

THE HOUSE OF MOURNING.

ELIZABETH came into the room with a black dress over her arm. Mary, her sister, who was writing letters at the table by the lamp, raised her eyes.

‘Where’s mother?’ she asked.

‘In her bedroom.’

‘Is she all right?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

Elizabeth found her work-basket and threaded her needle.

‘Mother is bearing up wonderfully,’ she said with a smile; ‘that’s what they always say of widows, isn’t it? Somehow I can’t help wondering if the bearing-up doesn’t mean that there’s not much to bear. We’re all so dreadfully conventional about birth and death—aren’t we?’

Mary looked with clear, rather luminous eyes at her sister. ‘Yes,’ she answered; ‘we never dare speak the truth about either. I think, with you, that lots of widows have a sort of feeling of getting out of prison at last. The others bear up because a shock numbs pain.’

Elizabeth propped her round chin on her hand.

‘I think,’ she said with resolute truthfulness, ‘that it’ll be getting out of prison for mother. No one will snub or scold her now. I don’t see how she can help not feeling happier in her freedom.’

‘Isn’t it terribly sad not to miss the dead?’ asked Mary. ‘If Stephen died there would be nothing left—he’d take everything with him. I’d only be a husk.’

‘But you are not married yet.’

‘No, but it would always be like that. Daddy and Mother were quite different.’

‘We don’t know how they began. Mary! are we horrid to talk like this when Daddy only died this morning?’

‘No, because words are crystallised thoughts and thoughts are true. Besides, we loved Daddy—as a father, I mean. It was only as Mother’s husband I disapproved of him. We shall miss him always—he was a nice father, but I could never forgive him for jeering at mother.’

‘Yes, I hated that, but still I understood it. I think Daddy fancied himself rather like Mr. Bennet in “Pride and Prejudice.” So many people have a pose like that. Mother is so gentle, so humble-minded, so devoted, that her very sweetness aggravated him. I’ve got his perversity in me, and I could understand his wanting to jibe at Mother, even while I hated it.’

‘It was like shooting arrows at a cushion. It was unfair.’

‘Yes, but she shouldn’t have let him. I often wonder why they married. They’d very little in common. Mother didn’t appreciate his mordant wit, his odd, warped sort of humour. He got a screw on to his jokes and she couldn’t take them. She was just hurt and frightened.’

Mary considered her engagement ring with grave eyes. ‘She shouldn’t have let him treat her like that,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t have it in my husband. Not, of course, that Stephen ever could treat me like that.’

Elizabeth smiled with a Puckish gleam in her eyes. She often looked like her father.

‘My good child, you can’t talk yet,’ she protested, ‘you’re only just engaged. What do you know about love?’

‘Everything!’ The answer was full of conviction and simplicity. Mary, though she laughed at herself, believed truly that no two beings had ever found a love so exquisite, so full, so strong, so eternal as this of hers and Stephen’s.

Elizabeth’s mouth twitched with amusement.

‘Well! Mother said she and Daddy made a love match; yet, look at the result. Was there anything eternal and romantic about it? Mother was just a sort of target for Daddy’s most pointed jeers, and a sort of buffer for his moods when his liver was out of order. Don’t be too sure that Stephen won’t refer to *you* as “my poor wife” in a few years.’

Mary flushed with annoyance.

‘How aggravating you are,’ she said; ‘you simply don’t know Stephen, and you don’t know love.’

‘Don’t I, my dear? I haven’t seen much of *love*, for it lasts so short a time. Passion is another matter. Most people are the dupes of passion. They mistake it for love. They think they’ve found some beautiful, eternal, spiritual affinity, and they’re merely the slaves of nature, who at all costs and without the faintest regard for our spirits demands the continuation of the race.’

Mary gave a little snort of disgust.

'Really!' she exclaimed. 'I'm sorry for you, Betsy. A little science is a dangerous thing! On the strength of a few lessons in biology or some such stuff you talk this fatuous materialism. I can't argue about love, I don't want to, it's sacred. But I pity the people who talk like you!'

Elizabeth laughed. She had her father's provoking trick of remaining good-tempered when the adversary lost temper.

'Camouflaged natural instinct!' she said. 'When you've been married ten, twenty, thirty years I shall ask you if Stephen is still Bayard and Galahad rolled into one, and if romance is all that you thought it. For the devotion of an elderly couple does really impress me.'

There was silence. Mary's anger and disdain made her return to her letter-writing, and Elizabeth stitched in silence. But the Puckish spirit that possessed her would not be withheld and she made her jibe.

'And will Stephen be allowed to have platonic friends like Lady Frazer and Nina Barrington?' Mary's cheeks were very pink.

'I trust Stephen,' she declared. 'Of course, he can have what friends he likes—besides, you know there was no harm in Daddy's friendships.'

'No; but would you like Lady Frazer quoted to you every day and her raiment extolled? And would you like another Nina playing puss-puss round Stephen?'

Mary's honest eyes met her sister's.

'No, I'd hate it. I'd want to kill them both, though I like Lady Frazer. She appreciates Mother. I think she understood Daddy better than Mother did. Often the people who don't love understand better because they don't get hurt so easily. Of course, Nina is just a minx, but Daddy didn't quite see through her.'

'His aesthetic sense appreciated her youth. Men love youth however foolish it is.'

'Betsy! What do you know about men?'

'Plenty, my dear child. I see that a man at forty-five is entirely different from a man at twenty-five. You don't realise that. You expect Stephen to have only one phase in his life—being in love with you.'

Mary's dignity made her return to her letter-writing again. But Elizabeth, still pricked by inherited perversity, could not be silent.

'Mary . . . I can't help wondering what Daddy will do now.'

Do you picture him waiting to welcome Mother at the gates of Heaven ?'

Mary, slower and more candid in her thoughts, paused to consider.

'No, I don't,' she said at last. 'I think he'll find another affinity, for I've always felt certain that Mother belongs spiritually to someone else—to some big, simple, country squire, someone who'd pet her and make much of her, and read prayers in the evening, and hold her hand when they sit in the chimney corner.'

'Yet I suppose Daddy and she once vowed eternal devotion.'

'I suppose so. It's very sad. It puzzles me.'

'Personally I like our old grandfather's favourite motto: "Give me deeds, not words." At least three men have offered to die for me, but not one of them offered to clean my bicycle, which would have been devotion much more easily and pleasantly proved.'

