

*W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM*

THE  
PAINTED VEIL



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*“ . . . the painted veil which those who live call Life ”*

## THE PAINTED VEIL

*i*

SHE gave a startled cry.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

Notwithstanding the darkness of the shuttered room he saw her face on a sudden distraught with terror.

“Some one just tried the door.”

“Well, perhaps it was the amah, or one of the boys.”

“They never come at this time. They know I always sleep after tiffin.”

“Who else could it be?”

“Walter,” she whispered, her lips trembling.

She pointed to his shoes. He tried to put them on, but his nervousness, for her alarm was affecting him, made him clumsy, and besides, they were on the tight side. With a faint gasp of impatience she gave him a shoe-horn. She slipped into a kimono and in her bare feet went over to her dressing-table. Her hair was shingled and with a comb she had repaired its disorder before he had laced his second shoe. She handed him his coat.

“How shall I get out?”

“You’d better wait a bit. I’ll look out and see that it’s all right.”

“It can’t possibly be Walter. He doesn’t leave the laboratory till five.”

“Who is it then?”

They spoke in whispers now. She was quaking. It occurred to him that in an emergency she would lose her head and on a sudden he felt angry with her. If it wasn’t safe why the devil had she said it was? She caught her breath and put her hand on his arm. He followed the direction of her glance. They stood facing the windows that led out on the verandah. They were shuttered and the shutters were bolted. They saw the white china knob of the handle slowly turn. They had heard no one walk along the verandah. It was terrifying to see that silent motion. A minute passed and there was no sound. Then, with the ghastliness of the supernatural, in the same stealthy, noiseless and horrifying manner, they saw the white china knob of the handle at the other window turn also. It was so frightening that Kitty, her nerves failing her, opened her mouth to scream; but, seeing what she was going to do, he swiftly put his hand over it and her cry was smothered in his fingers.

Silence. She leaned against him, her knees shaking, and he was afraid she would faint. Frowning, his jaw set, he carried her to the bed and sat her down upon it. She was as white as the sheet and notwithstanding his tan his checks were pale too. He stood by her side looking with fascinated gaze at the china knob. They did not







































































































































































































































































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“Just now, when they’d washed Walter, before they put him into the coffin I looked at him. He looked very young. Too young to die. Do you remember that beggar that we saw the first time you took me for a walk? I was frightened not because he was dead, but because he looked as though he’d never been a human being. He was just a dead animal. And now again, with Walter, it looked so like a machine that has run down. That’s what is so frightening. And if it is only a machine how futile is all this suffering and the heart pains and the misery.”

He did not answer, but his eyes travelled over the landscape at their feet. The wide expanse on that gay and sunny morning filled the heart with exultation. The trim little rice fields stretched as far as the eye could see and in many of them the blue-clad peasants with their buffaloes were working industriously. It was a peaceful and a happy scene. Kitty broke the silence.

“I can’t tell you how deeply moved I’ve been by all I’ve seen at the convent. They’re wonderful, those nun, they make me feel utterly worthless. They give up everything, their home, their country, love, children, freedom; and all the little things which I sometimes think must be harder still to give up, flowers and green fields, going for a walk on an autumn day, books and music, comfort, everything they give up, everything. And they do it so that they may devote themselves to a life of sacrifice and poverty, obedience, killing work and prayer. To all of them this world is really and truly a place of exile. Life is a cross which they willingly bear, but in their hearts all the time is the desire—oh, it’s so much stronger than desire, it’s a longing, an eager, passionate longing for the death which shall lead them to life everlasting.”

Kitty clasped her hands and looked at him with anguish.

“Well?”

“Supposing there is no life everlasting? Think what it means if death is really the end of all things. They’ve given up all for nothing. They’ve been cheated. They’re dupes.”

Waddington reflected for a little while.

“I wonder. I wonder if it matters that what they have aimed at is illusion. Their lives are in themselves beautiful. I have an idea that the only thing which makes it possible to regard this world we live in without disgust is the beauty which now and then men create out of the chaos. The pictures they paint, the music they compose, the books they write, and the lives they lead. Of all these the richest in beauty is the beautiful life. That is the perfect work of art.”

Kitty sighed. What he said seemed hard. She wanted more.

“Have you ever been to a symphony concert?” he continued.

“Yes,” she smiled. “I know nothing of music, but I’m rather fond of it.”

“Each member of the orchestra plays his own little instrument, and what do you think he knows of the complicated harmonies

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which unroll themselves on the indifferent air? He is concerned only with his own small share. But he knows that the symphony is lovely, and though there's none to hear it, it is lovely still, and he is content to play his part."

"You spoke of Tao the other day," said Kitty, after a pause. "Tell me what it is."

Waddington gave her a little look, hesitated an instant, and then with a faint smile on his comic face answered:

"It is the Way and the Waygoer. It is the eternal road along which walk all beings, but no being made it, for itself is being. It is everything and nothing. From it all things spring, all things conform to it, and to it at last all things return. It is a square without angles, a sound which ears cannot hear, and an image without form. It is a vast net and though its meshes are as wide as the sea it lets nothing through. It is the sanctuary where all things find refuge. It is nowhere, but without looking out of the window you may see it. Desire not to desire, it teaches, and leave all things to take their course. He that humbles himself shall be preserved entire. He that bends shall be made straight. Failure is the foundation of success and success is the lurking-place of failure; but who can tell when the turning point will come? He who strives after tenderness can become even as a little child. Gentleness brings victory to him who attacks and safety to him who defends. Mighty is he who conquers himself."

"Does it mean anything?"

"Sometimes, when I've had half a dozen whiskies and look at the stars, I think perhaps it does."

Silence fell upon them and when it was broken it was again by Kitty.

"Tell me, is: the dog it was that died, a quotation?"

Waddington's lips outlined a smile and he was ready with his answer. But perhaps at that moment his sensibilities were abnormally acute. Kitty was not looking at him, but there was something about her expression which made him change his mind.

"If it is I don't know it," he answered warily. "Why?"

"Nothing. It crossed my mind. It had a familiar ring."

There was another silence.

"When you were alone with your husband," said Waddington presently, "I had a talk with the regimental surgeon. I thought we ought to have some details."

"Well?"

"He was in a very hysterical state. I couldn't really quite understand what he meant. So far as I can make out your husband got infected during the course of experiments he was making."

"He was always experimenting. He wasn't really a doctor, he was a bacteriologist; that is why he was so anxious to come here."

"But I can't quite make out from the surgeon's statements whether he was infected accidentally or whether he was actually ex-

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perimenting on himself.”

Kitty grew very pale. The suggestion made her shudder. Waddington took her hand.

“Forgive me for talking about this again,” he said gently, “but I thought it might comfort you—I know how frightfully difficult it is on these occasions to say anything that is of the least use—I thought it might mean something to you that Walter died a martyr to science and to his duty.”

Kitty shrugged her shoulders with a suspicion of impatience.

“Walter died of a broken heart,” she said.

Waddington did not answer. She turned and looked at him slowly. Her face was white and set.

“What did he mean by saying: the dog it was that died? What is it?”

“It’s the last line of Goldsmith’s *Elegy*.”

