwardly. In spite of himself and in spite of his decision, she drew his secret out. Enchantment touched him deliciously, an actual torture in it.

‘Yes,’ he said honestly, ‘perhaps I did.’ He said it shamefacedly rather, to his keen vexation. ‘For it *has* to do with Tony somehow.’

He got up abruptly, tossed his cigarette over the wall into the river, then sat down again. ‘There’s something about it—strange and big. I can’t make it out a bit.’ He faltered, stammered over the words. ‘It’s a long way off—then all at once it’s close.’ He had the feeling that he had put a match to something. ‘I’ve done it now,’ he said to himself like a boy, as though he expected that something dramatic must happen instantly.

But nothing happened. The river flowed on silently, the heat blazed down, the leaves hung motionless as before, and far away the lime-stone hills lay sweltering in the glare. But those hills had glided nearer. He was aware of them,—the Valley of the Kings,—the desolate Theban Hills with their myriad secrets and their deathless tombs.

Lettice gave her low, significant little laugh. ‘It’s odd you should say that, Tom—very odd. Because I’ve felt it too. It’s awfully remote and quite near at the same time—’

‘And Tony’s brought it,’ he interrupted eagerly, half passionately. ‘It’s got to do with him, I mean.’

It seemed to him that the barrier between them had lowered a little. The Lettice he knew first peered over it at him.

‘No,’ she corrected, ‘I don’t feel that he’s brought it. He’s *in* it somehow, I admit, but he has not brought it exactly.’ She hesitated a moment. ‘I think the truth is he can’t help himself—any more than we—you or I—can.’

There was a caressing tenderness in her voice as she said it, but whether for himself or for another he could not tell. In his heart rose a frantic impulse just then to ask—to blurt it out:

‘Do you love Tony? Has he taken you from me? Tell me the truth and I can bear it. Only, for heaven’s sake, don’t hide it!’ But, instead of saying this absurd, theatrical thing, he looked at her through the drifting cigarette smoke a moment without speaking, trying to read the expression in her face. ‘Last night, for instance,’ he exclaimed abruptly; ‘in the music room, I mean. Did you feel *that?*—the intensity—a kind of ominous feeling?’

Her expression was enigmatical; there were signs of struggle in it, he thought. It was as if two persons fought within her which should answer. Apparently the dear Lettice of his first acquaintance won—for the moment.

‘You noticed it too!’ she exclaimed with astonishment. ‘I thought I was the only one.’

‘We all—all three of us—felt it,’ he said in a lower tone. ‘Tony certainly did—’

Lettice raised herself suddenly on her elbow and looked down at him with earnestness. Something of the old eagerness was in her. The barrier between them lowered perceptibly again, and Tom felt a momentary return of the confidence he had lost. His heart beat quickly. He made a half-impetuous gesture towards her—‘What is it? What does it all mean, Lettice?’ he exclaimed. ‘D’you feel what *I* feel in it—danger somewhere—danger for *us?*’ There was a yearning, almost a cry for mercy in his voice.

She drew back again. ‘You amaze me, Tom,’ she said, as she lay among her cushions. ‘I had no idea you were so observant.’ She paused, putting her hand across her eyes a moment. ‘N-no—I don’t feel danger exactly,’ she went on in a lower tone, speaking half to herself and half to him; ‘I feel—’ She broke off with a little sigh; her hand still covered her eyes. ‘I feel,’ she went on slowly, with pauses between the words, ‘a deep, deep something—from very far away—that comes over me at times—only at times, yes. It’s remote, enormously remote—but it has to be. I’ve never given you all that I ought to give. We have to go through with it—’

‘You and I?’ he whispered. He was listening intently. The beats of his heart were most audible.

She sighed. ‘All three of us—somehow,’ she replied equally low, and speaking again more to herself than to him. ‘Ah! Now my dream comes back a little. It was *the* river—my river with the floating faces. And the thing I feel comes—from its source, far, far away—its tiny source among the hills—’ She sighed again, more deeply than before. Her breast heaved slightly. ‘We must go through it—yes. It’s necessary for us—necessary for you—and me—’

‘Lettice, my precious, my wonderful!’ Tom whispered as though the breath choked and strangled him. ‘But we stay together through it? We stay together *afterwards?* You love me still?’ He leaned across and took her other hand. It lay unresistingly in his. It was very cold—without a sign of response.

Her faint reply half staggered him: ‘We are always, always together, you and I. Even if you married, I should still be yours. He will go out—’

Fear clashed with hope in his heart as he heard these words he could not understand. He groped and plunged after their meaning. He was bewildered by the reference to marriage—his marriage! Was she, then, already aware that she might lose him? . . . But there was confession in them too, the confession that she *had* been away from him. That he felt clearly. Now that the dividing influence was removed, she was coming back perhaps! If Tony stayed away she would come back entirely; only then the thing that had to happen would be prevented—which was not to be thought of for a moment. . . . ‘Poor Lettice. . . .’ He felt pity, love, protection that he burned to give; he felt a savage pain and anger as well. In the depths of his love and murder sat side by side.

‘Oh, Lettice, tell me everything. Do share with me—share it and we’ll meet it together.’ He drew her cold hand towards him, putting it inside his coat. ‘Don’t hide it from me. You’re my whole world. *My* love can never change. . . . Only don’t hide anything!’ The words poured out of him with passionate entreaty. The barrier had melted, vanished. He had found her again, the Lettice of his childhood, of his dream, the true and faithful woman he had known first. His inexpressible love rose like a wave upon him. Regardless of where they were he bent over to take her in his arms—when she suddenly withdrew her hand from his. She removed the other from her eyes. He saw her face. And he realised in an instant that his words had been all wrong. He had said precisely again what he ought not to have said. The moment in her had passed.

The sudden change had a freezing effect upon him.