Mary sighed and dipped her pen in the ink.

'I must finish this letter to Cousin Alice,' she said. 'What would she say if she could hear us talking? She always speaks of dead people in a hushed voice as if they were asleep on the sofa.'

'Yes, and it always annoyed Daddy so. Oh, Mary, I can't think of him as dead—he was so funny.'

Elizabeth rose and stretched. The house seemed very still. There was a footfall in their mother's room overhead, and the scrape of some heavy weight on the floor.

'What is Mother doing?' asked Mary.

'I don't know. I'm going to bed. Will you look in on her as you go up? You suit her better than I do.'

'Very well! Good-night!'

Elizabeth went upstairs in the dark. Economy demanded the saving of gas. She paused at the door of her father's room and listened. The silence seemed audible and throbbing.

'Good-night, Daddy,' she whispered, 'you're not dead, really. I don't believe it, and I'll miss you always . . . always.'

Suddenly the waves of a strange passionate pity overwhelmed her and she went to bed in a storm of tears.

While the girls were talking, their mother went softly to the top of the stairs and listened. The study door was shut. She would be alone for awhile. With a curious elation she returned to her bedroom and shut and locked her door. Then kneeling down, a little stiffly, she drew a tin box from under the bed. She

wore the key on a chain round her neck. In the box were legal papers and a few packets of letters. Eleanor put the letters on the bed and lighted a candle. Her face, in spite of its wrinkles, had some undeniable youthfulness about it. Her eyes were luminous, soft, like her daughter Mary's. There were no traces of tears about them.

The letters were collected in packets with elastic rings round them. The date was written on each, and several bore some little note, such as 'my birthday' or 'our first parting' or 'Christmas Day.' Several of the letters were brown, faded and torn. They had been worn inside a dress and read again and again until they were nearly in pieces.

One of the most ragged was the letter she selected now, bending her head over it so that her white hair gleamed in the candle-light.

'Dearest,' the letter said, 'I don't ask you to forgive me, because I don't think one can forgive where one loves. I know I hurt you to-night. I wanted to. That's what I can't understand—because I love you I want to hurt you. Love seems to me a ghastly, savage business, jealous, possessive, exacting. If half is from God the other half is from the devil, and the two war together.

'They war together in me, and I'm bewildered, horrified, scared by my own temperament, which is the battle-ground.

'I'm made that way—you saw it to-night. I made much of that silly girl; I seemed careless of you, indifferent. Even while you were as a goddess to me I was twitting you, neglecting you, showing off my irony and cynicism. I wanted to see you jealous. I was proud as Lucifer to see the trouble in your pretty eyes. I wanted to feel my mastery over you.

'Eleanor, dear—try to understand me. Try to love me with this ugly streak in me. I hate it, but I can't get rid of it. You're bound to see it often. Your own nature is simple, lucid, exquisitely kind, and trustful. My queerness will hurt you. Well, then, try to believe this: While I'm shocking you I'm adoring you. To-night as I went out with that simpleton of a girl, I turned on the drive to look back at you. You were framed in the light from the hall and you seemed to me like a statue of the Madonna.

'I can understand now why Mariolatry is such a force in Christendom. Mary is the type of all women loved and trusted, Mother and Virgin, infinitely above us, yet always bending to our

needs. You're that to me—religion, happiness, home, everything that can save me from outer darkness. Bend down from your shrine and pity me even if you can't forgive.

'Remember that the devils knew and worshipped goodness. So do I even when I'm devilish. So love me still, it's my one chance of Heaven.

'Yours in life and death,

'FRANCIS.'

Eleanor read this letter three times, then she put it down and gazed through tears at the candle till the flame seemed to blaze inside a fiery crown of thorns. The intensity of her concentration on an old memory made her see again the man who had gone home to write the letter. She saw him turn at the foot of the steps to look back at her. Unhappy, frightened as she had been by his caprices, his sarcasm, she had realized at that moment what she was to him. He had looked wistful as a soul shut out from Paradise, as a dog turned from a kindly door. His eyes had worshipped her in that sudden honouring glance. Diffident as she was, she had known it with a passion of love and gratitude.

To this man she spoke—she seemed to herself to speak aloud, but it was a voice in her mind only that spoke, her lips remained closed.

'Oh! Francis,' said the inward voice, 'it's not for me to forgive, I've failed too so much. Do you know, my dear, . . . if I'd loved you less I'd have done better, I'd have been wiser. I was so easily hurt . . . I couldn't take you lightly, gaily. I'm not clever as you are. I'm literal and dull . . . there's too much of the faithful sheep-dog about me. Men don't like that. Mabel Frazer understood you so well. I wasn't really jealous of her, Francis. She wasn't like Nina. I—oh! I've hated Nina. You loved her youth and prettiness, but she's a minx. She didn't love you. She just liked the flattery of your friendship because you're a well-known writer and she can tell people how well she knows you.

'I have been jealous of her. I've been cruelly, odiously jealous. I was jealous of Mabel Frazer too, but differently. I envied her the gifts that charmed you . . . her gay worldly wisdom, her lovely voice, her nice clothes. Yes, I see how I've failed you, my dearest, and yet I started with such high hopes. But love is so different from what girls think . . . it's so far harder, so much sterner . . . it asks everything of one—body, soul, and spirit. The spirit . . . that's the hard part. I used to think before we

married that I could stand any test, that I'd be faithful whatever you did. But I imagined impossible things, that you murdered or forged or something of that sort.

“ If thou wert scorned
I would kill my pride
And humble and outcast would live with thee,”

as the song says.

‘I used to love that poem about the knight who got leprosy and his lady followed him to the leper camp. Mother said it was morbid. But I almost envied the woman who'd a chance to do that. I would have done it for you.

‘But I never imagined the likely things, that you'd get a little bored with me. No! I'm not blaming you, Frank; you just couldn't help it. And when you felt ill you couldn't help being irritable—people always are, specially clever men who write as you do. Only I couldn't realise that you loved me. All that seemed to have gone, and the blank was too awful.’

Her eyes filled with tears that rolled over on to her clasped hands.