### *lxvii*

NEXT morning Kitty went to the convent. The girl who opened the door seemed surprised to see her and when Kitty had been for a few minutes about her work the Mother Superior came in. She went up to Kitty and took her hand.

“I am glad to see you, my dear child. You show a fine courage in coming back here so soon after your great sorrow; and wisdom, for I am sure that a little work will keep you from brooding.”

Kitty cast down her eyes, reddening a little; she did not want the Mother Superior to see into her heart.

“I need not tell you how sincerely all of us here sympathise with you.”

“You are very kind,” whispered Kitty.

“We all pray for you constantly and for the soul of him you have lost.”

Kitty made no reply. The Mother Superior released her hand and in her cool, authoritative tone imposed various tasks upon her. She patted two or three children on the head, gave them her aloof, but winning smile, and went about her more pressing affairs.

### *lxviii*

A WEEK went by. Kitty was sewing. The Mother Superior entered the room and sat down beside her. She gave Kitty’s work a shrewd glance.

“You sew very well, my dear. It is a rare accomplishment for young women of your world nowadays.”

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"I owe it to my mother."

"I am sure that your mother will be very glad to see you again."

Kitty looked up. There was that in the Mother Superior's manner which prevented the remark from being taken as a casual politeness. She went on.

"I allowed you to come here after the death of your dear husband because I thought occupation would distract your mind. I did not think you were fit at that moment to take the long journey to Tching-Yen by yourself, nor did I wish you to sit alone in your house with nothing to do but to remember your loss. But now eight days have passed. It is time for you to go."

"I don't want to go, Mother. I want to stay here."

"There is nothing for you to stay for. You came to be with your husband. Your husband is dead. You are in a condition in which you will shortly need a care and attention which it is impossible for you to get here. It is your duty, my dear child, to do everything in your power for the welfare of the being that God has entrusted to your care."

Kitty was silent for a moment. She looked down.

"I was under the impression that I was of some use here. It has been a great pleasure to me to think that I was. I hoped that you would allow me to go on with my work till the epidemic had come to an end."

"We are all very grateful for what you have done for us," answered the Superior, with a slight smile, "but now that the epidemic is waning the risk of coming here is not so great and I am expecting two sisters from Canton. They should be here very shortly and when they arrive I do not think that I shall be able to make any use of your services."

Kitty's heart sank. The Mother Superior's tone admitted of no reply; she knew her well enough to know that she would be insensible to entreaty. That she found it necessary to reason with Kitty had brought into her voice a note, if hardly of irritation, at least of the peremptoriness which might lead to it.

"Mr. Waddington was good enough to ask my advice."

"I wish he could have minded his own business," interrupted Kitty.

"If he hadn't I should all the same have felt obliged to give it him," said the Mother Superior gently. "At the present moment your place is not here, but with your mother. Mr. Waddington has arranged with Colonel Yü to give you a strong escort so that you will be perfectly safe on the journey, and he has arranged for bearers and coolies. The amah will go with you and arrangements will be made at the cities you pass through. In fact, everything possible for your comfort has been done."

Kitty's lips tightened. She thought that they might at least have consulted her in a matter which only concerned herself. She had to

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exercise some self-control in order not to answer sharply.

“And when am I to start?”

The Mother Superior remained quite placid.

“The sooner you can get back to Tching-Yen and then sail to England the better, my dear child. We thought you would like to start at dawn the day after to-morrow.”

“So soon.”

Kitty felt a little inclined to cry. But it was true enough; she had no place there.

“You all seem in a great hurry to be rid of me,” she said ruefully.

Kitty was conscious of a relaxation in the Superior’s demeanour. She saw that Kitty was prepared to yield and unconsciously she assumed a more gracious tone. Kitty’s sense of humour was acute and her eyes twinkled as she reflected that even the saints liked to have their own way.

“Don’t think that I fail to appreciate the goodness of your heart, my dear child, and the admirable charity which makes you unwilling to abandon your self-imposed duties.”

Kitty stared straight in front of her. She faintly shrugged her shoulders. She knew that she could ascribe to herself no such exalted virtues. She wanted to stay because she had nowhere else to go. It was a curious sensation this, that nobody in the world cared two straws whether she was alive or dead.

“I cannot understand that you should be reluctant to go home,” pursued the Superior amiably. “There are many foreigners in this country who would give a great deal to have your chance!”

“But not you, Mother?”

“Oh, with us it is different, my dear child. When we come here we know that we have left our homes for ever.”

Out of her own wounded feelings emerged the desire in Kitty’s mind, malicious perhaps, to seek the joint in the armour of faith which rendered the nuns so aloofly immune to all the natural feelings. She wanted to see whether there was left in the Superior any of the weakness of humanity.

“I should have thought that sometimes it was hard never to see again those that are dear to you and the scenes amid which you were brought up.”

The Mother Superior hesitated for a moment, but Kitty watching her could see no change in the serenity of her beautiful and austere face.

“It is hard for my mother who is old now, for I am her only daughter and she would dearly like to see me once more before she dies. I wish I could give her that joy. But it cannot be and we shall wait till we can meet in paradise.”

“All the same, when one thinks of those to whom one is so dear, it must be difficult not to ask oneself if one was right in cutting oneself off from them.”

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"Are you asking me if I have ever regretted the step I took?" On a sudden the Mother Superior's face grew radiant. "Never, never. I have exchanged a life that was trivial and worthless for one of sacrifice and prayer." There was a brief silence and then the Mother Superior, assuming a lighter manner, smiled.

"I am going to ask you to take a little parcel and post it for me when you get to Marseilles. I do not wish to entrust it to the Chinese post-office. I will fetch it at once."

"You can give it to me to-morrow," said Kitty.

"You will be too busy to come here to-morrow, my dear. It will be more convenient for you to bid us farewell to-night."

She rose and with the easy dignity which her voluminous habit could not conceal left the room. In a moment Sister St. Joseph came in. She was come to say good-bye. She hoped that Kitty would have a pleasant journey; she would be quite safe, for Colonel Yü was sending a strong escort with her; and the sisters constantly did the journey alone and no harm came to them. And did she like the sea? *Mon Dieu*, how ill she was when there was a storm in the Indian Ocean, *Madame* her mother would be pleased to see her daughter, and she must take care of herself; after all she had another little soul in her care now, and they would all pray for her; she would pray constantly for her and the dear little baby and for the soul of the poor, brave doctor. She was voluble, kindly and affectionate; and yet Kitty was deeply conscious that for Sister St. Joseph (her gaze intent on eternity) she was but a wraith without body or substance. She had a wild impulse to seize the stout, good-natured nun by the shoulders and shake her, crying: "Don't you know that I'm a human being, unhappy and alone, and I want comfort and sympathy and encouragement; oh, can't you turn a minute away from God and give me a little compassion; not the Christian compassion that you have for all suffering things, but just human compassion for me?" The thought brought a smile to Kitty's lips: how very surprised Sister St. Joseph would be! She would certainly be convinced of what now she only suspected, that all English people were mad.

"Fortunately I am a very good sailor," Kitty answered. "I've never been sea-sick yet."

The Mother Superior returned with a small, neat parcel.

"They're handkerchiefs that I've had made for the name-day of my mother," she said. "The initials have been embroidered by our young girls."

