

THE LATER LIFE

BY

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The Later Life

Chapter I

Van der Welcke woke that morning from a long, sound sleep and stretched himself luxuriously in the warmth of the sheets. But suddenly he remembered what he had been dreaming; and, as he did so, he gazed into the wardrobe-glass, in which he could just see himself from his pillow. A smile began to flicker about his curly moustache; his blue eyes lit up with merriment. The sheets, which still covered his body—he had flung his arms above his head—rose and fell with the ripple of his silent chuckles; and suddenly, irrepressibly, he burst into a loud guffaw:

“Addie!” he shouted, roaring with laughter. “Addie, are you up?... Addie, come here for a minute!”

The door between the two rooms opened; Addie entered.

“Addie!... Just imagine ... just imagine what I’ve been dreaming. It was at the seaside—Ostende or Scheveningen or somewhere—and everybody, everybody was going about ... half-naked ... their legs bare... and the rest beautifully dressed. The men had coloured shirts and light jackets and exquisite ties and straw hats, gloves and a stick in their hands ... and the rest ... the rest was stark naked. The ladies wore lovely blouses, magnificent hats, parasols ... and that was all!... And there was nothing in it, Addie, really there was nothing in it; it was all quite natural, quite proper, quite fashionable; and they walked about like that and sat on chairs and listened to the music!... And the fishermen ... the fishermen, Addie, went about like that too!... And the musicians ... in the bandstand ... were half-naked too; and ... the tails ... of their dress-coats ... hung down ... well ... like that!”

Van der Welcke, as he told his dream in broken sentences, lay shaking with laughter; his whole bed shook, the sheets rose and fell; he was red in the face, as if on the verge of choking; he wept as though consumed with grief; he gasped for breath, threw the bed-clothes off:

“Just imagine it ... just imagine it ... you never ... you never saw such a stretch of sands as that!”

Addie had begun by listening with his usual serious face; but, when he saw his father crying and gasping for breath, rolling about in the bed, and when the vision of those sands became clearer to his imagination, he also was seized with irresistible laughter. But he had one peculiarity, that he could not laugh outright, but, shaken with internal merriment, would laugh in his stomach without uttering a sound; and he now sat on the edge of his father’s bed, rocking with silent laughter as the bed rocked under him. He tried not to look at his father, for, when he saw his father’s face, distorted and purple with his paroxysms of laughter, lying on the white pillow

like the mask of some faun, he had to make agonized clutches at his stomach and, bent double, to try to laugh outright; and he couldn't, he couldn't.

"Doesn't it ... doesn't it ... strike you as funny?" asked Van der Welcke, hearing no sound of laughter from his son.

And he looked at Addie and, suddenly remembering that Addie could never roar with laughter out loud, he became still merrier at the sight of his poor boy's silent throes, his noiseless stomach-laugh, until his own laughter rang through the room, echoing back from the walls, filling the whole room with loud Homeric mirth.

"Oh, Father, stop!" said Addie at last, a little relieved by his internal paroxysms, the tears streaming in wet streaks down his face.

And he heaved a sigh of despair that he could not laugh like his father.

"Give me a pencil and paper," said Van der Welcke, "and I'll draw you my dream."

But Addie was very severe and shocked:

"No, Father, that won't do! That'll never do.... it'd be a vulgar drawing!"

And his son's chaste seriousness worked to such an extent upon Van der Welcke's easily tickled nerves that he began roaring once more at Addie's indignation....

Truitje was prowling about the passage, knocking at all the doors, not knowing where Addie was:

"Are you up, Master Addie?"

"Yes," cried Addie. "Wait a minute."

He went to the door:

"What is it?"

"A telegram ... from the mistress, I expect...."

"Here."

He took the telegram, shut the door again.

"From Mamma?" asked Van der Welcke.

"Sure to be. Yes, from Paris: 'J'arrive ce soir.'"

Van der Welcke grew serious:

"And high time too. What business had Mamma to go rushing abroad like that?... One'd think we were well off.... What did you do about those bills, Addie?"

"I went to the shops and said that mevrouw was out of town and that they'd have to wait."

"I see. That's all right.... Can you meet Mamma at the station?"

"Yes. The train's due at six.... Then we'll have dinner afterwards, with Mamma."

"I don't know.... I think I'd better dine at the club."

"Come, Father, don't be silly!"

"No," said Van der Welcke, crossly, "don't bother me. I'll stay on at the Witte."

"But don't you see that means starting off with a manifestation? Whereas, if you wait in for Mamma peacefully and we all have dinner together, then things'll come right of themselves. That'll be much easier than if you go staying out at once: Mamma would only think it rude."

"Rude?... Rude?..."

"Well, there's nothing to flare up about! And you just come home to dinner. Then you'll be on the right side."

"I'll think it over. If I don't look out, you'll be bossing me altogether."

"Well, then, don't mind me, stay at the Witte."

"Oho! So you're offended, young man?"

"Oh, no! I'd rather you came home, of course; but, if you prefer to dine at the Witte, do."

"Dearly-beloved son!" said Van der Welcke, throwing out his hands with a comical gesture of resignation. "Your father will obey your sapient wishes."

"Fond Father, I thank you. But I must be off to school now."

"Good-bye, then ... and you'd better forget those sands."

They both exploded and Addie hurried away and vanished, shaking with his painful stomach-laugh, while he heard Van der Welcke break into a fresh guffaw:

"He can laugh!" thought the boy.

Chapter II

Van der Welcke had dressed and breakfasted and, because he felt bored, took his bicycle and went for a long ride by himself. He was very often bored these days, now that Addie was working hard at the grammar-school. Without his boy, he seemed at once to have nothing to do, no object in life; he could see no reason for his existence. He would smoke endless cigarettes in his den, or go bicycling, or turn up once in a way at the Plaats, once in a way at the Witte; but he did not go to either of his clubs as often as he used to. He saw much less of his friends, his friends of former days, the men of birth and position who had all won fame in their respective spheres, though Van Vreeswijck continued his visits regularly, appreciating the cosy little dinners. Van der Welcke generally felt lonely and stranded, found his own company more and more boring from day to day; and it was only when he saw his boy come back from school that he cheered up, enjoyed life, was glad and lively as a child.

He loved the quick movement of it; and he cycled and cycled along the lonely, chill, windy country-roads, aiming at no destination, just pedalling away for the sake of speed, for the sake of covering the ground. If he were only rich: then he'd have a motor-car! There was nothing like a motor-car! A motor-car made up for this rotten, stodgy, boring life. To rush along the smooth roads in your car, to let her rip: tock, tock, tock, tock, tock-tock-tock-tock! Ha!... Ha!... That would be grand! Suppose his father were to make him a present of a car.... Ha!... Tock-tock-tock-tock!... And, as he spurred along, he suggested to himself the frantic orgy of speed of a puffing, snorting motor-car, the acrid stench of its petrol-fumes, the ready obedience of the pneumatic-tyred wheels while the car flew through the dust like a storm-chariot over the clouds. It made him poetic—tock-tock-tock-tock, tock-tock-tock-tock—but, as long as his father lived, he would never have enough money to buy himself a decent car!

Life was stodgy, rotten, boring.... If only Addie had finished school! But then ... then he would have to go to the university ... and into the diplomatic service.... No, no, the older his boy grew, the less he would see of him.... How wretched it all was: he did not know whether to wish that Addie was older or not!... To think, it wasn't a year ago since the child used to sit on his knee, with his cheek against his father's, his arm round his father's neck; and Van der Welcke would feel that slight and yet sturdy frame against his heart; and now ... now already he was a lad, a chap with a deep voice, who ruled his father with a rod of iron! Yes, Van der Welcke was simply ruled by him: there was no getting away from it! Suppose he wanted to stay and dine at the Witte that night: why the blazes shouldn't he? And he knew as sure as anything that he wouldn't! He would come home like a good little boy, because Addie had rather he did, because otherwise Addie would look upon it as a

manifestation against Constance.... She too was coming back, after Addie had written that it really wouldn't do, financially. She had run away like a madwoman, two months ago, after that pleasant business at the last Sunday-evening which they had spent at Mamma van Lowe's, after the furious scene which she had made him, Van der Welcke, because he wanted to hit their brother-in-law, Van Naghel, in the face. Mind, it was for her, for his wife's sake, that he wanted to hit Van Naghel in the face. For her sake, because that pompous ass had dared to say that he wasn't keen on Constance calling on Bertha's at-home day ... but that in other respects they were brothers and sisters! The disgusting snob! That old woman, that non-entity, that rotter, that twopenny-halfpenny cabinet-minister, who had got on simply because old Van Lowe, in his day, had kicked him upstairs step by step!... Van der Welcke was still furious when he thought of the fellow, with his smooth face and his namby-pamby speeches. He hadn't been able to control himself that time: his wife, at any rate, was his wife; his wife was Baroness van der Welcke; and he couldn't stand it, that they should insult his wife and before his face too; and, if Paul had not prevented him, he would have struck the snobbish ass in the face, thrashed him, thrashed him, thrashed him! His blood still boiled at the thought of it.... Well, there it was! Paul had held him back ... but still, he would have liked to challenge the fellow, to have fought a duel with him!... He grinned—pedalling like mad, bending over like a record-breaker at the last lap of a bicycle-race—he grinned now when he thought of the despair of the whole family, because their revered brother-in-law Van Naghel, "his excellency," whom they all looked up to with such reverence, might have to fight a duel with a brother-in-law who was already viewed with sufficient disfavour at the Hague!... Well, it hadn't come off. They had all interfered; but it wasn't for that reason, but because dear old Mamma van Lowe had taken to her bed—and also for Addie's sake—that he had not insisted on the duel. Yes, those Dutchmen: they never wanted to fight if they could help it! He, Van der Welcke, would have liked to fight, though Van Naghel had been a thousand times his brother-in-law, a thousand times colonial secretary. And it wasn't only that the whole family had thought the very idea of a duel so dreadful; but his wise son had interfered, had taken up a very severe attitude to his father, had reproached him because he—still "a young man," as Addie put it in his amusing way—wanted to insult and strike a man of Uncle van Naghel's age, even though it was for Mamma's sake! And Addie had gone to Frans van Naghel, the eldest son, the undergraduate, of whom he was very fond; and Frans was furious, wanted to take his father's place and fight in his stead. But Addie had said that Papa was in the wrong, that Papa had lost his self-control; and he had calmed Frans and told him, his father, positively, that it was his, Van der Welcke's, duty to apologize to Uncle van Naghel! That boy, that boy, thought Van der Welcke, thinking half-angrily of his son's perpetual tutelage. It was really too silly: if he didn't look out, the brat would twist him round

his little finger entirely. A little chap like that, a schoolboy of fourteen ... and yet the beggar had managed so that Frans did not challenge Van der Welcke and that Van der Welcke had sent Van Naghel a note of apology, a note the thought of which made him boil even now, made him rant and curse at the thought that he had let himself be persuaded by the fourteen-year-old schoolboy. And then he had had to express his regret to Mamma van Lowe into the bargain; but that he didn't mind, for she was an old dear and he thought it too bad that the wretched affair should have made her ill. And so the fourteen-year-old schoolboy had succeeded in hushing up a Hague scandal, just like a grown-up man.... When you came to think of it, it was simply absurd, incredible; you would never have believed it if you read it in a book; and it was the positive truth: the schoolboy had prevented the cabinet-minister or his son from fighting a duel with the schoolboy's father!... And now Van der Welcke had to choke with laughter at the thought of it; and, as he spurted along the roads, like a professional, with his back bent into an arch, he roared with laughter all by himself and thought:

"Lord, what an extraordinary beggar he is!"

But the boy's mother, after scene upon scene with him, the father; his mother, furious that her husband should have dared to raise his hand against that revered brother-in-law, "his excellency;" his mother, driven out of her senses, with every nerve on edge after all that she had had to endure that Sunday: his mother the boy had not been able to restrain; a woman is always more difficult to manage than a man; a mother is not half so easy as a father! Constance, after one of those scenes which followed one upon the other as long as the atmosphere remained charged with electricity, had said:

"I'm sick of it all; I'm going away; I'm going abroad!"

And even the fact that she was leaving her son behind her did not bring her to reason. She packed her trunks, told Truitje to keep house for the master and Master Addie as she herself used to and went away, almost insolently, hardly even saying good-bye to Addie.... They thought at first that she would do something rash, goodness knows what, and were anxious because they didn't know where Constance had gone; but the next day there was a telegram from Paris to reassure them, telling them that Constance was going to Nice and meant to stay some time. Then letters came from Nice and they had no more fears, nor had Mamma van Lowe; they all thought the change might even do her good; and she continued pretty sensible. She wrote to her mother, to Addie; she wrote to Truitje, impressing upon her to look after the house well and after the master and Master Addie and to see that everything was going on all right when her mistress returned. And this sensible, housewifely letter had done more than anything to reassure Mamma van Lowe and the two of them; and now they didn't grudge Constance, Mamma, her trip, for once

in a way. But it was an expensive amusement. Constance, it was true, had taken some money of her own with her; but still, since they had come to the Hague, Van der Welcke no longer made anything out of wine- and insurance-commissions; he was no longer an agent for the Brussels firms; and they had not much to live on and had to be very economical. And so Van der Welcke, after seven weeks had passed, was obliged to tell Addie that it wouldn't do for Mamma to stay on at Nice, in an expensive hotel, and that he had better write to her. And the schoolboy had written asking his mother to come back now, telling his mother that that would have to do and that there was no money left. And Constance was coming home that evening.

Van der Welcke was in good spirits all day, perhaps through the after-effects of his dream—he kept seeing those sands before his eyes—and, pedalling along like mad, he sat shaking in his saddle, thinking of that young scamp of his, who ruled over his father and mother. It wasn't right, it was too absurd, soon they would neither of them be able to call their souls their own; but the boy was so sensible and he was always the little peacemaker, who settled everything. Yes, the scamp was the joy of his life; and really, really, except for the boy, everything was unrelieved gloom.... If only he could buy a motor-car, or at least a motor-cycle. He must find out one day, just ask what a motor-cycle cost.... But, apart from that, what was there? Especially now that they two—Constance in particular—had wanted at all costs to “rehabilitate” themselves, as Constance called it, in Hague society and now that they had failed utterly through that scene with Van Naghel, things were stodgier than ever ... with no one to come and see them but Van Vreeswijk, with no outside interests whatever. It was his fault, his fault, his wife kept reproaching him in their scenes, almost with enjoyment, revelling in her revenge, because he, not long ago, had reproached her that it was her fault, her fault that they were buried away there, “cursing their luck in the Kerkhoflaan.” And he was sorry too because of Marianne: she used to come and dine once in a way; when Van Vreeswijk was coming, Constance would ask either Paul or Marianne, to make four; and, now that he had insulted her father, she wouldn't come again, they were on unfriendly terms not only with the parents, but also with the daughter ... and with the sons, to the great regret of Addie, who was very fond of Frans and Henri.... His fault! His fault! Perhaps it was his fault, but he couldn't always restrain himself, control himself, master himself. Possibly, if he had stuck to his career, he would have learnt to do it, after his training in diplomatic reserve ... or else he would always have remained an indifferent diplomatist. That might have happened too; it was quite possible!... Yes, he was sorry ... because of Marianne. She was a nice girl, so natural, so unaffected, in spite of her worldly environment; and he liked her eyes, her voice. He was sorry ... because of Marianne; but it couldn't be helped: although he had written to her father, she would not come to the house again, she would never come again, he thought.

And he almost sighed, sadly, he did not know why, no doubt because life would be still more stodgy without Marianne's eyes and voice. But, after all, it was only once every four or five weeks that she used to come and dine; so what did it really matter? What did it matter? No, really nothing mattered; really, the whole world was a sickening, stodgy business, rottenly managed.... Oh, if he could only have bought a motor! The longing was so intense, so violent that he was almost tempted to ask his father for one straight out. And now, while he spurted home after his long ride, he hummed between his teeth, to the rhythm of the flying wheels, a song which he suddenly made up for himself:

"A motor-car – and a motor-car: Ottocar in a motor-car – Ottocar in a motor-car!"

And burning with his longing for the unattainable, he pedalled away – Ottocar in a motor-car! – in a mad frenzy, delighting in the sheer speed of his ride, which made people turn round and stare at him, at his arched back and his piston-legs, like an automaton's....

He came home very late, just as Addie was starting to go to the station.

"I really thought, Daddy, that you were staying at the Witte after all!" said the boy. "You're so late!"

"No, old chap, I wouldn't have dared do that!" cried Van der Welcke. "Ottocar – in a motor-car! I've been cycling my legs off and I'm tired out."

"You're quite red in the face."

"Yes, I've had great fun! Ottocar – in his motor-car! You see, I've got to have my fun by myself ... when you're cooped up at school."

"What are you saying, Father, about Ottocar?"

"Nothing, nothing, it's a song: Ottocar in his motor-car!..."

"Well, I'm off ... to meet Mamma. Good-bye, you mad old Dad!"

"Good-bye, my boy.... Come here a moment...."

"What's the matter now?..."

"Old chap, I feel so lonely sometimes ... so terribly alone ... so forlorn.... Tell me, Addie, you'll always be your father's chum, won't you?... You won't leave me, like all the rest? You'll stay with your old father?"

"But, Daddy, what makes you so sentimental suddenly?"

"Oh, no, I'm not sentimental ... but, my dear boy, I'm so awfully bored sometimes!"

"Then why don't you find more to do, Daddy?"

"Oh, my boy, what would you have me do?... Oh, if I only had a car!"

"A car?..."

"A motor-car! Like Ottocar!"

And Van der Welcke burst out laughing:

"He at least had one!" he bellowed, amidst his laughter.

"Father, you're mad!"

"Yes, to-day ... because of that dream, those wonderful sands.... Oh, how I wish I were Ottocar!... My boy, my boy, I'm so terribly bored sometimes!"

"And just after you've had a jolly bicycle-ride!"

"All on my own ... with my head full of all sorts of wretched thoughts!..."

"Well, to-morrow, Wednesday afternoon, we'll go together."

"Do you mean it? A long ride? To-morrow? To-morrow?"

"Yes, certainly, a long ride."

"You brick! My own Addie! My boy! My boy!"

He was as grateful as a child, caught his son in his arms:

"Addie, let me give you one more hug!"

"Well, be quick about it, Father, for I must really go, or I shall be late."

Van der Welcke put his arms round him, kissed him on both cheeks, and flew upstairs. He undressed, flung his clothes to right and left, washed his face in a huge basin of water, shaved quickly, dressed himself neatly. He did all this with much fuss and rushing about, as though his toilet was a most important affair. Then he went downstairs. The table was laid. It was nearly seven. Constance would be there in no time. And, sitting down in the drawing-room with a cigarette, looking round the room—Constance' room all over, in which he sat as a stranger—he hummed, while he waited for his wife and his son:

"And Ottocar had a motor-car; but I—have—none!..."

Chapter III

Addie ran up the stairs to the platform just as the train from Paris steamed in. He hurried along, looking into the windows.... There was Mamma, there was Mamma! And he flung himself on the handle, pulled open the door, helped Constance to alight.

"Ah!" he said. "There you are! There you are at last!"

She laughed, kissed him, her handsome, sturdy boy:

"My boy, how could I do so long without you?"

"Ah, so you see! You're surprised at it yourself! Come, make haste, I've got a cab. Give me your luggage-ticket."

He swept her along; and, in the cab, while they were waiting for the luggage:

"Tell me, Addie," she said, "is there really no money left?"

"Do you imagine that, when you go spending seven weeks at Nice, in a first-class hotel, there'll still be money?"

"I never thought of it like that," she said meekly.

He laughed, thought her tremendously amusing. She laughed too, they both bubbled with mirth, Constance glad at seeing him, at finding him looking so well and in such good spirits.

"Mamma, you're hopeless!" he exclaimed. "Did you really never think that there was no money left?"

"No," said Constance, humbly.

And they both started laughing again. He shook his head, considered her incorrigible:

"And I've got some bills too, for the things you bought when you went away."

"Oh, yes!" she said, remembering. "But they can wait."

"I told them that you were abroad and that they'd have to wait."

"Of course," said she.

And they arrived in the Kerkhoflaan in excellent spirits.

"Well, Truitje, have you looked after the master and Master Addie nicely?"

"I did the best I could, ma'am.... But it's just as well you're back again...."

"Well, Constance?"

"Well, Henri?"

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yes."

"You're looking well."

"Thanks.... Oh, have you waited dinner for me?"

"Well, of course!"

"I'll go and wash my hands and I'll be down immediately."

"Mamma never thought for a moment ... that there was no money left," said Addie.

"Nonsense!" said Van der Welcke.

But he seemed to consider it quite natural; and, when Constance came downstairs, he said, laughing:

"Didn't you think that there was no money left?"

Constance glanced up, imagining that he meant to make a scene. But he was smiling; and his question sounded good-humoured.

"No!" she said, as if it was only natural.

And now they all went into fits of laughter, Addie with his silent convulsions, which made him shake up and down painfully.

"Do laugh right out, boy!" said Van der Welcke, teasing him. "Do laugh right out, if you can."

They were very gay as they sat down to dinner.

"And just guess," said Constance, "whom I met in the hotel at Nice, whom I sat next to at the table d'hôte: the d'Azignys, from Rome.... The first people I met, the d'Azignys. It's incredible how small the world is, how small, how small!"

He also remembered the d'Azignys: the French ambassador at Rome and his wife ... fifteen years ago now....

"Really?" he asked, greatly interested. "Were they all right?"

"Oh, quite," she said, "quite! I remembered them at once, but didn't bow. But d'Azigny was very polite; and, after a minute or two, he spoke to me, asked if he wasn't right in thinking I was the Baronne de Staffelaer. 'Baronne van der Welcke,' I replied. He flushed up and his wife nudged him, but after that they were very charming and amiable all the time I was at Nice. I saw a lot of them and, through their introduction, I went to a splendid ball at the Duc de Rivoli's. I enjoyed it thoroughly. I wore a beautiful dress, I was in my element once more, I was a foreigner, everybody was very pleasant and I felt light-hearted again, quit of everything and everybody, and I thought to myself...."

"Well, what did you think?"

"Oh, if only we had never gone back to Holland! If, when Brussels became so dull, we had just moved to a town like Nice. It's delightful there. As a foreigner, you need have nothing to trouble about, you can do just as you like, know just whom you please. You feel so free, so free.... And why, I thought, must Addie become and remain a Dutchman? He could just as well be a Frenchman ... or a cosmopolitan...."

"Thank you, Mamma: I don't feel like being a Frenchman, nor yet a cosmopolitan. And you'd better not say that to Uncle Gerrit, or you can look out for squalls."

"Addie, I've met with so many squalls in my dear Holland that I feel like blowing away myself, away from everybody...."

"Including your son?"

"No, my boy. I missed you. I thought of you every day. I am so glad to see you again. But I did think to myself that we should have done better never to come back to Holland."

"Yes," said Van der Welcke, thoughtfully.

"We could have lived at Nice, if we liked."

"Yes," Van der Welcke admitted, a little dubiously, "but you were longing for your family."

She clenched her little hand and struck the table with it:

"And you!" she cried. "Didn't you long for your parents, for your country?"

"But not so much as you did."

"And who thought it necessary for Addie? I didn't!" she exclaimed, in a shrill voice. "I didn't for a moment! It was you!"

"Oh, d— —," said Addie, almost breaking into an oath. "My dearest parents, for Heaven's sake don't begin quarrelling at once, for I assure the two of you that, if you do, I'll blow away and I'll go to Nice ... money or no money!"

Van der Welcke and Constance gave one roar and Addie joined in the laugh.

"Oh, that boy!" said Van der Welcke, choking with merriment. "That boy!"

Constance uttered a deep sigh:

"Oh, Addie!" she said. "Mamma does and says such strange things, sometimes ... but she doesn't mean them a bit. She's really glad to be back again, in her horrid country ... and in her own home, her dear cosy home ... and with her son, her darling boy!"

And, throwing her arm round his neck, she let her head fall on his breast and she sobbed, sobbed aloud, so that Truitje, entering the room, started, but then, accustomed to these perpetual, inevitable scenes, quietly went on laying the dessert-plates.

Van der Welcke fiddled with his knife.

“Why can’t those two manage to get on better together?” thought Addie, sadly, while he comforted his mother and gently patted her shoulder....

Chapter IV

"And shall Mamma show you what she looked like at the Duc de Rivoli's?"

Dinner was over and she was sitting by her open trunk, while Truitje helped her unpack and put the things away.