‘Doing without your love was too awful,’ she repeated. ‘I'd never imagined that. I'm not religious—not religious enough, I mean, and I feel nothing could make up for you—not God even, for your love and God had been all mixed up together in my mind. But one may have to do without. I see that now. Love is giving, not asking. I feel God keeps saying that. Girls think that love is passion and all the loveliness and romance of courtship. Those things are the outward signs, just as bands and flags and shouting crowds are the signs of patriotism; but the reality of patriotism lay in the long years of mud and horror in the trenches . . . the lice and rats and hunger and sleeplessness when all the glory had faded. Love is like that: love lies in the long years of feeling forgotten and on the shelf—it's the holding on in spite of everything. I see that, and I see where I've failed.’

The study door opened as Elizabeth came out and the mother listened acutely, her face young and frightened. She was fearful of interruption.

‘I don't want them to comfort me,’ she explained to the image of the young man she remembered; ‘they don't really understand. They didn't know *you*.’

She took another letter from her packet. On it was written ‘Our first parting.’ It was so brown and tattered with its long

pressure against her heart and its many readings that she had to hold the pieces together.

‘Since you left me,’ he wrote, ‘there seems a queer futility in everything. I can’t understand why the posters are concerned about agrarian trouble in Ireland or murder or sudden death. I expect every one of them to say “Eleanor has gone to Paris,” or “Eleanor has left England.”’

‘I’d never realised that one woman—not so very large, either—can dominate all the world. You’ll say this is lover’s nonsense. Yet haven’t I a name for cynicism? It’s just that I’m finding out the eternal verities and that I express them in the foolish terms of other men.

‘Truly I hadn’t expected such a blank. Now that there’s no chance of meeting you about the squares or the streets of this dull city I can see no romance or beauty anywhere. My intelligence still notes certain good bits of architecture, or fine effects of light and cloud, but the meaning seems to have gone. Beauty means you. Without you beauty only accentuates my loneliness.

‘I had a dream last night. Let me tell you, it was so wonderfully vivid.

‘Before I went to bed I was reading Dante—I want to rub up my Italian before our honeymoon in Italy; God speed the day! I went to sleep after midnight and I dreamt of you. I often do.

‘You were walking round a garden with another man, he was tall and fair. I waited for you by a fountain. I was so anxious for you to notice me. You came towards me. You were dressed in blue, and you’d a white rose in your pretty dark hair. You talked to the other man all the time, and when you were near me you looked up and met my eyes with utter unrecognition. You weren’t unkind, your eyes were sweet as they always are. Just you didn’t know me . . . had no response for me. Ah! it was ghastly. I woke up as terrified as a child in a nightmare.

‘Promise me that it can’t happen. I feel that I can’t lose you. Without you I think Heaven would torture me with its raptures. But I’m not a likely candidate for Heaven, am I? How long will they keep me in Purgatory? And will you wait? Whatever I do, will you wait for me? Will you be patient? Will you pray and hope? Will you, as Christina Rossetti says, “Watch the slow door, which letting in lets out no more”? Write to me. I’m terrified.’

Eleanor bent her head and kissed the letter. Again she spoke

in the voice of the spirit. 'It's you who'll have to wait for me now, Frank,' she said, and her eyes, looking at the flame of the candle, saw instead the man who had come to meet her on her return from Paris. All his welcome had been in his face, radiant as he caught sight of her. 'I've been waiting,' she explained, 'it's I who've been the lonely one. It was you who seemed to go away. I can't explain . . . but it was like your dream. You were here with me every day . . . but a stranger looked out of your eyes, someone who didn't know me or care for me.

'It terrified me too. That was why I was dull and timid and stupid. The strange, sarcastic you frightened me so. He seemed always belittling me. The other you was so different, so gentle, so courteous. It's ghastly to miss a person when he's there beside you. It's a worse loneliness than death or separation. If it hadn't been for these letters of yours I think I'd have been desperate. I'd have gone away, hidden somewhere out of your sight.

'Even so I was always thinking that Mabel Frazer was the right woman for you, that some day I'd have to give you up to her. I'll have to if it makes you happy, but she hasn't borne for you what I've borne. That's the test.

'I've loved you the most. I'm the mother of your children. Not Powers nor Principalities can take that from me.'

Eleanor's cheeks were flushed. Youth itself had never made her comelier. Her breath came quickly. Her eyes shone. Almost, it seemed, her love could conjure up the man who had won her undying faith. 'I'm stupid and obvious,' she pleaded, 'I know I am. I irritated you every day. But God will help me to be cleverer. I am the right woman for you, Francis. No one thought so. Some thought me too good, and some too dull. But I was only dull because you frightened me. When you're kind again I shall be gay and light-hearted as I used to be. I'd wait for you for a million years—two million, if only you'd love me, need me.

'My dearest, if you could speak to me, make some sign. If only you'd been conscious and able to give me some little hope before you died.'

There was no answer, but a breath of spring wind suddenly stirred the candle flame and blew the tattered letter against her hands. It seemed to her a sign and she took comfort. Still she knelt, trying desperately to break down the barrier of death.

A tap at the door recalled her almost violently to the realm of the actual.

'Who's there?' she asked.

'Me, Mother dear.'

'What is it, Mary?'

'I want you a minute.'

Eleanor rose from her knees, pushed the tin box under the bed, hid the letters under her eiderdown, and went to the door. She unlocked and opened it. Mary stood outside, anxiety and shyness in her eyes.

The two women were much alike—large, motherly, comely.

'What is it, dear?' asked the mother.

'I want to go to Daddy's room, but I don't like going alone. I want to say Good-night. Will you come?'

'Why, yes, of course I will.'

Mary had a candle. She gave it to her mother and let her lead the way into the dark room. The air was heavy and sweet with the scent of narcissus, white lilac and Bermuda lilies, a scent that seems strangely to mingle hope with sorrow and mourning, death with resurrection. The room was chilly, for the window was open behind the Venetian blind.

Eleanor put the candle on a table at the foot of the bed. The room seemed austere white and still, remote from daily life—and far removed from all the commonplace of the day was the figure barely outlined by the sheet.

The two women stood hand in hand. They were silent. Then Mary, moved by a sudden tender pity like Elizabeth's, began to cry. She went to the bedside, knelt down and prayed.