Tom, I don’t understand quite,’ she said coldly, her eyes fixed on his almost with resentment in them. ‘I’m not *hiding* anything from you. Why do you say such things? I’m true—true to myself.’

The barrier was up again in an instant, of granite this time, with jagged edges of cut glass upon it, so that he could not approach it even. It was not Lettice that spoke then:

‘I don’t know what’s come over you out here,’ she went on, each word she uttered increasing the distance between them; ‘you misunderstand everything I say and criticise all I do. You suspect my tenderest instincts. Even a friendship that brings me happiness you object to and— and exaggerate.’

He listened till she ceased; it was as if he had received a blow in the face; he felt disconcerted, keenly aware of his own stupidity, helpless. Something froze in him. He had seen her for a second, then lost her utterly.

‘No, no, Lettice,’ he stammered, ‘you read all that into me—really, you do. I only want your happiness.’

Her eyes softened a little. She sighed wearily and turned her face away.

‘We were only talking of this curious, big feeling that’s come—’ he went on.

‘You were speaking of Tony—that’s what you really meant, Tom,’ she interrupted. ‘You know it perfectly well. It only makes it harder—for *me*.’

He felt suddenly she was masquerading, playing with him again, playing with his very heart and soul. The devil tempted him. All the things he had decided he would not say rose to the tip of his tongue. The worst of them—those that hurt him most—he managed to force down. But even the one he did suffer to escape gave him atrocious pain:

‘Well, Lettice, to tell the truth, I do think Tony has a bad—a curious influence on you. I do feel he has come between us rather. And I do think that if you would only share with me—’

The sudden way she turned upon him, rising from her chair and standing over him, was so startling that he got up too. They faced each other, he in the blazing sunshine, she in the shade. She looked so different that he was utterly taken aback. She wore that singular Eastern appearance he now knew so well. Expression, attitude, gesture, all betrayed it. That inflexible, cruel thing shone in her eyes.

‘Tom, dear,’ she said, but with a touch of frigid exasperation that for a moment paralysed thought and utterance in him, ‘whatever happens, you must realise this—that I am myself and that I can never allow my freedom to be taken from me. If you’re determined to misjudge, the fault is yours, and if our love, our friendship, cannot understand *that*, there’s something wrong with it.’

The word ‘friendship’ was like a sword thrust. It went right through him. ‘I trust you,’ he faltered, ‘I trust you wholly. I know you’re true.’ But the words, it seemed, gave expression to an

intense desire, a fading hope. He did not say it with conviction. She gazed at him for a moment through half-closed eyelids.

'Do you, Tom?' she whispered.

'Lettice . . . !'

'Then believe at least—' her voice wavered suddenly, there came a little break in it—'that I am true to you, Tom, as I am to myself. Believe in that. . . and—Oh! for the love of heaven—help me!'

Before he could respond, before he could act upon the hope and passion her last unexpected words set loose in him—she turned away to go into the house. Voices were audible behind them, and Miss de Lorne was coming up the sandy drive with Mrs. Haughstone. Tom watched her go. She moved with a certain gliding, swaying walk as she passed along the verandah and disappeared behind the curtains of dried grass. It almost seemed—though this must certainly have been a trick of light and shadow—that she was swathed from head to foot in a clinging garment not of modern kind, and that he caught the gleam of gold upon the flesh of dusky arms that were bare above the elbow. Two persons were visible in her very physical appearance, as two persons had just been audible in her words. Thence came the conflict and the contradictions.

## CHAPTER XXV

A few minutes later Lettice was presiding over her luncheon table as though life were simple as the sunlight in the street outside, and no clouds could ever fleck the procession of the years. She was quiet and yet betrayed excitement. Tom, at the opposite end of the table, watched her girlish figure, her graceful gestures. Her eyes were very bright, no shadows in their depths; she returned his gaze with untroubled frankness. Yet the set of her little mouth had self-mastery in it somewhere; there was no wavering or uncertainty; her self-possession was complete. But above his head the sword of Damocles hung. He saw the thread, taut and gleaming in the glare of the Egyptian sunlight. . . . He waited upon his cousin's return as men once waited for the sign thumbs up, thumbs down. . . .

'Molly has sent me her album,' mentioned Mrs. Haughstone when the four of them were lounging in the garden chairs; 'she wonders if you would write your name in it. It's her passion—to fill it with distinguished names.' And when the page was found, she pointed to the quotation against his birthday date with the remark, in a lowered voice: 'It's quite appropriate, isn't it? For a man, I mean,' she added, 'because when a man's unhappy he's more easily tempted to suspicion than a woman is.'

'What is the quotation?' asked Lettice, glancing up from her deck chair.

Tom was carefully inscribing his 'distinguished' name in the child's album, as Mrs. Haughstone read the words aloud over his shoulder:

' "Whatever the circumstances, there is no man so miserable that he need not be true." It's anonymous,' she added, 'but it's by some one very wise.'

'A woman, probably,' Miss de Lorne put in with a laugh.

They discussed it, while Tom laboriously wrote his name against it with a fountain pen. His writing was a little shaky, for his sight was blurred and ice was in his veins.

'There's no need for you to hurry, is there?' said Lettice presently. 'Won't you stay and read to me a bit? Or would you rather look in—after dinner—and smoke?' The two selves spoke in that. It was as if the earlier, loving Lettice tried to assert itself, but was instantly driven back again.

How differently she would have said it a few months ago. . . . He made excuses, saying he would drop in after dinner if he might. She did not press him further.

'I am tired a little,' she said gently. 'I'll sleep and rest and write letters too, then.'

She was invariably tired now, Tom soon discovered—until Tony returned from Cairo. .