"I had my photograph taken at Nice. But first here's a work-box for Truitje, with Nice violets on it. Look, Truitje: it's palm-wood inlaid; a present for you. And here's one for cook."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am!"

"And for my wise son I hunted all over Nice for a souvenir and found nothing, for I was afraid of bringing you something not serious enough for your patriarchal tastes; and so I had myself photographed for you. There: the last frivolous portrait of your mother."

She took the photograph from its envelope: it showed her at full-length, standing, in her ball-dress; a photograph taken with a great deal of artistry and chic, but too young, too much touched up, with a little too much pose about the hair, the fan, the train.

He looked at her with a smile.

"Well, what do you think of it?" she asked.

"What a bundle of vanity you are, Mamma!"

"Don't you like it? Then give it back at once."

"Why, no, Mummy: I think it awfully jolly to have a photograph of you...."

"Of my last mad mood. Now your mother is really going to grow old, my boy. Upon my word, I believe Truitje admires my portrait more than my son does!..."

"Oh, ma'am, I think it's splendid!"

"How many did you have done, Mummy?"

"Six. One for Granny, one for Uncle Gerrit, one for Uncle Paul, one for you, one for myself...."

"And one for Papa."

"Oh, Papa owns the original!"

"No, give your husband one."

"Henri!" she called.

He came in.

"Here's a portrait of your wife."

"Lovely!" he exclaimed. "That's awfully good! Thanks very much."

"Glad you like it. My husband and my handmaid are satisfied, at any rate. My son thinks me a bundle of vanity.... Oh, how glad I am to be back!... Here's the ball-dress. We'll put it away to-morrow. I shall never wear the thing again. A dress that cost six hundred francs for one wearing. Now we'll be old again and economical."

They all laughed, including Truitje.

"Oh, how glad I am to be back!... My own room, my own cupboards.... Truitje, what did you give your masters to eat?"

"Well, just what you used to, ma'am!..."

"So it was all right? I wasn't missed?..."

"Oh, but you mustn't go away for so long again, ma'am!" said Truitje, in alarm.

Constance laughed and stretched herself out on her sofa, glad to be home. Van der Welcke left the room with his photograph, Truitje with her work-box.

"Come here, Addie. Papa has had you for seven weeks. Now you belong to me ... for an indefinite period."

She drew him down beside her, took his hands. It struck him that she looked tired, more like her years, not like her photograph; and, his mind travelling swiftly to his father, he thought his father so young, outwardly a young man and inwardly sometimes a child: Ottocar in a motor-car....

"It's strange, Addie," she said, softly, "that you are only fourteen: you always seem to me at least twenty. And I think it strange also that I should have such a big son. So everything is strange. And your mother herself, my boy, is the strangest of all. If you ask me honestly if I like being 'vain,' I mean, taking part in social frivolities, I shouldn't know what to answer. I certainly used to enjoy it in the old days; and, a fortnight ago, I admit I looked upon it as a sort of youth that comes over one again; but really it all means nothing: just a little brilliancy; and then you feel so tired and empty ... and so discontented...."

She stopped suddenly, not caring to say more, and looked at the photograph, now lying on a table beside her. It made her laugh again; and at the same time a tear trembled on her lashes. And she did not know if it gave her a peaceful feeling to be growing old ... or if she regretted it. It was as though the sun of Nice had imbued her with a strange, dull melancholy which she herself did not understand.

"To live!" she thought. "I have never lived. I would so gladly live once ... just once. To live! But not like this ... in a dress that cost six hundred francs. I know that, I know all about it: it is just a momentary brilliancy and then nothing.... To live! I should like to live ... really ... truly. There must be something. But it is a mad wish. I am too old. I am growing old, I am becoming an old woman.... To live! I have never lived ... I have been in the world, as a woman of the world; I spoilt that life; then I hid myself.... I was so anxious to come back to my country and my family; and it all meant nothing but a little show and illusion ... and a great deal of disappointment."

And so the days were wasted, one after the other, and I ... have ... never ... lived.... Just as I throw away my money, so I have thrown away my days. Perhaps I have squandered all my days ... for nothing. Oh, I oughtn't to feel like this! What does it mean when I do? What am I regretting? What is there left for me? At Nice, I thought for a moment of joining in that feminine revolt against approaching age; and I did join in it; and I succeeded. But what does it all mean and what is the use of it? It only means shining a little longer, for nothing; but it does not mean living.... But to long for it doesn't mean anything either, for there is nothing for me now but to grow old, in my home; and, even if I am not exactly among my people, my brothers and sisters, at any rate I have my mother ... and, perhaps for quite a long time still, my son too...."

"Mummy ... what are you thinking about so deeply?"

But she smiled, said nothing, looked earnestly at him:

"He's much fonder of his father," she thought. "I know it, but it can't be helped. I must put up with it and accept what he gives me."

"Come, Mummy, what are you thinking about?"

"Lots of things, my boy ... and perhaps nothing.... Mamma feels so lonely ... with no one about her ... except you...."

He started, struck by what she had said: it was almost the same words that his father had used that afternoon.

"My boy, will you always stay with me? You won't go away, like everybody?..."

"Come, Mummy, you've got Granny and Uncle Gerrit and Uncle Paul."

"Yes, they are nice," she said, softly.

And she thought:

"I shall lose him, later, when he's grown up.... I know that I shall lose him...."

It made her feel very weak and helpless; and she began to cry....

He knelt down beside her and, in a stern voice, forbade her to be so excitable, forbade her to cry about nothing....

It was heavenly to have him laying down the law like that. And she thought:

"I shall lose him, when he's grown up.... Oh, let me be thankful that I have him still!..."

Then, tired out, she went to sleep; and he left her, thinking to himself:

"They both feel the same thing!"

Chapter V

She tried tyrannically to monopolize her son, so that Van der Welcke became very jealous. It was the next day, Wednesday afternoon.

“Are you coming with me to Granny’s?”

“I promised Papa to go cycling.”

“You’ve had seven weeks for cycling with Papa.”

“I promised him yesterday that I would go for a long ride to-day.”

She was angry, offended:

“The first day that I’m home!...” she began.

He kissed her, with a shower of tiny little kisses, tried to appease her wrath:

“I promised!” he said. “We don’t go cycling together often. You will have me to yourself all the evening. Be sensible now and nice; and don’t be so cross.”

She tried to be reasonable, but it cost her an effort. She went alone to Mrs. van Lowe’s. She saw two umbrellas in the hall:

“Who is with mevrouw?” she asked the maid.

“Mrs. van Naghel and Mrs. van Saetzema.”

She hesitated. She had not seen her sisters since that awful Sunday-evening. She had gone abroad five days after. But she wanted to show them....

She went upstairs. Her step was no longer as timid as when she climbed those stairs ten months ago, when she first came back among them all. She did not wish to seem arrogant, but also she did not wish to be too humble. She entered with a smile:

“Mamma!” she cried, gaily, kissing her mother.

Mrs. van Lowe was surprised:

“My child!” she exclaimed, trembling. “My child! Are you back? Are you back again? What a long time you’ve been abroad!”

“I’ve enjoyed myself immensely. How d’ye do, Bertha? How d’ye do, Adolphine?”

She did not shake hands, but just nodded to them, almost cordially, because of her mother, who looked anxiously at her three daughters. Bertha and Adolphine nodded back. Carelessly and easily, she took the lead in the conversation and talked about Nice. She tried to talk naturally, without bragging; but in spite of herself there was a note of triumph in her voice:

“Yes, I felt I wanted to go abroad a bit.... Not nice of me to run away without saying good-bye, was it, Mamma dear? Well, you see, Constance sometimes behaves

differently from other people.... I had a very pleasant time at Nice: full season, lovely weather."

"Weren't you lonely?"

"No, for on the very first day I met some of our Rome friends at the hotel...."

She felt that Bertha started, blinked her eyes, disapproved of her for daring to speak of Rome. And she revelled in doing so, casually and airily, thought it delicious to dazzle Adolphine with a list of her social triumphs, very naturally described:

"People we used to know in Rome: Comte and Comtesse d'Azigny. He was French ambassador in those days. They recognized me at once and were very kind; and through the introduction I went to a glorious ball at the Duchesse de Rivoli's. And, Mummy, here's a portrait of your daughter in her ball-dress."

She showed the photograph, enjoyed giving the almost too-well-executed portrait to Mamma, not to her sisters, while letting them see it. She described her dress, described the ball, bragging a little this time, saying that, after all, parties abroad were always much grander than that "seeing a few friends" in Holland, addressing all her remarks to Mamma and, in words just tinged with ostentation, displaying no small scorn for Bertha's dinners and Adolphine's "little evenings:"

"Everything here is on such a small scale," she continued. "There, the first thing you see is a suite of twelve rooms, all with electric light ... or, better still, all lit up with wax-candles.... Yes, our little social efforts at the Hague cut a very poor figure beside it."

She gave a contemptuous little laugh to annoy her sisters, while Mamma, always interested in the doings of the great, did not notice the contempt and was glad enough to see that the sisters behaved as usual to one another. And now Constance went on to say that everything had gone on so well at home, that Truitje had looked after everything, even though Constance had gone away indefinitely, an unprecedented thing, so unlike a Dutch housewife! Then she turned to her sisters with an indifferent phrase or two; and they answered her almost cordially, out of respect for Mamma....

Adolphine was the first to leave, exasperated by Constance' insufferable tone, by all that talk about Nice, all those counts and dukes whom Constance had mentioned; and, when Constance said good-bye, Bertha also left and they went down the stairs together.

"Constance," said Bertha, "can I speak to you a minute in the cloak-room?"

Constance looked up haughtily, surprised; but she did not like to refuse. They went into the little cloak-room.

"Constance," said Bertha, "I do so want to say that I am sorry for what happened between us. Really, it pained me very much. And I want to tell you also that Van Naghel greatly appreciated Van der Welcke's writing to him to apologize. He has written to Van der Welcke to say so. But we should both like to call on you one day, to show you how glad we should be to come back to the old terms once more."

"Bertha," said Constance, a little impatiently and wearily, "I am prepared to receive your visit, but I should really like to know what is the good of it and why you suggest it. Do let us have some sincerity ... when there is no occasion for hypocrisy. Sometimes one has to be insincere ... but there is no need for that between us now. We both know that our mutual sympathy, if it ever existed, is dead. We never meet except at Mamma's and we don't let her see our estrangement. Apart from that, it seems to me that things are over between us."

"So you would rather that Van Naghel and I did not come?"

"It's not for me to decide, Bertha: I shall speak about it to Van der Welcke and write you a line."

"Is that cold answer all you have to say to me, Constance?"

"Bertha, a little time ago, I was not backward in showing my affection for you all. Perhaps I asked too much in return; but, in any case, I was repulsed. And now I retire. That is all."

"Constance, you don't know how sorry we all are that the old aunts ... spoke as they did. They are foolish old women, Constance; they are in their second childhood. Mamma had to take to her bed, her nerves are still quite upset; she can't bear to see her sisters now; and it sometimes sends her almost out of her mind. I have never seen her like it before. And we are all of us, all of us, Constance, very, very sorry."

"Bertha, those two old women only yelled out at the top of their voices, as deaf people do, what the rest of you thought in your hearts."

"Come, Constance, don't be so bitter. You are hard and unjust. I swear that you are mistaken. It is not as you think. Let me show it to you in the future, let me prove it to you ... and please speak to Van der Welcke and write and tell me a day when we shall find you at home, so that Van Naghel can shake hands with Van der Welcke. He is not a young man, Constance, and your husband is under forty. It's true, Van der Welcke has apologized and Van Naghel appreciates it, but that doesn't prevent him from wishing to shake hands with Van der Welcke."

"I'll tell my husband, Bertha. But I don't know that he will think it so necessary to shake hands, any more than I do. We live very quietly now, Bertha, and people, Hague people, no longer concern us. And Van Naghel only wants to shake hands because of people."

“And because of the old friendship.”

“Very well, Bertha,” said Constance, coldly, “because of the old friendship: a vague term that says very little to me. What I wished for was brotherly and sisterly affection, cordial companionship. That is no longer possible: it was a foolish fancy of mine, which has gone forever. But, as I said, I shall speak to Van der Welcke.”

They came out into the hall; the maid was waiting at the door. It was raining. Bertha’s carriage was outside, had been sent to fetch her.

“Shall I drop you on my way, Constance?”

“No, thank you, Bertha; the fresh air will do me good; I’d rather walk.”

And, as she walked, she thought:

“Oh, why did I go on like that to annoy them? And why didn’t I welcome Bertha’s visit at once?... It’s all so small, so petty....”

And she shrugged her shoulders under her umbrella, laughed at herself a little, because she had shown herself so petty.

Chapter VI

At Addie's wish, at the little schoolboy's wish, the Van der Welckes responded to Van Naghel's advances and Constance sent a note. The visit was paid and the brothers-in-law shook hands. Van der Welcke himself shrugged his shoulders over the whole business; but Addie was pleased, started going for walks again with Frans and spoke to Karel again at the grammar-school, though he did not much care for him. Two days later, Marianne called in the afternoon, when the rain was coming down in torrents. Constance was at home. The girl stood in the door-way of the drawing-room:

"May I come in, Auntie?..."

"Of course, Marianne, do."

"I don't like to: I'm rather wet."

"Nonsense, come in!"

And the girl suddenly ran in and threw herself on her knees beside Constance, almost with a scream:

"I am so glad, I am so glad!" she cried.

"Why?"

"That Uncle wrote to Papa ... that Papa and Mamma have been here ... that everything is all right again.... It was so dreadful; it kept me from sleeping. I kept on thinking about it. It was a sort of nightmare, an obsession. Auntie, dear Auntie, is everything all right now?"

"Yes, certainly, child."

"Really all right?... Are you coming to us again ... and may I come and see you ... and will you ask me to dinner again soon? Is everything all right, really all right?"

She snuggled up to her aunt like a child, putting her head against Constance's knees, stroking her hands:

"You will ask me again soon, Auntie, won't you? I love coming to you, I simply love it. I should have missed it so, I can't tell you how much...."

Her voice broke, as she knelt by Constance's side, and she suddenly burst into tears, sobbing out her words so excitedly that Constance was startled, thinking it almost unnatural, absurd:

"I was nearly coming to you before Papa and Mamma had been.... But I didn't dare.... I was afraid Papa would be angry.... But I can come now, it's all right now...."

"Yes, it's all right now...."

She kissed Marianne. But the door opened and Van der Welcke entered.

"How do you do, Uncle?"

He always thought it odd when Marianne called him uncle, just like that:

"Is it you, Marianne?... Constance, did I leave my Figaro down here?"

"The Figaro? No...."

He hunted for his paper and then sat down.

"Uncle," said Marianne, "I've just been telling Auntie, I'm so glad, I'm so glad that everything's settled."

"So am I, Marianne."

Outside, the rain came pelting down, lashed by the howling wind. Inside, all was cosiness, with Constance pouring out the tea and telling them about Nice, while Marianne talked about Emilie and Van Raven and how they were not getting on very well together and how Otto and Frances were also beginning to squabble and how Mamma took it all to heart and allowed it to depress her:

"I sha'n't get married," she said. "I see nothing but unhappy marriages around me. I sha'n't get married."

Then she started. She had a knack of behaving awkwardly and tactlessly, of saying things which she ought not to say. Van der Welcke looked at her, smiling. To make up for her indiscretion, she was more demonstrative than ever, profuse in exclamations of delight:

"Oh, Auntie, how glad I am to be with you once more!... I must be off presently in the rain.... I wish I could stay...."

"But stay and dine," said Van der Welcke.

Constance hesitated: she saw that Marianne would like to stop on and she did not know what to do, did not wish to seem ungracious; and yet....

"Will you stay to dinner?" she asked.

Marianne beamed with joy:

"Oh, I should love to, Auntie! Mamma knows I'm here; she'll understand...."

Constance was sorry that she had asked her; her nerves were feeling the strain of it all; but she was determined to control herself, to behave naturally and ordinarily. She could see it plainly: they were too fond of each other!

They were in love! Long before, she had seemed to guess it, when she saw them together, at her little dinners. The veriest trifle—an intonation of voice, a laughing phrase, the passing of a dish of fruit—had made her seem to guess it. Then the vague

thought that went through her mind, like a little cloud, would vanish at once, leaving not even a shadow behind it. But the cloud had come drifting again and again, brought by a gesture, a glance, a how-do-you-do or good-bye, an appointment for a bicycle ride. On such occasions, the brothers had always gone too—so had Addie—and there had never been anything that was in the least incorrect; and at the little dinners there was never a joke that went too far, nor an attempt at flirtation, nor the very least resemblance to love-making. And therefore those vague thoughts had always drifted away again, like clouds; and Constance would think:

“There is nothing, there is nothing. I am mistaken. I am imagining something that doesn’t exist.”

She had not seen them together for two months; and she knew, had understood from a word dropped here and there, that Van der Welcke had not seen Marianne during those two months which had passed since that Sunday evening. And now, suddenly, she was struck by it: the shy, almost glad hesitation while the girl was standing at the door of Constance’ drawing-room; her unconcealed delight at being able to come back to this house; the almost unnatural joy with which she had sobbed at Constance’ knee ... until Van der Welcke came in, after doubtless recognizing the sound of her voice in his little smoking-room, as transparent as a child, with his clumsy excuse of searching for a newspaper. And now at once she was struck by it: the almost insuppressible affection with which they had greeted each other, with a certain smiling radiance that beamed from them, involuntarily, irresistibly, unconsciously.... But still Constance thought:

“I am mistaken, there is nothing; and I am imagining something that doesn’t exist.”

And the thought passed away, that they were really in love with each other; only this time there remained a faint wonder, a doubt, which had never been there before. And, while she talked about Nice, it struck her that Van der Welcke was still there ... that he was staying on in her drawing-room, a thing which he never did except when Paul was there, or Gerrit.... He sat on, without saying much; but that happy smile never left his lips.... Yet she still thought:

“I am mistaken; it is only imagination; there is nothing, or at most a little mutual attraction; and what harm is there in that?”

But, be this as it might, she, who was so jealous where her son was concerned, now felt not the least shade of jealousy amid her wondering doubts. Yes, it was all gone, any love, passion, sentiment that she had ever entertained for Henri. It was quite dead.... And, now that he smiled like that, she noticed, with a sort of surprise, how young he was:

“He is thirty-eight,” she thought, “and looks even younger.”

As he sat there, calmly, always with the light of a smile on his face, it struck her that he was very young, with a healthy, youthful freshness, and that he had not a wrinkle, not a grey hair in his head.... His blue eyes were almost the eyes of a child. Even Addie's eyes, though they were like his father's, were more serious, had an older look.... And, at the sight of that youthfulness, she thought herself old, even though she was now showing Marianne the pretty photograph from Nice.... Yes, she felt old; and she was hardly surprised – if it was so, if she was not mistaken – at that youthfulness in her husband and at his possible love for that young girl.... Marianne's youth seemed to be nearer to his own youth.... And sometimes it was so evident that she almost ceased doubting and promised herself to be careful, not to encourage Marianne, not to invite her any more....

Unconscious: was it unconscious, thought Constance, on their part? Had they ever exchanged a more affectionate word, a pressure of the hand, a glance? Had they already confessed it to each other ... and to themselves? And a delicate intuition told her:

“No, they have confessed nothing to each other; no, they have not even confessed anything to themselves.”

Perhaps neither of them knew it yet; and, if so, Constance was the only one who knew. She looked at Marianne: the girl was very young, even though she had been out a year or two. She had something of Emilie's fragility, but she was more natural, franker; and that natural frankness showed in her whole attitude: she seemed not to think, but to allow herself to be dragged along by impulse, by sentiment.... She looked out with her smile at the pelting rain, nestled deeper in her chair, luxuriously, like a kitten, then suddenly jumped up, poured out a cup of tea for Constance and herself; and, when Van der Welcke begged his wife's leave to smoke a cigarette, she sprang up again, struck a match, held the light to him, with a fragile grace of gesture like a little statue. Her pale-brown eyes, with a touch of gold-dust over them, were like chrysolite; and they gazed up enthusiastically and then cast their glance downwards timidly, under the shade of their lids. She was pale, with the anæmic pallor of alabaster, the pallor of our jaded society-girls; and her hands moved feverishly and restlessly, as though the fingers were constantly seeking an object for their butterfly sensitiveness....

Was it so? Or was it all Constance's imagination? And, amidst her wondering doubts, there came suddenly – if it really was so – a spasm of jealousy; but not jealousy of her husband's love: jealousy of his youth. She suddenly looked back fifteen years and felt herself grown old, felt him remaining young. Life, real life, for which she sometimes had a vague yearning, while she felt herself too old for it, after frittering away her days: that life he would perhaps still be able to live, if he met with it. He at least was not too old for it!

It all filled her with a passion of misery and anger; and then again she thought:

“No, there is nothing; and I am imagining all manner of things that do not exist.”

Addie came home; and, with the rain pelting outside, there was a gentle cosiness indoors, at table. Constance was silent, but the others were cheerful. And, when, after tea had been served, the fury out of doors seemed to have subsided, Marianne stood up, almost too unwilling to go away:

“It’s time for me to go, Auntie....”

“Shall Addie see you home?”

“No, Addie’s working,” said Van der Welcke. “I’ll see Marianne home.”

Constance said nothing.

“Oh, Auntie,” said Marianne, “I am so glad that everything’s settled!”

She kissed Constance passionately.

“Uncle, isn’t it a nuisance for you to go all that way with me?”

“I wish I had a bicycle for you!...”

“Yes, if only we had our tandem here!”

“It’s stopped raining; we shall be able to walk.”

They went, leaving Constance alone. Her eyes were eager to follow them along the street. She could not help herself, softly opened a window, looked out into the damp winter night. She saw them go towards the Bankastraet. They were walking side by side, quite ordinarily. She watched them for a minute or two, until they turned the corner:

“No,” she said, “there is nothing. Oh, it would be too dreadful!”

Chapter VII

Van der Welcke and Marianne went side by side.

"How deliciously fresh it is now," she almost carolled. "The wind has gone down and the air is lovely; and look, how beautiful the sky is with those last black clouds.... Oh, I think it so ripping, that everything's all right again between you and Papa! I did feel it so. You know how fond I am of both of you, Aunt Constance and you, and of Addie; and it was all so sad.... Tell me, does Auntie still feel bitter about it? I expect she does.... Ah, I understand quite well now ... that she would have liked to come to our house ... officially, let me say! But why not first have spoken to Mamma ... or to me, who am so fond of you? Then we could have seen: we might have thought of something. As it was, Mamma was so startled by that unexpected visit.... Poor Aunt Constance, she isn't happy! How sad that you and she aren't happier together! Oh, I could cry about it at times: it seems such a shame!... A man and woman married ... and then ... and then what I so often see!... I oughtn't to have said what I did before dinner, it was stupid of me; but I may speak now, mayn't I?... Oh, I sha'n't marry, I won't marry!... To be married like Otto and Frances, like Emilie and Van Raven: I think it dreadful. Or like you and Auntie: I should think it dreadful. Can't you be happier together? Not even for Addie's sake? I wish you could; it would make me so happy. I can't bear it, when you and Auntie quarrel.... She was sweet and gentle to-night, but so very quiet. She is so nice.... That was a mad fit of hers, to go abroad so suddenly; but then she had had so much to vex her. Oh, those two old aunts: I could have murdered them! I can hear them now!... Poor Auntie! Do try and be a little nice to her.... Has this been going on between you for years? Don't you love each other any longer?... No, I sha'n't marry, I sha'n't marry, I shall never marry."

"Come, Marianne: if some one comes along whom you get to love...."

"No, I shall never marry.... I might expect too much of my husband. I should really want to find something beautiful, some great joy, in my love ... and to marry for the sake of marrying, like Frances or Emilie, is a thing I couldn't, couldn't do.... Otto is fonder of Louise than of his wife; and lately Emilie and Henri are inseparable.... In our family there has always been that affection between brother and sister. But it is too strong, far too strong. It doesn't make them happy. I've never felt it in that way, fond as I am of my brothers.... No, I should place the man I love above everybody, above everybody.... But I suppose you're laughing ... at my bread-and-butter notions...."

"No, I'm not laughing, Marianne; and, just as you would like to see Aunt Constance and me happy, so I should like to see you happy ... with a man whom you loved."

"That will never be, Uncle; no, that will never be."

"How can you tell?"

"Oh, I feel it, I feel it!..."

"Come, I'll have a bet on it," he said, laughingly.

"No, Uncle," she said, with a pained smile, "I won't bet on a thing like that..."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Marianne..."