Eleanor still remained standing. Her face was illumined. Only in the young days of her married life had she looked so happy. Death was the threshold of new hope to her. In losing her husband she had found her lover. The white fragrant flowers were symbolic of bridal estate. This was her initiation into that cult of the dead which enchains so many women. Not prayer, but thanksgiving rose in her heart as she stood there.

Mary, deepened and transformed by her own happiness, felt a passion of pity for both her parents. An almost maternal tenderness was in her feeling for her mother. Rising from her knees she clasped Eleanor in her strong arms.

'Darling little Mother,' she whispered as she kissed her. Her thoughts said 'She has never known real love, she never will.' And the mother, as she kissed her daughter, thought 'She does not know real love yet—not as I know it.'

THE MUDDY VESTURE.

'Such harmony is in immortal souls ;
 But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.'

Merchant of Venice.

THE breakfast table was ready for the master. Daffodils in a blue bowl spoke of the spring, but Spring herself laughed through the open window, peeped through the blossoming almond tree and left her kisses with the wallflowers in the little suburban garden. The breakfast table was demure, orderly in spite of spring and the daffodils. A kindly foreign-looking coffee pot stood beside the delft cup, the marmalade jar which was Cantagalli waited beside the toast rack, and the chafing dish, lord of them all, kept guard over the bacon.

By the master's plate lay two circulars, a black-edged letter, a thin long envelope addressed in the writing of those who send out bills, and a square parchment envelope bearing the Alnwick post-mark.

At nine o'clock the master came in. He had a well-bathed, well-shaven air, but Spring, if she still peeped through the window, must have turned away at once and danced off to the next house where there was a perambulator in the garden. Spring saw nothing in Horace Gilchrist that could induce her to linger. His grey hair was making an orderly retreat from the top of his head. He looked at the world through double-sighted pince-nez that seemed sometimes to magnify his eyes to an almost horrified wonder at what he saw, at other times to give him a shining benignity. He was tall but loose-limbed, 'a straggly sort of man,' said his friends.

He had many friends of the second degree, people who liked to say that they knew Horace Gilchrist, the author of 'those nice personal sort of books.' He was useful at dinner parties, for he was always kindly and polite. For a lion, and he really was a lion in his way, his roaring was dove-like.

But the young women and the matrons and the old ladies who loved his books and collected them, rarely failed to express their disappointment when the lion was out of hearing.

'Oh! he isn't *one bit* what I expected. Somehow he's quite

different from his books. I don't think I'll like them quite so much now that I've seen him.'

Gilchrist knew at once that his readers were disappointed. Of course they were. When we read gay gallant words about life, humorous accounts of its adventures, deep thoughts about the spirit of man, we naturally expect that the writer will himself look gay and gallant. Those who write beautiful books ought, quite obviously, to be beautiful themselves. A man who exalts our spirits by his printed words should likewise satisfy our eyes by the plenitude of his hair, the classical rectitude of his features, and the dark decision of his eyebrows. Gilchrist knew that in spite of his really excellent selling capacity he was something of a failure. His friends, those friends of the second degree, somehow let him see it. Of course they welcomed him. Anyone who had a sick dog consulted him; and ladies who were claiming rebate on their income-tax and wanted advice remembered him and asked him to tea. There were many men who really liked him, but he was a poor sportsman and he knew it with shame. Diffidence and bad sight ruined his tennis and made his golf a poor affair at best. Yet, in spite of that, men liked him. He was a fisherman and every year he went to the Cotswolds and fished the streams about Andoversford and Frogmill. Perhaps he liked the sunny Cotswold fields, the little stone houses, the purple attire of the Greater Cranesbill in its glory against the grey stone walls; perhaps he liked these things even better than the fish he caught. He would not shoot. He could not, in his odd way, imagine anything but self-disgust in the sudden destruction of the beautiful living mechanism of stag or pheasant or hare. The live thing was lovely to him, the dead one simply repellent in its limp, bloody decease. But for this sensitive whim he blamed himself. And even while his publisher's advertisements proclaimed his success he thought of himself as a failure. He had passed fifty and he was a failure.

He looked round the orderly little dining-room. Once it had known his mother. But no other woman had made her presence felt there in either beauty or ugliness. The staid little suburban house had been his home for twenty-five years, but it had no traditions, no tender memories except of the mother who used to sit in the window and knit.

Two women had refused to marry him, refused in a kindly, sisterly sort of way that might have taken the sting out of the rejection, but that in fact left him too much discouraged ever to try again. His was 'not that sort.'

He looked at the illustrations in popular magazines and realised that other chins and other jaws than his were the fashion. No! that gay normal magazine world had no welcome for him.

Thoughts like these came to him as he poured out his coffee and helped himself to bacon. He glanced at the paper, but the world was still upside down and the Irish were still ruining their own country. And, after all, the tottering of civilisation does not upset the coffee cups of the safe and orderly. Every man's life is his own world. The fall of dynasties is less important to him than his golf handicap.

Gilchrist put down the paper and picked up the square envelope. He slit it delicately with a knife. Then he leaned back in his chair and read it.

He looked up with a smile and for the first time he noticed the daffodils and beyond the open window the blossoming almond, so exquisite against the sky.

'Have you realised,' asked the writer, 'that spring is here? Our northern winter is so long, our east winds are so bitter that spring comes later to us; but the thorns are in blossom, the crocuses in my garden laugh at me every time I go out to look at them; the hepaticas are flowering in their own corner. I have a mind to send you a box of my flowers just for greeting. But why should I? You see them all. Yesterday you walked with me through the town, our dear old grey town. You would stop to look at the Castle, "the most beautiful Castle in the world" you called it. I could hardly drag you away to walk down the hill and across the bridge where the old Percy lion stands, his tail as stiff as a pointer's, ready to lash it if he smells a Scot.

'And we stood, you and I, to look up and down the Aln, the river of my heart. The dogwood is vivid red and the willows are a light vandyke brown. Spring is here, but she's hiding in the undergrowth. Then we walked through the meadows by the river that you might see the Castle in its sunny afternoon mood. It has more moods than any lady in the land, but they are all beautiful, which few ladies can say of their moods. And I brought you to the little copse where soon the anemones will hang their lovely heads.

'It was a long walk, but you are a good walker, I know. You found you couldn't tire me. I brought you to Peter's Mill and we wondered who Peter was, and if he still haunts the stepping stones, and you said he was fat and jolly and wore a white

waistcoat and a white hat, and had a warm heart for all the lovers that walk to his mill on Sunday afternoon. And I agreed.