And that evening he escaped the invitations to play bridge, and made his way back, as in a dream, to the little house upon the Nile. He found her bending over the table so that the lamp shone on her abundant coils of hair, and as he entered softly he saw the address on the envelope beside her writing pad, several pages of which were already covered with her small, fine writing. He read the name before he could turn his eyes away.

'I was writing to Tony,' she said, looking up with an untroubled smile, 'but I can finish later. And you've come just in time to take my part. Ettie's been scolding me severely again.'

She blotted the lines and put the paper on one side, then turned with a challenging expression at her cousin who was knitting by the open window. The little name sounded so incongruous; it did not suit the big gaunt woman who had almost a touch of the monstrous in her. Tom stared a moment without speaking. The playful challenge had reality in it. Lettice intended to define her position openly. She meant that Tom should support her too.

He smiled as he watched them. But no words came to him. Then, remembering all at once that he had not kept his promise, he said quietly: 'I must send a line as well. I quite forgot.'

'You can write it now,' suggested Lettice, 'and I'll enclose it in mine.' And she pointed to the envelopes and paper before him on the table.

There was a moment of acute and painful struggle in him; pride and love fought the old pitched battle, but on a field of her own bold choosing! Tom knew murder in his heart, but he knew also that strange rich pain of sacrifice. It was theatrical: he stood upon the stage, an audience watching him with intent expectancy, wondering upon his decision. Mrs. Haughstone, Lettice and another part of himself that was Onlooker were the audience; Mrs. Haughstone had ceased knitting, Lettice leaned back in her chair, a smile in the eyes, but the lips set very firmly together. The man in him, with scorn and anger, seemed to clench his fists, while that other self—as with a spirit's voice from very far away—whispered behind his pain: 'Obey. You must. It has to be, so why not help it forward!'

To play the game, but to play it better than before, flashed through him. . . . Half amazed at himself, yet half contented, he sat down mechanically and scribbled a few lines of urgent entreaty to his cousin to come back soon. . . . 'We want you here, it's dull, we can't get on without you . . .' knowing that he traced the sentences of his own death-warrant. He folded it and passed it across to Lettice, who slipped it unread into her envelope. 'That ought to bring him, you think?' she observed, a happy light in her eyes, yet with a faint sigh half suppressed, as though she did a thing which hurt her too.

'I hope so,' replied Tom. 'I think so.'

He knew not what she had written to Tony; but whatever it was, his own note would appear to endorse it. He had perhaps placed in her hand the weapon that should hasten his own defeat, stretch him bleeding on the sand. And yet he trusted her; she was loyal and true throughout. The quicker the climax came, the sooner would he know the marvellous joy that lay beyond the pain. In some way, moreover, she knew this too. Actually they were working together, hand in hand, to hasten its inevitable arrival. They merely used such instruments as fate offered, however trivial, however clumsy. They were *being* driven. They could neither choose nor resist. He found a germ of subtle comfort in the thought. The Wave was under them. Upon its tumultuous volume they swept forward, side by side . . . striking out wildly.

‘And will you also post it for me when you go?’ he heard. ‘I’ll just add a line to finish up with.’ Tom watched her open the writing-block again and trace a hurried sentence or two; she did it openly; he saw the neat, small words flow from the nib; he saw the signature: ‘Lettice.’

‘Fasten it down for me, Tom, will you? It’s such an ugly thing for a woman to do. It’s absurd that science can’t invent a better way of closing an envelope, isn’t it?’ He was oddly helpless; she forced him to obey out of some greater knowledge. And while he did the ungraceful act, their eyes met across the table. It was the other person in her—the remote, barbaric, eastern woman, set somehow in power over him—who watched him seal his own discomfiture, and smiled to know his obedience had to be. It was, indeed, as though she tortured him deliberately, yet for some reason undivined.

For a passing second Tom felt this—then the strange exaggeration vanished. They played a game together. All this had been before. They looked back upon it, looked down from a point above it. . . . Tom could not read her heart, but he could read his own.

In a few minutes at most all this happened. He put the letter in his pocket, and Lettice turned to her cousin, challenge in her manner, an air of victory as well. And Tom felt he shared that victory somehow too. It was a curious moment, charged with a subtle perplexity of emotions none of them quite understood. It held such singular contradictions.

‘There, Ettie!’ she exclaimed, as much as to say ‘Now you can’t scold me any more. You see how little Mr. Kolverdon minds!’

While she flitted into the next room to fetch a stamp, Mrs. Haughstone, her needles arrested in mid-air, looked steadily at Tom. Her face was white. She had watched the little scene intently.

‘The only thing I cannot understand, Mr. Kolverdon,’ she said in a low tone, her voice both indignant and sympathetic, ‘is how my cousin can give pain to a man like *you*. It’s the most heartless thing I’ve ever seen.’

‘Me!’ gasped Tom. ‘But I don’t understand you!’

‘And for a creature like that!’ she went on quickly, as Lettice was heard in the passage; ‘a libertine’—she almost hissed the word out—‘who thinks every pretty woman is made for his amusement—and false into the bargain—’

Tom put the stamp on. A few minutes later he was again walking along the narrow little Luxor street, the sentences just heard still filling the silent air about him, emotions charging wildly, each detail of the familiar little journey associated already with present pain and with prophecies of pain to come. The bewilderment and confusion in him were beyond all quieting. One moment he saw the picture of a slender foot that deliberately crushed life into the dust, the next he gazed into gentle, loving eyes that would brim with tears if a single hair of his head were injured.

A cold and mournful wind blew down the street, ruffling the darkened river. The black line of hills he could not see. Mystery, enchantment hung in the very air. The long dry fingers of the palm trees rattled overhead, and looking up, he saw the divine light of the starry heavens. . . . Surely among those comforting stars he saw her radiant eyes as well. . . .