"I know that..."

"But you mustn't be so melancholy, at your age. You're so young..."

"Twenty-one. That's quite old."

"Old! Old! What about me?"

She laughed:

"Oh, you're young! A man..."

"Is always young?"

"Not always. But you are."

"A young uncle?"

"Yes, a young uncle.... A woman gets old quicker..."

"So, when you're old and I am still young, we shall be about the same age."

She laughed:

"What a calculation! No, you're older. But age doesn't go by years."

"No. I sometimes have very young wishes. Do you know what I have been longing for since yesterday, like a baby, like a boy?"

"No."

"A motor-car."

She laughed, with a laugh like little tinkling bells:

"A motor-car?"

"Wouldn't it be delightful? To go tearing and tearing over fields and roads, through clouds of dust..."

"You're becoming poetic!"

"Yes, it's making me poetic..."

"And the smell of the petrol?... The mask and goggles against the dust?... The hideous dress?..."

"Oh, that's nothing!... To tear and fly along, faster and faster, at a mad pace..."

"I have never been in a motor-car...."1

"I have, in Brussels, in a friend's car. There's nothing to come up to it."

Her laugh tinkled out again:

"Yes, now you're most certainly like a boy!"

"I'm so young?"

"O young Uncle!"

"You oughtn't to call me uncle, Marianne: I'm too young for it."

The tinkling bells:

"What am I to call you then?"

"Anything you like. Not uncle."

"Nunkie?"

"No, no...."

"But I can't call you Henri ... or Van der Welcke?"

"No, that's too difficult. Better say nothing."

The tinkling bells:

"Nothing. Very well.... But am I to say U or je?"2

"Say je."

"But it seems so funny ... before people!"

"People, people! You can't always bother about people."

"But I have to: I'm a girl!"

"Oh, Marianne, people are always a nuisance!"

"A desert island would be the thing."

"Yes, a desert island...."

"With a motor-car...."

"And just you and me."

They both laughed; and her little bells tinkled through his boyish laugh.

"What a perfect night!"

"Perfect: the air is so crisp...."

"Marianne...."

"Yes, Uncle...."

"No, not uncle.... You must be my little friend.... Not a niece.... I've never had a girl-friend."

"Your little friend?... But I am!"

"Well, that's all right."

"Look, how dark it is in the Wood.... People say it's dangerous. Is it, Uncle? No, I didn't mean to say uncle...."

"Sometimes. Are you frightened? Take my arm."

"No, I'm not frightened."

"Come, take my arm."

"I don't mind...."

"We shall be home in a minute."

"If only Mamma isn't angry with me, for staying out.... Are you coming in?"

"No ... no...."

"Not because you're still angry with us?"

"No, I'm not angry."

"That's all right. Oh, I am glad! I should like to give you a motor for making me so happy!"

"Those old tin kettles cost a lot of money...."

"Poor Uncle! No, I don't mean uncle...."

"Here we are."

He rang the bell.

"Thank you for seeing me home."

"Good-night, Marianne."

The butler opened the door; she went in. He trotted back, whistling like a boy.

"Wherever have you been, Marianne?" asked Bertha.

"I stayed to dinner at Aunt Constance'."

"I was anxious about you," said Bertha.

But she was glad that Constance had been so gracious.

"Who brought you home?"

"Uncle."

She ran up to her room. She looked in the glass, as though to read her own eyes. There she read her secret:

“God help me!” she thought. “I oughtn’t to have gone. I oughtn’t to have gone. I was too weak, too weak.... Oh, if only they had never made it up, Papa and ... he!... Oh dear! I shall never go there again. It’s the last time, the last time.... O God, help me, help me!...”

She sank into a chair and sat with her face hidden in her hands, not weeping, her happiness still shedding its dying rays around her, but with a rising agony; and she remained like that for a long time, with her eyes closed, as though she were dreaming and suffering, both.

The period of the novel is about 1901.

Equivalent to vous or tu.

Chapter VIII

"And who do you think's in town?" Van Vreeswijck asked Van der Welcke, as they were walking together.

"I don't know."

"Brauws."

"Brauws?"

"Max Brauws."

"Max? Never! What, Leiden Max?"

"Yes, Leiden Max. I hadn't seen him for years."

"Nor I, of course. And what is he doing?"

"Well, that's a difficult question to answer. Shall I say, being eccentric?"

"Eccentric? In what way?"

"Oh, in the things he does. First one thing and then another. He's giving lectures now. In fact, he's a Bohemian."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes, he asked after you."

"I should like to see him. Does he belong to the Witte?"

"No, I don't think so."

"He's a mad fellow. Always was mad. An interesting chap, though. And a good sort. Has he money?"

"I don't know."

"Where is he staying?"

"In rooms, in the Buitenhof."

"We're close by. Let's go and see if he's in."

Brauws was not in. And Van der Welcke left a card for his old college-chum, with a pencilled word.

A fortnight passed; and Van der Welcke began to feel annoyed:

"I've heard nothing from Brauws," he said to Van Vreeswijck.

"I haven't seen him either."

"Perhaps he's offended about something."

"Nonsense, Brauws isn't that sort."

Van der Welcke was silent. Since the scene with the family, he was unduly sensitive, thinking that people were unfriendly, that they avoided him.

"Well, if he wants to ignore my card, let him!" he said, angrily. "He can go to the devil, for all I care!"

But, a couple of days later, when Van der Welcke was smoking in his little room, Truitje brought in a card.

"Brauws!" exclaimed Van der Welcke.

And he rushed outside:

"Come upstairs, old chap!" he shouted, from the landing.

In the hall stood a big, quiet man, looking up with a smile round his thick moustache.

"May I come up?"

"Yes, yes, come up. Upon my word, Max, I am glad...."

Brauws came upstairs; the two men gripped each other's hands.

"Welckje!" said Brauws. "Mad Hans!"

Van der Welcke laughed:

"Yes, those were my nicknames. My dear chap, what an age since we...."

He took him to his den, made him sit down, produced cigars.

"No, thanks, I don't smoke. I'm glad to see you. Why, Hans, you haven't changed a bit. You're a little stouter; and that's all. Just look at the fellow! You could pass for your own son. How old are you? You're thirty-eight ... getting on for thirty-nine. And now just look at me. I'm three years your senior; but I look old enough to be your father."

Van der Welcke laughed, pleased and flattered by the compliment paid to his youth. Their Leiden memories came up; they reminded each other of a score of incidents, speaking and laughing together in unfinished, breathless sentences which they understood at once.

"And what have you been doing all this time?"

"Oh, a lot! Too much to tell you all at once. And you?"

"I? Nothing, nothing. You know I'm married?"

"Yes, I know," said Brauws. "But what do you do? You're in a government-office, I suppose?"

"No, Lord no, old fellow! Nothing, I just do nothing. I cycle."

They both laughed. Brauws looked at his old college-friend, almost paternally, with a quiet smile.

"The beggar hasn't changed an atom," he said. "Yes, now that I look at you again, I see something here and there. But you've remained Welckje, for all that..."

"But not Mad Hans," sighed Van der Welcke.

"Vreeswijk has become a great swell," said Brauws. "And the others?"

"Greater swells still."

"Not you?"

"No, not I. Do you cycle?"

"Sometimes."

"Have you a motor-car?"

"No."

"That's a pity. I should like to have a motor. But I can't afford one of those sewing-machines."

Brauws roared with laughter:

"Why don't you start saving up for one?"

"No, old chap, no...."

"I say, do you know what's a funny thing? While you were living in Brussels, I too was living just outside Brussels."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, I was."

"And we never met?"

"I so seldom went into town. If I had known...."

"But what a pity!"

"Yes. And what's still funnier is that, when you were on the Riviera, I was there too."

"Look here, old fellow, you're kidding me!"

"I never knew till later that you were there also that year. But you were at Monte Carlo and I at Antibes. Just compare the dates."

They compared dates: Brauws was right.

"But that was horribly unlucky."

"It couldn't be helped. However, we've found each other now."

"Yes. We must see something of each other now, eh? Let's go cycling together ... or buy a motor-car between us."

Brauws roared with laughter again:

"Happy devil!" he shouted.

"I?" cried Van der Welcke, a little huffed. "What's there happy about me? I sometimes feel very miserable, very miserable indeed."

Brauws understood that he was referring to his marriage.

"Here's my boy," said Van der Welcke, showing Addie's photograph.

"A good face. What's he going to be?"

"He's going into the diplomatic service. I say, shall we take a stroll?"

"No, I'd rather sit here and talk."

"You're just as placid as ever...."

Brauws laughed:

"Outwardly, perhaps," he said. "Inwardly, I'm anything but placid."

"Have you been abroad much?"

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"Much ... and perhaps nothing. I am seeking...."

"What?"

"I can't explain it in a few words. Perhaps later, when we've seen more of each other."

"You're the same queer chap that you always were. What are you seeking?"

"Something."

"There's our old oracle. 'Something!' You were always fond of those short words."

"The universe lies in a word."

"Max, I can't follow you, if you go on like that. I never could, you know."

"Tell me about yourself now, about Rome, about Brussels."

Van der Welcke, smoking, described his life, more or less briefly, through the blue clouds of his cigarette. Brauws listened:

"Yes," he said. "Women...."

He had a habit of not finishing his sentences, or of saying only a single word.

"And what have women done to you?" asked Van der Welcke, gaily.

Brauws laughed:

"Nothing much," he said, jestingly. "Not worth talking about. There have been many women in my life ... and yet they were not there."

Van der Welcke reflected.

"Women," he said, pensively. "Sometimes, you know...."

"Hans, are you in love?"

"No, no!" said Van der Welcke, starting. "No, I've been fairly good."

"Fairly good?"

"Yes, only fairly..."

"You're in love," said Brauws, decisively.

"You're mad!" said Van der Welcke. "I wasn't thinking of myself.... And, now, what are you doing in the Hague?"

Brauws laughed:

"I'm going to give lectures, not only here, but all over Holland."

"Lectures?" cried Van der Welcke, in astonishment. "What made you think of that? Do you do it to make money? Don't you find it a bore to stand jawing in front of a lot of people for an hour at a time?"

"Not a bit," said Brauws. "I'm lecturing on Peace."

"Peace?" cried Van der Welcke, his blue orbs shining in wide-eyed young amazement through the blue haze of his cigarette-smoke. "What Peace?"

"Peace, simply."

"You're getting at me," cried Van der Welcke.

Brauws roared; and Van der Welcke too. They laughed for quite a minute or two.

"Hans," said Brauws, "how is it possible for any one to change as little as you have done? In all these years! You are just as incapable as in the old days of believing in anything serious."

"If you imagine that there's been nothing serious in my life," said Van der Welcke, vexed.

And, with great solemnity, he once more told his friend about Constance, about his marriage, his shattered career.

Brauws smiled.

"You laugh, as if it all didn't matter!" cried Van der Welcke, angrily.

"What does anything matter?" said Brauws.

"And your old Peace?"

"Very little as yet, at any rate.... Perhaps later.... Luckily, there's the future."

But Van der Welcke shrugged his shoulders and demolished Peace in a few ready-made sentences: there would always be war; it was one of those Utopian ideas....

Brauws only smiled.

"You must come and dine one day, to meet Vreeswijck," said Van der Welcke.

Brauws' smile disappeared suddenly:

"No, my dear fellow, honestly...."

"Why not?"

"I'm not the man for dinners."

"It won't be a dinner. Only Vreeswijck. My wife will be very pleased."

"Yes, but I shall be putting your wife out...."

"Not a bit. I'll see if she's at home and introduce you to her."

"No, my dear fellow, no, honestly.... I'm no ladies' man. I'm nothing of a drawing-room person. I never know what to say."

"You surely haven't grown shy!"

"Yes, almost. With ladies ... I really don't know what to say. No, old chap, honestly....."

His voice was full of anxious dismay.

"I think it's mean of you, to refuse to come and dine with us, quite quietly."

"Yes ... and then it'll be a dinner of twenty people. I know."

"I shouldn't know where to get them from. We see nobody. Nobody."

"No, no.... Well, yes, perhaps later."

He raised his hand deprecatingly, almost impatiently:

"Come," he said, "let's go for a walk."

And, as though fearing lest Van der Welcke should still find a moment to introduce him to his wife, Brauws hurried him down the stairs. Once outside, he breathed again, recovered his usual placidity.

Chapter IX

"I went last night with Van Vreeswijck to hear Brauws speak at Diligentia," said Van der Welcke, one morning. "The fellow's inspired. He speaks extempore and magnificently; he's an orator. A splendid fellow, the way he spoke: it was astounding.... I knew him years ago at Leiden. He was a queer chap even then. He did not belong to any particular club, not to ours either: his family is nothing out of the way. His father has a factory, I believe, somewhere in Overijssel. He himself has nothing of the tradesman about him. He used to coach us dull beggars and help us get up our examinations. I should never have passed without him. He knows about everything, he's not only good at law. He's read everything; he has a tremendous memory. He's travelled a lot and done all sorts of things, but I can't find out exactly what. Now he's lecturing. This evening, he's lecturing in Amsterdam. I asked him to dinner, but he refuses to come, says he's shy with ladies. Silly fellow!"

The newspapers printed lengthy reports of Brauws' speeches on Peace. He spoke in all the large Dutch towns and in many of the smaller ones. When he was to speak at the Hague for the second time, Van der Welcke said, excitedly:

"Constance, you must absolutely go and hear Brauws this evening. He's grand. You know, I can never listen to any one for more than a quarter of an hour...."

"Nor I for more than three minutes," said Paul, who was there. "But I love to talk for an hour on end myself."

"But Brauws: the fellow electrifies you. Though I think that Peace idea of his all rot. But that makes no difference: the chap speaks magnificently.... I'm dining with Van Vreeswijck and we're going on together."

Paul asked Constance to go with him. That evening, the little hall of Diligentia – the proceeds were to go to the fund for the Boer wounded – was full: Constance and Paul had difficulty in finding seats.

"All sorts of people," Paul observed. "A curious audience. An olla podrida of every set in the Hague. Here and there, the very select people have turned up, no doubt brought by Van Vreeswijck: look, there are the Van der Heuvel Steijns; and there's the French minister; and there, as I live, is Van Naghel, with his colleague from the Treasury.... And look, there's Isidore the hairdresser.... A bit of everything, a bit of everything.... How brotherly and sisterly the Hague has become this evening: it makes me feel quite sentimental!"

Brauws made his entrance, to faint applause.

"The fellow's not in evening-dress; he's wearing a frock-coat. I suppose he's playing the demagogue or the preacher."

But he had to stop, for Brauws at once began to speak from the rostrum. He had nothing with him, not a note; and his voice was firm but very gentle. He began with a masterly exposition of the present political situation, sketching it in broad outlines, like an enormous picture, for all those people in front of him. His voice became clearer; his eyes looked through the hall, steady and bright, like two shining stars. Constance, who seldom read any political news, listened, was at once interested, wondered vaguely for a moment that she lived like that, from day to day, without knowing the times in which she lived. The present took shape before her in those few sentences of Brauws'. Then he spoke of Peace, which would be essential sooner or later, which was already making its joyous way into the mind of the nations, even though they were actually still waging war upon one another. It was as though wide and radiant vistas opened under his words; and his voice, at first so gentle, now rang through the hall, triumphantly confirming the glad tidings. He spoke without pausing, for two hours on end; and, when he stopped, the hall was breathless for a moment, the audience forgot to cheer. Then indeed applause burst forth, jubilant; but by that time Brauws was gone. They called him back, but he did not return; and the audience streamed out.

Constance and Paul were in the crush, when they saw Van Vreeswijck and Van der Welcke behind them.

"Mevrouw," said Van Vreeswijck, bowing. "What do you think of our friend?"

"Wonderful," said Constance, excitedly.

"The fellow speaks well," said Paul, "but he is too earnest. He means all he says. People don't like that in the long run."

Van der Welcke protested vehemently, as he pushed through the close-packed crowd, and declared that he was converted, that he believed in Peace.

They reached the street: the hum of the crowd floated through the wintry air.

"How excited our stolid Haguers are!" said Paul.

"There's our man," said Van Vreeswijck.

"Yes, there he is!" exclaimed Van der Welcke.

And he darted forwards, stopped Brauws, who was walking fast and saw nobody, and seized his hand. The others drew near. Van Vreeswijck, out of politeness, stayed by Constance, waved his hand to Brauws. Van der Welcke was in a great state of excitement:

"Where are you going?" they heard him ask Brauws. "To the Witte?"

"No, my dear fellow, home."

"Home? Can you go home now? Won't you come to the Witte? I say, do let me introduce you to my wife, to my brother-in-law...."

Brauws started:

"No, Hans, honestly.... No, no.... What's the good?..."

Constance heard and could not help smiling. She walked on with Van Vreeswijk and Paul.

"Yes, yes," Van der Welcke insisted.

Brauws no doubt realized that Constance had heard, for he said, in a voice of despair:

"Very well then, Hans...."

"Constance! Paul!" cried Van der Welcke, proud of his friend, and caught them up.

He would have liked to introduce Brauws to the whole world, to the whole audience streaming out of Diligentia.

"Let me introduce you: my friend, Max Brauws; my wife; my brother-in-law, Van Lowe."

They shook hands. Brauws remained standing in front of Constance, shyly and awkwardly. She tried to pay him a compliment that would not sound too obvious; and, like the tactful woman that she was, she succeeded. Paul also said something; they walked on, Van Vreeswijk silently amused at Van der Welcke's excitement and Brauws' awkwardness.

"And are you really going home? Won't you come to the Witte?" Van der Welcke urged, in imploring tones.

"My dear Hans, what would you have me do at the Witte?"

"So you're going home."

"Yes, I'm going home, but I'll walk a bit of the way with you."

And, wishing to appear polite, he bowed vaguely to Constance, but said nothing more.

It was a delightful winter evening, with a sharp frost and a sky full of twinkling stars.

"I love walking," said Constance. "When I've heard anything fine — music, a play, or a speech like to-night's — I would much rather walk than rattle home in a cab."

"My dear fellow!" cried Van der Welcke, still bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"You've converted me! I believe in it, I believe in that Peace of yours!"

Brauws gave a sudden bellow.

"There, now the chap's laughing at me again!" said Van der Welcke, in an injured tone.

"Well," said Brauws, "shall I come and fetch you in a motor to-morrow, to reward you?"

They all laughed this time.

"Have you got one?" cried Van der Welcke, delightedly.

"No, but I can hire one," said Brauws. "And then you can drive."

"Can you hire one? Can you hire one?" cried Van der Welcke, in delighted amazement. "And may I really drive?"

And forgetting all about Peace, he was soon eagerly discussing motor-cars and motor-cycles....

When they reached the Kerkhoflaan, Constance asked:

"Won't you all come in?"

Van Vreeswijck and Paul said that they would be glad to come and have a glass of wine; but Brauws said:

"Mevrouw, it's so late...."

"Not for us."

"Come along, Max," said Van der Welcke.

But Brauws laughed his queer, soft laugh and said:

"What's the good of my coming in?..."

And he went off, with a shy bow. They all laughed.

"Really, Brauws is impossible," said Van Vreeswijck, indignantly.

"And he's forgotten to tell me at what time he's coming for me with his old sewing-machine...."

But next day, very early, in the misty winter morning, the "machine" came puffing and snorting and exploding down the Kerkhoflaan and stopped at Van der Welcke's door with a succession of deep-drawn sighs and spasmodic gasps, as if to take breath after its exertions; and this monster as it were of living and breathing iron, odorous of petrol—the acrid smell of its sweat—was soon surrounded by a little group of butchers'-boys and orange-hawkers. Brauws stepped out; and, as Constance happened to be coming downstairs, she received him.

"I'm not fit to be seen, mevrouw. In these 'sewing-machines,' as Hans calls them, one becomes unpresentable at once."

He was shy, looked out at the gasping motor-car and smiled at the crowd that had gathered round:

"I'm causing quite a tumult outside your door."

"They ought to be used to 'sewing-machines' at the Hague by now."

"That's a very graphic word of Hans'."

They both laughed. She thought his laugh attractive and his voice soft and restful to listen to.

"Mevrouw," he said, suddenly, overcoming his bashfulness, "I hope you were not angry that I was so ungracious yesterday?..."

"But you weren't at all ungracious."

"Yes, I was, very. But what excuse can I make? I have lost the habit ... of just talking...."

She smiled:

"To ladies," she said, jokingly.

"Yes, about nothing ... you know ... small talk...."

"You really needn't apologize, Mr. Brauws. You had already said so many delightful things last night that I can quite understand...."

"Yes, but I have said nothing this morning and...."

"You wouldn't know what to say ... about nothing. But please don't trouble ... and make yourself at home. Henri will be down in a minute; he is very worried at not being ready."

In fact, they heard Van der Welcke upstairs, dressing excitedly; he was rushing madly round his room and shouting:

"Addie! Addie! Pick me out a tie! Do be quick, boy!"

And Constance rose to go. Brauws stopped her:

"Mevrouw," he said, hurriedly, "Hans asked me to dinner."

"And you refused...."

"Well, you see, I'm such a bear. Don't be angry and don't let Hans be angry either and let me come and dine with you one day."

"So you're inviting yourself?"

"Yes."

"Very well; we shall be delighted to see you. When will you come?"

"Whenever you like."

"To-morrow?"

"With great pleasure."

"Would you rather come alone, or shall I ask Van Vreeswijck to meet you?"

"Yes, certainly, Van Vreeswijck...."

"And nobody else."

"No, nobody. But I mustn't dictate to you."

"Why shouldn't you, in this case?"

Van der Welcke came rushing down the stairs, followed by Addie:

"This is jolly of you, Max! Let's have a look at the old machine. She's a first-rater! And here's my boy.... Addie, eat a bit of bread and butter, quick; then we'll drop you at your school."

Addie laughed, quietly ate his bread and butter without sitting down:

"I've lots of time," he said.

"So much the better ... we'll drive you round a bit first. Quick, quick! Take your bread and butter with you in your hand!"

He rushed like a madman through the dining-room and hall, hunted for his hat, couldn't find it, shouted up the stairs, made Truitje look all over the place for his gloves, created a breezy draught all through the house. At last, he was ready:

"If only I can manage the old sewing-machine! ... Tock-tock-tock-tock, tock-tock-tock-tock!... Good-bye, Constance...."

He shoved Addie in front of him, made him get into the car, settled himself:

"We're off, Brauws!"

"Good-bye, mevrouw. Till to-morrow then!"

He ran out. Constance looked out of the window: they drove off, with Addie between them, waving his hand to her, while Brauws was showing Van der Welcke—much too quick, too wild, too impatient—how to work the "sewing-machine" and obviously asking him to be careful....

Chapter X

Constance had invited Van Vreeswijk at the last moment and he was engaged, so that Brauws was the only guest. Though Constance usually gave a deal of thought to her little dinners, she received Brauws quite simply, treating him as one of themselves; and Addie dined with them.

"And now tell me what you have been doing all these years?" asked Van der Welcke.

Brauws tried to tell him, but kept on hesitating, as though under a strange compulsion. His father was a manufacturer, owning big iron-works in Overijssel, and still carried on that huge business with Brauws' two elder brothers, who were married to two sisters, the daughters of another manufacturer, owning a cotton-mill in the same district. But Max, who had been a queer boy from a child, had from a child felt repelled by all that factory-life of masters and men, as he saw it around him; and his father, recognizing his exceptional intelligence, had sent him to college, hoping that in this way he would carve out an honourable career for himself among his fellow-men. Max was fond of study and studied long and hard, for the sake of study. At Leiden, he became acquainted with Van Vreeswijk, Van der Welcke and other young sprigs of the aristocracy, who would gladly have admitted him to their club, putting up with him because he had plenty of money to spend and because he was clever and it amused him to help them in their examinations. Van der Welcke and Van Vreeswijk had learnt to value his friendship, but nevertheless lost sight of him afterwards, thinking that he had joined his brothers after all and was managing the factory with them. And, even as they, as youths, had hardly known their friend more than superficially, so they did not know, on leaving Leiden, that Max had not gone to Overijssel—where his father would have liked to marry him to the third daughter of the father-in-law of his two other sons—but to America, to "seek."

"Well, but to seek what?" Van der Welcke asked, failing to understand what a rich youth could want to seek in America, if he did not see some idea, some plan, some object plainly outlined before him.

Brauws now confessed that at the time he scarcely knew what he had gone to seek, in America. He admitted that his father, the iron-master, had hoped that Max would form industrial connections in America which would have benefited the factory. But Max had formed no connections at all.