'We talked a lot; not very deep talk, but just careless, pleasant, sunny talk, like some of your essays, "Spring Morning" and "Strolling." Of course Waggles was with us. It's his favourite walk, for he, like Bacon, admires "Dampishnesse" in a garden, and as I have no pond he loves the river walk and the water-hens that explode and cackle under his blunt brown nose.

'You came back to tea with me! I'd made a seed cake in the morning. You said you loved seed cake, but still you gave several bits to Waggles to balance on his nose. Then you said you had proofs to correct and away you went. I stood at my door to watch you go. And I called good-bye as I do now.

'Yours,

'RICHENDA FORSTER.'

Horace Gilchrist laid the letter down and gazed abstractedly through the upper part of his eye-glasses. He was creating a vision of the writer of the letter, the unknown, the beloved, his 'lady of the north' as he called her. For fifty years had not robbed him of that sentimentalism which sold his books in thousands to the sentimental British public.

For two years she had been writing to him and he to her. The correspondence had begun with one of those letters from a grateful reader (re-addressed by a publisher's clerk) that bring pleasure or dismay to most authors. Gilchrist received hundreds of them, for his books were personal, sympathetic and full of that self-analysis which draws excited cries from the reader, 'Yes, that is how I feel! How do you know that is what I think? How true you are, how well you know human nature!'

Gilchrist replied punctiliously to all his letters, but the warmest, kindest answer was addressed to Miss Richenda Forster, Cheviot Cottage, Alnwick. And when she wrote again he was glad and answered her on two sheets of grey paper, moreover he kept her letters in a box labelled 'Miss Richenda Forster.' Perhaps he liked her rare old English name, or perhaps it was her writing, or more likely it was the intimacy, gay, childlike, trustful, of her letters.

The correspondence continued; it grew. The letters came once a fortnight, then once a week. The days between were dull to Gilchrist. His thoughts wrote pages to her when he should have been cudgelling his brains for more self-revelations to sell

to his readers at seven-and-sixpence a volume. Her opinion of his essays became supremely important to him. He inquired the day of her birth and sent her the complete edition of his works. He asked her for a photograph and she sent him a minute snapshot of an almost invisible lady in a garden with a spaniel in the foreground. Even a magnifying glass did not enlighten him. Mystery was her charm. She was his *Inconnue*. Gilchrist had read the *Lettres à l'Inconnue* and had yearned to find so faithful a correspondent. Now he had her, a sort of fairy lady, gay, alluring, but always invisible. He had made a picture of her in his mind. It was necessary to write to a person he could see, so he had clothed his dream lady in the flesh. She had told him with lovable frankness that she was only just on the hither side of fifty. She too had lived her life, and she too had realised the truth of another writer: 'all my life has been leading up to something that has never happened.' She was lost, as Gilchrist was, in the wood of the world. But now they had joined hands and they could laugh and cry together, could make fun of the darkness, the loneliness of the way. It was strange, he thought, how clear her image had grown to him; the tall, slight woman, plainly, even a little shabbily dressed, for she was poor, did she not make jumpers to increase her small income? Her hair was grey now, wavy silver hair that she brushed back from a wide forehead to the knot of darker hair at her neck. And she had laughing blue eyes and level brows that she would knit when deep in thought. There would be wrinkles of course, crowsfeet about her eyes because they smiled so often, and a little wrinkle of laughter at her mouth.

Always when she wrote to him he saw her like this, and saw too the cottage where she lived and the open glass door into her little garden. He had suggested going to see her but she had forbidden it almost fiercely and he had been content with the dream friendship, for dreams had been kinder to him than had reality, that severe schoolmistress. His elusive lady could not be more real to him, he thought, for she came to him in the spirit. The merry, charming spirit had no hindrances, none of the curious shyness that seems to belong to the flesh. And yet he longed to see her. How gracefully she would do the little daily things of life, pouring out the tea, dusting her china, watering her flowers. He wished that he might see her once.

Then something recalled his mind to the black-edged envelope that he had not opened, and he looked at it. It contained news

of the death of an old uncle who lived at Newcastle-on-Tyne. He had gone there to be with a married daughter and there he had died and would be buried. Gilchrist remembered the old man kindly. He would honour his memory by going to his funeral in the far Northumbrian town. When he was there he would be in the same county as his beloved. She had spoken of journeys to Newcastle. The resolution roused him to sudden action and he went out of the room to pack his bag.

The funeral was over. There was a chastened cheerfulness in the air. An old man full of years and honour had been laid to rest in the sunny cemetery, and the Church of his country had received him and buried him with that splendid dignity of hope that she accords to saint and sinner in this last earthly act.

The blinds were up and Gilchrist was talking in a subdued voice to his cousin. He was asking, almost to his own surprise, about the trains for Alnwick. Yes, there was a train that would leave him there in the early afternoon. Had he friends there? His voice replied in spite of himself that he had a friend he thought of looking up. So in a moment he was launched on the great adventure. He felt himself thrill with a slightly apprehensive excitement. Is it wise to pursue mystery to her secret place? Is achievement the fair reward of pursuit? He wondered, but yet he risked the quest.

Even as he took his ticket he doubted his venture a little. But the day was one of those reckless spring days when romance quickens the feeblest pulses. He had always been cautious. This time he determined to be rash. He was too much excited to read his paper. All his attention was given to the passing Northumbrian country, dull at first, then growing more beautiful, more wild as it drew nearer to the Borderland. Here was Alnmouth, that sandy, wind-blown pleasure town; he was drawing near the end of his journey. Then Alnwick took his eyes and ears, and he was down upon the platform, wondering if he should leave his bag in the cloak-room or take it to an hotel, for he intended to stay the night. Finally, the bag went to the cloak-room and he took his way unburdened. A porter directed him towards the road he named. It did not lie near the castle but towards the newer part of the old, grey town.

He was disappointed by the dull little streets he passed, but at last he reached a suburban road with the name he sought. It was

not as he had seen it in dreams, but still it was her road and he might meet her now at any moment. He had no doubt at all that he should know her. That electrical current of friendship would surely make itself felt if they met. He had imagined her as a Diana of the Uplands, with thirty years added to her youth, and for such a woman he looked eagerly as he passed the staid little houses with their pompous names,—‘Avallon,’ ‘Kia Ora,’ ‘Cintra,’ Sutton Lodge. But he saw no one of the graceful slenderness of his Lady of the North. He was absurdly thrilled by excitement. An elderly gentleman in large double-sighted eyeglasses that peered or beamed at passers-by! Who could have suspected him of having reached the inner sanctuary of romance?

