

PART IV

CHAPTER XXVIII

Tony had come back. The Play turned very real.

The situation *à trois* thenceforward became, for Tom, an acutely afflicting one. He found no permanent resting-place for heart or mind. He analysed, asked himself questions without end, but a final decisive judgment evaded him. He wrote letters and tore them up again. He hid himself in Assouan with belief for a companion, he came back and found that companion had been but a masquerader—disbelief. Suspicion grew confirmed into conviction. Vanity persuaded him against the weight of evidence, then left him naked with his facts. He wanted to kill, first others, then himself. He laughed, but the same minute he could have cried. Such complicated tangles of emotion were beyond his solving—it amazed him; such prolonged and incessant torture, so delicately applied—he marvelled that a human heart could bear it without breaking. For the affection and sympathy he felt for his cousin refused to die, while his worship and passion towards an unresponsive woman increasingly consumed him.

He no longer recognised himself his cousin, Lettice; all three, indeed, were singularly changed. Each duplicated into a double rôle. Towards their former selves he kept his former attitude—of affection, love, belief; towards the usurping selves he felt—he knew not what. Therefore he drifted. . . . Strange, mysterious, tender, unfathomable Woman! Vain, primitive, self-sufficing, confident Man! In him the masculine tried to reason and analyse to the very end; in her the feminine interpreted intuitively: the male and female attitudes, that is, held true throughout. The Wave swept him forward irresistibly, his very soul, it seemed, went shuffling to find solid ground. . . .

Meanwhile, however, no one broke the rules—rules that apparently had made themselves: subtle and delicate, it took place mostly out of sight, as it were, inside the heart. Below the mask of ordinary surface—conduct all agreed to wear, the deeper, inevitable intercourse proceeded, a Play within a Play, a tragedy concealed thinly by general consent under the most commonplace comedy imaginable. All acted out their parts, rehearsed, it seemed, of long ago. For, more and more, it came to Tom that the one thing he must never lose, whatever happened, was his trust in her. He must cling to that though it cost him all—trust in her love and truth and constancy. This singular burden seemed laid upon his soul. If he lost that trust and that belief, the Wave could never break, she could never justify that trust and that belief.

This ‘enchantment’ that tortured him, straining his whole being, was somehow a test indeed of his final worthiness to win her. Somehow, somehow, he owed her this. . . . He dared not fail. For if he failed the Wave that should sweep her back into the ‘sea’ with him would not break—he would merely go on shuffling with his feet to the end of life. Tony and Lettice conquered him till he lay bleeding in the sand; Tom played the rôle of loss—obediently almost; the feeling that they were set in power over him persisted strangely. It dominated, at any rate, the resistance he would otherwise have offered. He must learn to do without her in order that she might in the end be added to him. Thus, and thus alone, could he find himself, and reach the level where she lived. He took his fate from her gentle, merciless hands, well knowing that it had to be. In some marvellous, sweet way the sacrifice would bring her back again at last, but bring her back completed—and to a Tom worthy of her love. The self-centred, confident man in him that deemed itself indispensable must crumble. To find regeneration he must risk destruction.

Events—yet always inner events—moved with such rapidity then that he lost count of time. The barrier never lowered again. He played his ghastly part in silence—always inner silence. Out of sight, below the surface, the deep wordless Play continued. With Tony's return the drama hurried. The actor all had been waiting for came on, and took the centre of the stage, and stayed until the curtain fell—a few weeks, all told, of their short Egyptian winter.

In the crowded rush of action Tom felt the Wave—bend, break, and smash him. At its highest moment he saw the stars, at its lowest the crunch of shifting gravel filled his ears, the mud blinded sight, the rubbish choked his breath. Yet he had seen those distant stars. . . . Into the mothering sea, as he sank back, the memory of the light went with him. It was a kind of incredible performance, half on earth and half in the air: it rushed with such impetuous momentum.

Amid the intensity of his human emotions, meanwhile, he lost sight of any subtler hints, if indeed they offered: he saw no veiled eastern visions any more, divined no psychic warnings. His agony of blinding pain, alternating with briefest intervals of shining hope when he recovered belief in her and called himself the worst names he could think of—this seething warfare of cruder feelings left no part of him sensitive to the delicate promptings of finer forces, least of all to the tracery of fancied memories. He only gasped for breath—sufficient to keep himself afloat and cry, as he had promised he would cry, even to the bitter end: 'I'll face it . . . I'll stick it out . . . I'll trust. . . !'

The setting of the Play was perfect; in Egypt alone was its production possible. The brilliant lighting, the fathomless, soft shadows, deep covering of blue by day, clear stars by night, the solemn hills, and the slow, eternal river—all these, against the huge background of the Desert, silent, golden, lonely, formed the adequate and true environment. In no other country, in England least of all, could the presentation have been real. Tony, himself, and Lettice belonged, one and all, it seemed, to Egypt—yet, somehow, not wholly to the Egypt of the tourist hordes and dragoman, and big hotels. The Onlooker in him, who stood aloof and held a watching brief, looked down upon an ancient land unvexed by railways, graciously clothed and coloured gorgeously, mapped burningly mid fiercer passions, eager for life, contemptuous of death. He did not understand, but that it was thus, not otherwise, he knew. . . .

Her beauty, too, both physical and spiritual, became for him strangely heightened. He shifted between moods of worship that were alternately physical and spiritual. In the former he pictured her with darker colouring, half barbaric, eastern, her slender figure flitting through a grove of palms beyond a river too wide for him to cross; gold bands gleamed upon her arms, bare to the shoulder; he could not reach her; she was with another—it was torturing; she and that other disappeared into the covering shadows. . . . In the latter, however, there was no unworthy thought, no faintest desire of the blood; he saw her high among the little stars, gazing with tender, pitying eyes upon him, calling softly, praying for him, loving him, yet remote in some spiritual isolation where she must wait until he soared to join her.

Both physically and spiritually, that is, he idealised her—saw her divinely naked. She did not move. She hung there like a star, waiting for him, while he was carried past her, swept along helplessly by a tide, a flood, a wave, though a wave that was somehow rising up to where she dwelt above him. . . .

It was a marvellous experience. In the physical moods he felt the fires of jealousy burn his flesh away to the bare nerves—resentment, rage, a bitterness that could kill; in the alternate state he felt the uplifting joy and comfort of ultimate sacrifice, sweet as heaven, the bliss of complete

renunciation—for her happiness. If she loved another who could give her greater joy, he had no right to interfere.

It was this last that gradually increased in strength, the first that slowly, surely died. Unsatisfied yearnings hunted his soul across the empty desert that now seemed life. The self he had been so pleased with, had admired so proudly with calm complacency, thinking it indispensable—this was tortured, stabbed and mercilessly starved to death by slow degrees, while something else appeared shyly, gently, as yet unaware of itself, but already clearer and stronger. In the depths of his being, below an immense horizon, shone joy, luring him onward and brightening as it did so.

Love, he realised, was independent of the will—no one can will to love: she was not anywhere to blame, a stronger claim had come into life and changed her. She could not live untruth, pretending otherwise. He, rather, was to blame if he sought to hold her to a smaller love she had outgrown. She had the inalienable right to obey the bigger claim, if such it proved to be. Personal freedom was the basis of their contract. It would have been easier for him if she could have told him frankly, shared it with him; but, since that seemed beyond her, then it was for him to slip away. He must subtract himself from an inharmonious three, leaving a perfect two. He must make it easier for *her*.

The days of golden sunshine passed along their appointed way as before, leaving him still without a final decision. Outwardly the little party *à trois* seemed harmonious, a coherent unit, while inwardly the accumulation of suppressed emotion crept nearer and nearer to the final breaking point. They lived upon a crater, playing their comedy within sight and hearing of destruction: even Mrs. Haughstone, ever waiting in the wings for her cue, came on effectively and filled her rôle, insignificant yet necessary. Its meanness was its truth.

‘Mr. Winslowe excites my cousin too much; I’m sure it isn’t good for her—in England, yes, but not out here in this strong, dangerous climate.’

Tom understood, but invariably opposed her:

‘If it makes her happy for a little while, I see no harm in it; life has not been too kind to her, remember.’

Sometimes, however, the hint was barbed as well: ‘Your cousin *is* a delightful being, but he can talk nonsense when he wants to. He’s actually been trying to persuade me that you’re jealous of him. He said you were only waiting a suitable moment to catch him alone in the Desert and shoot him!’

Tom countered her with an assumption of portentous gravity: ‘Sound travels too easily in this still air,’ he reminded her; ‘the Nile would be the simplest way.’ After which, confused by ridicule, she renounced the hint direct, indulging instead in facial expression, glances, and innuendo conveyed by gesture.

That there was some truth, however, behind this betrayal of her hostess and her fellow-guest, Tom felt certain; it lied more by exaggeration than by sheer invention: he listened while he hated it ashamed of himself, he yet invited the ever-ready warnings, though he invariably defended the object of them—and himself.

Alternating thus, he knew no minute of happiness; a single day, a single hour contained both moods, trust ousted suspicion, and suspicion turned out trust. Lettice led him on, then abruptly turned to ice. In the morning he was first and Tony nowhere, the same afternoon this was reversed precisely—yet the balance growing steadily in his cousin’s favour, the evidence accumulating against himself. It was not purposely contrived, it was in automatic obedience to

deeper impulses than she knew. Tom never lost sight of this amazing duality in her, the struggle of one self against another older self to which cruelty was no stranger—or, as he put it, the newly awakened Woman against the Mother in her.

He could not fail to note the different effects he and his cousin produced in her—the ghastly difference. With himself she was captious, easily exasperated; her relations with Tony, above all, a sensitive spot on which she could bear no slightest pressure without annoyance; while behind this attitude, hid always the faithful motherly care that could not see him in distress. That touch of comedy lay in it dreadfully:—wet feet, cold, hungry, tired, and she flew to his consoling! Towards Tony this side of her remained unresponsive; he might drink unfiltered water for all she cared, tire himself to death, or sit in a draught for hours. It could have been comic almost but for its significance: that from Tony she *received*, instead of gave. The woman in her asked, claimed even—of the man in him. The pain for Tom lay there.

His cousin amused, stimulated her beyond anything Tom could offer; she sought protection from him, leant upon him. In his presence she blossomed out, her eyes shone the moment he arrived, her voice altered, her spirits became exuberant. The wholesome physical was awakened by him. He could not hope to equal Tony's address, his fascination. He never forgot that she once danced for happiness.

Helplessness grew upon him—he had no right to feel angry even, he could not justly blame herself or his cousin. The woman in her was open to capture by another; so far it had never belonged to him. In vain he argued that the mother was the larger part; it was the woman that he wanted with it. Having separated the two aspects of her in this way, the division, once made, remained.

And every day that passed this difference in her towards himself and Tony grew more mercilessly marked. The woman in her responded to another touch than his. Though neither lust nor passion, he knew, dwelt in her pure being anywhere, there were yet a thousand delicate unconscious ways by which a woman betrayed her attraction to a being of the opposite sex; they could not be challenged, but equally they could not be misinterpreted. Like the colour and perfume of a rose, they emanated from her inmost being. . . . In this sense, she was sexually indifferent to Tom, and while passion consumed his soul, he felt her, dearly mothering, yet cold as ice. The soft winds of Egypt bent the full-blossomed rose into another's hand, towards another's lips. . . . Tony had entered the garden of her secret life.