"Then what did you do?" asked Van der Welcke.

And Brauws smiled his strange, gentle smile, in which there gleamed a touch of irony and compassion—with himself, or the world, or both—a smile which sometimes broke into his big, resonant laugh. He smiled and at last said, very slowly:

"But I hardly dare confess to you, my dear Hans, what I did in America. I don't talk about that time as a rule, because it all sounds so strange, now that I am sitting at table with you and your wife and your son. Perhaps, if I tell you what I did do in America, Mrs. van der Welcke, after the first shock of surprise, will shudder at having invited such a queer person to her table and probably think me a very bad example for Addie. So don't let's talk about myself or what I did in America."

But Van der Welcke had grown inquisitive:

"No, my dear fellow, you sha'n't get out of it like that. I can't imagine that you did anything in America that Addie mustn't hear about; and in any case he needn't take you for his model. But I'm burning with curiosity and I insist on knowing what you were up to in America. Not lecturing on Peace all the time?..."

"No, not even once."

"Well, what then?"

"But, Hans, what's the good of talking about myself to this extent?"

"We're all interested, Mr. Brauws," said Constance. "We certainly are. But, if you would rather not talk about those days, we will not be indiscreet."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Van der Welcke, impatiently. "By Jingo, I will be indiscreet. Max, I must know...."

"Well, then," said Max Brauws, very simply and shyly, as though he were making an apology. "At the risk of your wife's never asking me to her house again: I was a porter."

They all three looked at him and did not understand.

"A porter?" asked Van der Welcke.

"A porter?" asked Constance.

"Yes, mevrouw: just a porter and dock-labourer."

"A dock-labourer?" asked Van der Welcke, thinking, from Max Brauws' quiet voice, that he had suddenly gone mad.

"Yes, Hans; and, later on, I worked as a stoker in an iron-works, like my father's."

"As a stoker?" asked Constance.

"Yes, mevrouw, as a stoker in a factory. And then, afterwards, as an engine-driver. And then—but that was very hard work—I was a miner for a short time; but then I fell ill."

"A miner?" asked Van der Welcke, in a blank voice, dazed with astonishment.

And at last, recovering from the astonishment, he burst out:

"Look here, Max, if you want to talk seriously, do; but don't go pulling my leg and making a fool of me to my face. I don't understand a word of what you're saying, unless I'm to suppose that your father was angry with you and gave you no money and that you had to work for your bread, perhaps. But that you were a porter...."

"And dock-labourer," said Constance.

"And engine-driver and miner, that I refuse to believe, unless your father...."

"My dear Hans, my father used to send me the same allowance that he made me at the university: three hundred guilders a month."

"And...?"

"And I used the money ... for other things; but I lived on my wages, like a labourer, as I really was. You see, you can't understand that; and, as I feared, your wife thinks it horrible to be sitting at table with a man who has been a porter, a dock-labourer and a stoker...."

"And a miner," added Van der Welcke.

And he shut his eyes, as though he had received a blow on the head.

"But, mevrouw," said Brauws, with his quiet smile, "my hands, although they are not delicate, have become fit to show again, as you see."

And he showed his hands, big, powerful hands, probably developed by manual labour, but now neither coarse nor hard.

"But can you explain to me," asked Constance, with a little laugh, "why you worked in those various humble capacities?"

"Shall we say, mevrouw, for the sake of being eccentric?" replied Brauws, almost coldly. "And then we will talk no more about myself. Tell me instead about Addie. Hans was saying the other day that his ambition was to enter the diplomatic service...."

But a certain constraint seemed involuntarily to make the conversation flag, as though both host and hostess were unable to understand their guest at all, as though some one of another class had actually strayed by accident into their dining-room, into the home of these born aristocrats; and Constance, perceiving this, not only wanted to avoid that constraint, but also a deeper feeling of invincible sympathy made her regret almost unconsciously any misunderstanding or unpleasantness that might arise between that strange man and Henri or herself. This deeper feeling was so faint and unconscious that, at the moment, she saw in it only her wish, as hostess, to make the passing hour as agreeable as possible for her guest; and she did not hear the deeper note in her voice when she said, with that candour and sincerity which at times gave her an exquisitely feminine charm:

"I should be very sorry indeed, Mr. Brauws, if you refused to go on speaking of yourself. You are an old and intimate friend of Henri's; and, now that you two have met again, it would be a pity if you refused to talk about the years when you did not see each other. But I am not speaking only for my husband, who will speak for himself: I am speaking especially for my own sake. When I heard you lecturing on Peace the other day – on something which I had really never thought about, though I had heard the word vaguely mentioned by people now and then – your speech really roused ... a sort of interest in me; and I listened with keen sympathy; and afterwards I thought about that word. And, now that you tell us that you have been a common workman in America, I am very much interested to know how you came to adopt a life so very different from that of the men in my set; and, if it is not too indiscreet, I should like to ask you, as a favour, to speak about yourself and explain what at present seems so perplexing to me...."

The simple, homely meal was finished; and they went into the drawing-room.

"May I stay, Mamma?" asked Addie, who never accompanied them to the drawing-room when there was a stranger present.

She laughed; and Van der Welcke said:

"You see, even my boy is curious."

"Our future diplomatist!" said Brauws, with his quiet smile. "Well, mevrouw, may he stay or not?"

"Of course he may stay!"

"Aren't you afraid that the ideas of ... a labouring-man will spoil him?"

"Oh, there's no spoiling my boy!" said she, lifting her head high and putting her arm round Addie's shoulder with motherly pride.

"And you don't make him vain, by saying that?"

"There's no making him vain," she continued, boasting a little, like a proud mother.

"So he can stay?" asked Brauws.

"He can stay."

"Well, in that case I shall tell you more about myself."

"Only in that case?"

"You are giving me a proof of confidence and, I might almost say, of sympathy."

Van der Welcke took his friend by the shoulders:

"My dear Max, you pretend that you don't know how to talk to 'ladies' and there you stand, like a typical courtier, paying compliments to my wife. That's all

superfluous, you know: here's a cup of coffee; sit down, make yourself at home, choose your own chair; and now, Mr. Miner, tell your Mad Hans how, when you were in America, you went even madder than he."

But Brauws was obviously still seeking subterfuges, as though it were impossible for him to interpret the riddle of his former existence to these people who were entertaining him so kindly; and at last he half managed to escape their pressing curiosity by saying:

"But I can't possibly tell you all that straight away.... Perhaps later, mevrouw, when I have known you a little longer, I may be able to tell you about that time, so that you may understand it after a fashion."

Constance was disappointed, but she said, with a smile:

"Then I must exercise patience."

"But I exercise no patience," said Van der Welcke. "Tell us now, Max: when you left Leiden, after taking your degree in law, a year before I did—but you were much older than I, an older student who really studied, a *rara avis*!—what did you do then?"

"I first went back to my father and my brothers, to the factory. And then I took such an aversion to the whole thing, to all that we represented, my father, my brothers and I, that I determined to go and lead an entirely different life. I saw that, though my father and brothers were comparatively good to their workmen, those workmen remained slaves; and we...."

He passed his hand over his forehead:

"How can I and why should I talk about all this, my dear Hans?" he said, gently interrupting himself. "You wouldn't understand me; nor you either, mevrouw...."

"Why shouldn't we understand you?" asked Constance.

His voice assumed a rough tone that almost frightened her:

"Because both of you, you and Hans, are capitalists—and titled capitalists at that—and because I.... But I don't want to be rude to my host and hostess."

"Capitalists without capital," said Van der Welcke, laughing.

Brauws shrugged his shoulders:

"There are more of them than you think," he said.

"So really you're among enemies here," said Constance, in her drawing-room voice.

"No," said Van der Welcke, "for he in his turn has deserted to the capitalists, even the titled ones."

"Not quite," said Brauws, quietly, "though I admit that I have been weak."

"I won't press you any more, Mr. Brauws," said Constance; but her voice urged him to continue.

"Don't look upon yourself and Henri as my enemies, mevrouw," said Brauws, earnestly. "Above all things, I should like to see nothing but friendship in this world of ours. But you were asking me about America: well, when I had lived for a short time with my father and my brothers in our big house near the factory, it became too much for me; and I went away, to lead my life just as if I had been born among workmen ... so as to study them more closely, do you understand?... No, you don't understand; and how can I go on?..."

"Max, you're being dull. And you're absurd too."

"I'm sorry, Hans, I simply can't talk about myself: you see, I've tried to, two or three times over."

"Then we won't worry you any more," said Constance.

A constraint seemed to have come upon them, a barrier which rose between their words at every moment. Addie, disappointed, left the room quietly. In a little while, Brauws took his leave, awkwardly, almost rudely. Constance and Van der Welcke exchanged a glance when they were alone. Van der Welcke shook his head:

"The fellow's mad," he said. "Always was; but, since he's joined the proletariats in America, he's stark, staring mad. He was so jolly yesterday, coming with that old sewing-machine. He is a good sort, there's something nice about him. But he's quite mad. Vreeswijck is much better company. We won't ask him again: what do you say, Constance? The fellow's really mad; and, besides, he doesn't know how to talk and, when all is said, he was impertinent, with his 'titled capitalists.' Indeed, I ought really to apologize to you for asking such a queer fish to your house."

"He is different from other people," she said, "but I think that, however much he may differ from you, he likes you."

Her husband burst out irritably:

"You women," he exclaimed, "are simply impossible! Who would ever have thought that you could have found a word of excuse for Brauws! Why, I was afraid that you would cover me with reproaches and point out to me that, even though we see nobody, you wouldn't want to receive a socialist friend of mine. But there's no understanding women!"

He was dissatisfied, out of temper, because of Brauws and that spasmodic conversation; and his tone seemed to invite a scene. But Constance raised her eyes to

his very calmly and said, so gently and quietly that the voice did not sound like hers to his ears:

"Henri, your friend Brauws is a man and an exceptional man; and that is enough to captivate a woman for a moment."

"Well, you can ask him every day, for all I care."

"I didn't ask him."

"No, I did, of course!"

"Don't let us quarrel, Henri. Mr. Brauws asked himself. But, if you would rather not see any more of him, we won't encourage him again; and then he'll stay away of his own accord...."

Her gentle words, which he did not understand, disturbed him greatly; and he went upstairs in a temper, undressed angrily and flung himself on his bed:

"And, upon my word, he'd be upsetting Addie's head next, with those queer notions," he muttered, as he dug his ear viciously into his pillow.

Chapter XI

A few days had passed, when Brauws rang at the door, late one afternoon. Constance was sitting in the drawing-room and saw him through the corner window; and, as she heard the bell, she felt a shock of alarm. She was afraid, she did not know why, and listened anxiously to his deep voice in the passage.

"Is meneer at home?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps mevrouw is at home?"

"Yes, sir, mevrouw is in. I'll just ask...."

Truitje entered:

"Mr. Brauws, ma'am...."

"Show meneer in."

She still felt her heart beating with that strange, inexplicable shock of alarm. And she thought that it was because she was alone with that strange man, who had been a workman in America and who could say such rude things sometimes, suddenly.

They shook hands:

"Henri is out," she said. "But sit down. I see in the paper that you are speaking at Arnhem to-morrow."

"Yes, mevrouw, but I haven't come to talk about my lectures. I've come to make you my very humble apologies."

"What for?"

"Mevrouw, I'm a bear. I don't know how to talk to people. Forgive me ... for what I said the other day."

"But what did you say?"

"Nothing – after your friendly encouragement – but what was rude."

"I have no great reverence for titles," she said, quickly.

She said it so suddenly and spontaneously that it surprised even herself; and she asked herself, the next second:

"Why do I say that? And is it true, now? Or is it not true?"

She herself did not know.

"You haven't, perhaps, but Hans has.... But I was rude especially because, after you had asked me so kindly and graciously, I still would not talk about my life."

"But you were to do that when we knew each other better...."

"People never know each other well. Still...."

"What?"

"I don't know.... May I tell you something about myself from time to time? Perhaps it won't interest you as much as, from politeness, you wish me to think; but ... when I've done it ... I shall feel relieved.... Heavens, how difficult words are!"

"And yet you are accustomed to speak for hours!..."

"That's a different thing. Then some one else is speaking inside me. When I myself am speaking, in everyday life, I find words difficult."

"Then don't make the least effort, but tell me ... gradually."

"What did Addie think? I should like to know."

"He was disappointed, but he did not say much."

"He's a serious boy, isn't he? Tell me about him."

She felt no more fear and talked about Addie. Brauws laughed, gently and kindly, at the pride that kept shining from her:

"I was a serious child too," he said.

And she understood that he was making an effort, in order to talk about himself.

"I was a strange child. Behind our house was a pine-forest, with hills in it; and behind that a little stream. I used to wander all day long in those woods, over the hills and beside the stream. They would miss me at home and look for me and find me there. But gradually they stopped being frightened, because they understood that I was only playing. I used to play by myself: a lonely, serious child. It's true I played at highwaymen and pirates; and yet my games were very serious, not like a child's ... I still feel a thrill when I think of that strange childhood of mine.... I used to play there in those woods and beside that stream, in Holland; but sometimes I imagined that I was playing at pirates and highwaymen in America, or in the tropics. And in my childish imagination the whole Dutch landscape changed. It became a roaring river, with great boulders, from which the water fell foaming, and very dense, tropical foliage, such as I had seen in pictures; and great flowers, red and white, grew in the enormous trees. Then my fancy changed and I was no longer a pirate or robber, but became ... an oriental prince. I don't know why I, a pure-bred Dutch boy, should have had that strange vision of the east, of something tropical, there, on those pine-covered hills and beside that little stream.... It was always like that afterwards: the tropical landscape, the spreading cocoa-trees, the broad plantain-leaves and the huge flowers, white and red ... and then I often thought, 'Now I will find her.' Whom I wanted to find I didn't know; but I would run down the hills and roam beside the little river and seek and seek ... and my seeking for

'her' became strange and fantastic: I, an oriental, was seeking for a fairy, or a princess, I forget which. It seemed to me as if she were running there ahead of me, very white and fragile: a little child, as I was a child; a girl, as I was a boy; in white and decked with the flowers, white and red ... And my seeking for the princess, for the fairy, for the little white, fragile girl became so intense that I sometimes thought I had found her, found her in my imagination; and then I would speak to her, as in a dream.... Until ... until I woke from my waking dream and remembered that I had been wandering away from home for hours, that my mother would be anxious, that I was not fit to be seen, that I looked like a dirty street-boy, that I had only been dreaming, that there were no white or red flowers around me ... and then I would cry, boy of thirteen though I was, passionately, as if I should go mad.... And I have never told all this to any one, but I am telling it to you, because I want to ask you: Addie is not like that, is he? When you come to think of it, how children differ, at that age!"

She sat on her chair, very pale, and could not speak.

"My parents did not know that I was like that; and I told nobody about my fancies. I went to school, in the meantime, and was just the usual sort of schoolboy. I was cruel to animals, a vulgar little rascal, in the meantime; and it was only in those free hours that I wandered and dreamt. And, when I now look at your boy, who is like a little man, I sometimes think, how is it possible that he is like this and that I was like that, at the same age?"

She made an effort to smile.

"So you see," he said, "gradually perhaps I shall be able to tell you something about my life ... at least, if it interests you...."

It seemed as if his first confession had in fact given him a greater facility, for of his own accord he now went on talking: how, when he grew a year or two older, he had shaken those fancies from him as so much child's-play and devoted himself seriously to every kind of study, until he went to the university, where he not only read law, but really took up all the other faculties in between, while at the same time he felt attracted by every branch of knowledge:

"I was a ready learner and a quick reader; I remembered everything; and I had a sort of fever to know everything in the world, to know all there was to know and learn. That I afterwards went and travelled goes almost without saying. And then...."

It was at this moment that Van der Welcke entered. He was at first surprised, almost annoyed to see Brauws; but his warm friendship gained the upper hand:

"Hullo, anarchist!" he said. "Is that you?"

But it was very late; Addie came in; it was close upon dinner-time. Brauws said good-bye and promised to come again and fetch Van der Welcke in a “machine;” and that made up for everything to Van der Welcke.

Chapter XII

It was a howling winter night of storm and rain. Addie was doing his lessons after dinner; and Van der Welcke had gone to sit by him with a book "because there was such a draught in his room." Constance was all alone. And she loved the loneliness of it just then. She had taken up a book, a piece of needlework; but first one and then the other had slipped from her hands. And, in the soft light of the lace-shaded lamps, she lay back in her chair and listened to the melancholy storm outside, which seemed to be rushing past the house like some monstrous animal. She was in a mood of vague excitement, of mingled nervousness and depression; and, in her loneliness, she let this strange feeling take possession of her and gave herself up to the quite new luxury of thinking about herself, wondering dimly:

"Does that sort of thing really exist?"

She found no answer to her question; she heard only the storm raging outside, the hiss of its lash round the groaning trees; and those mournful voices of the night did not include the mystic voice which alone could have supplied the answer.

"Does that sort of thing really exist?" she asked herself again.

And, in that vague emotion, she was conscious of a sense of fear, of a rising anxiety, an increasing terror. When, after a lull, the storm burst into sudden fury again, she started violently, as she had started when Brauws' hand rang the bell....

With each shriller howl of the raging storm she started; and each fresh alarm left her so nervous and so strangely despondent that she could not understand herself....

"Does that sort of thing really exist then?" she asked herself for the third time.

And the question seemed each time to echo through her soul like a refrain. She could never have thought, suspected or imagined that such things really existed. She did not remember ever reading about them or ever talking to anybody about them. It had never been her nature to attach much importance to the strange coincidences of life, because they had never harmonized in her life with those of other lives; at least, she did not know about them, did not remember them.... For a moment, it flashed through her mind that she had walked as the blind walk, all her life, in a pitch-dark night ... and that to-day suddenly a light had shone out before her and a ruddy glow had filtered through her closed eyelids.

"No," she thought, "in those things I have always been very much of a woman; and I have never thought about them. If by chance I ever heard about them, they did not attract me. Then why do they strike me so forcibly now? And why do I feel so strange?..."

The wind suddenly cried aloud, like the martyred soul of some monster; and she started, but forced herself to concentrate her thoughts:

"He can't know," she thought. "What can he know, to make him speak deliberately ... of those childish years? No, he can't know; and I felt that he did not know, that he was only speaking in order to compare himself with Addie to Addie's mother, in a burst of confidence. He is a man of impulses, I think.... No, there was nothing at the back of his words ... and he knows nothing, nothing of my own early years.... We are almost the same age: he is four years older than Henri. When he was a child, I was a child. When he was dreaming, I was dreaming. Does that sort of thing really exist? Or is it my fancy, some unconscious vein of poetry inside me, that is making me imagine all this?... Hush, hush ... it is becoming absurd! It is all very pretty and charming in children: they can have their day-dreams; and a young man and a young girl might perhaps give a thought to them afterwards, in a romantic moment; but, at my age, it all becomes absurd, utterly absurd.... And of course it's not there: it's nothing but a chance coincidence. I won't think about it any more.... And yet ... I have never felt before as I do now. Oh, that feeling as if I had always been straying, blindly, with my eyes shut, in a dark night! Have I never had that feeling before, that feeling as if nothing had really existed, as if I had never lived yet, as if I wanted to live once, just once, in my life?... But no, it can never be like that, it can't happen like that. No, that sort of thing does not exist. It is just our imagination when we are feeling restless and dissatisfied ... or when we are tired and feel that we have no energy ... or whatever it is that makes us more easily affected by all those strange things which we never suspected.... Why did I not at once laugh and say that, as a child, as a little girl, I myself...? No, no, I simply couldn't say it; and it is better that I didn't say it.... Now I am getting frightened at my own silliness. It is all very well for young people, for a boy and a girl, to have these fancies and even talk of them, in a romantic moment, but at my age it is simply ridiculous.... It is so long ago, so long ago; and, with all those years in between, it would be ridiculous to refer to poetic dreams and fancies which can only be spoken of when one is very young.... I sha'n't speak of them ... and I shall never tell him. Wouldn't it be ... utterly ridiculous?... Yet it does seem ... it does seem to me that, after those years – when, as Gerrit said, I was a dear little child, playing in the river at Buitenzorg, making up stories about fairies and poetries,¹ decked with flowers, red and white – that, after those years, I lost something of myself, something romantic that was in me then, something living that was in me then, and that, since then, I have never lived, never lived a single moment, as if all sorts of vain and worldly things had blinded me.... Oh, what thoughts are these and why do I have them? I won't think them; and yet ... and yet, after those wonderful, fairy years, it was all over ... all over.... What do I remember of the years after? Dances, balls, society, vanity and artificiality.... Yes, it was all over by then.... And now surely that childish spark hasn't revived, surely my soul isn't trying, isn't wanting to live again? No, no, it can't do that: the years are lying all around it, the silent, dead years of vanity, of blundering, of longing, of death in life.... And besides,

if my soul did want to live again, it would be too late now, for everything; and it doesn't want to either.... It's only because of those strange coincidences, it's only because he spoke like that ... and because his voice it attractive ... and because I am sitting here alone ... and because the storm is blowing so terribly, as though it wanted to open the windows and come inside.... No, hush, hush ... I won't give way to those thoughts again, never again ... and, even if that sort of thing does really exist, it is only for those who are young and who see life with the glamour of youth ... and not for me, not for me. ... Oh, I couldn't have told him about myself when I was a child, for it would have appeared to me as if, by telling him, I was behaving like ... a woman offering herself!... But hush, hush: all this is absurd ... for me ... now; and I will stop thinking of it.... But how lonely I am, sitting here ... and how the wind howls, how the wind howls!... The lamps are flickering; and it's just as if hands were rattling the shutters, trying hard to open them.... Oh, I wish those lamps wouldn't flicker so!... And I feel as if the windows were going to burst open and the curtains fly up in the air.... I'm frightened.... Hark to the trees cracking and the branches falling.... Hear me, O God, hear me! I'm frightened, I'm frightened.... Is this then the first night that I see something of myself, as if I were suddenly looking back, on a dark path that lies behind me, a dark path on which all the pageant of vanity has grown dim? For it does seem as if, right at the end of the road, I saw, as in a vision, the sun; trees with great leaves and blossoms red and white; and a little fairy child, in white, with flowers in her hair, standing on a boulder, in a river, beckoning mysteriously to her brothers, who do not understand. O my God, does that sort of thing really, really exist ... or is it only because I never, never heard the wind blow like this before?..."

These thoughts, these doubts, these wonderings flashed through her; and, because she had never heard herself thinking and doubting and wondering so swiftly, she grew still more frightened in her loneliness, while the storm howled more furiously outside. And the silent lamps flickered so violently in her drawing-room—in a sort of passionate draught—that she suddenly rushed staggering to the door. She went up the stairs; and it was as though the storm would break the little villa to pieces with one blow of its angry wing....

She went to Addie's room; her hand was on the door-handle; she turned it. She saw her boy working at his table and Van der Welcke smoking in the easy-chair. She gave a start, because he was there, and she looked deathly pale, with terrified, quivering eyes.

"Mamma!"

"My boy, I'm frightened; listen to the storm!..."

"Yes, did you ever see such weather?" asked Van der Welcke, through the clouds of his cigarette.

"Are you frightened, Mamma?"

"Yes, my boy, my Addie ... I'm frightened ... I'm frightened...."

"And shall your boy keep you safe, safe from the wind?"

"Yes, my darling, keep me safe!" she said, with a wan little laugh. "For I'm really, really frightened ... I've been sitting alone downstairs ... and it blew so, it blew so: the lamps blew and the shutters banged and I'm so frightened now!..."

The boy drew her on his knees and held her very tight:

"Silly Mummy! Are you really frightened?"

She made herself very small in his arms, between his knees, nestled up against him and repeated, as in a dream:

"Yes, I'm so frightened, I'm so frightened!..."

And, without a further glance at her husband sitting there clouded in the blue smoke of his cigarette, she as it were crept into the heart of her child, whispering, all pale and wan, with a wan smile and her eyes full of anxious wonder:

"I'm frightened, Addie! Save me! Protect me!..."

Malay fairies.

Chapter XIII

"I'm mad!" he thought, as, after a hasty meal at a restaurant in the town, he walked along the Hooge Weg to Scheveningen through the shrieking winter night.

The leafless branches lashed tragically to and fro, as though sweeping the scudding clouds; and the street-lamps seemed like ghostly eyes blinking here and there in the fitful darkness....

"I'm mad! Why did I tell her all that, I ... I who can never talk to women?"