A voice, asking in ridiculous English the direction to a certain house, broke his reverie, and, turning round, he saw the sheeted figure of an Arab boy, the bright eyes gleaming in the mischievous little face of bronze. He pointed out the gateway, and the boy slipped off into the darkness, his bare feet soundless and mysterious on the sand. He disappeared up the driveway to the house—her house. Tom knew quite well from whom the telegram came. Tony had telegraphed to let her know of his safe arrival. So even that was necessary! ‘And to-morrow morning,’ he thought, ‘he’ll get my letter too. He’ll come posting back again the very next day.’

He clenched his teeth a moment; he shuddered.. Then he added: 'So much the better!' and walked on quickly up the street. He posted *her* letter at the corner.

He went up to his bedroom. His sleepless nights had begun now. . . .

What was the use of thinking, he asked himself as the hours passed? What good did it do to put the same questions over and over again, to pass from doubt to certainty, only to be fung back again from certainty to doubt? Was there no discoverable centre where the pendulum ceased from swinging? How could she be at the same time both cruel and tender, both true and false, frank and secretive, spiritual and sensual? Each of these pairs, he realised, was really a single state of which the adjectives represented the extremes at either end. They were ripples. The central personality travelled in one or other direction according to circumstances, according to the pull or push of forces—the main momentum of the parent wave. But there was a point where the heart felt neither one nor other, neither cruel nor tender, false nor true. Where, on the thermometer, did heat begin and cold come to an end? Love and hate, similarly, were extremes of one and the same emotion. Love, he well knew, could turn to virulent hatred—if something checked and forced it back upon the line of natural advance. Could, then, *her* tenderness be thus reversed, turning into cruelty. . . . Or was this cruelty but the awakening in her of another thing? .

Possibly. Yet at the centre, that undiscovered centre at present beyond his reach, Lettice, he knew, remained unalterably steadfast. There he felt the absolute assurance she was his exclusively. His centre, moreover, coincided with her own. They were in the 'sea' together. But to get back into the sea, the Wave now rolling under them must first break and fall. . . .

The sooner, then, the better! They would swing back with it together eventually.

He chose, that is—without knowing it—a higher way of moulding destiny. It was the spiritual way, whose method and secret lie in that subtle paradox: Yield to conquer.

## CHAPTER XXVI

Yes, she was always 'tired' now, though the 'always' meant but three days at most. It was the starving sense of loneliness, the aching sense of loss, the yearning and the vain desire that made it seem so long. Lettice evaded him with laughter in her eyes, or with a tired smile. But the laughter was for another. It was merciless and terrible—so slightly, faintly indicated, yet so overwhelmingly convincing.

The talk between them rarely touched reality, as though a barrier deadened their very voices. Even her mothering became exasperating; it was so unforced and natural; it seemed still so right that she should show solicitude for his physical welfare. And therein lay the anguish and the poignancy. Yet, while he resented fiercely, knowing this was all she had to offer now, he struggled at the same time to accept. One moment he resisted, the next accepted. One hour he believed in her, the next he disbelieved. Hope and fear alternately made tragic sport of him,

Two personalities fought for possession of his soul, and he could not always keep back the lower of the two. They interpenetrated—as, at Deir-el-Bahri, two scenes had interpenetrated, something very, very old projected upon a modern screen.

Lettice too—he was convinced of it—was undergoing a similar experience in herself. Only in her case just now it was the lower, the primitive, the physical aspect that was uppermost. She clung to Tony, yet struggled to keep Tom. She could not help herself. And he himself, knowing he must shortly go, still clung and hesitated, hoping against hope. More and more now, until the end, he was aware that he stood outside his present-day self, and above it. He looked back—

looked down—upon former emotions and activities; and hence the confusing alternating of jealousy and forgiveness.

There were revealing little incidents from time to time. On the following afternoon he found her, for instance, radiant with that exuberant happiness he had learned now to distrust. And for a moment he half believed again that the menace had lifted and the happiness was for him. She held out both hands towards him, while she described a plan for going to Edfu and Abou Simbel. His heart beat wildly for a second.

‘But Tony?’ he asked, almost before he knew it. ‘We can’t leave him out!’

‘Oh, but I’ve had a letter.’ And as she said it his eye caught sight of a bulky envelope lying in the sand beside her chair.

‘Good,’ he said quietly, ‘and when is he coming back? I haven’t heard from him.’ The solid ground moved beneath his feet. He shivered, even in the blazing heat.

‘To-morrow. He sends you all sorts of messages and says that something you wrote made him very happy. I wonder what it was, Tom?’

Behind her voice he heard the north wind rattling in the palms; he heard the soft rustle of the acacia leaves as well; there was the crashing of little waves upon the river; but a deep, deep shadow fell upon the sky and blotted out the sunshine. The glory vanished from the day, leaving in its place a painful glare that hurt the eyes. The soul in him was darkened.

‘Ah!’ he exclaimed with assumed playfulness, ‘but that’s my secret!’ Men do smile, he remembered, as they are led to execution.

She laughed excitedly. ‘I shall find it out—’

‘You will,’ he burst out significantly, ‘in the end.’

Then, as she passed him to go into the house, he lost control a moment. He whispered suddenly:

‘Love has no secrets, Lettice, anywhere. We’re in the Sea together. I shall *never* let you go. The intensity in his manner betrayed him; he adored her; he could not hide it.

She turned an instant, standing two steps above him; the sidelong downward glance lent to her face a touch of royalty, half pitying, half imperious. Her exquisite, frail beauty held a strength that mocked the worship in his eyes and voice. Almost—she challenged him:

‘Soothsayer!’ she whispered back contemptuously. ‘Do your worst!’—and was gone into the house.

Desire surged wildly in him at that moment; impatience, scorn, fury even, raised their heads; he felt a savage impulse to seize her with violence, force her to confess, to have it out and end it one way or the other. He loathed himself for submitting to her cruelty, for it was intentional cruelty—she made him writhe and suffer of set purpose. And something barbaric in his blood leaped up in answer to the savagery in her own . . . when at that instant he heard her calling very softly:

‘Tom! Come indoors to me a moment; I want to show you something!’