CHAPTER XXIX

And so the fires of jealousy burned him. He struggled hard, smothering all outward expression of his pain, with the sole result that the suppression increased the fury of the heat within. For every day the tiniest details fed its fierceness. It was inextinguishable. He lost his appetite, his sleep, he lost all sense of what is called proportion. There was no rest in him, day and night he lived in the consuming flame.

His cousin's irresponsibility now assumed a sinister form that shocked him. He recognised the libertine in his careless play with members of the other sex who had pleased him for moments, then been tossed aside. He became aware of grossness in his eyes and lips and bearing. He understood, above all, his—hands.

Against the fiery screen of his emotions jealousy threw violent pictures which he mistook for thought . . . and there burst through this screen, then, scattering all lesser feelings, the flame of a

vindictive anger that he believed was the protective righteous anger of an outraged man. 'If Tony did her wrong,' he told himself, 'I would kill him.'

Always, at this extravagant moment, however, he reached a climax, then calmed down again. A sense of humour rose incongruously to check loss of self-restraint. The memory of her daily tenderness swept over him; and shame sent a blush into his cheeks. He felt mortified, ungenerous, a foolish figure even. While the reaction lasted he forgave, felt her above reproach, cursed his wretched thoughts that had tried to soil her, and lost the violent vindictiveness that had betrayed him. His affection for his cousin, always real, and the sympathy between them, always genuine, returned to complete his own discomfiture. His mood swayed back to the first, happy days when the three of them had laughed and played together.

And to punish himself while this reaction lasted, he would seek her out and see that she inflicted the punishment itself. He would hear from her own lips how fond she was of Tony, fighting to convince himself, while he listened, that she was above suspicion, and that his pain was due solely to unworthy jealousy. He would be specially nice to Tony, making things easier for him, even urging him, as it were, into her very arms.

These moments of generous reaction, however, seemed to puzzle her. The exalted state of emotion was confined, perhaps, to himself. At any rate, he produced results the very reverse of what he intended. Tony became more cautious, Lettice looked at himself with half-questioning eyes. . . . There was falseness in his attitude, something unnatural. It was not the part he was cast for in the Play. He could not keep it up. He fell back once more to watching, listening, playing his proper role of a slave who was forced to observe the happiness of others set somehow over him, while suffering in silence. The inner fires were fed anew thereby. He knew himself flung back, bruised and bleeding, upon his original fear and jealousy, convinced more than ever before that this cruelty and torture had to be, and that his pain was justified. To resist was only to delay the perfect dawn.

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.

He changed the pronouns in the last two lines, for always it was morning when *they* met, night when *they* bade farewell.

Mrs. Haughstone, meanwhile, neglected no opportunity of dotting the vowel for his benefit; she crossed each t that the writing of the stars dropped fluttering across her path. 'Mr. Winslowe has emotions,' she mentioned once, 'but he has no heart. If he ever marries and settles down, his wife will find it out.'

'My cousin is not the kind to marry,' Tom replied. 'He's too changeable, and he knows it.'

'He's young,' she said, 'he hasn't found the right woman yet. He will improve—a woman older than himself with the mother strong in her might hold him. He needs the mother too. Most men do, I think; they're all children really.'

Tom laughed. 'Tony as father of a family—I can't imagine it.'

'Once he had children of his own,' she suggested, 'he would steady wonderfully. Those men often make the best husbands—don't you think?'

'Perhaps,' Tom replied briefly. 'Provided there's real heart beneath.'

'In the woman, yes,' returned the other quietly. 'Too much heart in the man can so easily cloy. A real man is always half a savage; that's why the woman likes him. It's the woman who guards the family.'

Tom, knowing that her words veiled other meanings, pretended not to notice. He no longer rose to the bait she offered. He detected the nonsense, the insincerity as well, but he could not argue successfully, and generalisations were equally beyond him. Too polite to strike back, he always waited till she had talked herself out; besides he often acquired information thus, information he both longed for yet disliked intensely. Such information rarely failed: it was, indeed, the desire to impart it with an air of naturalness that caused the conversation almost invariably. It appeared now. It was pregnant information, too. She conveyed it in a lowered tone: there was news from Warsaw. The end, it seemed, was expected by the doctors; a few months at most. Lettice had been warned, however, that her appearance could do no good; the sufferer mistook her for a relative who came to persecute him. Her presence would only hasten the end. She had cabled, none the less, to say that she would come. This was a week ago; the answer was expected in a day or two.

And Tom had not been informed of this.

'Mr. Winslowe thinks she ought to go at once. I'm sure his advice is wise. Even if her presence can do no good, it might be an unceasing regret if she was not there. . . .

'Your cousin alone can judge,' he interrupted coldly. 'I'd rather not discuss it, if you don't mind,' he added, noticing her eagerness to continue the conversation.

'Oh, certainly, Mr. Kolverdon—just as you feel. But in case she asks your advice as well—I only thought you'd like to know—to be prepared, I mean.

Only long afterwards did it occur to him that Tony's informant was possibly this jealous parasite herself, who now deliberately put the matter in another light, hoping to sow discord to her own eventual benefit. All he realised at the moment was the intolerable pain that Lettice should tell him nothing. She looked to Tony for help, advice, possibly for consolation too.

There were moments of another kind, however, when it seemed quite easy to talk plainly. His position was absurd, undignified, unmanly. It was for him to state his case and abide by the result. Hearts rarely break in two, for all that poets and women might protest.

These moments, however, he did not use. It was not that he shrank from hearing his sentence plainly spoken, nor that he decided he must not prevent something that had to be. The reason lay deeper still:—it was impossible. In her presence he became tongue-tied, helpless. His own stupidity overwhelmed him. Silence took him. He felt at a hopeless disadvantage, ashamed even. No words of his could reach her through the distance, across the barrier, that lay between them now. He made no single attempt. His aching heart, filled with an immeasurable love, remained without the relief of utterance. He had lost her. But he loved now something in her place beyond the possibility of loss—an indestructible ideal.

Words, therefore, were not only impossible, they were vain. And when the final moment came they were still more useless. He could go, but he could not tell her he was going. Before that moment came, however, another searching experience was his: he saw Tony jealous—jealous of himself! He actually came to feel sympathy with his cousin who was his rival! It was his faithful love that made that possible too.

He realised this suddenly one day at Assouan.

He had been thinking about the long conversations Tony and Lettice enjoyed together, wondering what they found to discuss at such interminable length. From that his mind slipped easily into another question—how she could be so insensible to the pain she caused him?—

when, all in a flash, he realised the distance she had travelled from him on the road of love towards Tony. The moment of perspective made it abruptly clear. She now talked with Tony as once, at Montreux and elsewhere, she had talked with himself. He saw his former place completely occupied. As an accomplished fact he saw it.

The belief that Tony's influence would weaken deserted him from that instant. It had been but a false hope created by desire and yearning.

There was a crash. He reached the bottom of despair. That same evening, on returning to his hotel from the Works, he found a telegram. It had been arranged that Lettice, Tony, Miss de Lorne and her brother should join him in Assouan. The telegram stated briefly that it was not possible after all:—she sent an excuse.

The sleepless night was no new thing to him, but the acuteness of new suffering was a revelation. Jealousy unmasked her amazing powers of poisonous and devastating energy. . . . He visualised in detail. He saw Lettice and his cousin together in the very situations he had hitherto reserved imaginatively for himself, both sweets hoped for and delights experienced, but raised now a hundredfold in actuality. Like pictures of flame they rose before his inner eye; they seared and scorched him; his blood turned acid; the dregs of agony were his to drink. The happiness he had planned for himself, down to the smallest minutiae of each precious incident, he now saw transferred in this appalling way—to another. Not deliberately summoned, not morbidly evoked—the pictures rose of their own accord against the background of his mind, yet so instinct with actuality, that it seemed he had surely lived them, too, himself with her, somewhere, somehow . . . before. There was that same haunting touch of familiarity about them.

In the long hours of this particular night he reached, perhaps, the acme of his pain; imagination, whipped by jealousy, stoked the furnace to a heat he had not known as yet. He had been clinging to a visionary hope. 'I've lost her . . . lost her . . . lost her,' he repeated to himself, as though with each repetition the meaning of the phrase grew clearer. Numbness followed upon misery; there were long intervals when he felt nothing at all, periods when he thought he hated her, when pride and anger whispered he could do without her. . . . A state of negative insensibility followed. . . . On the heels of it came a red and violent vindictiveness; next—resignation, complete acceptance, almost peace. Then acute sensitiveness returned again—he felt the whole series of emotions over and over without one omission. This numbness and sensitiveness alternated with a kind of rhythmic succession. . . . He reviewed the entire episode from beginning to end, recalled every word she had uttered, traced the gradual influence of Tony on her, from its first faint origin to its present climax. He saw her struggles and her tears . . . the mysterious duality working to possess her soul. It was all plain as daylight. No justification for any further hope was left to him. He must go. . . . It was the thunder, surely, of the falling Wave.

For Tony, he realised at last, had not merely usurped his own place, but had discovered a new Lettice to herself, and setting her thus in a new, a larger world, had taught her a new relationship. He had achieved—perhaps innocently enough so far as his conscience was concerned?—a new result, and a bigger one than Tom, with his lesser powers, could possibly have effected.

There was no falseness, no duplicity in her. 'She still loves me as before, the mother still gives me what she always gave,' Tom put it to himself, 'but Tony has ploughed deeper—reached the woman in her. He loves a Lettice I have never realised. It is this new Lettice that loves him in return. . . . What right have I, with my smaller claim, to stand in her way a single moment? . . . I must slip out.'

He had lost the dream that Tony but tended a blossom, the fruit of which would come sweetly to his plucking afterwards. The intense suffering concealed all prophecy, as the jealousy killed

all hope. He spent that final night of awful pain on his balcony, remembering how weeks before in Luxor the first menacing presentiment had come to him. He stared out into the Egyptian wonder of outer darkness. The stillness held a final menace as of death. He recalled a Polish proverb: 'In the still marshes there are devils.' The world spread dark and empty like his life; the Theban Hills seemed to have crept after him, here to Assouan; the stars, incredibly distant, had no warmth or comfort in them; the river roared with a dull and lonely sound; he heard the palm trees rattling in the wind. The pain in him was almost physical. . . .

Dawn found him in the same position—yet with a change. Perhaps the prolonged agony had killed the ache of ceaseless personal craving, or perhaps the fierceness of the fire had burned it out. Tom could not say; nor did he ask the questions. A change was there, and that was all he knew. He had come at last to a decision, made a final choice. He had somehow fought his battle out with a courage he did not know was courage. Here at Assouan, he turned upon the Wave and faced it. He saw *her* happiness only, fixed all his hope and energy on that. A new and loftier strength woke in him. There was no shuffling now.

He would give her up. In his heart she would always remain his dream and his ideal—but outwardly he would no longer need her. He would do without her. He forgave—if there was anything to forgive—forgave them both. . . .

Something in him had broken.

He could not explain it, though he felt it. Yet it was not her that he had given up—it was himself.

The first effect of this, however, was to think that life lay in ruins round him, that, literally, the life in him was smothered by the breaking wave. . . .

And yet he did not break—he did not drown.