He was walking against the wind, angry with himself and angry with the wind when it barred his way with its widespread hindering arms. The wind whistled very high in the air, along the topmost leafless boughs; and the boughs broke off, as though at the touch of angry fingers, and scattered all around him; and sometimes a heavier branch fell, black, right at his feet. He walked on—his legs were stronger than the wind barring his way, tugging at his flapping coat—walked with his hands in his pockets, his collar turned up, his hat pulled over his eyes; and he walked on and on without an object, only with an eager craving for the sea, for sea and air and wind, to blow and wash everything out of his brain, which otherwise would be sick with dreaming.... Was he still such a dreamer, even though all the rest of his life belied his dreams? What did he mean by suddenly going to that woman, apologizing to her that afternoon because he didn't know how to talk and then suddenly talking, talking like a boy, telling her things—shadowy things of the past—which he had never told to anybody, because they were not things to be told, because, once told, they ceased to exist?... What interest did she take in his childish games and his childish dreams?... He had probably bored her: perhaps she had laughed at him—the cynical little laugh of the society-woman—and at his really too-ridiculous simplicity, the simplicity of a man who had thought and worked and lived and who had yet always remained a child ... in certain little corners of his soul.... He was so much ashamed at the recollection of all that he had dared to say to her, so much ashamed of the irresistible impulse which had driven him to speak to her, at such length, of his childhood and his childish imaginings, that he was now—as though to regain mastery of himself after the strange spell of her presence—that he was now fighting with the wind, to make himself feel strong again and a man.... The wind clung howling to his body, dragged itself by his legs, struck him blinding blows in the face, but he walked on: his strong legs walked on, with a sharp, regular step, ever mightier than the wind, which he trod under foot and kicked out of his path....

"I don't know what it was," he thought, "but, once I was alone with her, I had ... I had to say it.... How can I be of any use in the world, when I am such a dreamer?... Women! Have women ever woven into my life anything beyond the most commonplace threads? Have I ever confided in a woman before, or felt that irresistible impulse to open my heart, as I did this afternoon, in that weak moment of

enchantment? Why to her, why to her? Why not to others, before her, and why first to her?... Must my life always be this clumsy groping with dreams on one side and facts on the other? But why, why should I have spoken like that: what was the overpowering impulse that made me tell her those strange things, that made it impossible for me to do anything else? Are our actions then so independent of ourselves that we just behave according to the laws of the most secret forces in and above us?... Do I know what it was in me that made me speak like that, that compelled me to speak like that? It was like an irresistible temptation, it was like a path that sloped down to delectable valleys and it was as if angels or demons—I don't know which—pushed and pushed me and whispered, 'Tell it all ... and go down the path.... You'll see how beautiful it is, you'll see how beautiful it becomes!' She ... just listened, without speaking, without moving. What did she think? Nothing, most likely. She heard nothing, she felt nothing. If she's thinking of me now, she thinks of me as a madman, or at least a crank.... What is she? She has been a woman of the world, of just that world which I hate.... What has her life been? She married a man much older than herself, out of vanity. Then a moment of passion, between her and Hans.... What else has there been, what else is there in her? Nothing! How utterly small they all are, these people who don't think, who don't live: who exist like dolls, with dolls' brains and dolls' souls, in a dolls' world! What am I doing among them? Oh, not that I'm big; not that I am worth more than they, but, if I am to do anything—for the world—I must live among real people, different people from them ... or I must live alone, wrapped in myself!... That has always been the everlasting seesaw: doing, dreaming, doing, dreaming.... But there has never been that temptation, that beckoning towards delectable valleys of oblivion and that luxury of allowing myself to be drawn along as though by soul-magnetism, by the strange sympathy of a woman's soul!... Is it then so, in reality! Is it merely a mirage of love? Love has never come into my life: have I ever known what it was? Is there one woman then, only one? Can we find, even late, like this?... Oh, I wish that this wind would blow all this uncertainty, all these vapourings out of my head and my heart ... and leave me strong and simple ... to act alone, to act alone!... And now I will not think about it any more...."

And he quickened his pace and fought more vigorously against the wind, with a wrestler's vigour, and, when at last he saw the sea, foaming pale under the black pall of cloud and roaring with a thousand voices, he thought:

"It all came from one moment of foolishness. It had no real existence. I spoke as I should not have spoken, but what I said was nothing and is being blown out of my heart and out of my head at this very moment...."

But, the next day, waking from a calm sleep, he asked himself:

"Is it not just the unutterable things in us that matter more than anything else to us ... and to those who made us divine them?..."

Chapter XIV

A day or two later, Marianne called:

"Auntie," she said, "I haven't seen you for days. What's the matter? Are you vexed with me?"

"Why, no, Marianne."

"Yes, there's something. You're cross with me. Tell me that you're not cross with me. I haven't dined with you for an age. You are vexed with me because I invited myself. Tell me that I'm mistaken, that you're not vexed with me. And do ask me to dinner again, one day.... It's such a busy time just now: parties, dinners, the Court ball the other night. It was very boring.... We never see you. You never call on us. Nor Uncle either. It's all through that Brauws man."

Constance started, with that strange nervous catch in her throat:

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"That old friend of Uncle's, who speaks on Peace. I've heard him: it was splendid, splendid. His speech was topping, I'm mad on Peace. But he takes possession of Uncle; the boys have seen them together twice, in a motor-car. It's all through Brauws that I never see anything of either of you.... I suppose he's been to dinner, too?"

"Once."

"I'm jealous, Auntie. Why should he come when you don't ask me? Doesn't Mr. Van Vreeswijck ever come now either? If you're angry with me, I'll be an angel in the future, I'll never invite myself again. But do invite me again, yourself!"

"But, you silly child, I'm not angry."

"Yes, you are; you're cross with me. You're not the same. You're different towards me. I feel it. I see it."

"But, Marianne...."

"Aren't you? Am I wrong?.... Tell me that you're not cross with me."

She knelt down by Constance, caressingly.

"Marianne, what a baby you are!... I am not cross: there!"

"Say it once more, like a darling."

"I — am — not — cross. There: are you satisfied?"

"Yes, I believe you now. And when am I coming to dinner?"

"You little tyrant!"

"I daren't ask myself again."

"What do you like so much in our dinners?"

"They're just what I do like. The other night, when I was so bored at the Court ball, I thought, 'So long as Auntie asks me again soon, I don't mind anything!'"

"Rubbish! I don't believe a word of it!"

"It's quite true."

"Well, will you come one evening ... with Brauws and Van Vreeswijck? Then I'll ask Uncle Gerrit and Aunt Adeline too."

"Rather! That will be lovely. When?"

"I'll write and let you know; don't be so impatient."

"Now you are a darling!"

She hugged her aunt:

"You're looking so nice to-day, Auntie. So pretty. You are really. I say, how old are you?"

"You silly child, what does it matter?"

"I want to know. Wait, I can work it out. Mamma said there was eight years between you. Mamma is fifty. So you must be forty-two."

"Very nearly forty-three. That's old, isn't it?"

"Old? I don't know. For some women. Not for you. You're young. And how young Uncle looks, doesn't he? Why, Addie is more sedate than Uncle!... You don't look forty-two, you look ten years less than that. Auntie, isn't it strange how the years go by? I ... I feel old. One year comes after another; and it all makes me miserable.... Auntie, tell me, what makes me so fond of you?... Sometimes ... sometimes I feel as if I could cry when I am here...."

"Do I make you so sad?"

"No, not that. But, when I'm with you, I don't know why, I'm always thinking ... even when I'm chattering ... I feel happy in your house, Auntie. Look, here are the tears!... But you ... you have tears in your eyes also. Yes, you have, you can't deny it. Tell me, Auntie, what is it?"

"Why, Marianne, it's nothing ... but you talk such nonsense sometimes ... and that upsets me; and, when I see other people crying, it makes the tears come into my eyes too."

"Uncle isn't always nice to you, is he, Auntie?"

"My dear Marianne!..."

"No, I know he isn't. Do let me talk about it. It's so horrid, when you're very fond of some one, always to be silent about the things you're thinking of. Let me talk about it. I know that Uncle is not always nice. I told him the other day...."

"What?"

"You'll be angry when you hear. I told him the other day that he must be nicer to you. Are you angry?"

"No, dear, but...."

"No, you mustn't be angry: I meant to say the right thing. I can't bear to think of your not being happy together. Do try and be happy together."

"But, Marianne dear, it's years now...."

"Yes, but it must be altered. Auntie, it must be altered. It would make me so awfully happy."

"Oh, Marianne, Marianne, how excitable you are!..."

"Because I feel for people when I'm fond of them. There are people who never feel and others who never speak out. I feel ... and I say what I think. I'm like that. Mamma's different: she never speaks out. I must speak out; I should choke if I didn't. I should like to say everything, always. When I'm miserable, I want to say so; when I feel happy, I want to say so. But it's not always possible, Auntie.... Auntie, do try and be happy with Uncle. He is so nice, he is so kind; and you were very fond of him once. It's a very long time ago, I know; but you must begin and grow fond of each other again. Tell me, can't you love him any more?"

"Dear...."

"Oh, I see it all: you can't! No, you can't love him any more. And Uncle is so nice, so kind ... even though he is so quick-tempered and excitable. He's so young still: he's just like a hot-headed undergraduate sometimes, Henri said. In that scene with Papa, he was just like a game-cock.... You know, in the family, the uncles are afraid of Uncle Henri, because he always wants to be fighting duels. But that's his quick temper; in reality, he's nice, he's kind. I know it, Auntie, because, when Uncle sees me home, we talk about all sorts of things, tell each other everything. You don't mind, Auntie, do you? You're not jealous?"

"No, dear."

"No, you're not jealous. And Uncle Henri is my uncle too, isn't he, and there's no harm in talking to him? He talks so nicely: time seems to fly when Uncle's talking.... Tell me, Auntie, Brauws: is Brauws really a gentleman? He has been a workman."

"Yes, but that was because he wanted to."

"I don't understand those queer men, do you? No, you don't either, you can't understand such a queer man any more than I can. Just imagine ... Uncle Henri as a labouring man! Can you imagine it? No, no, not possibly! He speaks well, Brauws; and I raved about Peace for a whole evening...."

"And since?"

"No. I don't rave over things long. Raving isn't the same as feeling. When I really feel...."

"Well?"

"Then—I think—it is for always. For always."

"But, Marianne, darling, you mustn't be so sentimental!..."

"Well, what about you? You're crying again...."

"No, Marianne."

"Yes, you're crying. Let's cry together, Auntie. I feel as if I want to cry with you; I'm in that sort of mood, I don't know why. There, see, I am crying!..."

She knelt down by Constance; and her tears really came.

"Dear, you mustn't excite yourself like that. Some one is coming; I hear Uncle...."

The girl recovered herself quickly as Van der Welcke entered the room. He stood for a moment in the doorway, smiling his gay, boyish smile, his blue eyes glowing with happiness. She looked at him for a second.

"Well, Marianne ... I haven't seen you for ever so long...."

"Yes, you're always in that old car with Brauws.... And I've been an absolute butterfly. Only think, at the Court ball, the other night, just as the Queen entered the ball-room...."

She sat down and told her little budget of news in a voice that seemed to come from far away. The dusk crept in and shadowed the room, obliterating their outlines and the expression of their faces.

Chapter XV

"Isn't she coming?" asked Adolphine, with a sidelong glance at the door.

It was Sunday evening, at Mamma van Lowe's, and it was after half-past nine. It had been like that every Sunday evening since Constance returned from Nice: the sidelong, almost anxious look towards the door; the almost anxious question:

"Is she coming?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if she did to-night," said Floortje. "If so, she's coming late, so as not to stay long."

Mother and daughter were sitting at the bridge-table with Uncle Ruyvenaer and Jaap; and the cards fell slackly one upon the other, uninterestingly, with a dull flop; and Floortje gathered in the tricks mechanically, silently and greedily.

"What a frump Cateau looks to-night!" said Adolphine, with a furtive glance at the second card-table.

"Like a washerwoman in satin," said Floortje.

"I say," said Uncle Ruyvenaer, burning to say something spiteful: he was losing, couldn't get a hand, kept throwing his low cards, furiously, one after the other, on Floortje's fat trumps. "I say, it's high time Bertha interfered!"

"Why, what are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? What everybody's talking about: that Marianne is running after Van der Welcke in the most barefaced fashion."

"Aunt Bertha had better be very careful, with such a rotten cad as Uncle van der Welcke," Floortje opined.

"I passed them the other evening on the Koninginnegracht," said Jaap.

"And what were they doing?"

"How were they walking?"

"They had hold of each other."

"How?"

"Well, he had his arm around her waist."

"Did you see it?"

"Did I see it? And he kept on spooning her all the time."

"And Bertha," said Adolphine, "who just acts as if she saw nothing.... Good heavens, what a frump Cateau looks to-night!... She doesn't seem to be coming, does she?"

"No, she doesn't seem to be coming now."

"How does Mamma take it, her staying away?"

"Mamma seems to get on without her," answered Uncle Ruyvenaer.

"Mamma can't really be fond of her."

"Or else Granny would insist on her coming," said Floortje.

"It's much quieter, now that she's staying away."

"Well, I don't mind a bit of a kick-up," said Jaap.

"Have you had to-day's Dwarskijker, Jaap?"

"Yes, but they've stopped putting in anything about us."

"It's really a piece of cheek on her part, not to come any more on Sundays...."

"And to go rushing off to Nice...."

"And not even arrange to be back on New Year's Eve."

"Yes; and then we hear about 'longing for the family.'"

"And even on New Year's Eve...."

"She takes good care to keep away."

"Yes," said Adolphine sentimentally, "on New Year's Eve we ought all to be here."

"Just so," said Uncle Ruyvenaer. "I agree."

"Then, if you've had a quarrel...."

"You make it up again...."

"And start quarrelling again, with renewed courage, on the first of January," grinned Jaap.

"But—I've always said so—what Constance has not got is ... a heart," Adolphine continued, pathetically.

"Do you know what I think?" said Floortje, sinking her voice.

"What?"

"That she encourages Marianne."

"What for?"

"Well, deliberately."

"But what for?"

"Why, to be free of her husband."

"Of Van der Welcke?"

"Yes."

"To get ... rid of him?"

"Of course. He's young ... and she's old," said Floortje, not sparing her mother, who was only four years younger than Constance.

"But do you believe...?" said Uncle, nodding his head.

"Oh, no, I don't say that!"

"But still...."

"I expect it's only just spooning ... as Jaap says."

"I don't think!" said Jaap, with a knowing grin.

"Behave yourself, Jaap!" said Adolphine, angry because Floortje had used the word "old."

"Rats!" said Jaap, rudely, shrugging his shoulders, as much as to say that Mamma was an idiot. "I'll eat my hat if it's only spooning."

They looked at one another: Uncle, Adolphine and Floortje.

"You mustn't speak like that," said Adolphine, in a tone of reprimand, "when you don't know...."

"And what does Floortje know and what do you know? And you are both just as bad as I am, with your insinuations.... Only, I say what you and Floortje think...."

He flung down his cards and left his seat, because he couldn't stand being treated like a little boy who didn't know things.

The three others went on talking about Marianne and Van der Welcke ... because they saw. But they saw nothing of Brauws and Constance ... and did not talk about them....

"Oh, dear!" whined Cateau. "What a frump Aunt Adolphine looks to-night!"

She was sitting at the bridge-table with Aunt Ruyvenaer, Toetie and Eduard van Raven and looked over her ample bust at each card as she played it, very carefully, putting it down with her fat, stumpy fingers, the incarnation of unctuous caution.

"To-night?" asked Eduard.

"Oh, so oft-en: such a frump!" declared Cateau, emphatically. "So dowd-y!"

"She's your husband's sister, after all," said Aunt Ruyvenaer, quietly.

"Yes, Aunt-ie, I know.... But Ka-rel is al-ways a gen-tleman!"

"And Aunt Adolphine never," replied Van Raven, to provoke her.

There was no love lost between aunt and nephew; and Cateau said, meekly:

"Well, I'm not say-ing it to say any-thing un-kind about Adolph-ine.... But, Van Raven, how ill Emilie-tje's looking: so tired! Are you two all right to-gether?"

"Say, half right," said Van Raven, echoing her emphasis.

Toetie tittered behind her cards; and Auntie said:

"Ajo,¹ Edua-r-r-rd, you!... Attend to the game.... Your lead!"

Cateau was no match for Van Raven at laconic repartee and so she preferred to go on talking about Constance and said:

"Is she nev-er com-ing to Mo-ther's Sun-days again? Ah, I ex-pect she's been frightened away!"

"By you?" asked Eduard, gleefully capturing Cateau's knave of trumps.

"No, by the old aunts. It was re-ally ve-ry tactless ... of the two old aunts.... Isn't it aw-ful: about Mari-anne and Van der Wel-cke?"

Karel, Van Saetzema and Dijkerhof were playing three-handed bridge at the third table. They had begun in grim silence, each of them eager to play the dummy, and inwardly Karel thought his sister Adolphine dowdy, Van Saetzema thought his sister-in-law Cateau dowdy, while Dijkerhof thought both his aunts very dowdy, hardly presentable. All three, however, kept their thoughts locked up in the innermost recesses of their souls, so that outwardly they were playing very seriously, their eyes fixed greedily and attentively on the dummy's exposed cards. Suddenly, however, Karel said:

"I say...."

"Well?" asked Van Saetzema.

"Isn't it caddish of Van der Welcke?"

"What? Compromising Marianne?"

"Ah, those girls of Aunt Bertha's!" said Dijkerhof, with a grin.

"What do you mean?" asked his father-in-law.

"Well, Louise is in love with her brother Otto, Emilie with her brother Henri and now Marianne, by way of variety, goes falling in love with her uncle."

"They're crazy, all that Van Naghel lot," said Karel, who felt particularly fit and well that evening, puffing luxuriously after a substantial dinner. "I say, what about Constance? Isn't she coming any more?"

"It doesn't look like it."

"Isn't Aunt Constance coming any more?"

"No, it doesn't look like it."

"Father, it's my turn to take dummy."

"Yes, Saetzema, it's Dijkerhof's turn."

Father-in-law and son-in-law exchanged seats.

The old aunts were sitting in a corner near the door of the conservatory:

"Rine."

"Yes, Tine."

"She doesn't seem to be coming any more on Sundays."

"No, Tine, she doesn't come on Sundays now."

"A good thing too!" Tine yelled into Rine's ear.

Mamma van Lowe, smiling sadly, moved from table to table, with Dorine, asking the children if they wouldn't like something to drink.

1Malay: "Come on, now then."

Chapter XVI

"You're absolutely humanizing Brauws," said Van der Welcke to Constance, when Brauws had accepted a second invitation to dinner. "And with other people coming, too!... It's incredible!"

She was fond of seeing people whom she liked at her table; and she took a pleasure in making her house comfortable for others as well as for herself. Addie was to come down to dinner. Adeline was going out for the first time after her recent confinement; and Gerrit was glad to come, appreciated a good dinner. Her only fear had been that Van Vreeswijck would think it too much of a family dinner this time.

"Tell me frankly, would you rather not come?" she asked Van Vreeswijck.

But he almost flushed as he said:

"But I'm delighted to come, mevrouw."

She had noticed lately that he was paying great attention to Marianne; and she was almost glad of it.

They were very gay at dinner; and Brauws, feeling quite at home, talked about America: how he had stood on the platform of an electric tram, in wind and rain, as driver.

"Constance," said Paul, "all the social elements are assembled at your dinner-table to-night! Did you choose them on purpose? Van Vreeswijck represents the Court aristocracy; your husband, let us say, the country aristocracy: it's the only word I can find for him; Gerrit the army; Brauws labour; I the middle-classes, the pure unadulterated capitalists; and your boy the future, the mysterious future! The ladies are not so mixed: next time, you must mix your ladies...."

"Mr. Brauws," Marianne asked, suddenly, "why aren't you driving a tram now?"

"Freule,¹ to explain that, I should have to talk to you for two hours about myself; and you wouldn't be interested in the explanation...."

"Oh, yes!" said Marianne, flippantly. "If you had remained a tram-driver, your life would not have interested me. Now that you have resigned your rank as a workman and are eating pâté and drinking champagne with us, it does interest me. For it's just that evolution which attracts me...."

"Marianne!" said Paul, admonishing her. "Not so fast, child: you're only a little girl and you mustn't discuss such questions. You'll be making Mr. Brauws afraid to take another mouthful!..."

Brauws was obviously a little annoyed; and Constance whispered:

"Marianne ... don't talk like that...."

"But, Auntie...."

"No, dear, don't do it: don't talk like that...."

"Am I always saying tactless things?"

"No, no, but ... if you keep on, you'll really make Brauws refuse to come to the houses of people like ourselves...."

"Who eat pâté!"

"Hush, Marianne!"

"Uncle!" said Marianne to Van der Welcke.

"Yes?"

"Don't you think it silly? To become a workman and then leave off? Why? That's what I want to know. If you want to become one, you should remain one! Are you in sympathy with those ideas which lead to nothing?"

"I'm very fond of Brauws, Marianne."

"But not of his ideas?"

"No, he's a monomaniac. He's mad on that point, or was."

"Just so: was."

"Marianne, are you always so implacable?"

The bells:

"No, I'm not implacable. Paul is really right: I mustn't talk like that. I blurt out the first thing that comes into my head. Is Brauws angry, do you think?"

"With you? No."

"I say, Uncle, do you think it's the least use, always thinking about that improvement of social conditions? Why not, all of us, do good where we can and, for the rest, try and be happy ourselves? That's the great thing."

Van der Welcke laughed:

"What an easy solution, Marianne!"

"Tell me, Uncle: do you do a lot of good?"

"No."

"Are you happy?"

"Sometimes...."

"Not always.... I don't do any good either, or not much. I am happy ... sometimes. You see, I don't go very far, even according to my own superficial creed. Uncle, are we very insignificant, should you say?"

"Who, baby?"

"You and I! Much more insignificant than Brauws?"

"I think so."

"Are we small?"

"Small?"

"Yes, are we small souls ... and is he ... is he a big one?"

"Perhaps, Marianne."

"Yes, I'm a small one. And you too ... I think. He's not. No, he's one of the big ones ... though he is eating pâté just now. But I, a small soul, shall always like small souls best. I like you much better than him."

"And yet he is more interesting than I; and one doesn't come across many big souls."

"No, but I like you best. I daren't talk to him again. I should start quarrelling with him at once. Straight away. I could never quarrel with you. That's the sympathy between small soul ... and small soul. Tell me, is your insignificance attracted to mine also?"

"Perhaps, Marianne."

"You say perhaps to everything. Say yes."

"Well, then, yes."

"Are we both small?"

"Yes."

"Both of us?"

"Yes."

"In sympathy?"

"Yes."

The bells:

"Yes—yes—yes!" she laughed; and the little bells tinkled merrily, the shrill little silver bells. "Uncle, I drink to it."

"To what?"

"To our small ... sympathy."

“Here goes!”

Their champagne-glasses touched, with a crystal note. They drank.

“What are you drinking to?” asked Paul.

She put her finger to her tiny mouth. She was radiant and, in her excitement, she became very pretty, with her shining eyes. She felt that Brauws was looking at her; and she felt that Brauws was still angry. And, feeling mischievous and happy, with a desire to tease them all, Brauws, Paul and Van der Welcke, she murmured, with an airy grace:

“That’s our secret; Uncle’s and mine....”

“A secret?” asked Van Vreeswijk.

She laughed. The bells rang out merrily:

“And you,” she said to Van Vreeswijk, maliciously, “you sha’n’t know the secret ever!...”

The title borne by the unmarried daughters of Dutch noblemen.

Chapter XVII

The men remained behind to smoke; Constance went to the drawing-room with Adeline and Marianne.

"You're looking so happy to-night, Aunt Constance," said Marianne. "Don't you think so, Aunt Adeline? Tell me why."

The girl herself looked happy, radiant as though with visible rays, a great light flashing from her sparkling eyes.

"Yes, Auntie's looking very well," said the simple little fair-haired woman.

"That's because I think it so nice to have all of you with me."

Marianne knelt down beside her, in her caressing way:

"She is so nice, isn't she, Aunt Adeline? I say, Aunt Adeline, isn't she a darling? So nice, so jolly, so homy. I adore Aunt Constance these days."

And she embraced Constance impetuously.

"Yes, Constance," said Adeline, "I'm very fond of you too."