Cheviot Cottage! He was there at last. The garden gate stood open, the crocuses seemed to laugh up at him. A mezerion was in full, purple bloom and the prunus was scattering largess of blossom on the grass.

He rang the bell. He was a little breathless when a small maid came to the door.

‘Miss Forster?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir. Will you come this way?’

He followed her to the drawing-room, feeling that the whole affair was a dream.

‘Will you say Mr. Gilchrist is here,’ he told the rather bewildered maiden. She disappeared. He was alone. Like Aladdin in the magic cave, so did Mr. Gilchrist survey his surroundings.

The grey walls and the old prints were pleasing to his eyes. He liked the shelves of books, the copper, the old china, the Sheraton card table and chairs, the Dutch clock. But still he was bewildered, for in his mind he had seen it differently. He compared it with a dream room and found it wanting. There was the glass door that opened into the garden, but the garden was an ordinary little place after all. The romance of it had been woven out of her own mind. He felt as disillusioned as a child who walks across the stage and sees the trickery of the theatre.

But the door had opened behind him and he turned round quickly. A short, middle-aged woman, in a brown coat and skirt and a plain brown hat, stood before him. Her round cheeks were flushed with the rather hard colour of maturity. Her brown eyes, kind eyes they were, had lost the soft radiance of girlhood. She looked at him with a question on her lips.

'I'm sorry, I don't think my maid heard your name properly. She said Mr. Gilliland.'

He looked at her, his eyes magnified and amazed by his partitioned glasses.

'Gilchrist,' he explained, 'Horace Gilchrist. I came to see Miss Richenda Forster. Is she at home?'

They stood and stared at each other.

'Yes, I'm Richenda Forster,' said the short lady.

Then he roused himself. Convention is the social angel who, of all the angelic force, is the strongest to save us from the savage rudeness of our own hearts. His Lady of the North was slain. Worse, she had never lived. She was a lovely ghost who had been laid for ever by this stubby, kindly little person in brown. Yet he clung desperately to his manners. He forced a smile.

'Then we meet at last,' he said, and held out his hand.

But Miss Richenda failed. The wings of the angel Convention could not hide her stricken face.

'Oh!' she cried, 'why did you come? You've spoiled everything.'

'Nonsense! I've come to realise a dream, and you must help me. I've looked at your garden already, seen the crocuses; and come! Surely there's some of that seed cake left that I enjoyed so much the other day?'

She clasped her hands sorrowfully.

'Oh! it's stale, but you shall have it,' she answered and lifted shy, questioning eyes to his. What she sought she did not find, but she met a polite smile, and with a desperate effort she clutched Convention's outstretched hand and met the occasion.

They talked together by the tea-table in set little questions and answers. He exhorted himself desperately to see in her—not a miserable disillusion, but a pleasant little stranger. She was really very pleasant he found; intelligent, humorous, sympathetic.

'You are staying the night?' she asked.

He had meant to stay, foreseeing an enchanted firelit evening with his unknown lady. But now his only idea was instant flight. He pleaded the necessity of immediate return to London. He had proofs to correct. The excuse was thin and he knew it.

'But you must show me your magic castle, and the Percy Lion and the Aln—and what about Peter's Mill?'

She shrank from the idea.

'No, not all those places. They might disappoint you. We'll

just walk to the Castle gate and you shall see Hotspur Tower. There won't be time for much before your train.'

When they walked through the town he tried to keep his mind on the historical facts that she related to him, but a saying of his Irish housekeeper's would steal into his mind: 'She was a little butt of a woman, so she was.' And the little butt of a woman had slain his visionary lady.

He knew that the letters of his *inconnue* could never be the same to him again. And inwardly he cried out against the irony of Fate that clothes our gracious spirits in forms that are too often uncouth or unwieldy. Why, he asked, may not spirit express itself in worthy form and colour? Why these grotesque misfits of mind and body? He had no doubt that his companion was charming, poetic, all that her letters had revealed, yet he could only see the stunted figure, the lined face, the tired eyes. And in spite of himself, his voice and his eyes betrayed him. They were unresponsive, a little hard and cold. At their heels trotted Waggles. He, poor dog, had lost the literary grace that he wore so pleasantly in her letters. Reality revealed him as a stout, elderly spaniel with tearful, staring eyes. Melancholy seemed to have made him her own, for he gazed at the stranger with a face of tragedy. He seemed to have realised the sorrow that lurks for dogs and men in the passing of the years. But like a philosopher he contented himself with the trivial, and gave his mind to a large stone which he carried along the road as if it were indeed that far-famed philosopher's stone.

Gilchrist was intensely relieved when he found himself in the train waiting for the whistle that should carry him away from disillusion. But yet at this moment of parting from Miss Forster he felt that strange tenderness that we feel even for our enemies when we say good-bye. For this kind little woman, even though she had slain his visionary lady, he felt a sudden gust of affection.

'You'll keep up the letters,' he said, clasping her hand through the open window.

Her eyes met his in a straight long look.

'You shouldn't have come,' she said. 'I knew it would be like this. Men are such children. You've come too close to the stage and you're disappointed.'

The guard's whistle silenced any answer he could have made. He was trying to say 'Nonsense' against his conviction that she spoke the truth. Middle-aged women have a *flair* of uncomfortable

truths. The guard was wise to whistle. The train steamed out and Miss Forster and her spaniel turned away, slowly, sorrowfully, from the platform.

Gilchrist was scrupulous about his weekly letters to Alnwick. They had grown shorter, but he pleaded his preoccupation with proofs and a new book that required the racking of his brains. Her letters were few and short. They had lost the April freshness and gaiety that, in spite of her years, had charmed him. He felt vaguely that he had lost something, had, perhaps, spoilt it for himself. But he threw himself into his work and arranged for a holiday in Switzerland that was to refresh and distract him.