For, as though to show that his decision was the right, inevitable one, small outward details came to his assistance. Fate evidently approved. For Fate just then furnished relief by providing another outlet for his energies: the Works went seriously wrong; Tom could think of nothing else but how he could put things right again. Reflection, introspection, brooding over mental and spiritual pain became impossible.

The lieutenants he trusted had played him false; sub-contracts of an outrageous kind, flavoured by bribery, had been entered into; the cost of certain necessities had been raised absurdly, with the result that the profits of the entire undertaking to the Firm must be lowered correspondingly. And the blame, the responsibility was his own; he had unwisely delegated his powers to underlings whose ambitions for money exceeded their sense of honour. But Tom's honour was involved as well. He had delegated his powers in writing. He now had to pay the price of his prolonged neglect of duty.

The position was irremediable; Tom's neglect and inefficiency were established beyond question. He had failed in a position of high trust. And to make the situation still less pleasant, Sir William, the Chairman of the Company—Tom's chief, the man to whom he owed his partnership and post of trust—telegraphed that he was on the way at last from Salonika. One way alone offered—to break the disastrous contracts by payments made down without delay. Tom made these payments out of his own pocket; they were large; his private resources disappeared in a single day. . . . But, even so, the delay and bungling at the Works were not to be concealed. Sir William, shrewd, experienced man of business, stern of heart as well as hard of head, could not be deceived. Within half an hour of his arrival, Tom Kolverdon's glaring incompetency—worse,

his unreliability, to use no harsher word—were all laid bare. His position in the Firm, even his partnership, perhaps, became untenable. Resignation stared him in the face.

He saw his life go down in ruins before his very eyes; the roof had fallen long ago. The pillars now collapsed. The Wave, indeed, had turned him upside down; its smothering crash left no corner of his being above water; heart, mind, and character were fung in a broken tangle against the cruel bottom as it fell to earth.

But, at any rate, the new outlet for his immediate energies was offered. He seized it vigorously. He gave up his room at Luxor, and sent a man down to bring his luggage up. He did not write to Lettice. He faced the practical situation with a courage and thoroughness which, though too late, were admirable. Moreover, he found a curious relief in the new disaster, a certain comfort even. There was compensation in it somewhere. Everything was going to smash—the sooner, then, the better! This recklessness was in him. He had lost Lettice, so what else mattered? His attitude was somewhat devil-may-care, his grip on life itself seemed slipping.

This mood could not last, however, with a character like his. It seized him, but retained no hold. It was the last cry of despair when he touched bottom, the moment when weaker temperaments think of the emergency exit, realise their final worthlessness—proving themselves worthless, indeed, thereby.

Tom met the blow in other fashion. He saw himself unworthy, but by no means worthless. Suicide, whether of death or of final collapse, did not enter his mind even. He faced the Wave, he did not shuffle now. He sent a telegram to Lettice to say he was detained; he wrote to Tony that he had given up his room in the Luxor hotel, an affectionate, generous note, telling him to take good care of Lettice. It was only right and fair that Tony should think the path for himself was clear. Since he had decided to ‘slip out’ this attitude towards his cousin was necessarily involved. It must not appear that he had retired, beaten and unhappy. He must do no single thing that might offer resistance to the inevitable fate, least of all leave Tony with the sense of having injured him. True sacrifice forbade; renunciation, if real, was also silent—the smiling face, the cheerful, natural manner!

Tom, therefore, fixed his heart more firmly than ever upon one single point: her happiness. He fought to think of that alone. If he knew her happy, he could live. He found life in her joy. He lived in that. By ‘slipping out,’ no word of reproach, complaint, or censure uttered, he would actually contribute to her happiness. Thus, vicariously, he almost helped to cause it. In this faint, self-excluding bliss, he could live—even live on—until the end. That seemed true forgiveness.

Meanwhile, not easily nor immediately, did he defy the anguish that, day and night, kept gnawing at his heart. His one desire was to hide it, and—if the huge achievement might lie within his powers—to change it sweetly into a source of strength that should redeem him. The ‘sum of loss,’ indeed, he had not ‘reckoned yet,’ but he was beginning to add the figures up. Full measurement lay in the long, long awful years ahead. He had this strange comfort, however—that he now loved something he could never lose because it could not change. He loved an ideal. In that sense, he and Lettice were in the ‘sea’ together. His belief and trust in her were not lost, but heightened. And a hint of mothering contentment stole sweetly over him behind this shadowy yet genuine consolation.

The childhood nightmare was both presentiment and memory. The crest of the falling Wave was reflected in its base.

CHAPTER XXX

Tom took his passage home; he also told Sir William that his resignation, whether the Board accepted it or not, was final. His reputation, so far as the Firm was concerned, he knew was lost. His own self-respect had dwindled dangerously too. He had the feeling that he wanted to begin all over again from the very bottom. It seemed the only way. The prospect, at his age, was daunting. He faced it.

At the very moment in life when he had fancied himself most secure, most satisfied mentally, spiritually, materially—the entire structure on which self—confidence rested had given way. Even the means of material support had vanished too. The crash was absolute. This brief Egyptian winter had, indeed, proved the winter of his loss. The Wave had fallen at last.

During the interval at Assouan—ten days that seemed a month!—he heard occasionally from Lettice. ‘To-day I miss you,’ one letter opened. Another said: ‘We wonder when you will return. We *all* miss you very much: it’s not the same here without you, Tom.’ And all were signed ‘Your ever loving Lettice.’ But if hope for some strange reason refused to die completely, he did not allow himself to be deceived. His task—no easy one—was to transmute emotion into the higher, self-less, ideal love that was now—oh, he knew it well enough—his only hope and safety. In the desolate emptiness of desert that yawned ahead, he saw this single tree that blossomed, and offered shade. Beauty and comfort both were there. He believed in her truth and somehow in her faithfulness as well.

Tom sent his heavy luggage to Port Said, and took the train to Luxor. He had decided to keep his sailing secret. He could mention honestly that he was going to Cairo. He would write a line from there or, better still, from the steamer itself.

And the instinct that led to this decision was sound and wise. The act was not as boyish as it seemed. For he feared a reaction on her part that yet could be momentary only. His leaving so suddenly would be a shock, it might summon the earlier Lettice to the surface, there might be a painful scene for both of them. She would realise to some extent at any rate, the immediate sense of loss; for she would surely divine that he was going, not to England merely, but out of her life. And she would suffer; she might even try to keep him—the only result being a revival of pain already almost conquered, and of distress for her.

For such reaction, he divined, could not be permanent. The Play was over; it must not, could not be prolonged. He must go out. There must be no lingering when the curtain fell. A curtain that halts in its descent upon the actors endangers the effect of the entire Play.

He wired to Cairo for a room. He wired to her too: ‘Arrive to-morrow, *en route* Cairo. Leave same night.’ He braced himself. The strain would be cruelly exacting, but the worst had been lived out already; the jealousy was dead; the new love was established beyond all reach of change. These last few hours should be natural, careless, gay, no hint betraying him, flying no signals of distress. He could just hold out. The strength was in him. And there was time before he caught the evening train for a reply to come: ‘All delighted; expect you breakfast. Arranging picnic expedition.—LETTICE.’

And that one word ‘all’ helped him unexpectedly to greater steadiness. It eliminated the personal touch even in a telegram.

In the train he slept but little; the heat was suffocating; there was a Khamsîn blowing and the fine sand crept in everywhere. At Luxor, however, the wind remained so high up that the lower regions of the sky were calm and still. The sand hung in fog-like clouds shrouding the sun, dimming the usual brilliance. But the heat was intense, and the occasional stray puffs of air that

touched the creeping Nile or passed along the sweltering street, seemed to issue from the mouth of some vast furnace in the heavens. They dropped, then ceased abruptly; there was no relief in them. The natives sat listlessly in their doorways, the tourists kept their rooms or idled complainingly in the hotel halls and corridors. The ominous touch was everywhere. He felt it in his heart as well—the heart he thought broken beyond repair.

Tom bathed and changed his clothes, then drove down to the shady garden beside the river as of old. He felt the gritty sand between his teeth, it was in his mouth and eyes, it was on his tongue. . . . He met Lettice without a tremor, astonished at his own coolness and self-control; he watched her beauty as the beauty of a picture, something that was no longer his, *yet* watched it without envy and, in an odd sense, almost without pain. He loved the fairness of it for itself, for her, and for another who was not himself. Almost he loved their happiness to come—for *her* sake. Her eyes, too, followed him, he fancied, like a picture's eyes. She looked young and fresh, yet something mysterious in the following eyes. The usual excited happiness was less obvious, he thought, than usual, the mercurial gaiety wholly absent. He fancied a cloud upon her spirit somewhere. He imagined tiny, uncertain signs of questioning distress. He wondered. . . . This torture of a last uncertainty was also his.

Yet, obviously, she was glad to see him; her welcome was genuine; she came down the drive to meet him, both hands extended. Apparently, too, she was alone, Mrs. Haughstone still asleep, and Tony not yet arrived. It was still early morning.

'Well, and how did you get on without me—all of you?' he asked, adding the last three words with emphasis.

'I thought you were never coming back, Tom; I had the feeling you were bored here at Luxor and meant to leave us.' She looked him up and down with a curious look—of admiration almost, an admiration he believed he had now learned to do without. 'How lean and brown and well you look!' she went on, 'but thin, Tom. You've grown thinner.' She shook her finger at him. Her voice was perilously soft and kind, a sweet tenderness in her manner, too. 'You've been overworking and not eating enough. You've not had me to look after you.'

He flushed. 'I'm awfully fit,' he said, smiling a little shyly. 'I may be thinner. That's the heat, I suppose. Assouan's a blazing place—you feel you're in Africa.'" He said the banal thing as usual.

'But was there no one there to look after you?' She gave him a quick glance. 'No one at all?'

Tom noticed the repeated question, wondering a little. But there was no play in him; in place of it was something stern, unyielding as iron, though not tested yet.

'The Chairman of my Company, nine hundred noisy tourists, and about a thousand Arabs at the Works,' he told her. 'There was hardly a soul I knew besides.'

She said no more; she gave a scarcely audible sigh; she seemed unsatisfied somewhere. To his surprise, then, he noticed that the familiar little table was only laid for two.

'Where's Tony?' he asked. 'And, by the by, how is he?'

He thought she hesitated a moment. 'Tony's not coming till later,' she told him. 'He guessed we should have a lot to talk about together, so he stayed away. Nice of him, wasn't it?'

Behind the commonplace sentences, the hidden wordless Play also drew on towards its Curtain.

'Well, it is my turn rather for a chat, perhaps,' he returned presently with a laugh, taking his cup of steaming coffee from her hand. 'I can see him later in the day. You've arranged something, I'm sure. Your wire spoke of a picnic, but perhaps this heat—this beastly Khamsîn—'

'It's passing,' she mentioned. 'They say it blows for three days, for six days, or for nine, but as a matter of fact, it does nothing of the sort. It's going to clear. I thought we might take our tea into the Desert.'

She went on talking rapidly, almost nervously, it seemed to Tom. Her mind was upon something else. Thoughts of another kind lay unexpressed behind her speech. His own mind was busy too—Tony, Warsaw, the long long interval he had been away, what had happened during his absence, and so forth? Had no cable come? What would she feel this time to-morrow when she knew?—these and a hundred others seethed below his quiet manner and careless talk. He noticed then that she was exquisitely dressed; she wore, in fact, the very things he most admired—and wore them purposely: the orange-coloured jacket, the violet veil, the hat with the little roses on the brim. It was his turn to look her up and down.