Sister St. Joseph suggested that Kitty would like to see how beautifully the work was done and the Mother Superior with an indulgent, deprecating smile untied the parcel. The handkerchiefs were of very fine lawn and the initials embroidered in a complicated cypher were surmounted by a crown of strawberry leaves. When Kitty had properly admired the workmanship the handkerchiefs were wrapped up again and the parcel handed to her. Sister St. Joseph,

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with an "*eh bien, Madame, je vous quitte*" and a repetition of her polite and impersonal salutations, went away. Kitty realised that this was the moment to take her leave of the Superior. She thanked her for her kindness to her. They walked together along the bare, white-washed corridors.

"Would it be asking too much of you to register the parcel when you arrive at Marseilles?" said the Superior.

"Of course I'll do that," said Kitty.

She glanced at the address. The name seemed very grand, but the place mentioned attracted her attention.

"But that is one of the *châteaux* I've seen. I was motoring with friends in France."

"It is very possible," said the Mother Superior. "Strangers are permitted to view it on two days a week."

"I think if I had ever lived in such a beautiful place I should never have had the courage to leave it."

"It is of course a historical monument. It is scarcely intimate. If I regretted anything it would not be that, but the little *château* that we lived in when I was a child. It was in the Pyrenees. I was born within sound of the sea. I do not deny that sometimes I should like to hear the waves beating against the rocks."

Kitty had an idea that the Mother Superior, divining her thought and the reason for her remarks, was slyly making fun of her. But they reached the little, unpretentious door of the convent. To Kitty's surprise the Mother Superior took her in her arms and kissed her. The pressure of her pale lips on Kitty's cheeks, she kissed her first on one side and then on the other, was so unexpected that it made her flush and inclined to cry.

"Good-bye, God bless you, my dear child." She held her for a moment in her arms. "Remember that it is nothing to do your duty, that is demanded of you and is no more meritorious than to wash your hands when they are dirty; the only thing that counts is the love of duty; when love and duty are one, then grace is in you and you will enjoy a happiness which passes all understanding."

The convent door closed for the last time behind her.

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WADDINGTON walked with Kitty up the hill and they turned aside for a moment to look at Walter's grave; at the memorial arch he said good-bye to her, and looking at it for the last time she felt that she could reply to the enigmatic irony of its appearance with an equal irony of her own. She stepped into her chair.

One day passed after the other. The sights of the wayside served as a background to her thoughts. She saw them as it were in duplicate, rounded as though in a stereoscope, with an added significance

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because to everything she saw was added the recollection of what she had seen when but a few short weeks before she had taken the same journey in the contrary direction. The coolies with their loads straggled disorderly, two or three together, and then a hundred yards behind one by himself, and then two or three more; the soldiers of the escort shuffled along with a clumsy walk that covered five and twenty miles a day; the amah was carried by two bearers and Kitty, not because she was heavier, but for face's sake, by four. Now and then they met a string of coolies lolloping by in line with their heavy burdens, now and then a Chinese official in a sedan who looked at the white woman with inquisitive eyes; now they came across peasants in faded blue and huge hats on their way to market and now a woman, old or young, tottering along on her bound feet. They passed up and down little hills laid out with trim rice fields and farm-houses, nestling cosily in a grove of bamboos; they passed through ragged villages and populous cities walled like the cities in a missal. The sun of the early autumn was pleasant, and if at day-break, when the shimmering dawn lent the neat fields the enchantment of a fairy tale, it was cold, the warmth later was very grateful. Kitty was filled by it with a sense of beatitude which she made no effort to resist.

The vivid scenes with their elegant colour, their unexpected distinction, and their strangeness, were like an arras before which, like mysterious, shadowy shapes, played the phantoms of Kitty's fancy. They seemed wholly unreal. Mei-tan-fu with its crenellated walls was like the painted canvas placed on the stage in an old play to represent a city. The nuns, Waddington and the Manchu woman who loved him, were fantastic characters in a masque; and the rest, the people sidling along the tortuous streets and those who died, were nameless supers. Of course it had, they all had, a significance of some sort, but what was it? It was as though they performed a ritual dance, elaborate and ancient, and you knew that those complicated measures had a meaning which it was important for you to know; and yet you could see no clue, no clue.

It seemed incredible to Kitty (an old woman was passing along the causeway, in blue, and the blue in the sunshine was like lapis lazuli; her face with its thousand little wrinkles was like a mask of old ivory; and she leaned, as she walked on her tiny feet, on a long black staff), it seemed incredible to Kitty that she and Walter had taken part in that strange and unreal dance. They had played important parts too. She might easily have lost her life: he had. Was it a joke? Perhaps it was nothing but a dream from which she would suddenly awake with a sigh of relief. It seemed to have taken place a long time ago and in a far-off place. It was singular how shadowy the persons of that play seemed against the sunny background of real life. And now it seemed to Kitty like a story that she was reading; it was a little startling that it seemed to concern her so little. She found already



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that she could not recall with distinctness Waddington's face which had been so familiar to her.

This evening they should reach the city on the Western River from which she was to take the steamer. Thence it was but a night's run to Tching-Yen.

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AT first because she had not wept when Walter died she was ashamed. It seemed dreadfully callous. Why, the eyes of the Chinese officer, Colonel Yü, had been wet with tears. She was dazed by her husband's death. It was difficult to understand that he would not come into the bungalow again and that when he got up in the morning she would not hear him take his bath in the Suchow tub. He was alive and now he was dead. The sisters wondered at her Christian resignation and admired the courage with which she bore her loss. But Waddington was shrewd; for all his grave sympathy she had a feeling that—how should she put it?—that he had his tongue in his cheek. Of course, Walter's death had been a shock to her. She didn't want him to die. But after all she didn't love him, she had never loved him; it was decent to bear herself with becoming sorrow; it would be ugly and vulgar even to let anyone see into her heart; but she had gone through too much to make pretences to herself. It seemed to her that this at least the last few weeks had taught her, that if it is necessary sometimes to lie to others it is always despicable to lie to oneself. She was sorry that Walter had died in that tragic manner, but she was sorry with a purely human sorrow such as she might have felt if it had been an acquaintance. She would acknowledge that Walter had admirable qualities; it just happened that she did not like him; he had always bored her. She would not admit that his death was a relief to her, she could say honestly that if by a word of hers she could bring him back to life she would say it, but she could not resist the feeling that his death made her way to some extent a trifle easier. They would never have been happy together and yet to part would have been terribly difficult. She was startled at herself for feeling as she did; she supposed that people would think her heartless and cruel if they knew. Well, they shouldn't know. She wondered if all her fellows had in their hearts shameful secrets which they spent their time guarding from curious glances.

She looked very little into the future and she made no plans. The only thing she knew was that she wanted to stay in Tching-Yen as short a while as might be. She looked forward to arriving there with horror. It seemed to her that she would like to wander for ever through that smiling and friendly country in her rattan chair, and, an indifferent spectator for ever of the phantasmagoria of life, pass each

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night under a different roof. But of course the immediate future must be faced: she would go to the hotel when she reached Tching-Yen, she would arrange about getting rid of the house and selling the furniture; there would be no need to see Townsend. He would have the grace to keep out of her way. She would like, all the same, to see him once more in order to tell him what a despicable creature she thought him.