But with it another sentence sprang across him and was gone. Like a meteor it streaked the screen of memory. Seize it he could not. It had to do with death—his death. There was a thought of blood. Outwardly what he heard, however, was the playful little sentence of to-day. ‘Come, I want to show you something.’

At the sound of her voice so softly calling all violence was forgotten; love poured back in a flood upon him; he would go through fire and water to possess her in the end. In this strange drama she played her inevitable part, even as he did; there must be no loss of self-control that

might frustrate the coming climax. There must be no thwarting. If he felt jealousy, he must hide it; anger, scorn, desire must veil their faces.

He crossed the passage and stood before her in the darkened room, afraid and humble, full of a burning love that the centuries had not lessened, and that no conceivable cruelty of pain could ever change. Almost he knelt before her. Even if terrible, she was utterly adorable.

For he believed she was about to make a disclosure that would lay him bleeding in the dust; singularly at her mercy he felt, his heart laid bare to receive the final thrust that should make him outcast. Her little foot would crush him. . . .

The long green blinds kept out the glare of the sunshine; and at first he saw the room but dimly. Then, slowly, the white form emerged, the broad-brimmed hat, the hanging violet veil, the yellow jacket of soft, clinging silk, the long white gauntlet gloves. He saw her dear face peering through the dimness at him, the eyes burning like two dark precious stones. A table stood between them. There was a square white object on it. A moment's bewilderment stole over him. Why had she called him in? What was she going to say? Why did she choose this moment? Was it the threat of Tony's near arrival that made her confession—and his dismissal—at last inevitable?

Then, suddenly, that night in the London theatre flashed back across his mind—her strange absorption in the play, the look of pain in her face, the little conversation, the sense of familiarity that hung about it all. He remembered Tony's words later that another actor was expected with whose entry the piece would turn more real—turn tragic.

He waited. The dimness of the room was like the dimness of that theatre. The lights were lowered. They played their little parts. The audience watched and listened.

'Tom, dear,' her voice came floating tenderly across the air. 'I didn't like to give it you before the others. They wouldn't understand—they'd laugh at us.'

He did not understand. Surely he had heard indistinctly. He waited, saying nothing. The tenderness in her voice amazed him. He had expected very different words. Yet this was surely Lettice speaking, the Lettice of his spring-time in the mountains beside the calm blue lake. He stared hard. For the voice *was* Lettice, but the eyes and figure were another's. He was again aware of two persons there—of perplexing and bewildering struggle. But Lettice, for the moment, dominated as it seemed.

'So I put it here,' she went on in a low gentle tone, 'here, Tommy, on the table for you. And all my love is in it—my first, deep, fond love—our childhood love.' She leaned down and forward, her face in her hands, her elbows on the dark cloth she pushed the square, white packet across to him. 'God bless you,' floated to him with her breath.

The struggle in her seemed very patent then.

Yet in spite of that other, older self within her, it was still the voice of Lettice. . . .

There was a moment's silence while her whisper hung, as it were, upon the air. His entire body seemed a single heart. Exactly what he felt he hardly knew. There was a simultaneous collapse of several huge emotions in him. . . . But he trusted her. . . . He clung to that beloved voice. For she called him 'Tommy'; she was his mother; love, tenderness, and pity emanated from her like a cloud of perfume. He heard the faint rustle of her dress as she bent forward, but outside he heard the dry, harsh rattle of the palm trees in the northern wind. And in that—was terror.

'What—what is it, Lettice?' The voice sounded like a boy's. It was outrageous. He swallowed—with an effort.

'Tommy, you—don't mind? You *will* take it, won't you?' And it was as if he heard her saying 'Help me . . . once again, 'Trust me as I trust you. . . .'

Mechanically he put his hand out and drew the object towards him. He knew then what it was and what was in it. He was glad of the darkness, for there was a ridiculous moisture in his eyes now. A lump *was* in his throat!

'I've been neglecting you. You haven't had a thing for ages. You'll take it, Tommy, won't you—dear?'

The little foolish words, so sweetly commonplace, fell like balm upon an open wound. He already held the small white packet in his hand. He looked up at her. God alone knows the strain upon his will in that moment. Somehow he mastered himself. It seemed as if he swallowed blood. For behind the mothering words lurked, he knew, the other self that any minute would return.

'Thank you, Lettice, very much,' he said with a strange calmness, and his voice was firm. Whatever happened he must not prevent the delivery of what had to be. Above all, that was clear. The pain must come in full before the promised joy.

Was it, perhaps, this strength in him that drew her? Was it his moment of iron self—mastery that brought her with outstretched, clinging arms towards him? Was it the unshakable love in him that threatened the temporary ascendancy of that other in her who gladly tortured him that joy might come in a morning yet to break?

For she stood beside him, though he had not seen her move. She was close against his shoulder, nestling as of old. It was surely a stage effect. A trap-door had opened in the floor of his consciousness; his first, early love sheltered in his aching heart again. The entire structure of the drama they played together threatened to collapse.

'Tom . . . you love me less?'

He held her to him, but he did not kiss the face she turned up to his. Nor did he speak.

'You've changed somewhere?' she whispered. 'You, too, have changed?'

There was a pause before he found words that he could utter. He dared not yield. To do so would be vain in any case.

'N—no, Lettice. But I can't say what it is. There is pain. . . . It has turned some part of me numb . . . killed something, brought something else to life. You will come back to me . . . but not quite yet.'