She caught his eye. Uncannily, she caught his thought as well. Tom steeled himself.

'I put these on especially for you, you truant boy,' she said deliciously across the table at him. 'I hope you're sensible of the honour done you.'

'Rather, Lettice! I should think I am, indeed!'

'I got up half an hour earlier on purpose too. Think what that means to a woman like me.' She handed him a grape-fruit she had opened and prepared herself.

'My favourite hat, and my favourite fruit! I wish I were worthy of them!' He stammered slightly as he said the stupid thing: the blood rushed up to his very forehead, but she gave no sign of noticing either words or blush. The strong sunburn hid the latter doubtless. There was a desperate shyness in him that he could not manage quite. He wished to heaven the talk would shift into another key. He could not keep this up for long; it was too dangerous. Her attitude, it seemed, had gone back to that of weeks ago; there was more than the mother in it, he felt: it was almost the earlier Lettice—and yet not quite. Something was added, but something too was missing. He wondered more and more . . . he asked himself odd questions. . . . It seemed to him suddenly that her mood was assumed, not wholly natural. The flash came to him that disappointment lay behind it, yet that the disappointment was not with—himself.

'You're wearing a new tie, Tom,' her voice broke in upon his moment's reverie. 'That's not the one *I* gave you.'

It was so unexpected, so absurd. It startled him. He laughed with genuine amusement, explaining that he had bought it in Assouan in a moment of extravagance—'the nearest shade I could find to the blue you gave me. How observant you are!' Lettice laughed with him. 'I always notice little things like that,' she said. 'It's what you call the mother in me, I suppose.' She examined the tie across the table, while they smoked their cigarettes. He looked aside. 'I hope it was admired. It suits you.' She fingered it. Her hand touched his chin.

'Does it? It's your taste, you know.'

'But *was* it admired?' she insisted almost sharply.

'That's really more than I can say, Lettice. You see, I didn't ask Sir William what he thought, and the natives are poor judges because they don't wear ties.' He was about to say more, talking the first nonsense that came into his head, when she did a thing that took his breath away, and made him tremble where he sat. Regardless of lurking Arab servants, careless of Mrs. Haughstone's windows not far behind them, she rose suddenly, tripped round the little table, kissed him on his cheek—and was back again in her chair, smoking innocently as before. It was a repetition of an earlier act, yet with a difference somewhere.

The world seemed unreal just then; things like this did not happen in real life, at least not quite like this; nor did two persons in their respective positions talk exactly thus, using such banal

language, such insignificant phrases half of banter, half of surface foolishness. The kiss amazed him—for a moment. Tom felt in a dream. And yet this very sense of dream, this idle exchange of trivial conversation cloaked something that was a cruel, an indubitable reality. It was not a dream shot through with reality, it was a reality shot through with dream. But the dream itself, though old as the desert, dim as those grim Theban Hills now draped with flying sand, was also true and actual.

The hidden Play had broken through, merging for an instant with the upper surface-life. He was almost persuaded that this last, strange action had not happened, that Lettice had never really left her chair. So still and silent she sat there now. She had not stirred from her place. It was the burning wind that touched his cheek, a waft of heated atmosphere, lightly moving, that left the disquieting trail of perfume in the air. The glowing heavens, luminous athwart the clouds of fine, suspended sand, laid this ominous hint of dream upon the entire day. . . . The recent act became a mere picture in the mind.

Yet some little cell of innermost memory, stirring out of sleep, had surely given up its dead. . . . For a second it seemed to him this heavy, darkened air was in the recesses of the earth, beneath the burden of massive cliffs the centuries had piled. It was underground. In some cavern of those mournful Theban Hills, some one—had kissed him! For over his head shone painted stars against a painted blue, and in his nostrils hung a faint sweetness as of ambra. . . .

He recovered his balance quickly. They resumed their curious masquerade, the screen of idle talk between significance and emptiness, like sounds of reality between dream and waking.

And the rest of that long day of stifling heat was similarly a dream shot through with incongruous touches of reality, yet also a reality shot through with the glamour of some incredibly ancient dream. Not till he stood later upon the steamer deck, the sea-wind in his face and the salt spray on his lips, did he awake fully and distinguish the dream from the reality—or the reality from the dream. Nor even then was the deep, strange confusion wholly dissipated. To the end of life, indeed, it remained an unsolved mystery, labelled a Premonition Fulfilled, without adequate explanation. . . .

The time passed listlessly enough, to the accompaniment of similar idle talk, careless, it seemed to Tom, with the ghastly sense of the final minutes slipping remorselessly away, so swiftly, so poignantly unused. For each moment was gigantic, brimmed full with the distilled essence, as it were, of intensest value, value that yet was not his to seize. He never lost the point of view that he watched a picture that belonged to some one else. His own position was clear; he had already leaped from a height; he counted, as he fell, the blades of grass, the pebbles far below; slipping over Niagara's awful edge, he noted the bubbles in the whirlpools underneath. They talked of the weather . . . !

'It's clearing,' said Lettice. 'There'll be sand in our tea and thin bread and butter. But anything's better than sitting and stifling here.'

Tom readily agreed. 'You and I and Tony, then?'

'I thought so. We don't want too many, do we?'

'Not for our la—not for a day like this.' He corrected himself just in time. 'Tony will be here for lunch?' he asked.

She nodded. 'He said so, at any rate, only one never quite knows with Tony.' And though Tom plainly heard, he made no comment. He was puzzled.

Most of the morning they remained alone together. Tom had never felt so close to her before; it seemed to him their spirits touched; there was no barrier now. But there was distance. He could

not explain the paradox. A vague sweet feeling was in him that the distance was not of height, as formerly. He had risen somehow; he felt higher than before; he saw over the barrier that had been there. Pain and sacrifice, perhaps, had lifted him, raised him to the level where she dwelt; and in that way he was closer. A new strength was in him. At the same time, behind her outer quietness and her calm, he divined struggle still. In her atmosphere was a hint of strain, disharmony. He was positive of this. From time to time he caught trouble in her eyes. Could she, perhaps, discern—foreknow—the shadow of the dropping Curtain? He wondered. . . . He detected something in her that was new.

If any weakening of resolve were in himself, it disappeared long before Tony's arrival on the scene. A few private words from Mrs. Haughstone later banished it effectually. 'Your telegram, Mr. Kolverdon, came as a great surprise. We had planned a three-day trip to the Sphinx and Pyramids. Mr. Winslowe had written to you; he hoped to persuade you to join us. Again you left Assouan before the letter arrived. It's a habit with you!'

'Apparently.'

The poison no longer fevered him; he was immune.

'Mr. Winslowe—I had better warn you before he comes—was disappointed.'

'I'm sorry I spoilt the trip. It was most inconsiderate of me. But you can make it later when I'm gone—to Cairo, can't you?'

Mrs. Haughstone watched him somewhat keenly. Did she discover anything, he wondered? Was she aware that he was no longer within reach of her little shafts?

'It's all for the best, I think,' she went on in a casual tone. 'Lettice was too easily persuaded—she didn't really want to go without you. She said so. And Mr. Winslowe soon gets over his sulks—'

Tom interrupted her, turning sharply round. 'Oh,' he laughed, 'was that why he wouldn't come to breakfast, then?' And whether it was pain or pleasure that he felt, he did not know. The moment's anguish—he verily believed it—was for Lettice. And for Tony? Something akin to sympathy perhaps! If Tony should ever suffer pain like his—even temporarily . . . !

The other shrugged her angular shoulders a little. 'It's all passed now,' she observed; 'he's forgotten it, I'm sure. You needn't notice anything, by the way,' she added, 'if—if he seems ungracious.'

'Not for worlds,' replied Tom, throwing stones into the sullen river below. 'I'm far too tactful.'

Mrs. Haughstone looked away. There was a moment's expression of admiration on her face. 'You're big, Mr. Kolverdon, very big. I wish all men were as generous.' She spoke hurriedly below her breath. 'I saw this coming before you arrived. I wish I could have saved you. You've got the hero in you.'

Tom changed the subject, and presently moved away: it was time for lunch for one thing, and for another he wanted to hide his face from her too peering eyes. He was not quite sure of himself just then; his lips trembled a little; he could not altogether control his facial muscles. Tony jealous! Lettice piqued! Was this the explanation of her new sweetness towards himself! The position tried him sorely, testing his new strength from such amazing and unexpected angles. It was all beyond him somehow, the reversal of rôles so afflicting, tears and laughter so oddly mingled. Yet the sheet-anchor—his self-less love—held fast and true. There was no dragging, no shuffling where he stood.

Nor was there any weakening of resolution in him, any dimming of the new dawn within his heart. He felt sure of something that he did not understand, aware of a radiant promise some one whispered marvellously in his ear. He was alone, yet not alone, outcast yet companioned

sweetly, bereft of all the world holds valuable, yet possessor of riches that the world passed by. He felt a conqueror. The pain was somehow turning into joy. He seemed above the earth. Only one thing mattered—that his ideal love should have no stain upon it.

The lunch he dreaded passed smoothly and without alarm. Tony was gay, light-hearted as usual, belying Mrs. Haughstone's ominous prediction. They smoked together afterwards, walking up and down the garden arm-in-arm, Tony eagerly discussing expeditions, picnics, birds, anything and everything that offered, with keen interest as of old; he even once suggested coming back to Assouan with his cousin—alone . . . Tom made no comment on the adverb. Nor was his sympathy mere acting; he genuinely felt it; the affection for Tony somehow was not dead. . . . The joy in him grew, meanwhile, brighter, clearer, higher. It was alive. Some courage of the sun was in him. There seemed a great understanding with it, and a greater forgiveness.

Of one thing only did he feel uncertain. He caught himself sharply wondering more than once. For he had the impression—the conviction almost—that something had happened during his absence at Assouan—that there was a change in *her* attitude to Tony. It was a subtle change; it was beginning merely; but it was there. Her behaviour at breakfast was not due to pique, not solely due to pique, at any rate. It had a deeper origin. Almost he detected signs of friction between herself and Tony. Very slight they were indeed, if not imagined altogether. His perception was still exceptionally alert, its acuteness left over, apparently, from the earlier days of pain and jealousy. Yet the result upon him was confusing chiefly.

In very trivial ways the change betrayed itself. The talk between the three of them remained incongruously upon the surface always. The play and chatter went on independently of the Play beneath, almost ignoring it. In that Wordless Play, however, the change was registered.

'Tom, you've got the straightest back of any man I ever saw,' Lettice exclaimed once, eyeing them critically with an amused smile as they came back towards her chair. 'I've just been watching you both.'

They laughed, while Tony turned it wittily into fun. 'It's always safer to look a person in the face,' he observed. If he felt the comparison was made to his disadvantage he did not show it. Tom, wondering what she meant and why she said it, felt that the remark annoyed him. For there was disparagement of Tony in it.

'I can read your soul from your back alone,' she added.

'And mine!' cried Tony, laughing: 'what about my back too? Or have I got no soul misplaced between my shoulder-blades?'

Tom laid his hand between those slightly-rounded shoulders then—and rather suddenly.

'It's bent from too much creeping after birds,' he exclaimed. 'In your next life you'll be on all fours if you're not careful.'