But what did Charles Townsend matter?

Like a rich melody on a harp that rang in exultant arpeggios through the complicated harmonics of a symphony, one thought beat in her heart insistently. It was this thought which gave their exotic beauty to the rice fields, which made a little smile break on her pale lips as a smooth-faced lad swung past her on his way to the market town with exultation in his carriage and audacity in his eyes, and which gave the magic of a tumultuous life to the cities she passed through. The city of the pestilence was a prison from which she was escaped, and she had never known before how exquisite was the blueness of the sky and what a joy there was in the bamboo copses that leaned with such an adorable grace across the causeway. Freedom! That was the thought that sung in her heart so that even though the future was so dim, it was iridescent like the mist over the river where the morning sun fell upon it. Freedom! Not only freedom from a bond that irked, and a companionship which depressed her; freedom, not only from the death which had threatened, but freedom from the love that had degraded her; freedom from all spiritual ties, the freedom of a disembodied spirit; and with freedom, courage and a valiant unconcern for whatever was to come.

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WHEN the boat docked at Tching-Yen Kitty, who had been standing on deck to look at the coloured, gay and vivacious traffic of the river, went into her cabin to see that the amah had left nothing behind. She gave herself a look in the glass. She wore black, the nuns had dyed a dress for her, but not mourning; and the thought crossed her mind that the first thing she must do was to see to this. The habiliments of woe could not but serve as an effective disguise to her unexpected feelings. There was a knock on her cabin door. The amah opened it.

“Mrs. Fane.”

Kitty turned round and saw a face which at the first moment she did not recognise. Then her heart gave a sudden quick beat and she flushed. It was Dorothy Townsend. Kitty so little expected to see her that she knew neither what to do nor what to say. But Mrs. Townsend came into the cabin and with an impulsive gesture took Kitty in her arms.

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“Oh, my dear, my dear, I’m so dreadfully sorry for you.”

Kitty allowed herself to be kissed. She was a little surprised at this effusiveness in a woman whom she had always thought cold and distant.

“It’s very kind of you,” murmured Kitty.

“Come on deck. The amah will look after your things and my boys are here.”

She took Kitty’s hand and Kitty, allowing herself to be led, noticed that her good-natured, weather-beaten face bore an expression of real concern.

“Your boat’s early, I very nearly didn’t get down in time,” said Mrs. Townsend. “I couldn’t have borne it if I’d missed you.”

“But you didn’t come to meet me?” exclaimed Kitty.

“Of course I did.”

“But how did you know I was coming?”

“Mr. Waddington sent me a telegram.”

Kitty turned away. She had a lump in her throat. It was funny that a little unexpected kindness should so affect her. She did not want to cry; she wished Dorothy Townsend would go away. But Dorothy took the hand that was hanging by Kitty’s side and pressed it. It embarrassed Kitty that this shy woman should be so demonstrative.

“I want you to do me a great favour. Charlie and I want you to come and stay with us while you’re in Tching-Yen”

Kitty snatched her hand away.

“It’s awfully kind of you. I couldn’t possibly.”

“But you must. You can’t go and live all by yourself in your own house. It would be dreadful for you. I’ve prepared everything. You shall have your own sitting-room. You can have your meals there if you don’t care to have them with us. We both want you to come.”

“I wasn’t thinking of going to the house. I was going to get myself a room at the Tching-Yen Hotel. I couldn’t possibly put you to so much trouble.”

The suggestion had taken her by surprise. She was confused and vexed. If Charlie had had any sense of decency he would never have allowed his wife to make the invitation. She did not wish to be under an obligation to either of them.

“Oh, but I couldn’t bear the idea of your living at a hotel. And you’d hate the Tching-Yen Hotel just now. With all those people about and the band playing jazz all the time. Please say you’ll come to us. I promise you that Charlie and I won’t bother you.”

“I don’t know why you should be so kind to me.” Kitty was getting a little short of excuses; she could not bring herself to utter a blunt and definite no. “I’m afraid I’m not very good company among strangers just now.”

“But need we be strangers to you? Oh, I do so want not to be, I so want you to allow me to be your friend.” Dorothy clasped her

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hands and her voice, her cool, deliberate and distinguished voice, was tremulous with tears. "I so awfully want you to come. You see, I want to make amends to you."

Kitty did not understand. She did not know what amends Charlie's wife owed her.

"I'm afraid I didn't very much like you at first. I thought you rather fast. You see, I'm old-fashioned and I suppose I'm intolerant."

Kitty gave her a passing glance. What she meant was that at first she had thought Kitty vulgar. Though Kitty allowed no shadow of it to show on her face in her heart she laughed. Much she cared for what any one thought of her now!

"And when I heard that you'd gone with your husband into the jaws of death, without a moment's hesitation, I felt such a frightful cad. I felt so humiliated. You've been so wonderful, you've been so brave, you make all the rest of us look so dreadfully cheap and second-rate." Now the tears were pouring down her kind, homely face. "I can't tell you how much I admire you and what a respect I have for you. I know I can do nothing to make up for your terrible loss, but I want you to know how deeply, how sincerely I feel for you. And if you'll only allow me to do a little something for you it will be a privilege. Don't bear me a grudge because I misjudged you. You're heroic and I'm just a silly fool of a woman."

Kitty looked down at the deck. She was very pale. She wished that Dorothy would not show such uncontrollable emotion. She was touched, it was true, but she could not help a slight feeling of impatience that this simple creature should believe such lies.

"If you really mean that you'd like to have me, of course I shall be glad to come," she sighed.

### *lxxii*

THE Townsends lived on the Mount in a house with a wide view over the sea, and Charlie did not as a rule come up to luncheon, but on the day of Kitty's arrival Dorothy (they were Kitty and Dorothy to one another by now) told her that if she felt up to seeing him he would like to come and bid her welcome. Kitty reflected that since she must see him she might just as well see him at once and she looked forward with grim amusement to the embarrassment she must cause him. She saw very well that the invitation to stay had arisen in his wife's fancy and notwithstanding his own feelings he had immediately approved. Kitty knew how great his desire was always to do the right thing and to offer her a gracious hospitality was obviously very much the right thing. But he could hardly remember that last interview of theirs without mortification: to a man so vain as Townsend it must be galling like an ulcer that would not heal. She hoped that she had hurt him as much as he had hurt her. He must hate her

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now. She was glad to think that she did not hate, but only despised him. It gave her a sardonic satisfaction to reflect that whatever his feelings he would be obliged to make much of her. When she left his office that afternoon he must have hoped with all his heart that he would never set eyes on her again.

And now, sitting with Dorothy, she waited for him to come in. She was conscious of her delight in the sober luxury of the drawing-room. She sat in an armchair, there were lovely flowers here and there, on the walls were pleasing pictures; the room was shaded and cool, it was friendly and homelike. She remembered with a faint shudder the bare and empty parlour of the missionary's bungalow; the rattan chairs and the kitchen-table with its cotton cloth, the stained shelves with all those cheap editions of novels, and the little skimpy red curtains that had such a dusty look. Oh, it had been so uncomfortable! She supposed that Dorothy had never thought of that.

They heard a motor drive up, and Charlie strode into the room.