He sent several postcards to Alnwick from the places that pleased him most. And he often meant to write long letters but he never did, for to his own surprise he was always tired in the evenings. The holiday was a failure in many ways. He found himself older, weaker, more dispirited than he had known. Indeed, he was so unwell that on his return home in the autumn he went to see his doctor and his own doctor sent him to another in London. This was an ordeal to Gilchrist, and he waited for the verdict as a prisoner waits for the judge's black cap. He found himself staring, almost speechless, at the great man.

'There's nothing to worry about, Mr. Gilchrist,' he heard, with doubt still in his heart, 'it's merely a warning to be careful. All through life we get these warnings. Your heart is tired and you've got to treat it considerately. Miss your train rather than run for it. Never hurry yourself and don't worry. You bachelors escape the worry when you're young but now you begin to feel your loss. I'd like to hear that you'd found a wife to look after you . . . not to nurse you, bless me, no! But just to caution you as wives do. How long? Oh! you'll give us several more delightful books . . . if you go slow. But the warning is there. No hurry and no worry . . . that's your watchword. Ah, thanks! Good-bye, Mr. Gilchrist. I see your new book is announced in the autumn lists.'

Gilchrist wandered away. There was no one to whom he could go with his news, yet he wanted absurdly to go to some friend, to see sympathy, anxiety in his eyes. He longed to feel the strong reinforcement of friendship. He wanted an oak-tree of a friend. He thought of all his acquaintances, but there was no one for whom he felt an intimate need. After some wandering he found himself near a church and went in, solaced by the rich gloom of the interior. He knelt there speechless, reaching not

for help. With quick sensitive imagination he saw himself through a slow and weary decline, a lonely death and an exit that wouldn't wring a tear from man or woman. He was intensely sorry for himself. He longed to rest on lasting things, verities, eternal hopes, strongly enduring devotions. London with its youth, its change, its hurry seemed to him mockingly cruel. He went home to Wimbledon.

When he reached his little house in the dusk of a chilly autumn evening he found scant comfort. A temporary housekeeper had replaced the invaluable Mrs. Martin who was nursing a delicate daughter. The new woman did not know his ways. His dinner was unappetising and badly served. The fire in his study was nearly out. He could have cried with peevish distress. He dragged his chair close up to the fender and sat there alone with his thoughts. He was frightened and very unhappy. The last post brought a bill, but no friendly word from anyone. There had been no letter from Alnwick for three weeks. He had not written himself.

His mind turned to Richenda Forster, but this time he thought only of the real woman. He could see the actual room where she sat, he could picture her before her fire. There was no illusion this time. He thought of a reality. And suddenly, strangely, a flood of homesickness overwhelmed him. She would understand. She saw life as it was, with its limitations, its failures, its sorry attempt to reach the high planes of the spirit. She had wisdom and humour, her letters had been young with a youth that is eternal. She would give him hope and strength. Perhaps his dream lady, bewitching as she was, would not have been quite so tender, so understanding. The real Richenda knew what it was to feel old and ugly and a failure. She would let him sit by the fire and hug the physical comfort. She would not expect much of him. The idea of her flooded his soul with warmth. He felt like a schoolboy longing for his mother. He stood up, determined to write to her, but he was ill and tired. He would wait for the morning and then he would go to her. He picked up the A.B.C. guide and began to look for trains.

The wind swept down from the Cheviots and rushed across the Border country, as in old days the Scots came rushing into Northumberland. Old Cheviot was bonneted in cloud, and gusts of rain swept the placid waters of the Aln. The dead beech leaves whirled and danced about Richenda Forster's feet as she walked in the Duke's park, and Waggles, exhilarated to frenzy, ran and

barked among the drifted russet and sienna of the leaves. To take the dog out was one of her unflinching duties, for duty with a very big 'D' ruled her life. She was loyal to all her affections and trusts with a thoughtful, energetic loyalty that could admit no failure and no slackening. Love, to her, meant something painstaking, careful, that must never tire or weaken, that must never know caprice or weariness. The novels that she borrowed from her librarian-stationer amazed her by their outlook. To the new novelists love seemed to be nothing but an obsession, a mania that swept aside duty and let itself be carried away on a flood of selfish indulgence. So, in serious way, she expressed their point of view. The lovers thought of their *own* fulfilment, their *own* development. Of the responsibility, the duty of love they seemed not to think at all. That the ending was, so often, weariness, satiety, divorce, she did not wonder.

'I don't think they know what love means,' she said seriously to her friends, who smiled, perhaps, that a little old maid could talk so certainly of the meaning of love.

But perhaps Miss Forster knew more than they guessed. To-day, as she walked through the drifted, rustling leaves, her thoughts turned about Gilchrist. From the time he had first written to her she had given him a shrine in her heart. He was different from all other men. He was not better. No! she had admired others more. But he was different. She could not explain it to herself. He was hers because she loved him in a fashion beyond her own understanding. She knew all his faults. She had seen some in his books—his sentimentalism, that slight hint of futility that he felt so keenly in himself and tried so bravely to conceal. She had seen others in him the day he called upon her—his limitations, his failure to hide his feelings. Yet she loved him with gravity and yet with humour. She had her own faults. Why, then, should she carp at his? If love is not strong enough to hope, believe, endure all things, it is indeed the tinkling cymbal of St. Paul. She gave her love freely, faithfully, for she accepted the fact that her appearance had lost her his devotion. He had loved another woman, a dream. Richenda was better than the dream: she knew it. But she did not expect Horace Gilchrist to know it. He would never know it here in a world where parcels are valued by their outer wrapping and string. To her own clearer vision she would be true. Always she would love the plain, fallible, sensitive, lonely person who was called Horace Gilchrist. She felt vaguely that he would need her some time, and if he did she would

be ready to serve him—she knew not how. Meanwhile she would live her own decorous, dutiful life, and would laugh to herself at the humours and ironies of Fate, for only so may we, the victims, prove ourselves victorious over the victor. The mocker may be mocked. So with a smile Miss Forster took her homeward way.

In the same dutiful way that she had walked she changed her dress for tea. She determined to wear the new black velvet rest gown that she had trimmed with silver fur, and she put on her mother's string of Venetian beads: they were gay and lovely, and for her own delight she wore them.