And she took her sister-in-law's hand. She was a very gentle, simple, fair-haired little woman, the quiet, obedient little wife of her big, noisy Gerrit; and the family thought her insignificant and boring. Because Constance had at once sought her affection and valued her affection, she had, after her first surprise, grown very fond of Constance. She never went out in the evening, because of the children, except when Constance invited her. And she sat there, happy to be with Constance, with her gentle smile on her round, fair, motherly little face, pleasant and comfortable with her matronly little figure, now too plump for prettiness.

The men joined them; and, when Constance saw Brauws come in with the others, she thought that he looked strange, pale under the rough bronze of his cheeks. His deep, grey eyes seemed to lose themselves in their own sombre depths; and for the first time she examined his features in detail: they were somewhat irregular in outline, with the short-cropped hair; his nose was large and straight and the heavy eyebrows arched sombrely over the sombre eyes; his temples were broad and level; his cheekbones wide; and all that part of his face was energetic, intelligent, rough and sombre, a little Gothic and barbarian, but yet curiously ascetic, with the asceticism of the thinker. But the mouth might have belonged to quite another face: almost weak, more finely and purely drawn than any of his other features; the lips fresh, without any heavy sensuality; the white teeth seemed to hold a laughing threat as though they would bite: a threat that gave him the look of a beast of prey. And yet that mouth, the moustache and the chin had something more delicate about them, as though they belonged to another face; his voice was gentle; and his laugh, which every now and then burst out naturally and clearly, was charming, had a note

of kindness, which softened all that was rough and threatening into something surprisingly lovable. In his vigorous, broad, powerful movements he had retained an almost unceremonious freedom, which most certainly remained to him from his workman years: an indifference to the chair in which he sat, to the mantelpiece against which he leant; an indifference which seemed a strong and virile, easy and natural grace in the man of culture whose hands had laboured: something original and almost impulsive, which, when it did not charm, was bound to appear antipathetic, rude and rough to any one who was expecting the manners prescribed by social convention for a gentleman in a drawing-room. Constance was sometimes surprised that she, of all women, was not offended by this unceremonious freedom, that she was even attracted by it; but a nervous girl like Marianne—herself a delicate, fragile little doll of boudoir culture—would tingle to her finger-tips with irritation at that impulsive naturalness, which was too spacious for her among the furniture of Aunt Constance's drawing-room. And a sort of uncontrollable resentment surged through her when Brauws came to where she sat and said:

"Do you always ... take such an interest in evolution, freule?"

She looked up at him quickly. He was bending forward a little, in a protecting and almost mocking attitude; and she saw only the barbaric, Teutonic part of his head and the beast-of-prey threat of his handsome teeth. She hated it all, because it was very strong and as it were hostile to her caste. She answered, with cool irony:

"No, Mr. Brauws, only in your case."

"And to what do I owe the honour?" asked Brauws.

"It's only natural. You were not like everybody ... once. Now that I am meeting you just as I meet everybody, it interests me to know how it came about."

"From weakness, you think? Is that your secret idea?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps you are right. And, if it were so, would you despise me?"

The conversation was getting on her nerves. She tried to evade it:

"You may be weak, you may be strong," she said, irritably. "I don't know ... and ... it doesn't interest me so very much."

"It did just now."

Again she looked up quickly, with the quick, nervous grace of all her movements, and it flashed upon her that he was very angry with her, very hostile towards her.

"Aunt Constance!" she called. "Do come and help me. Mr. Brauws isn't at all nice."

Constance came up.

"He's not nice, your friend," Marianne went on, like a spoilt child, a little frightened. "He wants ... he absolutely insists on quarrelling with me. Do take my part!"

And she suddenly flitted away to another chair and, bending behind her fan to Van der Welcke:

"That Brauws man is a most disagreeable person. Why can't he let me alone?"

She felt safe with him, this man of her own class, who joined hands with her own selfish, happiness-craving youth—for he was young—a small soul, like hers. Her small soul hung on his eyes; and she felt that she loved him. As long as she did not think about it and abandoned herself to her overflowing happiness, she remained happy, full of radiance; it was only at home that it cost her tears and bitter agony.

"You're surely not angry with my little niece?" asked Constance.

He was still pale, under the rough bronze of his cheeks.

"Yes," he said, sombrely.

"Why?" she asked, almost beseechingly. "She is a child!"

"No, she is not merely a child. She represents to me...."

"What?..."

"All of you!" he said, roughly, with a wave of his hand.

"Whom do you mean?"

"Her caste, to which you yourself belong. What am I here for? Tell me what I am here for. A single word from that delicate, lily-white child, who hates me, has made me ask myself, what am I here for, among all of you? I'm out of place here."

"No. You are our friend, Henri's friend."

"And yours?"

"And mine."

"Already?"

"Already. So don't think that you are out of place here."

"You also are a woman ... of your caste," he said, gloomily.

"Can I help that?" she asked, half laughing.

"No. But why friendship? Our ideas remain poles apart."

"Ideas? I have none. I have never thought."

"Never thought?"

"No."

"You are a woman: you have only felt."

"Not that either."

"Not felt? But then what have you done?"

"I do not believe that I have lived."

"Not ever?"

"No, not ever."

"How do you know that now?"

"I am beginning to feel it now, by degrees. No doubt because I am getting old now."

"You are not old."

"I am old."

"And thinking: are you also beginning to think?"

"No, not yet."

"But, by the way you speak of yourself, you are quite young!"

"Don't be angry with that child!" she entreated, turning the conversation. "She is a nice girl, I am very fond of her ... but she sometimes says things...."

"Do you like her?"

"Yes."

"I don't. I could almost say, I hate her as she hates me."

"Why?" she asked, in a frightened voice. "You don't know her. You can't hate her."

"I am different from other people, am I not, mevrouw? I say different things and I say them differently. You know it, you knew it before I entered your house!" he said, almost fiercely.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to say something to you."

"What is it?"

"That child ... that delicate, that lily-white child ... is...."

"What?"

"The danger to your domestic happiness."

She gave a violent start:

"What do you mean?"

"She's in love with Hans."

"Hush!" she whispered, trembling, and laid her hand on his hand. "Hush!"

"She is in love with Hans."

"How do you know?"

"I see it.... It radiates from their whole being...."

They both of them looked at Van der Welcke and Marianne. The two were whispering together with a glance and a smile, half-hidden behind a fan, while Paul, Gerrit and Van Vreeswijck were in the midst of an eager discussion and Addie gallantly entertaining Aunt Adeline, who was smiling gently.

"Please hush!" Constance entreated again, very pale. "I know she's in love with him."

"You know it?"

"Yes."

"Has she told you?"

"No. But I see it radiating out of her, as you see it. But she is no danger ... to my domestic happiness. That happiness lies in my son, not in my husband."

"I like Hans," he said, almost reproachfully. "I have always liked him, perhaps just because he was always a child—and I already a man—when we were boys. He is still a child. He also ... loves her. You see, I say different things from other people, because I don't know how to talk...."

"I know," she whispered, "that he loves her."

"You know?"

"Yes."

"Has he told you?"

"No. But I see it radiating out of him as I do out of her."

"So do I."

"Hush, please hush!"

"What's the use of hushing? Everybody sees it."

"No, not everybody."

"If we see it, everybody sees it."

"No."

"I say yes. I know that your brothers see it."

"No.... Please, please ... don't speak of it, don't speak of it, don't speak of it!"

"She is happy!"

"She must be suffering as well."

"But she gives herself up to her happiness. She is young, she does not reflect ... any more than Hans does. I am sorry ... for your sake, mevrouw."

"It is no sorrow to me for my own sake.... I am sorry ... for hers. Don't be angry with the child! Who knows what she suffers! Don't be angry because she ... annoyed you at dinner, with her questions."

"One can't control one's likes ... or one's dislikes."

"No. But I do like the girl ... and I want you to try, as our friend, not to hate her.... How seriously we're talking! I can't talk like that: I'm not used to it. I confess to you honestly, I'm getting frightened...."

"Of me?..."

"You're too big ... to hate a child like that."

"I'm not big at all.... I am very human. I sometimes feel very small. But you are right: to hate that child, for a single word which she said, for a touch of hostility which I felt in her, is very small. Thanks for the rebuke. I won't hate her, I promise you."

At first, the sombre austerity of his frown and his expression had almost terrified her. She now saw his lips laugh and his face light up.

"I'm going to apologize."

"No, don't do that."

"Yes, I will."

He went to Marianne; and Constance heard him say:

"Freule, I want to make friends."

She did not catch what Marianne answered, but she heard the little bells of Marianne's laughter and saw her put out her hand to Brauws. It was a reconciliation; and yet she felt that the hostility continued to exist, irreconcilably, like a hostility that wastoo deep-seated, going down to the fundamental antagonism of caste, even though this was innate in her and cultivated in him....

"And why," she thought, "do not I feel that hostility?..."

Chapter XVIII

There was a big official dinner at Van Naghel's; and the guests were expected in three-quarters of an hour.

"Mamma," whined Huigje to Frances, as she was dressing, "what's happening?"

"There are people coming," said Frances, without looking up.

"What sort of people, Mamma?"

"Oh, there's a dinner-party, dear!" said Frances, irritably.

Huigje did not know what a dinner-party was:

"What's dinner-party?" he asked his little sister Ottelientje.

"Things to eat," said Ottelientje, importantly.

"Things to eat?"

"Yes, nice things ... ices."

"Shall we have dinner-party, Mamma, and ices?" whined Huigje.

"Allah,¹ baboe,² keep the sinjo³ with you!... But, baboe, do me up first."

Otto, who now had a billet at the Foreign Office, came in, followed by Louise.

"Oh, aren't you dressing, Louise?" said Frances.

"No, I'm not going down," she answered. "I shall have my meal with the children and with Marietje and Karel, in the nursery."

"I don't want you to have your dinner with the children," said Frances, fastening her bracelet.

"No," said Louise, gently, "but I'm having dinner with Karel and Marie in any case."

"One would think you were mad," said Frances. "Why aren't you at the dinner?"

"I arranged it with Mamma. There's a place short."

"But you're not a child!"

"Frances, what do I care about these dinners?" said Louise, with a gentle little laugh.

"If there's a place short," said Frances, working herself up about nothing, "I'll have my dinner with the children."

"Frances, please...."

"I will!"

"But, Frances, why make difficulties when there are none?" Louise replied, very gently. "Really, it has all been arranged ... with Mamma."

"I'm only a step-daughter!" cried Frances.

"You mean, a daughter-in-law!" Otto put in, with a laugh.

"A step-daughter!" Frances repeated, trembling with nervous irritation. "You're a daughter. Your place is at the dinner."

"Frances, I assure you, I'm not going in to dinner," said Louise, quietly but decidedly.

"Oh, shut up, Frances!" said Otto.

But Frances wanted to get angry, about nothing, merely for the sake of working herself up. She scolded the baboe, pushed the children out of her way, broke a fan:

"There, I've smashed the rotten thing!"

"Is that your new fan?" asked Otto, furiously.

"Yes. R-r-rootsh!... There, it's in shreds!"

He flew into a rage:

"You needn't think I'll ever give you anything again!... You're not worth it!"

"That's right, then you can give everything to your sister: you're fonder of Louise as it is ... you're in love with Louise. R-r-rootsh!... R-r-rootsh!"

And she sent the fan flying across the room, in pieces.

"Eh, njonja!"⁴ said the baboe in mild astonishment.

"You're a regular nonna,⁵ that's what you are!" said Otto, flushing angrily.

But his wife laughed. The broken fan had relieved her, made her feel livelier:

"Give me that other fan, baboe."

She was ready. She looked at her face in the glass, added a touch of powder and smiled. She thought that she looked nice, though she was a little pale and thin. Suddenly, she sat down, straight up in a chair:

"I feel so faint!" she murmured.

Louise went to her:

"What's the matter, Frances?"

"I feel so faint!" she said, almost inaudibly.

She was as white as a sheet.

"Give me some eau-de-Cologne...."

"What's the matter with you now?" cried Otto, in despair.

"Baboe," said Louise, "get some vinegar; mevrouw's fainting."

"No," moaned Frances, "vinegar ... stains ... one's ... things.... Mind ... my ... dress. Eau ... de ... Cologne."

Louise dabbed her forehead.

"Don't ruffle my hair!" screamed Frances.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she moaned, the next second.

She rested her head against Louise:

"Louise!"

"What is it, Frances?"

"I haven't been nice to you.... I'm going to die."

"No, no, you're not."

"Yes, I am.... Huigje! Ottelientje! Mamma's going to die."

Otto took the children out of the room.

"Leave them with me!" she moaned. "I'm dying!..."

"No, Frances. But won't you lie down a little? Take off your things? Lie down on your bed?"

"No ... no ... I'm a little better.... I must go down...."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes.... Give me some ... eau-de-Cologne.... Oh, Louise, everything suddenly went black!..."

"You felt giddy, I expect. Did you take your drops to-day?"

"Yes, but they're no good, those drops. I'm much better now, Louise. Are you angry with me?..."

"No."

"For saying Otto was in love with you?"

"Oh, nonsense, Frances!"

"Yes, he is in love with you. You're mad, you two: brother and sister; I never heard of such a thing.... I'm better, Louise. Will you help me downstairs? And will you ... will you have your dinner with the children? That's sweet of you.... You see, the foreign secretary's coming and that's why Papa wants Otto and me to be at the dinner. Otherwise I don't care about that sort of thing.... I'm much better now, Louise.... Come, take me downstairs."

She stood up and Louise helped her down the stairs, tenderly.

The maids were running upstairs, downstairs and along the passages; footmen were waiting in the hall; the house was one blaze of light. In the drawing-room, Bertha, already dressed, was speaking to Willem, the butler; the doors were open, showing the long table glittering through its flowers.

"What's the matter with Frances?" asked Bertha, seeing Frances come in slowly, looking very pale, leaning on Louise's arm.

"I'm better now, Mamma.... I thought I was dying...."

At that moment, there was a loud peal at the front-door bell.

"Who can that be?"

One of the footmen opened the door.

"Who is it?" asked Bertha, softly, from the stairs.

"It's I, Mamma!"

"Emilie!"

"Yes ... I...."

Emilie came up. She had flung down a wet waterproof in the hall and was very pale; her hair hung in disorder over her face.

"But, Emilie ... what's the matter?"

She had flown upstairs precipitately, seeing nothing; now she suddenly perceived the rooms, all open and lit up, with the long table and the flowers; and she remembered that there was a dinner-party....

"I've run away!" she said. "I'm not going back!"

"Run away!"

"Yes. Eduard struck me ... and insulted me ... insulted me.... I won't go back home.... I shall stay here!"

"Emilie! Good heavens!"

"Unless you turn me away.... Then I'll go into the streets, I don't know where ... to Leiden ... to Henri.... I'll go to Henri. Understand what I say, Mamma: I'll never go back to Eduard."

Van Naghel appeared at the door:

"What's happened, Emilie?"

"Papa, Papa, I've run away...."

"Run away...."

"From Eduard. It's a dog's life. He's a miser. He's always bullying me, reproaching me, saying that I spend too much money ... that my parents, yes, that you ... that you spend too much money! He's mad with meanness. He locks up my linen-cupboard ... because I wear too many chemises and send too many things to the wash and employ too expensive a laundress! He grudges me more than one chemise a week! He's mad ... he's gone mad! For a whole week, I put on three fresh chemises a day, to annoy him, and I threw all those chemises into his dirty-clothes-basket, to annoy him! He found them this morning! I told him that I was the mistress of my own chemises and that I should wear just as many as I pleased. Then he flew into a passion and he struck me...."

She burst out laughing:

"I flung all my chemises at his head!" she screamed, hysterically. "And he flung them all back. The room was one vast chemise!... Oh, it's terrible.... It's a dog's life. I won't go back to him.... Papa, I needn't go back to him, need I?"

"Emilie, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

She threw herself upon her father, crushed herself against the orders on his breast:

"Oh, Papa, I am so unhappy! I can't stand any more of it: I am so unhappy!"

Marianne came in. She was looking very pretty: a delicate, fair little society-girl, in her low-necked white frock. She heard Emilie's last words, saw her pale, thin, dishevelled:

"Emilietje!... Sissy!... What is it?" she exclaimed. "Oh, that horrid man! It's that horrid man!"

Bertha shut her eyes:

"Emilie," she said, wearily.

"Mamma, don't be angry ... but I'm staying!"

The bell rang.

"There's the bell, Emilie!" said Van Naghel, sternly.

"I'm going, Papa...."

She looked around her in perplexity, not knowing which door to go out by.

"Come with me," said Louise, quickly.

And, taking Emilie almost in her arms, she hurried her away.

The first arrivals were coming up the stairs. Louise and Emilie just managed to escape into a little boudoir. But the doors were open.

"We can run across the passage presently," whispered Louise.

"Just think," whispered Emilie, "he's absolutely mad! He interferes with the cook's housekeeping-book. He checks what she spends each day.... He's mad, he's mad! He won't eat at meals, so as to save a bit of meat for next day. And, when we give a little dinner, nothing's good enough. It's all for people, all for show: he'd starve, in order to give his friends champagne!"

"Hush, Emilie!"

They heard the exchange of greetings in the drawing-room; their parents' well-bred, expressionless voices; Marianne's nervous, tinkling laugh; Otto and Frances making up to the foreign secretary. It all sounded false. The bell kept on ringing. More guests came upstairs, with a rustle of skirts, a creaking of shoes....

"We can't get away!" said Emilie, plaintively, almost collapsing in Louise's arms.

They succeeded in running upstairs between two rings at the bell. The table was laid in the nursery: Karel and Marietje were there, playing with Ottelientje and Huig; the baboe sat huddled in a corner.

"I'll have something with you!" said Emilie. "I'm faint with hunger.... What a day, good God, what a day!"

"We'll get something to eat in between," said Louise. "Come, Emilie, come to my room."

And, as if they were fleeing again, this time from the children, she dragged Emilie up to her own room.

"Emilie, do be sensible!" she implored.

"Louise, I mean what I said, give me a glass of wine, a biscuit, anything: I'm sinking...."

Louise went out and Emilie was left alone. She looked around the bright, cosy sitting-room, stamped with the gentle personality of its owner: there were many books about; the doors of a book-case were open.

"The dear girl!" thought Emilie, lying back wearily in a chair. "She lives her own life peacefully ... and, when there's anything wrong, she's the one who helps. Her life just goes on, the same thing day after day! She was a girl while we were still children; and, properly speaking, we never knew her as we know one another. She's fond of Otto, just as I'm very fond of Otto ... but, apart from that, her life just goes on in the same way.... She's always silent.... She just lives and reads up here ... and, if there's anything wrong, she's the one who helps.... What have I done, my God, what have I done!... But I won't go back!..."

Louise returned, with a glass of wine and a few biscuits.

"We're dining presently," she said. "There, drink that and be sensible, Emilie. Does Eduard know you're here?"

"No. He was out when I left. I waited till he was out.... Louise, I won't go back! I've telegraphed to Henri to help me. I'm expecting him here."

They heard voices below.

"Listen!" said Louise.

"Who is it?"

"Perhaps it's some one who has come late.... But that's impossible.... I hear a noise on the stairs...."

"My God!" cried Emilie. "It's Eduard! Hide me! Say you don't know where I am!"

"I can't do that, Emilie. Keep calm, Emilie, be sensible. Go to my bedroom, if you like...."

Emilie fled. It was a renewed flight, the fluttering of a young bird, a frail butterfly, hither and thither. Her eyes seemed to be seeking, vaguely and anxiously.... She and Louise had to go down to the next landing and Emilie managed to escape to Marianne's room, once the boudoir which they had shared between them:

"My own little room!" she sobbed, throwing herself into a chair.

The gas was half-lowered. Everywhere lay things of Marianne's; the dressing-table was in disorder, as though Marianne had had to dress quickly and hurriedly for the dinner-party.

"How nice she looked!" sobbed Emilie. "My little sister, my dear little sister! O God, they say she's in love with Uncle Henri!"

She sprang up again in nervous restlessness, turned the gas on, looked round, anxiously, feeling lost, even in this room:

"His portrait!" she cried. "Uncle Henri's portrait!"

She saw Van der Welcke's photograph. True, it was between Constance' and Addie's; but there was another on Marianne's writing-table.

"My little sister, my poor little sister!" sobbed Emilie.

And she dropped limply into another chair, on the top of a corset and petticoats of Marianne's. She lay like that, with drooping arms, among her sister's things. Suddenly she sat up. She heard voices outside, in the passage: Louise with Eduard, her husband.

"She's mad, she's mad!" he was snarling. "She's run away! The servant didn't know where to. Where is she, where is she?"

"She's here," said Louise, calmly.

"Where?"

"She's resting. But keep calm, Eduard, and don't let them hear you downstairs. There's a dinner-party."

"I don't care! I insist...."

"I insist that you keep quiet and don't make a scene...."

"Where is Emilie?"

"If you're quiet, you can speak to her. If you shout like that, so that you can be heard downstairs, I'll send a message to Papa."

Emilie, on tenterhooks, quivering in every nerve, stood up and opened the door:

"I am here," she said.

She stood in front of her husband. He was no longer the dapper nonentity; he stood there coarse, raving, like a clod-hopper:

"You're coming home with me!" he shouted. "This minute!"

"Eduard!" Louise entreated. "Don't shout. Come in."

She pushed him into Marianne's room.

"You're coming home!" he shouted again. "Are you coming? Are you coming?"

"No, I'm not," said Emilie.

"You're not?"

"No! I won't go back to you."

"You've got to!"

"I want a divorce."

"I don't; and you're coming home."

"I'm not going home. You've struck me ... and I'm placing myself under my father's protection. I don't know the law, but I'm not going to be struck by you."

"If you don't come ... I'll make you, I'll thrash you to the door."

She gave a contemptuous laugh:

"You're not a man," she said. "You're a cowardly brute!"

He raved as though beside himself. He cursed and foamed at the mouth. Louise stared at him in dismay; hardly knew him, now that he had lost all his veneer of manner, all his German, would-be correct politeness.

"Home you go!" he roared again, pointing to the door with his finger.

"I am not going."

He flew at her, seized her by her frail shoulders, shook her, his mouth distorted by passion, his eyes starting out of his head, like a madman's. She writhed herself free, struck him full in the face. He hit her back.

"Eduard! Emilie!" screamed Louise.

Her anger gave her strength. She threw herself upon her brother-in-law, strong in her indignation, pushed him away from his wife.

"Go away!" she cried aloud, clasping Emilie in her arms. "Go away! Out of the room!"

"I want my wife back!"

Louise calmed herself:

"Eduard," she said, quietly, "leave the room."

"No."

"Once more, Eduard, leave the room, or I'll send one of the men to Papa. If you want to make a scandal, very well, do; but you'll be the chief sufferer."

He suddenly remembered the Hague, his career....

"Go out of the room, Eduard."

"He's hurt me!" moaned Emilie. "I've got a pain, here...."

She lay like a dead thing in her sister's arms.

"Eduard, go out of the room."

"I'll go," he said. "But I shall stay until the dinner is over...."

He went away.

"The wretch! The wretch!" moaned Emilie. "He's bruised my breast. Lucky that he did: now I can get a divorce, can't I, Louise?... Louise, do you know the law?"

"No, my darling, but Papa will tell you all about it. But keep calm, keep calm...."

"Where has he gone?"

"If you don't mind being left alone, I'll go and see...."

"No, stay with me, stay with me...."

There was a knock at the door.

"Who's there?"

An old nurse entered:

"Freule," she said to Louise, "meneer asks if you'll please not talk so loud up here. Meneer can hear Mr. van Raven's voice."

"Where is Mr. van Raven now?"

"The blackguard has gone to Mr. Frans and Mr. Henri's sitting-room."

"Very well, Leentje, we'll make less noise. But you mustn't talk like that."

"It hurts!" moaned Emilie.

The woman looked at her compassionately:

"The dirty blackguard!" she said. "Did he hit you, my poor dear?..."

"Leentje, I won't have you speak like that!" said Louise.

"And I'll tell him to his face ... that he's a dirty blackguard," the old nurse insisted, obstinately.

She knelt beside Emilie, opened the girl's blouse and softly rubbed her breast:

"The blackguard!" she repeated.

The sisters let her alone. They were silent, all three; the room was all in confusion. Emilie had dropped back again limply among Marianne's clothes. Leentje got up and began tidying.

"Louise," whispered Emilie.

"My poor sissy!"

"I see Uncle Henri's portrait there.... And there.... And another over there.... Marianne's fond of Uncle Henri...."

"Yes, but hush!"

"She's fond of him ... she's in love with him, Louise."

"Yes, I know. Hush, Emilie!"