"Am I late? I hope I haven't kept you waiting. I had to see the Governor and I simply couldn't get away."

He went up to Kitty, and took both her hands.

"I'm so very, very glad you've come here. I know Dorothy has told you that we want you to stay as long as ever you like and that we want you to look upon our house as your home. But I want to tell you so myself as well. If there's anything in the world I can do for you I shall only be too happy." His eyes wore a charming expression of sincerity; she wondered if he saw the irony in hers. "I'm awfully stupid at saying some things and I don't want to seem a clumsy fool, but I do want you to know how deeply I sympathise with you in your husband's death. He was a thundering good chap, and he'll be missed here more than I can say."

"Don't, Charlie," said his wife. "I'm sure Kitty understands. . . . Here are the cocktails."

Following the luxurious custom of the foreigners in China two boys in uniform came into the room with savouries and cocktails. Kitty refused.

"Oh, you must have one," insisted Townsend in his breezy, cordial way. "It'll do you good and I'm sure you haven't had such a thing as a cocktail since you left Tching-Yen. Unless I'm very much mistaken you couldn't get ice at Mei-tan-fu."

"You're not mistaken," said Kitty.

For a moment she had a picture before her mind's eye of that beggar with the tousled head in the blue rags through which you saw the emaciated limbs, who had lain dead against the compound wall.

THEY went in to luncheon. Charlie, sitting at the head of his table, easily took charge of the conversation. After those first few words of sympathy he treated Kitty, not as though she had just suffered a devastating experience, but rather as though she had come in from Shanghai for a change after an operation for appendicitis. She needed cheering and he was prepared to cheer her. The best way of making her feel at home was to treat her as one of the family. He was a tactful man. He began talking of the autumn race meeting, and the polo—by Jove, he would have to give up playing polo if he couldn't get his weight down—and a chat he had had that morning with the Governor. He spoke of a party they had been to on the Admiral's flag-ship, the state of affairs in Canton, and of the links at Lushan. In a few minutes Kitty felt that she might have been away for no longer than a week-end. It was incredible that over there, up-country, six hundred miles away only (the distance from London to Edinburgh, wasn't it?) men, women and children had been dying like flies. Soon she found herself asking about so and so who had broken a collar-bone at polo and if Mrs. This had gone home or Mrs. That was playing in the tennis tournament. Charlie made his little jokes and she smiled at them. Dorothy with her faint air of superiority (which now included Kitty and so was no longer slightly offensive, but a bond of union rather) was gently ironic about various persons in the colony. Kitty began to feel more alert.

"Why, she's looking better already," said Charlie to his wife. "She was so pale before tiffin that I was quite startled; she's really got some colour in her cheeks now."

But while she took her part in the conversation, if not with gaiety (for she felt that neither Dorothy nor Charlie with his admirable sense of decorum would approve of that) at least with cheerfulness, Kitty observed her host. In all those weeks during which her fancy had been revengefully occupied with him she had built up in her mind a very vivid impression of him. His thick curling hair was a little too long and too carefully brushed in order to hide the fact that it was greying there was too much oil on it; his face was too red, with its network of mauve veins on the cheeks, and his jowl was too massive: when he did not hold his head up to hide it you saw that he had a double chin; and there was something apelike in those bushy grizzled eyebrows of his that vaguely disgusted her. He was heavy in his movements, and all the care he took in his diet and all his exercise did not prevent him from being fat; his bones were much too well covered and his joints had a middle-aged stiffness. His smart clothes were a little tight for him and a little too young.

But when he came into the drawing-room before luncheon Kitty received quite a shock (this perhaps was why her pallor had been so marked), for she discovered that her imagination had played an odd

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trick on her: he did not in the least look as she had pictured him. She could hardly help laughing at herself. His hair was not grey at all, oh, there were a few white hairs on the temple but they were becoming; and his face was not red, but sunburned; his head was very well placed on his neck; and he wasn't stout and he wasn't old: in fact he was almost slim and his figure was admirable—could you blame him if he was a trifle vain of it?—he might have been a young man. And of course he did know how to wear his clothes; it was absurd to deny that: he looked neat and clean and trim. Whatever could have possessed her to think him this and that? He was a very handsome man. It was lucky that she knew how worthless he was. Of course she had always admitted that his voice had a winning quality, and his voice was exactly as she remembered it: it made the falseness of every word he said more exasperating; its richness of tone and its warmth rang now in her ears with insincerity and she wondered how she could ever have been taken in by it. His eyes were beautiful: that was where his charm lay, they had such a soft, blue brilliance and even when he was talking balderdash an expression which was so delightful; it was almost impossible not to be moved by them.

At last the coffee was brought in and Charlie lit his cheroot. He looked at his watch and rose from the table.

“Well, I must leave you two young women to your own devices. It's time for me to get back to the office.” He paused and then with his friendly, charming eyes on Kitty said to her: “I'm not going to bother you for a day or two till you're rested, but then I want to have a little business talk with you.”

“With me?”

“We must make arrangements about your house, you know, and then there's the furniture.”

“Oh, but I can go to a lawyer. There's no reason why I should bother you about that.”

“Don't think for a moment I'm going to let you waste your money on legal expenses. I'm going to see to everything. You know you're entitled to a pension: I'm going to talk to H. E. about it and see if by making representations in the proper quarter we can't get something extra for you. You put yourself in my hands. But don't bother about anything just yet. All we want you to do now is to get fit and well: isn't that right, Dorothy?”

“Of course.”

He gave Kitty a little nod and then passing by his wife's chair took her hand and kissed it. Most Englishmen look a little foolish when they kiss a woman's hand; he did it with a graceful ease.

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### *Lxxiv*

IT was not till Kitty was fairly settled at the Townsends' that she discovered that she was weary. The comfort and the unaccustomed amenity of this life broke up the strain under which she had been living. She had forgotten how pleasant it was to take one's ease, how lulling to be surrounded by pretty things, and how agreeable it was to receive attention. She sank back with a sigh of relief into the facile existence of the luxurious East. It was not displeasing to feel that in a discreet and well-bred fashion she was an object of sympathetic interest. Her bereavement was so recent that it was impossible for entertainments to be given for her, but ladies of consequence in the Colony (His Excellency's wife, the wives of the Admiral and of the Chief Justice) came to drink a quiet cup of tea with her. His Excellency's wife said that His Excellency was most anxious to see her and if she would come very quietly to luncheon at Government House ("not a party, of course, only ourselves and the A.D.C.'s!"), it would be very nice. These ladies used Kitty as though she were a piece of porcelain which was as fragile as it was precious. She could not fail to see that they looked upon her as a little heroine, and she had sufficient humour to play the part with modesty and discretion. She wished sometimes that Waddington were there; with his malicious shrewdness he would have seen the fun of the situation; and when alone they might have had a good laugh over it together. Dorothy had had a letter from him, and he had said all manner of things about her devoted work at the convent, about her courage and her self-control. Of course he was skilfully pulling their legs: the dirty dog.

### *Lxxv*

KITTY did not know whether it was by chance or by design that she never found herself for a moment alone with Charlie. His tact was exquisite. He remained kindly, sympathetic, pleasant and amiable. No one could have guessed that they had ever been more than acquaintances. But one afternoon when she was lying on a sofa outside her room reading he passed along the verandah and stopped.