The Arab appeared to say the donkeys and sand-cart were waiting in the road, and Tony went indoors to get cameras and other paraphernalia essential to a Desert picnic. Lettice continued talking idly to Tom, who stood beside her, smoking. . . . The feeling of dream and reality were very strong in him at the moment. He hardly realised what the nonsense was he had said to his cousin. There was a slight sense of discomfort in him. The little, playful conversation just over had meaning in it. He missed that meaning. Somehow the comparison in his favour was disagreeable—he preferred to hear his cousin praised, but certainly not belittled. Perhaps vanity was wounded there—that his successful rival woke contempt in her was unendurable. . . . And he thought of his train for the first time with a vague relief.

'Birds,' she was saying, half to herself, the eyes beneath the big sun-hat looking beyond him, C that reminds me, Tom—a dream I had. A little bird left its nest and hopped about to try all the

other branches, because it thought it ought to explore them—had to, in a way. And it got into all sorts of danger, and ran fearful risks, and couldn't fly or use its wings properly,—till finally—'

She stopped, and her eyes turned full upon his own. The love in his face was plain to read, though he was not conscious of it. He waited in silence:

'Till finally it crept back up into its own nest again,' she went on, 'and found its wings lying there all the time. It had forgotten them! And it got in, felt warm and safe and cosy—and fell asleep.'

'Whereupon you woke and found it was all a dream,' said Tom. His tone, though matter-of-fact, was lower than usual, but it was firm. No sign of emotion now was visible in his face. The eyes were steady, the lips betrayed no hint. Her little dream, the way of telling it rather, perplexed him.

'Yes,' she said, 'but I found somehow that the bird was me.' She sighed a little.

It flashed upon him suddenly that she was exhausted, wearied out; that her heart was beating with some interior stress and struggle. She seemed on the point of giving up, some long long battle in her ended. There was something she wished to say to him—he got this impression too—something she could not bring herself to say, unless he helped her, unless he asked for it. The duality was ending, perhaps fused into unity again? . . . The intense and burning desire to help her rose upon him, the desire to protect. And the word 'Warsaw' fled across his mind . . . as though it fell through the heated air into his mind . . . from hers.

'Tony declares,' she was saying, 'that our memories are packed away under pressure like steam in a boiler, and the dream is their safety-valve . . . I wonder. . . . He read it somewhere. It's not his own, of course. But Tony never explains—because he doesn't really know. He's flashy—not the depth we thought—the truth . . . *Tom*'

She called his name with emphasis, as if annoyed that he showed so little interest. There was an instant's cloud upon her face; the eyes wavered, then looked away; he felt again there was disappointment somewhere in her—with himself or with Tony, he did not know. . . . He kept silent. He could think of nothing by way of answer—nothing appropriate, nothing safe.

She waited, keeping silent too. The Curtain was lowering, its shadow growing on the air.

'I dream so little,' he stammered at length. 'I can't say.' It enraged him that he faltered. He turned away. . . . Tony at that moment arrived. The cart and animals were ready, everything was collected. He announced it loudly, urging them with a certain impatience, as though they caused the delay. He stared keenly at them a moment. . . . They started.

CHAPTER XXXI

How trivial, yet how significant of the tension of interior forces—the careless words, the foolish little dream, the playful allusion to one man's stoop and to another's upright carriage, how easy to read, how obvious! Yet Tom, too intensely preoccupied, perhaps, with keeping his own balance, was unaware of revelation. His mind perceived the delicate change, yet attached a wrong direction to it. Perplexity and discomfort in him deepened. He was relieved when Tony interrupted; he felt glad. The shifting of values was disturbing to him. It was as though the falling Curtain halted. . . .

The hours left to him were few; they both rushed and lingered. The afternoon seemed gone so quickly, while yet the moments dragged, each separate instant too intense with feeling to yield up its being willingly. The minutes lingered; it was the hours that rushed.

Subconsciously, it seemed, Tom counted them in his heart. . . . Subconsciously, too, he stated the position, as though to do so steadied him: Three persons, three friends, were off upon a picnic. At a certain moment they would turn back; at a certain moment two of them would say good-bye; at a certain moment a final train would start—his eyes would no longer see *her*. . . . It seemed impossible, unreal; it could not happen. . . . He could so easily prevent it. No question had been asked about his going to Cairo; it was taken for granted that he went on business and would return. He could cancel his steamer-berth, no explanation necessary, nor any asked.

But having weighed the sacrifice against the joy, he was not wanting.

They mounted their lusty donkeys; Lettice climbed into her sand-cart; the boys came clattering after them down the street of Thebes with the tea-things and the bundles of clover for the animals. Across the belt of brilliant emerald green, past clover-fields and groves of palms, they followed the ancient track towards the desert. They were on the eastern bank, the Theban Hills far behind them on the horizon. Towards the Red Sea they headed, though Tom had no notion of their direction, aware only that while they went further and further from those hills, the hills themselves somehow came ever nearer. The gaunt outline followed them; each time he looked back the shadow cast was closer than before, almost upon their heels. But for the assurance of his senses he could have believed they headed towards these yellow cliffs instead of the reverse. He could not shake off the singular impression that their weight was on his back; he felt the oppression of those ancient tombs, those crowded corridors, that hidden subterranean world. No mummy, he remembered, but believed it would one day unwind again when the soul, cleansed and justified, came back to claim it. Regeneration was inevitable. A glorious faith secure in ultimate joy!

They hurried vainly; the distance between them, instead of increasing, lessened. The hills would not let them go.

The burning atmosphere, the motionless air caused doubtless the optical illusion. The glare was blinding. Tom did not draw attention to it. He tugged his obstinate donkey into line with the slower sand-cart, riding for several minutes in silence, close beside Lettice, aware of her perfume, her flying veil almost across his eyes from time to time. Tony was some way ahead.

‘Tom,’ he heard suddenly, ‘must you really go to Cairo to-night?’

‘I’m afraid so. It’s important.’ But after a pause he added ‘Why?’ He said it because his sentence sounded otherwise suspiciously incomplete. Above all, he must seem natural. ‘Why do you ask?’

The answer made him regret that extra word:

‘There’s something I want to tell you.’

‘*Very* important?’ He asked it laughingly, busy with the reins apparently.

‘Far more important than your going to Cairo. I want your advice and help.’

‘I must,’ he said slowly. ‘Won’t it keep?’ He tugged violently at the reins, though the donkey was behaving admirably.

‘How long will you stay?’ she asked.

‘One night only, Lettice. Not longer.’

They were on soft and yellow sand by now; the desert shone with a luminous glow; Tom could not hear the sound of his donkey’s hoofs, nor the crunching of the sand-cart. He heard nothing but a voice singing beside him in the burning air. But the air had grown radiant. He realised that he was beating the donkey without the slightest reason.

‘When you come back, then—I’ll tell you when you come back,’ he heard.

And a sudden inspiration came to his assistance. 'Couldn't you write it?' he asked calmly. 'The Semiramis Hotel will find me—in case anything happened. I should have time to think it over—I like that best—if it's really so important. My mind, you know, works slowly.'

Her reply had a curious effect upon him. She needed help—his help. 'Perhaps, Tom. But one can depend so upon your judgment.'

He knew that she was watching his face. With an effort he turned to meet her gaze. He saw her against the background of the hills, whose following mass towered menacingly above her little outline. And as he looked he was suddenly transfixed, he dropped his reins, he stared without a word. Two pairs of eyes, two smiles, two human physiognomies once again met his arrested gaze. He knew them, of course, well enough by now, but never before had he caught the two expressions so vividly revealed, so distinctly marked; clear as a composite picture, one face painted in upon another that lay beneath it. There was the darker face—and there was Lettice and each struggled for complete possession of her features. There was conflict, sharp and dreadful; one second, the gleam of cruelty flashed out, a yellow of amber in it, as though gold shone reflected faintly—the next, an anguish of tenderness, as though love brimmed her eyes with the moisture of divine compassion. The conflict was desperate, amazing, painful beyond words. Then the darker aspect slowly waned, withdrawing backwards, melting away into the shadows of the hills behind—as though it first had issued thence—as though almost it belonged there. Alive and true, yet vanquished, it faded out. . . . He saw at last the dear, innocent eyes of—Lettice only. It was this Lettice who had spoken.

His donkey stumbled—it was natural enough, seeing that the reins hung loose and his feet had somehow left the stirrups. Tom pitched forward heavily, saving himself and his animal from an ignominious accident just in the nick of time. There were cries and laughter. The sand-cart swerved aside at the same moment, and Tony, from a distance, came galloping back towards them.

Tom recovered his balance and told his donkey in honest English what he thought of it. 'But it was your fault, you careless boy,' cried Lettice; 'you let go the reins and whacked it at the same time. Your eyes were popping out of your head. I thought you'd seen a ghost.'

Tom glanced at her. 'I was nearly off' he said. 'Another second and it would have been a case of "Low let me lie where the dead dog—"'

She interrupted him with surprising vehemence:

'Don't, don't, Tom. I hate it! I hate the words and the tune and everything. I won't hear it . . . !'

Tony came clattering up and the incident was over, ended as abruptly as begun. But, as Tom well realised, another hitch had occurred in the lowering of the Curtain. The actors, for a moment, had stood there in their normal fashion, betrayed, caught in the act, a little foolish even. It was the hand of a woman this time that delayed it.

'Did you hurt yourself anywhere, Tom?' Her question rang in his head like music for the next mile or two. He kept beside the sand-cart until they reached their destination. It was absurd—yet he could not ride in front with Tony lest some one driving behind them should notice—yes, that was the half-comical truth—notice that Tony was round-shouldered—oh, very, very slightly so—whereas his own back was straight! It was ridiculously foolish, yet pathetic. At the same time, it was poignantly dramatic. . . .

And their destination was a deep bay of yellow sand, soft and tawny, ribbed with a series of lesser troughs the wind had scooped out to look like a shore some withdrawing ocean had left exposed below the westering sun. A solitary palm tree stood behind upon a dune.

The afternoon, the beating hotness of the air, the clouds of high, suspended sand, the stupendous sunset—as if the world caught fire and burned along the whole horizon—it was all unforgettable. The yellow sand about them blazed and shone, scorching their bare hands; the Desert was empty, silent, lonely. Only the western heavens, where the sun sank in a red mass of ominous splendour, was alive with energy. Coloured shafts mapped the vault from horizon to zenith like the spokes of a prodigious wheel of fire. Any minute the air and the sand it pressed upon might burst into a sea of flame. The furnace where the Khamsîn brewed in distant Nubia sent its warnings in advance; it was slowly travelling northward. And hence, possibly, arose the disquieting sensation that something was gathering, something that might take them unawares. The sand lay listening, waiting, watching. There was whispering among the very grains. . . .

It was half way through tea when the first stray puffs of wind came dropping abruptly, sighing away in tiny eddies of dust beyond the circle. Three human atoms upon the huge yellow carpet, that ere long would shake itself across five hundred miles and rise, whirling, driving, suffocating all life within its folds—three human beings noted the puffs of heated air and reacted variously to the little change. Each felt, it seemed, a slight uneasiness, as though of trouble coming that was yet not entirely atmospherical. Nerves tingled. They looked into each other's faces. They looked back.

'We mustn't stay too late,' said Tony, filling a basket for the donkey-boys in their dune two hundred yards away. 'We've a long way to go.' He examined the portentous sky. 'It won't come till night,' he added, 'still—they're a bit awkward, these sandstorms, and one never knows.'