When her lamp was lighted she settled herself by the fire to do the knitting that helped her slender income and made her a regular contributor to various charities. Waggles lay near her feet, enjoying both the physical warmth of the fire and the spiritual warmth of companionship. But when he was forced to choose he always preferred the spirit warmth and followed his mistress to cold rooms, but the divorce of body and soul cost him something. He, too, knew love as duty and would not, one fancies, have understood the more pagan neo-Georgian novels. The clock ticked, the needles clicked, Waggles snored a little, but life went on with that sense of nothing happening which makes existence for most people. Then the bell rang.

'It must be the parcel from the dyer's,' thought Miss Forster.

The little maid answered a man's voice in the hall. Unexpectedly the door was opened.

'Mr. Gilchrist,' said the little maid.

Richenda turned; her silk skeins hindered her from rising from her low chair.

'Don't get up,' he said. 'I want you to sit there.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Oh, I'll tell you! Don't talk about tea yet. Presently, perhaps. Here's a chair; don't trouble.'

He sat down and leaned forward. The lamplight gleamed on his glasses.

'Richenda,' he said, 'I've come because I had to. I'm a failure. I was never really good at anything. Tennis and golf, the things that matter . . . I'm really rotten at. I won't pretend. I'm a muddler. Writing . . . no, my books aren't worth anything. Anyway, what *are* books? Just heavy packets of paper that won't even burn when one sticks them on the fire. It's living, not writing, that counts. I've always despised writers. But I couldn't do anything else for my money.'

'Did you come just to tell me that?' she asked in surprise.

'Yes, chiefly. I just had to. There was no one else to tell. I'm a creak, too. I've got a heart that is getting troublesome. Presently I'll be ill and tiresome . . . and cross probably. People change when they're ill, don't they? I'm horribly lonely . . . that's why I thought of you. You were disappointed in me the last time—I'm a queer, straggly Guy Fawkes sort of a man. I know it. Only I thought you'd understand.'

He held out his hand shyly. She took it and held it in both of hers. Her eyes met his searchingly, then she smiled.

'But remember,' she said, 'I'm not your Lady of the North. You were as miserably disappointed with me as a little child when he gets the wrong presents at Christmas. You'd pictured someone graceful, beautiful, like a birch on a hillside.'

'I had.'

'Yes, I knew it. You'd been writing to her, not to me. You'd no use for me.'

'But it's you I want now. I'm frightened somehow. I want someone to face reality with me. I don't want the Lady of the North. I want you—just you. I don't want you to be different.'

'Face reality with you? I can do that. Plain women always face reality. What do you want?'

'Let me stay, or come to London with me. No, let me stay here with you.'

'You shall do just as you like.'

'You won't send me away, Richenda?'

'No, I won't send you away.'

'You'll marry me and keep me safe?'

Richenda smiled as mothers smile at their little sons.

'Yes, I shan't fail you,' she said; 'and now I'm going to ring for tea, because I can feel that you've had none.'

'Richenda!'

'Well, Horace?'

'Do you remember those lines in the *Merchant of Venice*?:

"Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."

Can you forgive me for my muddy vesture?'

'What of my own? Isn't that what love is for? To see through the muddy vesture? . . . Only love can see so far.'

W. M. LETTS.

nothing, and receive a glass of English gin or a mutchkin of ale in place of a supper. I was one of 180 soldiers billeted at the White Swan Inn in a town called Alton not twice as large as Haddington.

When in Ireland I was remarkably sober. When I received my wages I was in the practice of laying up the gold but always spent the silver, etc., with my comrades and messmates. This was my custom in Ireland and sometimes in Dominica, and when we were nearly leaving Dominica I had realased [realised] in all £30.10.8, and it being mostly all silver was both bulky and weighty and being ignorant of money business I asked Lieutenant Tomlinson to be so good as to keep it for me. He consented to do so with the provision that I was not to be paid till the expiry of eight months after landing in England; and as already observed we embarked on board Admiral Colpoys' squadron and when on board we sailed for Gibraltar, where we joined Lord Hood's fleet and cruised a considerable time on the French and Genoa coast. We were some time on that station and got a bit of a brush in the Gulf of Lyons by a gale. I should have observed that trusting to Lieutenant Tomlinson I was disappointed in regard to the promised payment. When I found that I could not receive my money from him in Liverpool, although I had dunned him a hundred times, I was obliged to be quiet because by this time—1792-3—he had managed to raise a company and was in consequence promoted to be Light Infantry captain, of which as a private I was one.

We were joined by the Spanish Fleet and I believe were in all more than 40 sail of the line, besides frigates, sloops and tenders. We cruised on the coasts of Genoa and France till August 28, and then stood in to a landing place a considerable distance from Toulon. We were on boats embarked on the *Robust*, at that time commanded by Commodore Elfingston, and the *Robust* pushed into the shore as the pilot advised. We were landed in boats without interruption. We marched through vinefields and the grapes were ripe and French girls brought us as we passed along bunches of fine black grapes which was new to British soldiers.

I have sat on the breast works in Mount Bruce and read a small edition of small print by moonlight of Shakespeare's plays.

A sickly-looking soldier somehow when in the ranks did not please Adjutant Russell who gave the man as good a beating as Paddy gave the drum. The man made application to a town medical man. It ended by the soldiers getting his discharge and the adjutant paid him 40 guineas to have the matter hushed up. This was a sore stroke to the usual tyranny but another plan was fallen on, viz., that any man who messed or bungled a motion at drill or parades or exercise or field-days was put prisoner

and tried by court-martial and flogged for what a man would be at present only drilled at most.

I believe the Duke of York, who was then commanding in chief, contributed greatly to the stop of the tyrannical practice of caning; but the French Revolution gave the death blow to caning because the officers found that the men they were in the practice of beating were to be their only defenders. So it was farewell to beating and a considerable scarcity of flogging on ship-board also; but soldiers must be tried by a court-martial before being punished and the evidence for and against must be sworn. So must the officers composing the court be sworn, and if the soldier appeals to the decision of a general court-martial I believe the officer commanding dare not refuse to transmit the appeal to the proper authorities, but of this I am not certain. But sailors and marines were brought to the grating without knowing what their crime was, and received 12 or more lashes on the shoulders with a cat-o'-nine-tails composed of strong whipcord and plenty knots on the end of each cord. I believe there are nine cords all separate from each other. I have seen a soldier receive 900 lashes, but I believe half that number would kill the strongest man in the fleet with the ship's cats.