"What is that you're reading?" he asked.

"A book."

She looked at him with irony. He smiled.

"Dorothy's gone to a garden-party at Government House."

"I know. Why haven't you gone too?"

"I didn't feel I could face it and I thought I'd come back and keep you company. The car's outside, would you like to come for a drive round the island?"



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"No, thank you."

He sat down on the foot of the sofa on which she lay. "We haven't had the chance of a talk by ourselves since you got here."

She looked straight into his eyes with cool insolence. "Do you think we have anything to say to one another?"

"Volumes."

She shifted her feet a little so that she should not touch him.

"Are you still angry with me?" he asked, the shadow of a smile on his lips and his eyes melting.

"Not a bit," she laughed.

"I don't think you'd laugh if you weren't."

"You're mistaken; I despise you much too much to be angry with you."

He was unruffled.

"I think you're rather hard on me. Looking back calmly, don't you honestly think I was right?"

"From your standpoint."

"Now that you know Dorothy, you must admit she's rather nice?"

"Of course. I shall always be grateful for her great kindness to me."

"She's one in a thousand. I should never have had a moment's peace if we'd bolted. It would have been a rotten trick to play on her. And after all I had to think of my children; it would have been an awful handicap for them."

For a minute she held him in her reflective gaze. She felt completely mistress of the situation.

"I've watched you very carefully during the week I've been here. I've come to the conclusion that you really are fond of Dorothy. I should never have thought you capable of it."

"I told you I was fond of her. I wouldn't do anything to cause her a moment's uneasiness. She's the best wife a man ever had."

"Have you never thought that you owed her any loyalty?"

"What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for," he smiled.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You're despicable."

"I'm human. I don't know why you should think me such a cad because I fell head over ears in love with you. I didn't particularly want to, you know."

It gave her a little twist of the heart-strings to hear him say that.

"I was fair game," she answered bitterly.

"Naturally I couldn't foresee that we were going to get into such a devil of a scrape."

"And in any case you had a pretty shrewd idea that if anyone suffered it wouldn't be you."

"I think that's a bit thick. After all, now it's all over, you must see

## THE PAINTED VEIL

I acted for the best for both of us. You lost your head and you ought to be jolly glad that I kept mine. Do you think it would have been a success if I'd done what you wanted me to? We were dashed uncomfortable in the frying-pan, but we should have been a damned sight worse off in the fire. And you haven't come to any harm. Why can't we kiss and make friends?"

She almost laughed.

"You can hardly expect me to forget that you sent me to almost certain death without a shadow of compunction?"

"Oh, what nonsense! I told you there was no risk if you took reasonable precautions. Do you think I'd have let you go for a moment if I hadn't been perfectly convinced of that?"

"You were convinced because you wanted to be. You're one of those cowards who only think what it's profitable for them to think."

"Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. You have come back, and if you don't mind my saying anything so objectionable you've come back prettier than ever."

"And Walter?"

He could not resist the facetious answer which came to his mind. Charlie smiled.

"Nothing suits you so well as black."

She stared at him for a moment. Tears filled her eyes and she began to cry. Her beautiful face was distorted with grief. She did not seek to hide it, but lay on her back with her hands along her sides.

"For God's sake don't cry like that. I didn't mean to say anything unkind. It was only a joke. You know how sincerely I feel for you in your bereavement."

"Oh, hold your stupid tongue."

"I'd give anything to have Walter back again."

"He died because of you and me."

He took her hand, but she snatched it away from him.

"Please go away," she sobbed. "That's the only thing you can do for me now. I hate and despise you. Walter was worth ten of you and I was too big a fool to see it. Go away. Go away."

She saw he was going to speak again and she sprang to her feet and went into her room. He followed her, and as he entered, with instinctive prudence, drew the shutter so that they were almost in darkness.

"I can't leave you like this," he said, putting his arms round her. "You know I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Don't touch me. For God's sake go. Go away." She tried to tear herself from him, but he would not let her. She was crying hysterically now.

"Darling, don't you know that I've always loved you," he said in his deep, charming voice. "I love you more than ever."

"How can you tell such lies! Let me go. Damn you, let me go."

"Don't be unkind to me, Kitty. I know I've been a brute to you,

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but forgive me.”

She was shaking and sobbing, struggling to get away from him, but the pressure of his arms was strangely comforting. She had so longed to feel them round her once more, just once, and all her body trembled. She felt dreadfully weak. It seemed as though her bones were melting, and the sorrow she felt for Walter shifted into pity for herself.

“Oh, how could you be so unkind to me?” she sobbed. “Don’t you know that I loved you with all my heart. No one has ever loved you as I loved you.”

“Darling.”

He began to kiss her.

“No, no,” she cried.

He sought her face, but she turned it away; he sought her lips; she did not know what he was saying, broken, passionate words of love; and his arms held her so firmly that she felt like a child that has been lost and now at last is safe at home. She moaned faintly. Her eyes were closed and her face was wet with tears. And then he found her lips and the pressure of his upon them shot through her body like the flame of God. It was an ecstasy and she was burnt to a cinder and she glowed as though she were transfigured. In her dreams, in her dreams she had known this rapture. What was he doing with her now? She did not know. She was not a woman, her personality was dissolved, she was nothing but desire. He lifted her off her feet, she was very light in his arms, he carried her and she clung to him, desperate and adoring; her head sank on the pillow and his lips clung to hers.

### *Lxxvi*

SHE sat on the edge of the bed hiding her face with her hands.

“Would you like a drop of water?”

She shook her head. He went over to the washing stand, filled the tooth-glass and brought it to her.

“Come along, have a little drink and you’ll feel better.”

He put the glass to her lips and she sipped the water. Then, with horrified eyes, she stared at him. He was standing over her, looking down, and in his eyes was a twinkle of self-satisfaction.

“Well, do you think I’m such a dirty dog as you did?” he asked.

She looked down.

“Yes. But I know that I’m not a bit better than you. Oh, I’m so ashamed.”

“Well, I think you’re very ungrateful.”

“Will you go now?”

“To tell you the truth I think it’s about time. I’ll just go and tidy myself up before Dorothy comes in.”

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He went out of the room with a jaunty step.

Kitty sat for a while, still on the edge of the bed, hunched up like an imbecile. Her mind was vacant. A shudder passed through her. She staggered to her feet and, going to the dressing-table, sank into a chair. She stared at herself in the glass. Her eyes were swollen with tears; her face was stained and there was a red mark on one cheek where his had rested. She looked at herself with horror. It was the same face. She had expected in it she knew not what change of degradation. "Swine," she flung at her reflection. "Swine."

Then, letting her face fall on her arms, she wept bitterly. Shame, shame! She did not know what had come over her. It was horrible. She hated him and she hated herself. It had been ecstasy. Oh, hateful! She could never look him in the face again. He was so justified. He had been right not to marry her, for she was worthless; she was no better than a harlot. Oh, worse, for those poor women gave themselves for bread. And in this house too into which Dorothy had taken her in her sorrow and cruel desolation! Her shoulders shook with her sobs. Everything was gone now. She had thought herself changed, she had thought herself strong, she thought she had returned to Tching-Yen a woman who possessed herself; new ideas flitted about her heart like little yellow butterflies in the sunshine and she had hoped to be so much better in the future; freedom like a spirit of light had beckoned her on, and the world was like a spacious plain through which she could walk light of foot and with head erect. She had thought herself free from lust and vile passions, free to live the clean and healthy life of the spirit; she had likened herself to the white egrets that fly with leisurely flight across the rice fields at dusk and they are like the soaring thoughts of a mind at rest with itself; and she was a slave. Weak, weak! It was hopeless, it was no good to try, she was a slut.