In spite of the darkness, he saw her face clearly then. For a moment—it seemed so easy—he could have caught her in his arms, kissed her, known the end of his present agony of heart and mind. She would have come back to him, Tony's claim obliterated from her life. The driving power that forced an older self upon her had weakened before the steadfast love he bore her. She was ready to capitulate. The little, childish present in his hands was offered as of old. . . . Tears rose behind his eyes.

How he resisted he never understood. Some thoroughness in him triumphed. If he shirked the pain to-day, it would have to be faced to-morrow—that alone was clear in his breaking heart. To be worthy of the greater love, the completer joy to follow, they must accept the present pain and see it through—experience it—exhaust it once for all. To refuse it now was only to postpone it. She must go her way, while he went his. . . .

Gently he pushed her from him, released his hold; the little face slipped from his shoulder as though it sank into the sea. He felt that she understood. He heard himself speaking, though how he chose the words he never knew. Out of new depths in himself the phrases rose—a regenerated Tom uprising, though not yet sure of himself:

'You are not wholly mine. I must first—oh, Lettice!—learn to do without you. It is you who say it.'

Her voice, as she answered, seemed already changed, a shade of something harder and less yielding in it:

‘That which you can do without is added to you.’

‘A new thing . . . beginning,’ he whispered, feeling it both belief and prophecy. His whisper broke in spite of himself. He saw her across the room, the table between them again. Already she looked different, ‘Lettice’ fading from her eyes and mouth.

She said a marvellous, sweet thing before that other self usurped her then:

‘One day, Tom, we shall find each other in a crowd. . . .’

There was a yearning cry in him he did not utter. It seemed she faded from the atmosphere as the dimness closed about her. He saw a darker figure with burning eyes upon a darker face; there was a gleam of gold; a faint perfume as of ambra hung about the air, and outside the palm leaves rattled in the northern wind. He had heard awful words, it seemed, that sealed his fate. He was forsaken, lonely, outcast. It was a sentence of death, for she was set in power over him. . . .

A flood of dazzling sunshine poured into the room from a lifted blind, as the others looked in from the verandah to say that they were going and wanted to say good-bye. A moment later all were discussing plans in the garden, Tom as loudly and eagerly as any of them. He held his square white packet. But he did not open it till he reached his room a little later, and then arranged the different articles in a row upon his table: the favourite cigarettes, the soap, the pair of white tennis socks with his initial neatly sewn on, the tie in the shade of blue that suited him best . . . the writing-pad and the dates!

A letter from Tony next caught his eye and he opened it, slowly, calmly, almost without interest, knowing exactly what it would say:

‘. . . I was delighted, old chap, to get your note,’ he read. ‘I felt sure it would be all right, for I felt somehow that I *had* exaggerated your feeling towards her. As you say, what one has to think of with a woman in so delicate a position is her happiness more than one’s own. But I wouldn’t do anything to offend you or cause you pain for worlds, and I’m awfully glad to know the way is clear. To tell you the truth, I went away on purpose, for I felt uneasy. I wanted to be quite sure first that I was not trespassing. She made me feel I was doing you no wrong, but I wanted your assurance too. . . .’

There was a good deal more in similar vein—he laid the burden upon her—ending with a word to say he was coming back to Luxor immediately. He would arrive the following day.

As a matter of fact Tony was already then in the train that left Cairo that evening and reached Luxor at eight o’clock next morning. Tom, who had counted upon another twenty-four hours’ respite, did not know this; nor did he know till later that another telegram had been carried by a ghostly little Arab boy, with the result that Tony and Lettice enjoyed their hot rolls and coffee alone together in the shady garden where the cool northern wind rattled among the palm trees. Mrs. Haughstone mentioned it in due course, however, having watched the *tête-à-tête* from her bedroom window, unobserved.

## CHAPTER XXVII

And next day there was one more revealing incident that helped, yet also hindered him, as he moved along his *via dolorosa*. For every step he took away from her seemed also to bring him nearer. They followed opposing curves of a circle. They separated ever more widely, back to back, yet were approaching each other at the same time. They would meet face to face. . . .

He found her at the piano, practising the song that now ran ever in his blood; the score, he noticed, was in Tony's writing.

'Unwelcome!' he exclaimed, reading out the title over her shoulder.

'Tom! How you startled me! I was trying to learn it.' She turned to him; her eyes were shining. He was aware of a singular impression—struggle, effort barely manageable. Her beauty seemed fresh made; he thought of a wild rose washed by the dew and sparkling in the sunlight.

'I thought you knew it already,' he observed.

She laughed significantly, looking up into his face so close he could have kissed her lips by merely bending his head a few inches. 'Not quite—yet,' she answered. 'Will you give me a lesson, Tom?'

'Unpaid?' he asked.

She looked reproachfully at him. 'The best services are unpaid always.'

'I'm afraid I have neither the patience nor the knowledge,' he replied.

Her next words stirred happiness in him for a moment; the divine trust he fought to keep stole from his heart into his eyes: 'But you would never, never give up, Tom, no matter how difficult and obstinate the pupil. You would always understand. *That* I know.'

He moved away. Such double-edged talk, even in play, was dangerous. A deep weariness was in him, weakening self-control. Sensitive to the slightest touch just then, he dared not let her torture him too much. He felt in her a strength far, far beyond his own; he was powerless before her. Had Tony been present he could not have played his part at all. Somehow he had a curious feeling, moreover, that his cousin was not very far away.

'Tony will be here later, I think,' she said, as she followed him outside. 'But, if not, he's sure to come to dinner.'

'Good,' he replied, thinking that the train arrived in time to dress, and in no way surprised that she divined his thoughts. 'We can decide our plans then.' He added that he might be obliged to go back to Assouan, but she made no comment. Speech died away between them, as they sat down in the old familiar corner above the Nile. Tom, for the life of him, could think of nothing to say. Lettice, on the other hand, wanted to say nothing. He felt that she *had* nothing to say. Behind, below the numbness in him, meanwhile, her silence stabbed him without ceasing. The intense yearning in his heart threatened any minute to burst forth in vehement speech, almost in action. It lay accumulating in him dangerously, ready to leap out at the least sign—the pin-prick of a look, a word, a gesture on her part, and he would smash the barrier down between them and—ruin all. The sight of Tony, for instance, just then must have been as a red rag to a bull.