'And I've got a train to catch,' Tom mentioned, 'absurd as it sounds in a place like this.' He was scraping his lips with a handkerchief. 'I've eaten enough bread-and-sand to last me till dinner, anyhow.' He helped his cousin with the Arabs' food. 'They probably don't mind it, they're used to it.' He straightened up from his stooping posture. Lettice, he saw, was lying with a cigarette against the bank of sloping sand that curved above them. She was intently watching them. She had not spoken for some time; she looked almost drowsy; the eyelids were half closed; the cigarette smoke rose in a steady little thread that did not waver. . . . There was perhaps ten yards between them, but he caught the direction of her gaze, and throwing his own eyes into the same line of sight, he saw what she saw. Instinctively, he took a quick step forward—hiding Tony from her immediate view.

It was certainly curious, this desire to screen his cousin, to prevent his appearing at a disadvantage. He was impelled, at all costs and in the smallest details, to help the man she admired, to increase his value, to minimise his disabilities, however trivial. It pained him to see Tony even at a physical disadvantage; Tony must show always at his very best; and at this moment, bending over the baskets, the attitude of the shoulders was disagreeably emphasised.

Tom did not laugh, he did not even smile. Gravely, as though it were of importance, he moved forward so that Lettice should not see the detail of the rounded shoulders which, he knew, compared unfavourably with his own straighter carriage. Yet almost the next minute, when he looked back again, he saw that the cigarette had fallen from her fingers, the eyes were closed, her body had slipped into a more recumbent angle, she seemed actually asleep.

'Give a shout, Tom, and the boys will come to fetch it,' said Tony, when at length the basket was ready. He put his hands to his own mouth to coo-ee across the dunes. Tom stopped him at once. 'Hush! Lettice has dropped off,' he explained, 'you'll wake her. It's the heat. I'll carry the things over to them.' He noticed Tony's hands as he held them to his lips. And again he felt a touch of sympathy, almost pity. Had *she*, so observant, so discerning in her fastidious taste—had she failed to notice the small detail too?

‘No, let me take it,’ Tony was saying, seizing the hamper from his cousin. Tom suggested carrying it between them. They tried it, laughing and struggling together with the awkward burden, but keeping their voices low. They lost the direction too; for all the sand-dunes were alike, and the boys were hidden in a hollow. It ended in Tony going off in triumph with the basket under one arm, guided at length by the faint neighing of a donkey in the distance.

Some little time had passed, perhaps five minutes, perhaps longer, when Tom went back to the tea-place across the soft sand, stepping cautiously so as not to disturb the sleeper. And another five minutes, perhaps another ten, had slipped by before Tony’s head reappeared above a neighbouring dune. A boy had come to meet him, shortening his journey.

But Fate calculated to a nicety, wasting no seconds one way or the other. There had been time—just time before Tony’s return—for Tom to have stretched himself at her feet, to have lit a cigarette, and to have smoked sufficient of it for the first ash to fall. He was very careful to make no sound, even lighting the match softly inside his hat. But his hand was trembling. For Lettice slept, and in her sleep made little sounds of pain.

He watched her. There was a tiny frown between the eyebrows, the lips twitched from time to time, she moved uneasily upon the bank of sliding sand; and, as she made these little broken sounds of pain, from beneath the closed eyelids two small tears crept out upon her cheeks.

Tom stared, making no sound or movement. The tears rolled down and fell into the sand. The suffering in the face made his heart beat irregularly. Something transfixed him. She wore the expression he had seen in the London theatre. For a moment he felt terror—a terror of something coming, something going to happen. He stared, trembling, holding his breath. She was dreaming, as a person even in a three-minute sleep can dream—deeply, vividly. He waited. He had the amazing sensation that he knew what she was dreaming—that he took part in it with her almost. . . . Unable, finally, to restrain himself another instant, he moved—and the noise awakened her. She sighed. The eyes opened of their own accord. She stared at him in a dazed way for a moment. Then she looked over his shoulder across the desert.

‘You’ve been asleep, Lettice,’ he whispered, ‘and actually dreaming—all in five minutes.’

She rubbed her eyes slowly, as though sand was in them. She stared into his face a moment before she spoke.

‘Yes, I dreamed,’ she answered with a little frightened sigh. ‘I dreamed of you—There was a tent—the flap lifted suddenly—oh, it was so vivid! Then there was a crowd and awful drums were beating—and my river with the floating faces was there and I plunged in to save one—it was yours, *Tom*, yours—’

She paused for a fraction of a second, while his heart went thumping against his ribs. He did not speak. He waited.

‘Then somehow you were taken from me,’ she went on; ‘you left me, *Tom*.’ Her voice sank. ‘And it broke my heart in two.’

‘Lettice . . . !’

He made a sudden movement in the sand—at which moment, precisely, Tony’s head appeared above the neighbouring dune, the rest of his body following it immediately.

And it seemed to Tom that his cousin came upon them out of the heart of a dream, out of the earth, out of a sandy tomb. His very existence, for those minutes, had been utterly forgotten, obliterated. He rose from the dead and came towards them over the hot, yellow desert. The distant hills—the Theban Hills above the Valley of the Kings—disgorged him. And, as once before, he looked dreadful, threatening, his great hands held out in front of him. He came gliding down the yielding slope. He caught them!

In that second—it was but the fraction of a second actually—the impression upon Tom’s mind was acute and terrible. Speech and movement were not in him anywhere; he could only sit and stare, both terrified and fascinated. Between himself and Lettice stretched an interval of six feet certainly, and into this very gap, the figure of his cousin, followed and preceded by heaps of moving sand, descended now. It was towards Lettice that Tony came so swiftly gliding.

It *was* his cousin surely . . . ?

He saw the big hands outspread, he saw the slightly stooping shoulders, he saw the face and eyes, the light blue eyes. But also he saw strange, unaccustomed raiment, he saw a sheet of gold, he smelt the soft breath of ambra. . . . And the fact was dark and menacing. There were words, too, careless, playful words, uttered undoubtedly by Tony’s familiar voice: ‘Caught you both asleep! Well, I declare! You *are* a couple . . .!’ followed by something else about its being ‘time to pack up and go because the sand was coming. . . .’ Tom heard the words distinctly, but far away, tiny with curious distance; they were half smothered, half submerged, it seemed, behind an acute inner hearing that caught another set of words he could not understand—in a language he both remembered and forgot. And the deep sense of dread passed swiftly then into a blinding jealous rage; he saw red; a fury of wrath that could kill and stab and strangle rushed over him in a flood of passionate emotion. He lost control. He rushed headlong.

Seconds dragged out incredibly into minutes, as though time halted. . . . An intense, murderous hatred blazed in his heart.

From where he sat, both figures were above him, sheltered half way up the long sliding slope. At the base of the yellow dune he crouched; he looked up at them. His eyes perhaps were blinded by the red tempest in his heart; or perhaps the tiny particles of flying sand drove against his eyeballs. He saw, at any rate, the figures close together, as if the man came gliding straight into her arms. He rose—At the same moment a draught of sudden, violent wind broke with a pouring rush across the desert, and the entire crest of the undulating dune behind them rose to meet it in a single whirling eddy. As a gust of sea-wind tosses the spray into the air, this burst of scorching desert-wind drew the ridge up after it, then flung it in a blinding swirl against his face and skin.

The dune rose in a Wave of glittering yellow sand, drowning them from head to foot. He saw the glint and shimmer of the myriad particles in the sunset; he saw them drifting by the thousand, by the million through the whirling mass of it; he saw the two figures side by side above him, caught beneath the toppling crest of this bending billow that curved and broke against the fiery sky; he smelt the faint perfume of the desert underneath the hollow arch; he heard the thin, metallic grating of the countless grains in friction; he heard the palm leaves rattling; he saw two pairs of eyes . . . his feet went shuffling. It was The Wave—of sand. . . .

And the nightmare clutch laid hold upon his heart with giant pincers. The fiery red of insensate anger burst into flames, filled his throat to choking, set his paralysed muscles free with uncontrollable energy. This savage lust of murder caught him. The shuffling went faster, faster. . . . He turned and faced the eyes. He would kill—rather than see her touched by those great hands. It seemed he made the leap of a wild animal upon its prey. . . .

Fire flashed . . . then passed, before he knew it, from red to shining amber, from sullen crimson into purest gold, from gold to the sheen of dazzling whiteness. The change was instantaneous. His leap was arrested in mid-air. The red wrath passed amazingly, forgotten or transmuted. With a miraculous swiftness he was aware of understanding, of sympathy, of forgiveness. . . . The red light melted into white—the white of glory. The murder faded from his heart, replaced by a deep, deep glow of peace, of love, of infinite trust, of complete comprehension. . . . He accepted something marvellously. . . . He forgot—himself. . . .

The eyes faded, the gold, the raiment, the perfume vanished, the sound died away. He no longer shuffled upon yielding sand. There was solid ground beneath his feet. . . . He was standing alert and upright, his arms outstretched to save—Tony from collapse upon the sliding dune. And the sandy wind drove blindingly against his face and skin.

The three of them stood side by side, holding to each other, laughing, choking, spluttering, heads bent and eyes closed tightly. Tom found his cousin's hand in his own, clutching it firmly to keep his balance, while behind himself—against his 'straight back,' he realised, even while he choked and laughed—Lettice clung for shelter. Tom, therefore, actually *had* leaped forward—but to protect and not to kill. He protected both of them. This time, however, it was to himself that Lettice clung, instead of to another.

The violent gust passed on its way, the flying cloud of sand subsided, settling down on everything. For a moment they stood there rubbing their eyes, shaking their clothing free; then raising their heads cautiously, they looked about them. The air was still and calm again, but in the distance, already a mile away and swiftly travelling across the luminous waste, they saw the miniature whirlwind driving furiously, leaping from ridge to ridge. It swept over the innumerable dunes, lifting the series, one crest after another, into upright waves upon a yellow shimmering sea, then scattering them in a cloud that shone and glinted against the fiery sunset. Its track was easily marked. They watched it. . . .

Tony was the first to recover breath.

'Whew!' he cried, still spluttering, 'but that was sudden! It took me clean off my feet for a moment. I got your hand, Tom, only just in time to save myself!' He shook himself the sand was down his back and in his hair, his shoes were full of it. 'There'll be another any minute now—another whirlwind—we'd better be starting.' He began packing up busily, shouting as he did so to the donkey-boys. 'By Jove!' he cried the next second, 'look what's happened to our dune!'

Tom, who was on his knees, helping Lettice shake her skirts free, rose to look. The high, curving bank of sand where they had sheltered had indeed changed its shape; the entire ridge had been flattened by the wind; the crest had been lifted and carried away, scattered in all directions. The wave-outline of two minutes before no longer existed, it had broken, fallen over, melted back into the surrounding sea of desert whence it rose.

'It's disappeared!' exclaimed Tom and Lettice in the same breath.

The boys arrived with the animals and sand-cart the baskets were quickly arranged, Tony mounted, Tom helped Lettice in. She leaned heavily on his arm and shoulder. It was in this moment's pause before the actual start that Lettice turned her head suddenly as though listening. The air, motionless again, extraordinarily heated, hung in a dull and yet transparent curtain between them and the sinking sun. The entire heavens seemed to form a sounding-board, the least vibration resonant beneath its stretch.