She would not go in to dinner. She sent the boy to tell Dorothy that she had a headache and preferred to remain in her room. Dorothy came in and, seeing her red, swollen eyes, talked for a little in her gentle, commiserating way of trivial things. Kitty knew that Dorothy thought she had been crying on account of Walter and, sympathising like the good and loving wife she was, respected the natural sorrow.

"I know it's very hard, dear," she said as she left Kitty. "But you must try to have courage. I'm sure your dear husband wouldn't wish you to grieve for him."

### *lxxvii*

BUT next morning Kitty rose early and leaving a note for Dorothy to say that she was gone out on business took a tram down the hill. She made her way through the crowded streets with their motor

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cars, rickshaws and chairs, and the motley throng of Europeans and Chinese, to the offices of the P. & O. Company. A ship was sailing in two days, the first ship out of the port, and she had made up her mind that at all costs she must go on it. When the clerk told her that every berth was booked she asked to see the chief agent. She sent in her name and the agent, whom she had met before, came out to fetch her into his office. He knew her circumstances and when she told him what she wished he sent for the passenger list. He looked at it with perplexity.

"I beseech you to do what you can for me," she urged him.

"I don't think there's any one in the Colony who wouldn't do anything in the world for you, Mrs. Fane," he answered.

He sent for a clerk and made enquiries. Then he nodded.

"I'm going to shift one or two people. I know you want to get home and I think we ought to do our best for you. I can give you a little cabin to yourself. I expect you'd prefer that."

She thanked him. She left him with an elated heart. Flight: that was her only thought. Flight! She sent a cable to her father to announce her immediate return; she had already cabled to him to say that Walter was dead; and then went back again to the Townsends to tell Dorothy what she had done.

"We shall be dreadfully sorry to lose you," the kind creature said, "but of course I understand that you want to be with your mother and father."

Since her return to Tching-Yen Kitty had hesitated from day to day to go to her house. She dreaded entering it again and meeting face to face the recollections with which it was peopled. But now she had no alternative. Townsend had arranged for the sale of the furniture and he had found some one eager to take on the lease, but there were all her clothes and Walter's, for they had taken next to nothing to Mei-tan-fu, and there were books, photographs, and various odds and ends. Kitty, indifferent to everything and anxious to cut herself off completely from the past, realised that it would outrage the susceptibilities of the Colony if she allowed these things to go with the rest to an auction-room. They must be packed and sent to her. So after tiffin she prepared to go to the house. Dorothy, eager to give her help, offered to accompany her, but Kitty begged to be allowed to go alone. She agreed that two of Dorothy's boys should come and assist in the packing.

The house had been left in charge of the head boy and he opened the door for Kitty. It was curious to go into her own house as though she were a stranger. It was neat and clean. Everything was in its place, ready for her use, but although the day was warm and sunny there was about the silent rooms a chill and desolate air. The furniture was stiffly arranged, exactly where it should be, and the vases which should have held flowers were in their places; the book which Kitty had laid face downwards she did not remember when

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still lay face downwards. It was as though the house had been left empty but a minute before and yet that minute was fraught with eternity so that you could not imagine that ever again that house would echo with talk and resound with laughter. On the piano the open music of a foxtrot seemed to wait to be played, but you had a feeling that if you struck the keys no sound would come. Walter's room was as tidy as when he was there. On the chest of drawers were two large photographs of Kitty, one in her presentation dress and one in her wedding-gown.

But the boys fetched up the trunks from the box-room and she stood over them watching them pack. They packed neatly and quickly. Kitty reflected that in the two days she had it would be easy to get everything done. She must not let herself think: she had no time for that. Suddenly she heard a step behind her and turning round saw Charles Townsend. She felt a sudden chill at her heart.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Will you come into your sitting-room? I have something to say to you."

"I'm very busy."

"I shall only keep you five minutes."

She said no more, but with a word to the boys to go on with what they were doing, preceded Charles into the next room. She did not sit down, in order to show him that she expected him not to detain her. She knew that she was very pale and her heart was beating fast, but she faced him coolly, with hostile eyes.

"What is it you want?"

"I've just heard from Dorothy that you're going the day after tomorrow. She told me that you'd come here to do your packing and she asked me to ring up and find out if there was anything I could do for you."

"I'm grateful to you, but I can manage quite well by myself."

"So I imagined. I didn't come here to ask you that. I came to ask if your sudden departure is due to what happened yesterday."

"You and Dorothy have been very good to me. I didn't wish you to think I was taking advantage of your good nature."

"That's not a very straight answer."

"What does it matter to you?"

"It matters a great deal. I shouldn't like to think that anything I'd done had driven you away."

She was standing at the table. She looked down. Her eyes fell on the *Sketch*. It was months old now. It was that paper which Walter had stared at all through the terrible evening when—and Walter now was. . . . She raised her eyes.

"I feel absolutely degraded. You can't possibly despise me as much as I despise myself."

"But I don't despise you. I meant every word that I said yesterday. What's the good of running away like this? I don't know why

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we can't be good friends. I hate the idea of your thinking I've treated you badly."

"Why couldn't you leave me alone?"

"Hang it all, I'm not a stick or a stone. It's so unreasonable, the way you look at it; it's so morbid. I thought after yesterday you'd feel a little more kindly to me. After all, we're only human."

"I don't feel human. I feel like an animal. A pig or a rabbit or a dog. Oh, I don't blame you, I was just as bad. I yielded to you because I wanted you. But it wasn't me, it wasn't the real me. I'm not that hateful, beastly, lustful woman. I disown her. It wasn't me that lay on that bed panting for you when my husband was hardly cold in his grave and your wife had been so kind to me, so indescribably kind. It was only the animal in me, dark and fearful like an evil spirit, and I disown, and hate, and despise it. And ever since, when I've thought of it, my gorge rises and I feel that I must vomit."

He frowned a little and gave a short, uneasy snigger. "Well, I'm fairly broadminded, but sometimes you say things that positively shock me."

"I should be sorry to do that. You'd better go now. You're a very unimportant little man and I'm silly to talk to you seriously."

He did not answer for a while and she saw by the shadow in his blue eyes that he was angry with her. He would heave a sigh of relief when, tactful and courteous as ever, he had finally seen her off. It amused her to think of the politeness with which, while they shook hands and he wished her a pleasant journey, she would thank him for his hospitality. But she saw his expression change.

"Dorothy tells me you're going to have a baby," he said.

She felt herself colour, but she allowed no gesture to escape her.

"I am."

"Am I by any chance the father?"

"No, no. It's Walter's child."

She spoke with an emphasis which she could not prevent, but even as she spoke she knew that it was not the tone with which to carry conviction.