He traced figures in the sand with his heel, he listened to the wind above them, he never ceased to watch her motionless, indifferent figure stretched above him on the long deck-chair. A book peeped out from behind the cushion where her head rested. Tom put his hand across and took it suddenly, partly for something to do, partly from curiosity as well. She made a quick, restraining gesture, then changed her mind. And again he was conscious of battle in her, as if two beings fought.

'The Mary Coleridge Poems,' she said carelessly. 'Tony gave it me. You'll find the song he put to music.'

Tom vigorously turned the leaves. He had already glanced at the title-page with the small inscription in one corner: 'To L. J., from A. W.' There was a pencil mark against a poem half-way through.

'He's going to write music for some of the others too,' she added, watching him; 'the ones he has marked.' Her voice, he fancied, wavered slightly.

Tom nodded his head. 'I see,' he murmured, noticing a cross in pencil. A sullen defiance rose in his blood, but he forced it out of sight. He read the words in a low voice to himself. It was astonishing how the powers behind the scenes forced a contribution from the commonest incidents:

The sum of loss I have not reckoned yet,  
I cannot tell.  
For ever it was morning when we met,  
Night when we bade farewell.

Perhaps the words let loose the emotion, though of different kinds, pent up behind their silence. The strain, at any rate, between them tightened first, then seemed to split. He kept his eyes upon the page before him; Lettice, too, remained still as before only her lips moved as she spoke:

'Tom. . . .' The voice plunged into his heart like iron.

'Yes,' he said quietly, without looking up.

'Tom,' she repeated, 'what are you thinking about so hard?'

He found no answer.

'And all to yourself?'

The blood rushed to his face; her voice was so soft.

He met her eyes and smiled. 'The same as usual, I suppose,' he said.

For a moment she made no reply, then, glancing at the book lying in his hand, she said in a lower voice: 'That woman had suffered deeply. There's truth and passion in every word she writes; there's a marvellous restraint as well. Tom,' she added, gazing hard at him, 'you feel it, don't you? You understand her?' For an instant she knit her brows as if in perplexity or misgiving.

'The truth, yes,' he replied after a moment's hesitation; 'the restraint as well.'

'And the passion?'

He nodded curtly by way of agreement. He turned the pages over very rapidly. His fingers were as thick and clumsy as rigid bits of wood. He fumbled.

'Will you read it once again?' she asked. He did so . . . in a low voice. With difficulty he reached the end. There was a mist before his eyes and his voice seemed confused. He dared not look up.

'There's a deep spiritual beauty,' he went on slowly, making an enormous effort, 'that's what I feel strongest, I think. There's renunciation, sacrifice—'

He was going to say more, for he felt the words surge up in his throat. This talk, he knew, was a mere safety valve to both of them; they used words as people attacked by laughter out of due season seize upon anything, however far-fetched, that may furnish excuse for it. The flood of language and emotion, too long suppressed, again rose to his very lips—when a slight sound stopped his utterance. He turned. Amazement caught him. Her frozen immobility, her dead indifference, her boredom possibly—all these, passing suddenly, had melted in a flood of tears. Her face was covered by her hands. She lay there sobbing within a foot of his hungry arms, sobbing as though her heart must break. He saw the drops between her little fingers, trickling.

It was so sudden, so unexpected, that Tom felt unable to speak or act at first. Numbness seized him. His faculties were arrested. He watched her, saw the little body heave down its entire length, noted the small convulsive movements of it. He saw all this, yet he could not do the natural thing. It was very ghastly. . . . He could not move a muscle, he could not say a single

word, he could not comfort her—because he knew those tears were the tears of pity only. It was for himself she sobbed. The tenderness in her—in ‘Lettice’—broke down before his weight of pain, the weight of pain she herself laid upon him. Nothing that *he* might do or say could comfort her. Divining what the immediate future held in store for him, she wept these burning tears of pity. In that poignant moment of self-revelation Tom’s cumbersome machinery of intuition did not fail him. He understood. It was a confession—the last perhaps. He saw ahead with vivid and merciless clarity of vision. Only another could comfort her. . . . Yet he could help. Yes—he could help—by going. There was no other way. He must slip out.

And, as if prophetically just then, she murmured between her tight-pressed fingers: ‘Leave me, Tom, for a moment . . . please go away . . . . I’m so mortified . . . this idiotic scene. . . . Leave me a little, then come back. I shall be myself again presently. . . . It’s Egypt—this awful Egypt. . . .’

Tom obeyed. He got up and left her, moving without feeling in his legs, as though he walked in his sleep, as though he dreamed, as though he were—dead. He did not notice the direction. He walked mechanically. It felt to him that he simply walked straight out of her life into a world of emptiness and ice and shadows. . . .

The river lay below him in a flood of light. He saw the Theban Hills rolling their dark, menacing wave along the far horizon. In the blistering heat the desert lay sun-drenched, basking, silent. Its faint sweet perfume reached him in the northern wind, that pungent odour of the sand, which is the odour of this sun-baked land etherealised.

A fiery intensity of light lay over it, as though any moment it must burst into sheets of flame. So intense was the light that it seemed to let sight through to—to what? To a more distant vision, infinitely remote. It was not a mirror, but a transparency. The eyes slipped through it marvellously.