'Listen!' she exclaimed. She had uttered no word till now. She looked down at Tom, then looked away again.

They turned their heads in the direction where she pointed, and Tom caught a faint, distant sound as of little strokes that fell thudding on the heavy air. Tony declared he heard nothing. The sound repeated itself rapidly, but at rhythmic intervals; it was unpleasant somewhere, a hint of alarm and menace in the throbbing note—ominous as though it warned. In the pulse of the blood it seemed, like the beating of the heart, Tom thought. It came to him almost through the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder, although his ear told him it came from the horizon where the Theban Hills loomed through the coming dusk, just visible, but shadowy. The muttering died

away, then ceased, but not before he suddenly recalled an early morning hour beside a mountain lake, when months ago the thud of invisible paddle-wheels had stolen upon him through the quiet air. . . .

‘A drum, he heard Lettice murmur. ‘It’s a native drum in Thebes. My little dream! How the sound travels too! And how it multiplies!’ She peered at Tom through half-closed eyelids. ‘It must be at least a dozen miles away . . .!’ She smiled faintly, then dropped her eyes quickly.

‘Or a dozen centuries,’ he replied, not knowing quite why he said it. ‘And more like a thousand drums than only one!’ He smiled too. For another part of him, beyond capture somehow, knew what he meant, knew also why he smiled—knew also that *she* knew.

‘It frightens me! It’s horrible. It sounds like death!’ And though she whispered the words, more to herself than to the others, Tom heard each syllable.

The sound died away into the distance, and then ceased.

Then Tony, watching them both, but, unable to hear anything himself called out again impatiently that it was time to start, that Tom had a train to catch, that any minute the real, big wind might be upon them. The hand slowly, half lingeringly, left Tom’s shoulder. They started rapidly with a kind of flourish. In a thin, black line the small procession crept across the immense darkening desert, like a strip of life that drifted upon a shoreless ocean. . . .

The sun sank down below the Libyan sands. But no awful wind descended. They reached home safely, exhausted and rather silent. The two hours seemed to Tom to have passed with a dream-like swiftness. The stars were shining as they clattered down the little Luxor street. In a dream, too, he went to the hotel to change, and fetch his bag; in a dream he stood upon the platform, held Tony’s hand, held the soft hand of Lettice, said good-bye. . . and watched the station lights glide past as he left them standing there together, side by side.

CHAPTER XXXII

One incident, however,—trivial, yet pregnant with significant revelation,—remained vividly outside the dream. The Play behind broke through, as it were; an actor forgot his rôle, and involved another actor for an instant the masquerade tripped up, and merged with the commonplace reality of daily life. Explicit disclosure lay in the trifling matter.

They supplied a touch of comedy, but of rather ghastly comedy, ludicrous and at the same time painful—those smart, new yellow gloves that Tony put on when he climbed into the sand-cart and took the reins. His donkey had gone lame, he abandoned it to the boys behind, he climbed in to drive with Lettice. Tom, riding beside the cart, witnessed the entire incident; he laughed as heartily as either of the others; he felt it, however, as *she* felt it—a new sudden spiritual proximity to her proved this to him. Both shrank—from something disagreeable and afflicting. The hands looked somehow dreadful.

For the first time Tom realised the physiognomy of hands—that hands, rather than faces, should be photographed; not merely that they seemed now so large, so spread, so ugly, but that somehow the glaring canary yellow subtly emphasised another aspect that was distasteful and unpleasant—an undesirable aspect in their owner. The cotton was atrocious. So obvious was it to Tom that he felt pity before he felt disgust. The obnoxious revelation was so palpable. He was aware that he felt ashamed—for Lettice. He stared for a moment, unable to move his eyes away. The next second, lifting his glance, he saw that she, too, had noticed it. With a flash of keen relief, he was aware that she, like himself, shrank visibly from the distressing half-sinister revelation that was betrayal.

The hands, cased in their ridiculous yellow cotton, had physiognomy. Upon the pair of them, just then, was an expression not to be denied: of furtiveness, of something sly and unreliable, a quality not to be depended on through thick and thin, able to grasp for themselves but not to hold—for others; eager to take, yet incompetent to give. The hands were selfish, mean and unprotective. It was a remarkable disclosure of innate duality hitherto concealed. Their physiognomy dropped a mask the face still wore. The hands looked straight at Lettice; they assumed a sensual leer; they grinned.

‘One second,’ Tony cried, ‘the reins hurt my fingers,’—and had drawn from his pocket the gloves and quickly slipped them on—canary yellow—cotton!

‘Oh, oh!’ exclaimed Lettice, ‘but how can you! It’s ghastly . . . for a man . . .!’ She stared a moment, as though fascinated, then turned her eyes away, flicking the whip in the air and laughing—a trifle nervously.

Why the innocent, if vulgar, scraps of clothing should have been so revealing was hard to say. That they were incongruous and out of place in the Desert was surely an inconsiderable thing, that they were possibly in bad taste was of even less account. It was something more than that. It came in a second of vivid intuition—so, at least, it seemed to Tom, and therefore perhaps to Lettice too—that he saw his cousin’s soul behind the foolish detail. Tony had put his soul upon his hands—and the hands were somewhere cheap and worthless.

So difficult was it to catch the elusive thought in language, that Tom certainly used none of the adjectives that flashed unbidden across his mind; he assuredly thought neither of ‘coarse,’ ‘untrustworthy,’ nor of ‘false’ or ‘nasty’—yet the last named came probably nearest to expressing the disquieting sensation that laid its instant pressure upon his nerves, then went its way again. It was disturbing in a very searching way; he felt uneasy for *her* sake. How could he leave her with the owner of those hands, the wearer of those appalling yellow cotton gloves! The laughter in him was subtle mockery. For, of course, he laughed at himself for such an absurd conclusion. . . . Yet, somehow, those gloves revealed the man, betrayed him mercilessly! The hands were naked—they were stained.

It was just then that her exclamation of disapproval interrupted Tom’s curious sensations. It came with welcome. ‘Thank Heavens!’ a voice cried inside him. . . . ‘She feels it too!’

‘But my sister sent them to me,’ Tony defended himself ‘sent them from London. They’re the latest thing at home!’ He was laughing at himself. At the same time he was shifting the responsibility as usual.

Lettice laughed with him then, though her Laughter held another note that was not merriment. He felt disgust, resentment in her. There was no pity there. Tony had missed a cue—the entire Play was blocked. The ‘hero’ stirred contempt in place of admiration. But more—the incident confirmed, it seemed, much else that had preceded it. Her eyes were opened.

The conflict of pain and joy in Tom was most acute. His entire sacrifice—for an instant—trembled in a hair-like balance. For the capital rôle stood gravely endangered in her eyes.

‘Take them off Tony! Put them away! Hide them! I couldn’t trust you to drive me with such things on your hands. A man in yellow canary cotton!’

All three laughed together, and Tom, watching the trivial incident, as he rode beside them, saw her seize one hand and pull the glove off by the fingers. It seemed she tore a mask from one side of his face—the face beneath was disfigured. The glove fell into the bottom of the cart, then caught the loose rein and was jerked out upon the sand. The next second, something of covert fury in the gesture, Tony had taken off the other and tossed it to keep company with the first. Both hands showed naked: the entire face was bare. Tom looked away.

'They *are* hideous rather, I admit,' exclaimed Tony. 'The donkey boys can pick them up and wear them.' And there was mortification in his tone and manner; almost—he was found out.

It was the memory of this pregnant little incident that held persistently before Tom's mind now, as the train bore him the long night through between the desert and the river that were Egypt. The bigger crowding pictures, scenes and sentences, thronged panorama of the recent weeks, lay in hiding underneath; but it was the incident of those yellow gloves that memory tossed up for ever before his eyes. He clung to it in spite of himself. Imagination played its impish pranks. What did it portend? Removing gloves was the first act in undressing, it struck him. Tony had dressed up for the Play, the Play was over, he must put off piece by piece, the glamour he had worn so successfully for his passionate rôle. Once off the stage, the enchantment of the limelight, the scenery, the raiment of gold that left a perfume of ambra in the air—all the assumed allurements he had borrowed must be discarded. The Tony of the Play withdrew, the real Tony stood discovered, undressed—by no means admirable. No longer on the boards, walking like a king, with the regal fascination of an older day, he would pass along the busy street unnoticed, unadorned, bereft of the high distinction that imagination, so strangely stirred, had laid upon him for a little space. . . . The yellow gloves lay now upon the desert sand; perhaps the whirling tempest tossed them to and fro, perhaps it buried them; perhaps the Arab boys, proud of the tinsel they mistook for gold, now wore them in their sleep, lying on beds of rushes beneath the flat-roofed houses of sun-baked clay. . . .

This vivid detail kept the heavier memories back at first; somehow the long review of his brief Egyptian winter blocked each time against a pair of stooping shoulders and a pair of yellow cotton gloves.

During the voyage of four days, however, followed then the inevitable cruel aftermath of doubt, suspicion, jealousy he had fancied long since overthrown. A hundred incidents and details forced themselves upon him from the past—glances, gestures, phrases, such little things and yet so pregnant with delayed or undelivered meaning. The meanings rose remorselessly to the surface now.

All belonged to the first days in Egypt before he noticed anything; the mind worked backwards to their gleanings. They had escaped his attention at the time, yet the mind had registered them none the less. He did not seek their recovery, but the series offered itself compelling him to examine one and all, demanding that he should pass judgment. He forced them back, they leaped up again on springs the resilience was due to their life, their truth; they were not to be denied. There was no escape. . . .

All pointed to the same conclusion: the month spent alone with Tony had worked the mischief before his own arrival—by the time he came upon the scene the new relationship was in full swing beyond her power to stop it. Heavens, he had been blind! Ceaselessly, endlessly, he made the circle of alternate pain and joy, of hope and despair, of doubt and confidences—yet the ideal in him safe beyond assault. He believed in her, he trusted, and he—hoped.

The most poignant test, however, came when port was reached and the scented land-wind met his nostrils with the—Spring. He saw the harbour with its white houses shining in the early April sunshine; the blue sea recalled a wide-shored lake among the mountains: he saw the sea-gulls, heard the lapping of the waves against the shipping. . . .

He took the train to a little town along the coast, meaning to stay there a day or two before facing London, where the dismantling of the Brown Flat and the search for work awaited him. And there the full-blooded spring of this southern climate took him by the throat. The haze, the

sweet moist air, the luscious fields, the woods and flowery roads, above all the singing birds—this biting contrast with the dry, blazing desert skies of tawny Egypt was dislocating. The fierce glare of perpetual summer seemed a nightmare he had left behind; he came back to the sweet companionship of friendly life in field and tree and flower.

The first soft shower of rain, the first long twilight, the singing of the thrushes after dark, the light in the little homestead windows—he felt such intimate kindness in it all that the tears rose to his eyes. He longed to share it with her . . . there was no joy in life without her. . . . Egypt lay behind him with its awful loneliness, its stern, forbidding emptiness, its nightmare sunsets, its cruel desert, its appalling vastness in which everything had already happened. Thebes was a single, enormous tomb; his past lay buried there; from the solemn, mournful, desolate hills he had escaped.

He emerged into a smiling land of running streams and flowers. His new life was beginning like the Spring. It gushed everywhere, reminding him of another Spring he had known among the mountains. . . . The ‘sum of loss’ he counted minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day. He began the long, long reckoning. . . .