"Are you quite sure?" He was now roguishly smiling. "After all, you were married to Walter a couple of years and nothing happened. The dates seem to fit all right. I think it's much more likely to be mine than Walter's."

"I would rather kill myself than have a child of yours."

"Oh, come now, that's nonsense. I should be awfully pleased and proud. I'd like it to be a girl, you know. I've only had boys with Dorothy. You won't be able to be in doubt very long, you know: my three kiddies are absolutely the living image of me."

He had regained his good humour and she knew why. If the child was his, though she might never see him again, she could never entirely escape him. His power over her would reach out and he would still, obscurely but definitely, influence every day of her life.

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“You really are the most vain and fatuous ass that it’s ever been my bad luck to run across,” she said.

### *lxxviii*

AS the ship steamed into Marseilles Kitty, looking at the rugged and beautiful outline of the coast glowing in the sunlight, on a sudden caught sight of the golden statue of the Blessed Virgin which stands upon the church of Sainte Marie de la Grace as a symbol of safety to the mariner at sea. She remembered how the Sisters of the convent at Mei-tan-fu, leaving their own land for ever, had knelt as the figure faded in the distance so that it was no more than a little golden flame in the blue sky and sought in prayer to allay the pang of separation. She clasped her hands in supplication to what power she knew not.

During the long, quiet journey she had thought incessantly of the horrible thing that had happened to her. She could not understand herself. It was so unexpected. What was it that had seized her, so that, despising him, despising him with all her heart, she had yielded passionately to Charlie’s foul embrace? Rage filled her and disgust of herself obsessed her. She felt that she could never forget her humiliation. She wept. But as the distance from Tching-Yen increased she found that she was insensibly losing the vividness of her resentment. What had happened seemed to have happened in another world. She was like a person who has been stricken with sudden madness and recovering is distressed and ashamed at the grotesque things he vaguely remembers to have done when he was not himself. But because he knows he was not himself he feels that in his own eyes at least he can claim indulgence. Kitty thought that perhaps a generous heart might pity rather than condemn her. But she sighed as she thought how woefully her self-confidence had been shattered. The way had seemed to stretch before her straight and easy and now she saw that it was a tortuous way and that pitfalls awaited her. The vast spaces and the tragic and beautiful sunsets of the Indian Ocean rested her. She seemed borne then to some country where she might in freedom possess her soul. If she could only regain her self-respect at the cost of a bitter conflict, well, she must find the courage to affront it.

The future was lonely and difficult. At Port Said she had received a letter from her mother in answer to her cable. It was a long letter written in the large and fanciful writing which was taught to young ladies in her mother’s youth. Its ornateness was so neat that it gave you an impression of insincerity. Mrs. Garstin expressed her regret at Walter’s death and sympathised properly with her daughter’s grief. She feared that Kitty was left inadequately provided for, but naturally the Colonial Office would give her a pension. She was



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glad to know that Kitty was coming back to England and of course she must come and stay with her father and mother till her child was born. Then followed certain instructions that Kitty must be sure to follow and various details of her sister Doris's confinement. The little boy weighed so and so much and his paternal grandfather said he had never seen a finer child. Doris was expecting again and they hoped for another boy in order to make the succession to the baronetcy quite sure.

Kitty saw that the point of the letter lay in the definite date set for the invitation. Mrs. Garstin had no intention of being saddled with a widowed daughter in modest circumstances. It was singular, when she reflected how her mother had idolised her, that now, disappointed in her, she found her merely a nuisance. How strange was the relation between parents and children! When they were small the parents doted on them, passed through agonies of apprehension at each childish ailment, and the children clung to their parents with love and adoration; a few years passed, the children grew up, and persons not of their kin were more important to their happiness than father or mother. Indifference displaced the blind and instinctive love of the past. Their meetings were a source of boredom and irritation. Distracted once at the thought of a month's separation they were able now to look forward with equanimity to being parted for years. Her mother need not worry: as soon as she could she would make herself a home of her own. But she must have a little time; at present everything was vague and she could not form any picture of the future: perhaps she would die at childbirth; that would be a solution of many difficulties.

But when they docked two letters were handed to her. She was surprised to recognise her father's writing: she did not remember that he had ever written to her. He was not effusive, and began: dear Kitty. He told her that he was writing instead of her mother who had not been well and was obliged to go into a nursing home to have an operation. Kitty was not to be frightened and was to keep to her intention of going round by sea; it was much more expensive to come across by land and with her mother away it would be inconvenient for Kitty to stay at the house in Harrington Gardens. The other was from Doris, it started: Kitty darling, not because Doris had any particular affection for her, but because it was her way thus to address every one she knew.

*Kitty darling,*

*I expect Father has written to you. Mother has got to have an operation. It appears that she has been rotten for the last year, but you know she hates doctors and she's been taking all sorts of patent medicines. I don't quite know what's the matter with her as she insists on making a secret of the whole thing and flies into a passion if you ask her questions. She has been looking simply awful and if I were you I think I'd get off at Marseilles and come back as quick as you can. But don't let on that I told you to come as she pretends there's nothing much the matter*











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breaking.

“Oh, my Kitty, my little Kitty,” he murmured.

She looked up and put her arms round his neck. “Oh, father, be kind to me. Let us be kind to one another.”

He kissed her, on the lips as a lover might, and his cheeks were wet with her tears.

“Of course you shall come with me.”

“Do you want me to? Do you really want me to?”

“Yes.”

“I’m so grateful to you.”

“Oh, my dear, don’t say things like that to me. It makes me feel quite awkward.”

He took out his handkerchief and dried her eyes. He smiled in a way that she had never seen him smile before. Once more she threw her arms round his neck.

“We’ll have such a lark, father dear. You don’t know what fun we’re going to have together.”

“You haven’t forgotten that you’re going to have a baby.”

“I’m glad she’ll be born out there within sound of the sea and under a wide blue sky.”

“Have you already made up your mind about the sex?” he murmured, with his thin, dry smile.

“I want a girl because I want to bring her up so that she shan’t make the mistakes I’ve made. When I look back upon the girl I was I hate myself. But I never had a chance. I’m going to bring up my daughter so that she’s free and can stand on her own feet. I’m not going to bring a child into the world, and love her, and bring her up, just so that some man may want to sleep with her so much that he’s willing to provide her with board and lodging for the rest of her life.”

She felt her father stiffen. He had never spoken of such things and it shocked him to hear these words in his daughter’s mouth.

“Let me be frank just this once, father. I’ve been foolish and wicked and hateful. I’ve been terribly punished. I’m determined to save my daughter from all that. I want her to be fearless and frank. I want her to be a person, independent of others because she is possessed of herself, and I want her to take life like a free man and make a better job of it than I have.”

“Why, my love, you talk as though you were fifty. You’ve got all your life before you. You mustn’t be downhearted.”

Kitty shook her head and slowly smiled.

“I’m not. I have hope and courage. The past is finished; let the dead bury their dead. It’s all uncertain, life and whatever is to come to me, but I enter upon it with a light and buoyant heart. It’s all confused, but vaguely I discern a pattern, and I see before me an inexhaustible richness, the mystery and the strangeness of everything, compassion and charity, the Way and the Wayfarer, and perhaps in the end—God.”