He stood on the steps of worn-out sandstone, listening, staring, feeling nothing . . . and then a little song came floating across the air towards him, sung by a boatman in mid-stream. It was a native melody, but it had the strange, monotonous lilt of Tony’s old-Egyptian melody. . . . And feeling stole back upon him, alternately burning and freezing the currents of his blood. The childhood nightmare touch crept into him: he saw the wavelike outline of the gloomy hills, he heard the wind rattling in the leaves behind him, to his nostrils came the strange, penetrating perfume of the tawny desert that encircles ancient Thebes, and in the air before him hung two pairs of eyes, dark, faithful eyes, cruel and at the same time tender, true yet merciless, and the others—treacherous, false, light blue in colour. . . . He began to shuffle furiously with his feet. . . . The soul in him went under. . . .

He turned to face the menace coming up behind . . . the falling Wave. . . .

‘Tom!’ he heard—and turned back towards her. And when he reached her side, she had so entirely regained composure that he could hardly believe it was the same person. Fresh and radiant she looked once more, no sign of tears, no traces of her recent emotion anywhere. Perhaps the interval had been longer than he guessed, but, in any case, the change was swift and half unaccountable. In himself, equally, was a calmness that seemed unnatural. He heard himself speaking in an even tone about the view, the river, the gold of the coming sunset. He wished to spare her, he talked as though nothing had happened, he mentioned the deep purple colour of the hills—when she broke out with sudden vehemence.

‘Oh, don’t speak of those hills, those awful hills,’ she cried. ‘I dread the sight of them. Last night I dreamed again—they crushed me down into the sand. I felt buried beneath them, deep, deep down—*buried*.’ She whispered the last word as though to herself. She hid her face.

The words amazed him. He caught the passing shiver in her voice.

‘“Again?”’ he asked. ‘You’ve dreamed of them before?’ He stood close, looking down at her. The sense of his own identity returned slowly, yet he still felt two persons in him.

‘Often and often,’ she said in a lowered tone, ‘since Tony came. I dream that we all three lie buried somewhere in that forbidding valley. It terrifies me more and more each time.’

‘Strange,’ he said. ‘For they draw me too. I feel them somehow known—familiar.’ He paused. ‘I believe Tony was right, you know, when he said that we three—’

How she stopped him he never quite understood. At first he thought the curious movement on her face portended tears again, but the next second he saw that instead of tears a slow strange smile was stealing upon her—upwards from the mouth. It lay upon her features for a second only, but long enough to alter them. A thin, diaphanous mask, transparent, swiftly fleeting, passed over her, and through it another woman, yet herself peered up at him with a penetrating yet somehow distant gaze. A shudder ran down his spine; there was a sensation of inner cold against his heart; he trembled, but he could not look away. . . . He saw in that brief instant the face of the woman who tortured him. The same second, so swiftly was it gone again, he saw Lettice watching him through half-closed eyelids. He heard her saying something. She was completing the sentence that had interrupted him:

‘We’re too imaginative, Tom. Believe me, Egypt is no place to let imagination loose, and I don’t like it.’ She sighed: there was exhaustion in her. ‘It’s stimulating enough without *our* help. Besides—’ she used a curious adjective—‘it’s dangerous too.’

Tom willingly let the subject drop; his own desire was to appear natural, to protect her, to save her pain. He thought no longer of himself. Drawing upon all his strength, forcing himself almost to breaking-point, he talked quietly of obvious things, while longing secretly to get away to his own room where he could be alone. He craved to hide himself; like a stricken animal his instinct was to withdraw from observation.

The arrival of the tea-tray helped him, and, while they drank, the sky let down the emblazoned curtain of a hundred colours lest Night should bring her diamonds unnoticed, unannounced. There is no dusk in Egypt; the sun draws on his opal hood; there is a rush of soft white stars: the desert cools, and the wind turns icy. Night, high on her spangled throne, watches the sun dip down behind the Libyan sands.

Tom felt this coming of Night as he sat there, so close to Lettice that he could touch her fingers, feel her breath, catch the lightest rustle of her thin white dress. He felt night creeping in upon his heart. Swiftly the shadows piled. His soul seemed draped in blackness, drained of its shining gold, hidden below the horizon of the years. It sank out of sight, cold, lost, forgotten. His day was past and over. . . .

They had been sitting silent for some minutes when a voice became audible, singing in the distance. It came nearer. Tom recognised the tune—‘We were young, we were merry, we were very, very wise’; and Lettice sat up suddenly to listen. But Tom then thought of one thing only—that it was beyond his power just now to meet his cousin. He knew his control was not equal to the task; he would betray himself; the role was too exacting. He rose abruptly.

‘That must be Tony coming,’ Lettice said. ‘His tea will be all cold!’ Each word was a caress, each syllable alive with interest, sympathy, excited anticipation. She had become suddenly alive. Tom saw her eyes shining as she gazed past him down the darkening drive. He made his absurd excuse. ‘I’m going home to rest a bit, Lettice. I played tennis too hard. The sun’s given me a headache. We’ll meet later. You’ll keep Tony for dinner?’ His mind had begun to work, too; the evening train from Cairo, he remembered, was not due for an hour or more yet. A hideous suspicion rushed like fire through him.

But he asked no question. He knew they wished to be alone together. Yet also he had a wild, secret hope that she would be disappointed. He was speedily undeceived.

‘All right, Tom,’ she answered, hardly looking at him. ‘And mind you’re not late. Eight o’clock sharp. I’ll make Tony stay.’

He was gone. He chose the path along the river bank instead of going by the drive. He did not look back once. It was when he entered the road a little later that he met Mrs. Haughstone coming home from a visit to some friends in his hotel. It was then she told him. . . .

‘What a surprise you must have had,’ Tom believes he said in reply. He said something, at any rate, that he hoped sounded natural and right.

‘Oh, no,’ Mrs. Haughstone explained. ‘We were quite prepared. Lettice had a telegram, you see, to let her know.’

She told him other things as well. . . .