"Does Mamma know?"

"We don't talk about it. But I think so."

"Does everybody know?"

"No, no, not everybody!"

"Does Marianne never talk about it?"

"No, never."

"Is there nothing to be done? Aunt Adolphine and Aunt Cateau were speaking of it the other day. Everybody knows about it."

"No, no, not everybody, surely?"

"Yes, everybody. And everybody knows too that Eduard beats me.... Louise!"

"Ssh! I hear voices."

"That's ... Henri!"

"Yes, it's Henri's voice...."

"And Eduard...."

"Heavens!... Leentje!" cried Louise. "Go to Mr. Henri and Mr. Eduard and tell them that Papa doesn't wish them to speak loud."

"The blackguard!" said Leentje.

She left the room and went down the stairs. The whole house was lit up, the doors of the reception-rooms were open; one caught the glitter of the dinner-table amid its flowers and the sound of laughing voices: a soft, well-bred society-ripple, a ring of silver, a faint tinkling of crystal.

"The blackguard!" thought the old nurse.

She was down in the hall now: from the kitchen came the voices of bustling maids, of the chef, the footmen. The cloak-room was lighted and open, was full of wraps and overcoats. On the other side of the hall was the sitting-room of the two undergraduates.

Old Leentje opened the door. She saw Van Raven standing opposite Henri; their voices clashed, in bitter enmity:

"Then why did Emilie telegraph to me?"

"I don't know; but our affairs don't concern you."

"Mr. Henri, Mr. Eduard," said the old nurse, "your papa asks, will you please not speak loud...."

"Where is Emilie?" asked Henri.

"The poor dear is in Marianne's room," said Leentje. "Come with me, my boy...."

She took Henri, who was shaking all over, by the hand. And, as she left the room with Henri, she said, out loud:

"The blackguard!"

"Who?" asked Henri.

"He!"

"What has he done?"

"What hasn't he done!"

She hesitated to tell him, dreading his temper, went cautiously up the stairs, past the open doors of the lighted rooms.

Henri caught a glimpse of the dinner-table, through the flowers, and of three of the guests talking and laughing, lightly and pleasantly, in their well-bred, expressionless voices.

And then he found his two sisters in Marianne's room. As soon as Emilie saw him, she threw herself into his arms:

"Henri!"

"Sissy, what is it?"

She told him, briefly.

"The cad!" he cried. "The cad! Has he hit you? I'll ... I'll ..."

He wanted to rush downstairs; they held him back:

"Henri, for goodness' sake," Louise entreated, "remember there are people here!"

"Don't you all want your dinner?" asked Karel, at the door. "We're starving."

They went to the nursery, as it had been called for years, and sat down to table.

"I'm not hungry now," said Emilie.

"I don't want anything either," said Henri. "I'm calmer now ... and I'm going downstairs."

They held him back again. And the time dragged on. Ottelientje and Huig were put to bed; Karel went to do his home-work; Marietje hung round her elder sisters, inquisitively. And they listened, with the doors open, to the sounds below.

"They've finished dinner...."

"Yes, I can hear them in the drawing-room...."

Marianne suddenly came running upstairs, appeared in the doorway, looking very white and sweet:

"I couldn't bear it any longer!" she exclaimed. "The dinner's over. I escaped for a moment. Emilie! Sissy!"

"He's here!" said Emilie. "Eduard: he's waiting downstairs. He wants to take me home with him. You must all help me. He struck me!"

"My sissy, my sissy!" cried Marianne, excitedly, wringing her arms and her hands, kissing Emilie. "Is he downstairs? I'll tell Papa. I daren't stay any longer. Oh, those tiresome people down there! It's nearly nine. They'll be gone in an hour. Now I must go."

And she started to hurry away.

"Marianne!" said Henri.

"What is it?"

"I want to speak to you presently."

"Very well, presently."

And she flitted down the stairs.

"How pretty she's growing!" said Henri.

"And I," said Emilie, "so ugly!"

She leant against Louise. They heard a rustle on the stairs. It was Bertha herself:

"My child!"

"Mamma!"

"I managed to slip away, just for a moment. My dear child!"

"Eduard is here, Mamma. He's downstairs. He wants to take me away with him. He is waiting till the people are gone. He was shouting so...."

"I heard him."

"We told him to be quiet. I won't go with him, Mamma. I'll stay with you, I'll stay with you. He struck me!"

"The cad!" cried Henri, pale in the face.

"The dirty blackguard!" said the old nurse.

Bertha, very pale, shut her eyes, heaved a deep sigh:

"My child, my dear child ... be sensible, make it up."

"But he is brutal to me, Mamma!"

She flung herself, sobbing, into Bertha's arms.

"My darling!" Bertha wept. "I can't stay away any longer."

She released herself, went away; her dress rustled down the stairs. Her guests were sitting in the drawing-room; one or two looked at her strangely, because she had absented herself. In a moment she was once more the tactful, charming hostess.

Marianne, with a smile on her face, had gone to Van Naghel's study, where the men were having their coffee, smoking:

"Papa...."

"What is it, dear?"

"Eduard is downstairs!" she whispered. "I only came to tell you. He wants to take Emilie with him. He has struck her."

"Tell him I'll speak to him ... as soon as our visitors have gone."

And, as the host, he turned to his guests again.

Marianne went downstairs, found Eduard in the boys' sitting-room. He was quietly smoking.

"Papa will speak to you as soon as they're all gone. The carriages will be here in three-quarters of an hour."

"Very well," he said laconically.

Her blood seethed up:

"You're a cowardly wretch!" she cried. "You've struck Emilie!"

He flared up, losing all his stiff German society-manners:

"And I'm her husband!" he roared. "But you ... you ..."

"What about me?"

"You've no decency! You're in love with your uncle! With a married man!"

"O-o-oh!" screamed Marianne.

She hid her face with her hands, terrified. Then she recovered herself, but her pale face flushed red with shame:

"You don't know what you're saying!" she said, haughtily, trying to withdraw into her maidenly reserve. "You don't know what you're saying. But your manners are only put on, for strangers. And at heart you're a cowardly cad, a cowardly cad, who strikes and insults women."

He made an angry movement at her words.

"You're not going to strike me, I suppose?" she said, drawing herself up haughtily.

"You've insulted me: isn't that enough for you?"

She made an effort to turn away calmly, walked out of the room, up the stairs. The sobs welled up in her throat; she could no longer keep them back:

"O God!" she thought. "Everybody knows it. Everybody sees it. I can't keep it hidden: I love him, I love him!... Hush! Hush! I must suppress it, deep, deep down in myself. But, if I love him, if I love him ... if I am happy when I see him.... Oh, hush, hush!"

She pressed her two hands to her breast, as though to thrust her emotion deep down in her soul. She wiped her eyes, had the strength to return to the drawing-room. She

talked gaily and pleasantly, as the daughter of the house, but she suddenly felt tired to death:

"Everybody knows it, everybody sees it," she kept on thinking; and she tried to read in the faces of the guests what they saw, what they knew.

It was over at last. The butler was continually coming to the door, announcing the carriages. Those people would not remain much longer. It was ten o'clock; and they began to say good-bye. They followed one after the other, at short intervals, as is proper at big dinner-parties.... There was only one of the ministers left, talking earnestly to Van Naghel, in a low voice, probably about some government matter: he was not thinking yet of going.... But at last he also hastened away, apologizing. And Van Naghel and Bertha, Marianne, Frances and Otto all listened while he put on his overcoat downstairs, said a word to the butler.... The front-door slammed. They were alone.

They looked at one another....

And, as if driven by an irresistible impulse, Van Naghel went downstairs, to his son-in-law, and Bertha and Marianne upstairs, to Emilie....

"Mamma, have you come to me at last?" said Emilie, plaintively. "Mamma, I shall stay here: I won't go back...."

She was clutching Henri desperately; and Marianne went up to her, comforted her, kissed her.

"Marianne," said Henri, "here, a minute...."

He led her out into the passage:

"Marianne," he said, "you don't know how fond I am of you ... almost as fond as of Emilie. Marianne, let me just say this to you: be sensible; everybody's talking about it...."

"Everybody?" she asked, frightened; and she did not even ask what it was, because she understood.

"You even know it yourself then?" he asked, quickly, to take her by surprise.

She withdrew into the mysterious recesses of her little soul, which was too transparent, reflected its radiance too much; she wanted to veil that radiance from him and from the others:

"What?" she said. "There's nothing to know!... Everybody? Everybody who? Everybody what?..."

"Everybody's talking about it, about Uncle Henri's making love to you?"

She tried to laugh; and the little silver bells sounded shrill and false:

"Making love to me?... Uncle Henri?... People are mad!"

"You were out with him yesterday ... in a motor-car."

"And what is there in that?"

"Don't do it again."

"Why not?"

"Everybody's talking about it."

Again she tried to laugh; and the little silver bells sounded shrill and false:

"Uncle Henri!" she said. "Why, he might be my father!"

"You know you don't mean what you say."

"Uncle Henri!"

"He is a young man.... Marianne, tell me that it's not true...."

"That he makes love to me? I'm fond of him ... just as I'm fond of Aunt Constance."

"That you love him. There, you can't deny it. You love him."

"I do not love him," she lied.

"Yes, you do, you love him."

"I do not love him."

"Yes, you do."

"Very well, then, I do!" she said, curtly. "I love him. What then?"

"Marianne...."

"I like being with him, like talking to him, cycling with him, motoring with him: what then? There's no harm in it; and ... I love Aunt Constance too."

"Marianne, I've warned you," he said, sadly. "Be sensible."

"Yes," she answered. "But you be sensible also."

"How do you mean?"

"Be sensible with Eduard! Control your temper, Henri! It can only make things worse, if you don't control your temper."

"I will control myself!" he promised, clenching his fists as he spoke.

"Henri...."

"I hate the bounder ... I could murder him, wring his neck."

"Henri, be quiet, I hear Papa coming."

"Promise me, Marianne, that you will be careful."

"Yes, Henri. And you promise me also, Henri, that you will be careful."

"I promise you."

She went up to him, put her arms round his neck:

"My brother, my poor brother!"

"My dear little sister, my little sister!"

"Hush, hush!..."

"Hush!..."

"Here's Papa...."

Van Naghel came up the stairs.

And they went with him into the nursery, where Bertha was waiting with Emilie, Otto and Frances.

"Eduard has gone now," said Van Naghel, quietly. "I calmed him down; he is coming back to-morrow, to talk things over. You can stay here to-night, Emilie."

"Papa, I won't go back to him!"

"No, Emilie," cried Frances, excitedly, "you can't go back to him!"

"Be quiet, Frances," said Van Naghel, severely. And he repeated, "You ... can ... stay here, Emilie ... to-night..."

He suddenly turned purple.

"Tell me what the law is, Papa," Emilie insisted.

"The law?" asked Van Naghel. "The law?..."

And, almost black in the face, he pulled at his collar.

"Bertha!" he cried, in a hoarse voice.

They were all terrified....

He tore open his collar, his tie, his shirt:

"Air!" he implored.

And his eyes started from his head, he staggered, fell into a chair.

Louise rang the bell. The girls screamed for the maids, the butler. Henri flew down the stairs to fetch a doctor.

It was too late....

Van Naghel lay dead, struck down by apoplexy.

Lord! Heavens!

Nurse, ayah.

The young master.

Mem-sahib.

Half-caste.

Chapter XIX

The winter months dragged sadly and monotonously past, with their continual rains and no frost: even such snow as fell melted at once in the raw, damp atmosphere. But the wind blew all the time, kept on blowing from some mysterious cloud-realm, carrying the clouds with it, violet clouds and grey clouds, a never-ending succession, which came sailing over the trees in the Woods as though over the sea. And Constance followed them with her eyes, vaguely and dreamily, dreaming on and on in an endless reverie. The clouds sailed everlastingly on the wind; and the wind blew everlastingly, like an everlasting storm, not always raging, but always rustling, sometimes high up above the trees, sometimes straight through the trees themselves. Constance remained mostly at home and sat by her window during those short afternoons, which she lengthened out in the dim shadows of the fire-lit room, where at three o'clock dusk was falling.... The everyday life went on, regularly and monotonously: when the weather was tolerable, Van der Welcke went bicycling; but for the rest he stayed upstairs a great deal, seldom going to the Witte or the Plaats, smoking, cursing inwardly because he was not rich enough to buy a "sewing-machine" of his own. Addie went to and fro between home and school; and it was he that enlivened the meals....

And Constance, in her drawing-room, sat at the window and gazed at the clouds, looked out at the rain. Through the silent monotony of her short, grey days a dream began to weave itself, as with a luminous thread, so that she was not oppressed by the sombre melancholy of the rainy winter. When Van der Welcke went upstairs, cursing because it was raining again and because he had nothing to do, she settled herself in her drawing-room—in that room in which she lived and which was tinged as it were with her own personality—and looked out at the clouds, at the rain. She sat dreaming. She smiled, wide-eyed. She liked the ever louring skies, the ever drifting clouds; and, though at times the gusty squalls still made her start with that sudden catch in her throat and breast, she loved the raging and rustling winds, listened to them, content for them to blow and blow, high above her head, her house, her trees—hers—till, blowing, they lost themselves in the infinities beyond.... She had her work beside her, a book; but she did not sew, did not read: she dreamt.... She smiled, looking out, looking up at the endlessly rolling skies.... The clouds sailed by, sometimes high, sometimes low, above the houses, above the people's heads, like passions disdaining mankind: dank, monstrous passions riding arrogantly by upon the passion of the winds, from a far-off land of sheer passion, sullen and tempestuous; and the threatening cohorts rolled on, great and majestic, like Olympian deities towering above the petty human strife hidden under the roofs over which they passed, ever opening their mighty flood-gates.... When Constance looked up at them, the vast, phantom monsters, coming she knew not whence and going she knew not whither, just shadowing across her life and followed by new monsters,

no less vast and no less big with mystery, she was not afraid or sad, for she felt safe in her dream. The sombre skies had always attracted her, even in the old days, though they used to frighten her then, she did not know why; but now, now for the first time she smiled, because she felt safe. A soft radiance shone from her eyes, which gazed up at the phantom monsters. When the wind whistled, soughed, moaned and bellowed round the house, like a giant soul in pain, she remained as it were looking up at the wind, let her soul swell softly in unison with its dirges, like something that surrenders itself, small and weak but peaceful, to a mighty force. In her little house, as she gazed out at the dreary road, on these winter days, especially when it grew dark of an afternoon, the wind and the rain round about her seemed almost one element, vast and sad as life, which came from over the sea, which drifted away over the town and which continued to hold her and her house in its embrace....

She looked outside, she smiled. Sometimes she heard her husband's step in the passages, as he went through the house, grumbling, muttering, cursing, because he wanted to go out.... Then she would think for a moment:

"He hasn't seen Marianne for days."

But then she would think no more about either of them; and her dream shone out before her again. The dream shone softly and unfalteringly, like a gentle, steady ray: a path of soft light that issued as it were from her eyes to the sombre, frowning clouds out yonder. Over the soft-shining path something seemed to be wafted from her outwards, upwards, far and wide and then back again, to where she sat.... It was so strange that she smiled at it, closed her eyes; and, when she opened them, it was once more as though she saw her dream, that path of light, always.... Her dream took no more definite shape and remained thus, a gentle, kindly glow, a pale, soft ray from her to the sombre skies.... It was dusk now and she sat on, quite lost in the misty, shadowy darkness all around her, quite invisible in the black room; and her eyes continued to stare outside, at the last wan streaks in the darkening heavens.... The road outside was black.... A street-lamp shone out, throwing its harsh light upon a puddle....

Then she covered her face with her hands, ashamed because she had sat musing so long, ashamed especially because she had allowed herself to wander along that luminous thread, the path of her dream.... She rang, had the lamps lit and waited for Addie, who would soon be home.

But those were the lonely afternoons.... Sometimes in those wet, dull afternoons when it grew dark so early, she saw his figure pass the window, heard him ring. It was Brauws. She did not move and she heard him go upstairs first, when Van der Welcke was in. But, since he had recommenced his visits to their house, he had got into the way of saying to Van der Welcke, in half an hour or so:

"Now I'll go and pay my respects to your wife."

The first few times, Van der Welcke had gone with him to the drawing-room; but, now that Brauws had taken to calling in a more informal fashion, Van der Welcke stayed upstairs, let him go his own way. And, after the first shock which Brauws' ideas had produced in their house, his friendship became something cheering and comforting which both Van der Welcke and Constance continued to appreciate for their own and each other's sakes. He and Van Vreeswijk were now the only friends whom they both really liked, the two regular visitors to their otherwise lonely house. And for that reason Van der Welcke let Brauws go to Constance alone, staying away, never entering his wife's drawing-room unnecessarily ... except when he heard the little bells of Marianne's voice and laugh.

Constance's heart beat when she heard Brauws' voice on the stairs:

"Now I'll go and pay my respects to your wife. She's at home, isn't she?"

"Sure to be, in this beastly weather."

She heard Brauws' step, which made the stairs creak as it came down them. Then she felt a violent emotion, of which she was secretly ashamed, ashamed for herself. For she was severe with herself: she was afraid of becoming ridiculous in her own eyes. When she felt her emotion grow too violent, she at once conjured up Addie's image: he was fourteen now. The mother of a son of fourteen! Then a smile of ironic indulgence would curve the dimples by her lips; and it was with the greatest composure that she welcomed Brauws:

"Isn't it dark early? But it's only half-past three and really too soon to light the lamp."

"There are times when twilight upsets me," he said, "and times when it makes me feel very calm and peaceful."

He sat down near her, contentedly, and his broad figure loomed darkly in the little room, among the other shadows. The street-lamps were already lighted outside, glittering harshly on the wet road.

"It's been awful weather lately."

"Yes, so I prefer to stay indoors."

"You're too much indoors."

"I go out whenever it's fine."

"You don't care for going out 'in all weathers.'"

"I like looking at the weather from here. It's a different sky every day...."

Then they talked on all sorts of subjects. He often spoke of Addie, with a sort of enthusiasm which he had conceived for the lad. Her face would glow with pride as she listened. And, almost involuntarily, she told him how the boy had always been a comfort to them, to Van der Welcke as well as to her. And, when she mentioned her husband's name, he often answered, as though with a touch of reproach:

"I'm very fond of Hans. He is a child; and still I'm fond of him...."

Then she would feel ashamed, because she had just had a wordy dispute with Van der Welcke – about nothing at all – and she would veer round and say:

"It can't be helped. We can not get on. We endure each other as well as we can. To separate would be too silly ... and also very sad for Addie. He is fond of both of us."

And their conversation again turned on the boy. Then she had to tell him about Brussels and even about Rome.

"It's strange," he said. "When you were in Brussels ... I was living at Schaerbeek."

"And we never met."

"No, never. And, when you and Hans went to the Riviera, I was there in the same year."

"Did you come often to Monte Carlo?"

"Once or twice, at any rate. Attracted by just that vivid contrast between the atmosphere out there, where money has no value, and my own ideas. It was a sort of self-inflicted torture. And we never saw each other there.... And, when you were here, in the Hague, as a girl, I used often to come to the Hague and I even remember often passing your parents' house, where your mother still lives, in the Alexanderstraat, and reading your name on the door: Van Lowe...."

"We were destined never to meet," she said, trying to laugh softly; and in spite of herself her voice broke, as though sadly.

"No," he said, quietly, "we were destined not to meet."

"The fatality of meeting is sometimes very strange," she said.

"There are thousands and millions, in our lives...."

"Don't you think that we often, day after day, for months on end, pass quite close to somebody...."

"Somebody who, if we met him or her, would influence our lives?..."

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"I'm certain of it."

"It's curious to think of.... In the street, sometimes, one's always meeting the same people, without knowing them."

"Yes, I know what you mean. In New York, when I was a tram-driver, there was a woman who always got into my car; and, without being in love with her, I used to think I should like to speak to her, to know her, to meet her...."

"And how often it is the other way round! I have met thousands of people and forgotten their names and what they said to me. They were like ghosts. That is how we meet people in society."

"Yes, it's all so futile...."

"You exchange names, exchange a few sentences ... and nothing remains, not the slightest recollection...."

"Yes, it all vanishes."

"I was so often tired ... of so many people, so many ghosts.... I couldn't live like that now."

"Yet you have remained a society-woman."

"Oh, no, I am no longer that!"

And she told him how she had once thought of making her reappearance in Hague society; she told him about Van Naghel and Bertha.

"Are you on bad terms with your sister now?"

"Not on bad terms...."

"He died suddenly...?"

"Yes, quite suddenly. They had just had a dinner-party.... It was a terrible blow for my sister. And I hear there are serious financial difficulties. It is all very sad.... But this doesn't interest you. Tell me about yourself."

"Again?"

"It interests me."

"Tell me about your own life."

"I've just been telling you."

"Yes, about Rome and Brussels. Now tell me about Buitenzorg."

"Why about that?"

"The childhood of my friends—I hope I may number you among my friends?—always interests me."

"About Buitenzorg? I don't remember anything.... I was a little girl.... There was nothing in particular...."

"Your brother Gerrit...."

She turned pale, but he did not see it, in the dim room.

"What has he been saying?"

"Your brother Gerrit remembers it all. The other night, after your dinner here, he told me about it while we were smoking."

"Gerrit?" she said, anxiously.

"Yes: how prettily you used to play on the great boulders in the river...."

She flushed scarlet, in the friendly dusk:

"He's mad!" she said, harshly. "What does he want to talk about that for?"

He laughed:

"Mayn't he? He idolizes you ... and he idolized you at that time...."

"He's always teasing me with those reminiscences.... They're ridiculous now."

"Why?"

"Because I'm old. Those memories are pretty enough when you are young.... When you grow older, you let them sleep ... in the dead, silent years. For, when you're old, they become ridiculous."

Her voice sounded hard. He was silent.

"Don't you think I'm right?" she asked.

"Perhaps," he said, very gently. "Perhaps you are right. But it is a pity."

"Why?" she forced herself to ask.

He gave a very deep sigh:

"Because it reminds us of all that we lose as we grow older ... even the right to our memories."

"The right to our memories," she echoed almost under her breath. And, in a firmer voice, she repeated, severely, "Certainly. When we grow older, we lose our right.... There are memories to which we lose our right as we grow old...."

"Tell me," he said, "is it hard for a woman to grow old?"

"I don't know," she answered, softly. "I believe that I shall grow old, that I am growing old as it is, without finding it hard."

"But you're not old," he said.

"I am forty-three," she replied, "and my son is fourteen."

She was determined to show herself no mercy.

"And now tell me about yourself," she went on.

"Why should I?" he asked, almost dejectedly. "You would never understand me, however long I spoke. No, I can't speak about myself to-day."

"It's not only to-day: it's very often."

"Yes, very often. The idea suddenly comes to me ... that everything has been of no use. That I have done nothing that was worth while. That my life ought to have been quite different ... to be worth while."

"What do you mean by worth while?"

"Worth while for people, for humanity. It always obsessed me, after my games in the woods. You remember my telling you how I used to play in the woods?"

"Yes," she said, very softly.

"Tell me," he suddenly broke in. "Are those memories to which I have no right?"

"You are a man," said she.

"Have I more right to memories, as a man?"

"Why not ... to these?" she said, softly. "They do not make your years ridiculous ... as mine do mine."

"Are you so much afraid ... of ridicule?"

"Yes," she said, frankly. "I am as unwilling to be ashamed in my own eyes ... as in those of the world."

"So you abdicate...."

"My youth," she said, gently.

He was silent. Then he said:

"I interrupted myself just now. I meant to tell you that, after my games as a child, it was always my obsession ... to be something. To be somebody. To be a man. To be a man among men. That was when I was a boy of sixteen or seventeen. Afterwards, at the university, I was amazed at the childishness of Hans and Van Vreeswijck and the others. They never thought; I was always thinking.... I worked hard, I wanted to know everything. When I knew a good deal, I said to myself, 'Why go on learning all this that others have thought out? Think things out for yourself!' ... Then I had a feeling of utter helplessness.... But I'm boring you."

"No," she said, impatiently.

"I felt utterly helpless.... Then I said to myself, 'If you can't think things out, do something. Be somebody. Be a man. Work!' ... Then I read Marx, Fourier, Saint-Simon: do you know them?"

"I've never read them," said she, "but I've heard their names often enough to follow you. Go on."

"When I had read them, I started thinking, I thought a great deal ... and then I wanted to work. As a labourer. So as to understand all those who were destitute.... God, how difficult words are! I simply can't speak to you about myself."