He felt intolerably alone. The hunger and yearning in his heart seemed more than he could bear. This beauty . . . without her beside him, without her to share the sweet companionship of the earth . . . was too much to bear. For one minute with her beside him in the meadows, picking flowers, listening to the birds, her blue veil flying in the wet mountain wind—he would have given all his life, his past, his future, everything that mind and heart held precious. . . . In the middle of which and at its darkest moment came the certain knowledge with a joy that broke in light and rapture on his soul—that she *was* beside him because she was within him. . . . He approached the impersonal, selfless attitude to which the attainment of an ideal alone is possible. She had been added to him. . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

The silence, meanwhile, was like the silence that death brings. He clung tenaciously to his ideal, yet he thought of her daily, nightly, hourly. She was really never absent from his thoughts. He starved, yet perhaps he did not know he starved. . . . The days grew into weeks with a grinding, dreadful slowness. He had written from the steamer, explaining briefly that he was called to England. He had written a similar line to Tony too. No answers came.

Yet the silence was full of questions. The mystery of her Egyptian infatuation remained the biggest one of all perhaps. But there were others, equally insistent. Did he really possess her in a way that made earthly companionship unnecessary? Had he lasting joy in this ideal possession? Was it true that an ideal once attained, its prototype becomes unsatisfying? Did he deceive himself? And had not her strange experience after all but ripened and completed her nature, provided something she had lacked before, and blended the Mother and the Woman into the perfect mate his dream foretold and his heart’s deep instinct prophesied?

He heard many answers to these questions; his heart made one, his reason made another. It was the soft and urgent Spring, however, with its perfumed winds, its singing birds, its happy message breaking with tumultuous life—it was the Spring on those wooded Mediterranean shores that whispered the compelling truth. He needed her, he yearned. An ideal, on this earth, to retain its upward lure, must remain—an ideal. Attainment in the literal sense destroys it. His arms were hungry and his heart was desolate. Then one day he knew the happy yet unhappy feeling that she suffered too. He felt her thoughts about him like soft birds. . . .

And he wrote to her: 'I should just like to know that you are well—and happy.' He addressed it to the Bungalow. The same day, chance had it, he received word from her, forwarded from the Semiramis Hotel in Cairo. She wrote two lines only: 'Tom, the thing I had to tell you about was—Warsaw. It is over. As you said, it is better written, perhaps, than told. Yours, L.'

Egypt came flooding through the open window as he laid the letter down; the silence, the desert spaces, the perfume and the spell. He saw one thing clearly in that second, for he saw it in a flash. The secret of her trouble that last day in Luxor was laid bare—the knowledge that within a few hours she would be free. To Tom she could not easily tell it; delicacy, modesty, pride forbade. Her long, painful duty, faithfully fulfilled these many years, was over. Her world had altered, opened out. Values, of course, had instantly altered too; she saw what was real and what ephemeral; she looked at Tony and she looked at—himself. She could speak to Tony—it was easier, it did not matter—but she could not so easily speak to Tom.

The yellow gloves of cotton! . . . His heart leaped within him.

He stared out of the window across the blue Mediterranean with its dancing, white-capped waves he saw the white houses by the harbour; he watched the whirling sea-gulls and tasted the fresh, salt air. How familiar it all was! Of her whereabouts at that moment he had no knowledge; she might be on the steamer, gazing at the same dancing waves; she might be in Warsaw or in London even; she might pass by the windows of the Brown Flat. .

He turned aside, closing the window. Egypt withdrew, the glamour waned, the ancient spell seemed lifted. He thought of those Theban Hills without emotion. Yet something in him trembled; he yearned, he ached, he longed with all the longing of the Spring. He wavered—oh, deliciously He was glad, radiantly glad, that she had written. Only—he dared not, he could not answer. . . .

Yet big issues are decided sometimes by paltry and ignoble influences when sturdier considerations produce no effect. It is the contrast that furnishes the magic. It was contrast, doubtless, that swayed Tom's judgment in the very direction he had decided was prohibited. His surroundings at the moment supplied the contrast, for these surroundings were petty and ignoble—they drove him by the distress of sheer disgust into the world of larger values he had known with her. Probably, he did not discover this consciously for himself: the result, in any case, was logical and obvious. Values changed suddenly for him, too, both in his outlook and his judgment.

For he was spending a few days with his widowed sister, she who had been playmate to Lettice years ago; and the conditions of her life and mind distressed him. He had seen her name in a hotel list of Mentone; he surprised her with a visit; he was received with inexplicable coldness. His tie with her was slight, her husband, a clergyman, little to his liking; he had not been near them for several years. The frigid reception, however, had a deeper cause, he felt; his curiosity was piqued.

His sister's chart of existence, indeed, was too remote from his own for true sympathy to be possible, and her married life had not improved her. They had drifted apart without openly acknowledging it. There was no quarrel, but there was a certain bitterness between them. She had a *marked faiblesse*, strange in one securely born, for those nominally in high places that, while disingenuous enough, jarred painfully always on her brother. God was unknown to her, although her husband preached most familiarly concerning Him. She had never seen the deity, but an Earl was a living reality, and often very useful. This banal weakness, he now found, had increased in widowhood. Tom hid his extreme distaste—and learned the astonishing reason for her coldness. It was Mrs. Haughstone. It took his breath away. He was too amazed to speak.

How clearly he understood her conduct now in Egypt! For Mrs. Haughstone had spread stories of the Bungalow, pernicious stories of an incredible kind, yet with just sufficient basis of apparent truth to render them plausible—plausible, that is, to any who were glad of an excuse to believe them against himself. These stories by a round-about way, gathering in circumstantial detail as they travelled, had reached his sister. She wished to believe them, and she did. Certain relatives, moreover, of meagre intelligence but highly placed in the social world, and consequently of great importance in her life, were remotely affected by the lurid tales. A report in full is unnecessary, but Mary held that the family honour was stained. It was an incredible imbroglio. Tom was so overwhelmed by this revelation of the jealous woman's guile, and the light it threw upon her rôle in Egypt, that he did not even trouble to defend himself. He merely felt sorry that his sister could believe such tales—and forgave her without a single word. He saw in it all another scrap of evidence that the Wave had indeed fallen, that his life everywhere, and from the most unlikely directions, was threatened, that all the most solid in the structure he had hitherto built up and leaned upon, was crumbling—and must crumble utterly—in order that it might rise secure upon fresh foundations.

He faced it, but faced it silently. He washed his hands of all concerned; he had learned their values too; he now looked forward instead of behind; that is, he forgot, and at the same time utterly—forgave.

But the effect upon him was curious. The stagnant ditch his sister lived in had the result of flinging him headlong back into the larger stream he had just left behind him; in that larger world things happened indeed, things unpleasant, cruel, mysterious, amazing—but yet not little things. The scale was vaster, horizons wider, beauty and wonder walked hand in hand with love and death. The contrast shook him; the trivial blow had this immense effect, that he yearned with redoubled passion for the region in which bigger ideals with their prototypes, however broken, existed side by side.

This yearning, and the change involved, remained subtly concealed, however. He was not properly conscious of it. Other very practical considerations, it seemed, influenced him; his money was getting low; he had luckily sublet the flat, but the question of work was becoming insistent. There was much to be faced. . . . A month had slipped by, it was five weeks since he had left Egypt. He decided to go to London. He telegraphed to the Club for his letters—he expected important ones—to be sent to Paris, and it was in a small high room on the top floor of a second-rate hotel across the Seine that he found them waiting for him. It was here, in this dingy room, that he read the wondrous words. The letter had lain at his Club three days, it was dated Switzerland and the postmark was Montreux. It was in pencil, without beginning and without end; his name, the signature did not appear

Your little letter has come—yes, I am well, but happy I am not. I went to the Semiramis and found that you had sailed, sailed without even a good-bye. I have come here, here to familiar little Montreux by the blue lake, where we first knew the Spring together. I can't say anything, I can't explain anything. You must never ask me to explain; Egypt changed me—brought out something in me I was helpless to resist. It was something perhaps I needed. I struggled—perhaps you can guess how I struggled, perhaps you can't. I have suffered these past weeks, I believe that I have expiated something. The power that drove me is exhausted, and that is all I know. I have worked it out. I have come back. There is no blame for others—for any one; I can't explain. Your little letter has come, and so I write. Help me, oh, help me in years to find my respect again, and try to love the woman you once knew—knew here in Montreux beside the lake, long ago in our childhood days, further back still, perhaps, though where I do not know. And, Tom—tell me how you are. I must know that. Please write and tell me that. I can bear it no longer. If anything happened to you I should just turn over and die. You have been true and very big, oh, so true and big. I see it now. . . .

Tom did not answer. He took the night train. He was just in time to catch the Simplon Express from the Gare de Lyon. He reached Montreux at seven o'clock, when the June sun was already high above the Dent du Midi and the lake a sheet of sparkling blue. He went to his old hotel. He saw the swans floating like bundles of dry paper, he saw the whirling sea-gulls, he obtained his former room. And spring was just melting into full-blown summer upon the encircling mountains.

It was still early when he had bathed and breakfasted, too early for visitors to be abroad, too early to search He could settle to nothing; he filled the time as best he could; he smoked and read an English newspaper that was several days old at least. His eyes took in the lines, but his mind did not take in the sense—until a familiar name caught his attention and made him keenly alert. The name was Anthony Winslowe. He remembered suddenly that Tony had never replied to his letter. . . . The paragraph concerning his cousin, however, dealt with another matter that sent the blood flaming to his cheeks. He was defendant in the breach of promise suit brought by a notorious London actress, then playing in a popular revue. The case had opened; the letters were already produced in court—and read. The print danced before his eyes. The letters were dated last October and November, just before Tony had come out to Egypt, and with crimson face Tom read them. It was more than distressing, it was afflicting—the letters tore an established reputation into a thousand pieces. He could not finish the report; he only prayed that another had not seen it. . . .

It was eleven o'clock when he went out and joined the throng of people sunning themselves on the walk beside the lake. The air was sweet and fresh, there were sailing-boats upon the water, the blue mountains lifted their dazzling snow far, far into the summer sky. He leaned over the rail and watched the myriads of tiny fishes, he watched the swans, he saw the dim line of the Jura hills in the hazy distance, he heard the muffled beat of a steamer's paddle-wheels a long way off. And then, abruptly, he was aware that some one touched him a hand in a long white glove was on his arm; there was a subtle perfume; two dark eyes looked into his; and he heard a low familiar voice:

'One day we shall find each other in a crowd.'

Tom was amazingly inarticulate. He just turned and looked down at her, moving a few inches closer as he did so. She wore a black boa; the fur touched his cheek.

'You have come back,' he said.

There was a new wonder in her face, a soft new beauty. The woman in her glowed. . . . He saw the suffering plainly too.

'We have both found out,' she said very low, 'found out what we are to one another.'

Tom's supply of words failed completely then. He looked at her—looked all the language in the world. And she understood. She lowered her eyes. 'I feel shy,' he thought he heard. It was murmured only. The next minute she raised her eyes again to his. He saw them dark and beautiful, tender as his mother's, true and faithful, as in his boyhood's dream of years ago. But they were now a woman's eyes.

'I never really left you, Tom . . .' she said with absolute conviction. 'I never could. I went aside . . . to fetch something—to give to you. That was all!'