"And about Peace you speak ... as if you were inspired!"

"About Peace ... perhaps, but not about myself. I went to America, I became a workman. But the terrible thing was that I felt I was not a workman. I had money. I gave it all to the poor ... nearly. But I kept just enough never to be hungry, to live a little more comfortably than my mates, to take a day's rest when I was tired, to buy meat and wine and medicines when I wanted them ... to go to the theatre dressed as a gentleman. Do you understand? I was a Sunday workman. I was an amateur labourer. I remained a gentleman, a 'toff.' I come of a good middle-class family: well, over there, in America, while I was a workman, I remained—I became even more than I had been—an aristocrat. I felt that I was far above my fellow-workmen. I knew more than they, I knew a great deal: they could tell it by listening to me. I was finer-grained, more delicately constituted than they: they could tell it by looking at me. They regarded me as a wastrel who had been kicked out of doors, who had 'seen better days;' but they continued to think me a gentleman and I myself felt a gentleman, a 'toff.' I never became a proper workman. I should have liked to, so as to understand the workman thoroughly and afterwards, in the light of my knowledge, to work for his welfare, back in my own country, in my own station of life. But, though I was living among working people, I did not understand them. I shuddered involuntarily at their jokes, their oaths, their drinking, their friendship even. I remained a gentleman, a 'toff.' I remained of a different blood and a different culture. My ideas and my theories would have had me resemble my mates; but all my former life—my birth, my upbringing, my education—all my own and my parents' past, all my inherited instincts were against it. I simply could not fraternize with them. I kept on trying something different, thinking it was that that was amiss: a different sort of work, a different occupation. Nothing made any difference. I remained a harmless, inquisitive amateur; and just that settled conviction, that I could leave off at any time if I wished, was the reason why my life never became the profoundly serious thing which I would have had it. It remained amateurish. It became almost a mockery of the life of my mates. I was free and they were slaves. I was vigorous and they were worked to death. To me, after my brain-work, that manual and muscular labour came as a tonic. If I was overtired, I rested, left my job,

looked for something else after a few weeks. The others would be sweated, right up to their old age, till they had yielded the last ounce of their working-power. I should work just as long as I took pleasure in it. I looked healthy and well, even though my face and hands became rough. I ate in proportion to the hardness of my work. And I thought: if they could all eat as I do, it would be all right. Then I felt ashamed of myself, distributed all my money, secretly, among the poor and lived solely on my wages ... until I fell ill ... and cured myself with my money. It became absurd. And never more so than when I, habitually well-fed, looked down upon my mates because their unalterable ideal appeared to be ... to eat beef every day! Do they long for nothing better and higher and nobler, I thought, than to eat beef? It was easy for me to think like that and look down on them, I who ate beef whenever I wanted to! Well-fed, even though tired with my work, I could think of nobler things than beef. And yet ... and yet, though I felt all this at the time, I still continued to despise them for their base ideal. That was because of my blood and my birth, but especially because of my superior training and education. And then I became very despondent and thought, 'I shall never feel myself their brother; I shall remain a gentleman, a "toff;" it is not my fault: it is the fault of everything, of all my past life.' ... Then, suddenly, without any transition, I went back to Europe. I have lectured here ... on Peace. In a year's time, perhaps, I shall be lecturing on War. I am still seeking. I no longer know anything. Properly speaking, I never did know anything. I seek and seek.... But why have I talked to you at such length about myself? I am ashamed of myself, I am ashamed. Perhaps I have no right to go on seeking. A man seeks when he is young, does he not? When he has come to my age, which is the same as yours, he ought to have found and he has no right to go on seeking. And, if he hasn't found, then he looks back upon his life as one colossal failure, as one huge mistake – mistake upon mistake – and then things become hopeless, hopeless, hopeless...."

She was silent....

She thought of her own life, her small feminine life – the life of a small soul that had not thought and had not felt, that was only just beginning to feel and only just beginning at rare intervals to think – and she saw her own small life also wasting the years in mistake upon mistake.

"Oh," he said, in a voice filled with longing, "to have found what one might have gone on seeking for years! To have found, when young, happiness ... for one's self ... and for others! Oh, to be young, to be once more young!... And then to seek ... and then to find when young ... and to meet when young ... and to be happy when young and to make others – everybody! – happy!... To be young, oh, to be young!"

"But you are not old," she said. "You are in the prime of life."

"I hate that phrase," he said, gloomily. "The prime of life occurs at my age in people who do not seek, but who have quietly travelled a definite, known path. Those are

the people who, when they are my age, are in the prime of life. I am not: I have sought; I have never found. I now feel all the sadness of my wasted efforts; I now feel ... old. I feel old. What more can I do now? Think a little more; try to keep abreast of modern thought and modern conditions; seek a little, like a blind man. And," with a bitter laugh, "I have even lost that right: the right to seek. You seek only when you are very young, or else it becomes absurd."

"You are echoing me," she said, in gentle reproach.

"But you were right, you were right. It is so. There is nothing left, at our age; not even our memories...."

"Our memories," she murmured, very softly.

"The memories of our childhood...."

"Of our childhood," she repeated.

"Not even that."

"Not even that," she repeated, as though hypnotized.

"No, there is nothing left ... for us...."

The door opened suddenly: they started.

"Mamma, are you there?"

It was Addie.

"Yes, my boy...."

"I can't see you. It is quite dark."

"And here is Mr. Brauws."

"I can see nothing and nobody. May I light one of the lamps?"

"Yes, do."

He bustled through the room, hunted for matches, lit a lamp in the corner:

"That's it. Now at least I can see you."

He came nearer: a young, handsome, bright boy, with his good-looking, healthy face and his serious, blue eyes; broad and strong, shedding a note of joy in the melancholy room, which lit up softly with the glow of its one lamp, behind Constance. She smiled at him, drew him down beside her, put her arms round him while he kissed her:

"He is left!" she said, softly, with a glance at Brauws, referring to the last words which he had spoken.

He understood:

“Yes,” he answered—and his gloom seemed suddenly to brighten into a sort of rueful gladness, a yearning hope that all was not yet lost, that his dreams might be realized not by myself, but by another, by Addie—and he repeated her own, radiant words, “Yes, yes, he is left!”

The boy did not understand, looked at them both by turns and smiled enquiringly, receiving only their smiles in answer....

Chapter XX

For a long time, Constance had not been to Mamma van Lowe's Sunday-evenings; and at first Mamma had not insisted. Now, however, one afternoon, she said, gently:

"Are you never coming again on a Sunday, Constance?"

She saw that her mother had suddenly become very nervous and she was sorry that she had not made an effort and overcome her reluctance to attend the family-gatherings after that terrible evening.

"Yes, Mamma," she said, without hesitation, "I will come. This is Saturday: I will come to-morrow."

The old woman leant back wearily in her chair, nodded her head up and down, as though she knew all sorts of sad things:

"It is so sad ... about Van Naghel," she said. "Bertha is going through a lot of trouble."

It seemed as if Mamma wished to talk about it; but Constance, with an affected indifference to her relations' affairs, asked no questions.

The next evening, Constance and Addie were ready to start for the Alexanderstraat.

"Aren't you coming?" she asked Van der Welcke.

He hesitated. He would rather not go, feeling unfriendly towards the whole family, but he would have liked to see Marianne. Still he said:

"No, I think not."

He was afraid that his refusal would cause a scene; but latterly, even though anger welled up inside her, she had shown a forbearance which surprised him; and she merely said:

"Mamma would like us all to come again."

He was really fond of the old lady: she had always been kind to him.

"Who will be there?" he asked.

"Why, all of them!" she said. "As usual."

"Surely not Bertha ... and her children...?"

"I think so," she said, gently, feeling that he was sounding her to see if Marianne would be there. "Why shouldn't they go, though they are in mourning? It's not a party: there will be no one but the family."

"Perhaps I'll come on later," he said, still hesitating.

She did not insist, went off on foot with Addie. It was curious, but now, whenever she went to her mother's house, nice though her mother always was to her, she felt as if she were going there as a stranger, not as a daughter. It was because of the others that she felt like a stranger, because of Bertha, Adolphine, Karel, Cateau and Dorine. Gerrit and Paul were the only ones whom she still looked upon as brothers; and she was very fond of Adeline.

This evening again, as she entered the room, she felt like that, like a stranger. The old aunts were sitting in their usual places, doing their crochet-work mechanically. Mamma, as Constance knew, had had an angry scene with the two old things, to explain to them that they mustn't talk scandal and, above all, that they mustn't do so out loud, a scene which had thoroughly upset Mamma herself and which the old aunts had not even seemed to understand, for they merely nodded a vague consent, nodded yes, yes, no doubt Marie was right. Yet Constance suspected that Auntie Rine had understood at least something of it, for she was now looking at Constance askance, with a frightened look. Constance could not bring herself to speak to the old aunts: she walked past them; and Auntie Tine whispered to Auntie Rine:

"There she is again!"

"Who?" screamed Auntie Rine, aloud.

But Auntie Tine dared not whisper anything more, because of their sister Marie, who had flown into such a passion; and she pinched Auntie Rine's withered hand, whereupon Auntie Rine glared at her angrily. Then they cackled together for a moment, bad-temperedly. The three young Saetzemas, playing their cards in a corner of the conservatory, sat bursting with laughter at the bickering of the two old aunts.

Constance sat down quietly by Mamma. And she felt, now that Addie spoke to Marietje – Adolphine's Marietje – but did not go to the boys in the conservatory, that there was no harmony among them all and that they only met for the sake of Mamma, of Grandmamma. Poor Mamma! And yet she did not seem to notice it, was glad that the children and grandchildren came to her Sundays, to her "family-group."

Adolphine and Cateau sat talking in a corner; and Constance caught what they said:

"So Ber-tha is not ... keep-ing on the house?"

"I should think not, indeed! They have nothing but debts."

"Is it their bro-ther-in-law who is see-ing to things and ad-min-istering the es-tate?"

"Yes, the commissary in Overijssel."¹

"So they are not well off?"

"No, they haven't a farthing."

"Yes, as I al-ways used to say to Ka-rel, they al-ways lived on much too large a scale."

"They squandered all they had."

"Well, that's not very pleas-ant for the children!"

"No. And there's Emilie, who wants a divorce. But don't mention that to Mamma: she doesn't know about it."

"Ve-ry well.... Yes, that's most unfor-tunate. Your Floor-tje, Phine, is bet-ter off than that with Dij-kerhof."

"At least, they're not thinking of getting divorced. I always look upon a divorce as a scandal. We've one divorce in the family as it is; and I consider that one too many."

Constance turned pale and felt that Adolphine was speaking loud on purpose, though it was behind her back.... Dear Mamma noticed nothing!... She had been much upset on that one Sunday, that terrible evening, but had not really understood the truth: the terrible thing to her was merely that the old sisters had talked so loud and so spitefully about her poor Constance, like the cross-grained, spiteful old women that they were; but what happened besides she had really never quite known.... And this, now that Constance was gradually drawing farther away from her brothers and sisters, suddenly struck her as rather fine. Whatever happened, they kept Mamma out of it as far as they could, in a general filial affection for Mamma, in a filial conspiracy to leave Mamma her happiness and her illusion about the family; and it seemed as if the brothers and sisters also impressed this on their children; it appeared that Adolphine even taught it to her loutish boys, for, to her sudden surprise, she saw Chris and Piet go up to Addie and ask him to join in their game. Addie refused, coldly; and now Constance was almost ashamed that she herself had not pointed out to Addie that Grandmamma must always be spared and left in her fond illusion that all was harmony. But fortunately Addie of his own accord always knew what was the right thing to do; for, when Adolphine's Marietje also came up with a smile and asked him to come and play cards in the conservatory, he went with her at once. She smiled because of it all: no, there was no mutual sympathy, but there was a general affection for Mamma. A general affection, for Mamma, was something rather touching after all; and really she had never before seen it in that light, as something fine, that strong and really unanimous feeling among all those different members of a family whose interests and inclinations in the natural course of things were divided. Yes, now that she was standing farther away from her brothers and sisters, she saw for the first time this one feature which was good in them. Yes, it was really something very good, something lovable; and even Adolphine had it.... It was as though a softer mood came over Constance, no longer

one of criticism and resentment, but rather of sympathy and understanding, in which bitterness had given place to kindliness; and in that softer mood there was still indeed sadness, but no anger, as if everything could not well be other than it was, in their circle of small people, of very small people, whose eyes saw only a little way beyond themselves, whose hearts were sensitive only a little way beyond themselves, not farther than the narrow circle of their children and perhaps their children's children.... She did not know why, but, in the vague sadness of this new, softer mood, she thought of Brauws. And, though not able at once to explain why, she connected her thought of him with this kindlier feeling of hers, this deeper, truer vision of things around her. And, as though new, far-stretching vistas opened up before her, she suddenly seemed to be contemplating life, that life which she had never yet contemplated. A new, distant horizon lay open before her, a distant circle, a wide circle round the narrow little circle past which the eyes of her soul had never yet been able to gaze.... It was strange to her, this feeling, here in this room, in this family-circle. It was as though she suddenly saw all her relations—the Ruyvenaers had now arrived as well—sitting and talking in that room, all her relations and herself also, as very small people, who sat and talked, who moved and lived and thought in a very narrow little circle of self-interest, while outside that circle the horizon extended ever wider and wider, like a vision of great cloudy skies, under which towns rose sharply, seas billowed, bright lightning glanced. It all shot through her and in front of her very swiftly: two or three little revealing flashes, no more; swift revelations, which flashed out and then darkened again. But, swiftly though those revelations had flashed, after that brightness the room remained small, those people remained small, she herself remained small....

She herself had never lived: oh, she had so often suspected it! But those other people: had they also never, never lived? Mamma, in the narrow circle of her children's and grandchildren's affection; Uncle and Aunt, in their interests as sugar-planters; Karel and Cateau, in their narrow, respectable, complacent comfort; Adolphine, in her miserable struggle for social importance; and the others, Gerrit, Dorine, Ernst, Paul: had they ever, ever lived? Her husband: had he ever lived? Or was it all just a mere existence, as she herself had existed; a vegetation rooted in little thoughts and habits, in little opinions and prejudices, in little religions or philosophies; and feeling pleasant and comfortable therein and looking down upon and condemning others and considering one's self fairly good and fairly high-minded, not so bad as others and at least far more sensible in one's opinions and beliefs than most of one's neighbours?... Oh, people like themselves; people in their "set," in other sets, with their several variations of birth, religion, position, money; decent people, whom Brauws sometimes called "thebourgeois:" had they ever lived, ever looked out beyond the very narrow circle which their dogmas drew around them? What a small and insignificant merry-go-round it was! And what was the object of whirling

among one another and round one another like that?... It suddenly appeared to her that, of all these people who belonged to her and of all the others, the acquaintances, whom with a swift mental effort she grouped around them, there was not one who could send a single thought shining out far and wide, towards the wide horizons yonder, without thinking of himself, his wife and his children and clinging to his prejudices about money, position, religion and birth.... As regards money, it was almost a distinction among all of them not to have any and then to live as if they had. Position was what they strove for; and those who did not strive for it, such as Paul and Ernst, were criticized for their weakness. Religion was, with those other people, the mere acquaintances, not belonging to their circle, sometimes a matter of decency or of political interest; but, in their set, with its East-Indian leaven, it was ignored, quietly and calmly, never thought about or talked about, save that the children were just confirmed, quickly, as they might be given a dancing- or music-lesson. Birth, birth, that was everything; and even then there was that superior contempt for new titles of nobility, that respect only for old titles and a tendency to think themselves very grand, even though they were not titled, as members of a patrician Dutch-Indian family which, in addition to its original importance, had also absorbed the importance attaching to the highest official positions in Java.... And over it all lay the soft smile of indulgent pity and contempt for any who thought differently from themselves. It formed the basis of all their opinions, however greatly those opinions might vary according to their personal interests and views: compassion and contempt for people who had no money and lived economically; for those who did not aim at an exalted position; for those, whether Catholics or anti-revolutionaries – they themselves were all moderate liberals, with special emphasis on the “moderate” – who cherished an enthusiasm for religion; for those who were not of such patrician birth as themselves. And so on, with certain variations in these opinions.... It was as though Constance noticed the merry-go-round for the first time, whirling in that little circle. It was as though she saw it in the past, saw it whirling in their drawing-rooms, when her father was still alive, then especially. She saw it suddenly, as a child, after it is grown up, sees its parents and their house, their former life, in which it was a child, in which it grew up. She saw it now like that at her mother’s, only less vividly, because of the informality of that family-gathering. She saw it like that, dimly, in all, in every one of them, more or less. But she also saw the respect, the love for Mamma, the wish to leave her in the illusion which that love gave her.

She had never seen it like that before. She herself was just the same as the others. And she thought herself and all of them small, so small that she said to herself:

“Do we all of us live for so very little, when there is so very much beyond, stretching far and wide, under the cloudy skies of that immense horizon? Do we never stop outside this little circle in which we all, with our superior smile – because we are so

distinguished and enlightened—spin round one another and ourselves, like humming-tops, like everlasting humming-tops?”

And again Brauws’ figure rose before her eyes. Oh, she now for the first time understood what he had said, on that first evening when she saw and heard him, about Peace!... Peace! The pure, immaculate ideal suddenly streamed before her like a silver banner, fluttered in the wide cloudy skies! Oh, she now for the first time understood ... why he sought. He had wanted to seek ... life! He had sought ... and he had not found. But, while seeking, he had lived: he still lived! His breath came and went, his pulses throbbed, his chest heaved ... even though his sadness, because he had never “found,” bedimmed his energies. But she and all of them did not live! They did not live, they had never lived. They were born, people of distinction, with all their little cynicisms about money and religion, with all their fondness for birth and position; and they continued to spin round like that, to spin like humming-tops: moderate liberals. That they all tolerated her again, in the little circle, was that not all part of their moderate liberal attitude? Oh, to live, to live really, to live as he had lived, to live ... to live with him!

She was now startled at herself. She was in a room full of people and she sat in silence next to her mother. Dear Mamma!... And she was weary of her own thinking, for swift as lightning it all flashed through her, that revelation of her thoughts, without sentences, without images, without words. It just flashed; and that was all. But that flashing made her feel weary, enervated, almost breathless in the room, which she found close.... And the very last of her thoughts, which had just for a moment appeared before her—sentence, image and word—had startled her. She had to confess it to herself: she loved, she loved him. But she inwardly pronounced that love—perhaps with the little cynical laugh which she had observed in her own people—she pronounced that love to be absurd, because so many silent, dead years lay heaped up there, because she was old, quite old. To wish to live at this time of day was absurd. To wish to dream at this stage was absurd. No, after so many years had been wasted on that meaningless existence, then she, an old woman now, must not hope to live again when it dawned too late, that life of thinking and feeling, that life from which might have sprung a life of doing and loving, of boundless love, of love for everybody and everything.... No, after so many years had been spent in living the life of a plant, until the plant became yellow and sere, then inevitably, inexorably extinction, slow extinction, was the only hope that remained....

The absurdity, of being so old—forty-three—and feeling like that!... Never, she swore, would she allow anybody to perceive that absurdity. She knew quite well that it was not really absurd, that its absurdity existed only in the narrow little circle of little prejudices and little dogmas. But she also knew that she, like all of them, was small, that she herself was full of prejudice; she knew that she could not rise, could

never rise above what she considered absurd, what she had been taught, from a child, in her little circle, to look upon as absurd!

No, now that she was old, there was nothing for her but to turn her eyes from the radiant vision and, calmly, to grow still older ... to go towards that slow extinction which perhaps would still drag on for many long and empty years: the years of a woman of her age ... in their set....

¹The "Queen's Commissary" of a Dutch province has no counterpart in England except, perhaps, the lord lieutenant of a county. His functions, however, correspond more nearly with those of a French prefect.

Chapter XXI

The door opened and Bertha, Louise and Marianne entered. And they stepped so suddenly right across Constance's thoughts that she was startled at their appearance: mother and daughters in deep mourning. She had not seen Bertha except on that first hurried visit immediately after Van Naghel's death and on the day of the funeral, six weeks ago; and she knew very little of what was happening; she had seen Marianne only once. And now that they both stepped right across her thoughts, into that narrow circle—which she condemned, though she herself was unable to move out of it—a great compassion suddenly surged through her, like a torrent. Bertha looked very pale, tired, wasted, grown all at once into an old woman, hopeless and resigned, as though broken under much silent sorrow. Louise's face wore a rather more tranquil expression; but Marianne beside her, delicate and white, still more delicate and white in her black dress, also diffused an almost tearful melancholy. Mamma rose and went towards them. It was the first time since her husband's death that Bertha had come to Mamma's Sunday-evening; and the gesture with which the old woman rose, approached her daughter, embraced her and led her to the sofa where she had been sitting showed the same open-armed and open-hearted motherly affection with which, as Constance remembered, Mamma had received her, Constance, at the door, on the landing, on the first evening of her own return. Dear Mamma!

It touched her so much that she herself rose, went to Bertha, kissed her tenderly, kissed Louise and Marianne. Her voice, for the first time for many a day, had a sisterly note in it that took Bertha by surprise. She pressed Constance's hand and, after the others had spoken to her, sat down quietly near Mamma, Aunt Lot and Constance. How pale, dejected and resigned she was! She seemed to be looking helplessly around her, to be looking for some one to assist her, to be wishing to say something, to somebody, that would have relieved her. She sighed:

"I have come, Mamma ... but I cannot stay long," she said. "I am very tired. There are all those business matters; and, though Adolph is very kind and sympathetic and is a great help, it is terribly complicated and I sometimes feel half-dead with it all.... It's lucky that I have Otto and Frances; I don't know what I should do without them.... You know we are going to live in the country?..."

"You were thinking about it the other day, dear," said Mamma, anxiously, "but it wasn't decided yet ... Bertha, must I lose you?"

"Dear Mamma, it's better in the country. Adolph wanted us to look round in Overijssel, but I would rather be at Baarn, for instance: it's nearer to the Hague and you...."

"Why, Baarn, my child? There's nobody there but Amsterdam people, business-people: such a very different set from ours!..."

"We sha'n't expect to make friends, Mamma, at first. I shall be alone with the girls. Otto and Frances have found a little house at the Hague: it's lucky that Otto is provided for at the Foreign Office. The minister spoke very nicely about him the other day.... Frans and Henri must finish their university-course quickly now," she said, in a hesitating tone. "Karel is going to a boarding-school, for I can't manage him. And Marietje too: she was going soon, in any case. So there will be just the three of us: Louise, Marianne and I.... Things have changed very much, all at once, Aunt Lot. We want to live quietly. In the first place, we shall just have to live quietly; and the girls are quite content to do so...."

It again seemed to Constance as if Bertha were looking for somebody in the room, were hushing something up. Constance had Emilie's name on her lips, but she did not like to ask. Mamma knew nothing more than that Emilie and Van Raven sometimes had differences.

"I shall have a lot of trouble and worry before me," said Bertha. "But, when it is all settled and we have our little villa...."

She sank back in her chair and stared before her with dim eyes.

Constance took her hand compassionately, held it tight. It looked as though Bertha, after that busy life which had suddenly snapped with Van Naghel's death, an hour after their last dinner-party, no longer knew what to do or say, felt derelict and helpless....

Though there was so much business to attend to, she seemed stunned all at once, in the grip of a strange lethargy, as though everything was now finished, as though there was nothing left now that there would soon be no more visits to pay, no receptions to hold, no dinners to give; now that Van Naghel no longer came home from the Chamber, tired and irritable from an afternoon's heckling; now that there would be no more calculating how they could manage to spend a thousand guilders less a month; now that she would simply have to live quietly on what she and the girls possessed. And it seemed as if she no longer knew how or why she should go on living, now that she would no longer have to give her dinners and pay her visits ... for her children, particularly her girls. Louise and Marianne had said to her so calmly that they wanted very soon to begin living quietly that Bertha now began to wonder:

"Why did I always make so much fuss, if the girls cared for it so little? Why did I go on till I was old and worn out?"

It was true, that had been Van Naghel's ambition: he had wanted to see his house a political salon. What he wished had happened. Now it was all over. Now there was

nothing to be done but to live quietly, in the little villa at Baarn; to make no debts; to let the boys finish their college-course as quickly as possible; and then to educate Karel and Marietje and let theirs be a different life from the others': how she did not know....

Bertha remained sitting wearily, staring vaguely before her, half-listening to the sympathetic words, uttered with an emphatic Indian accent, of Aunt Lot, who kept saying:

"Kassian!..."¹

But suddenly an access of nervousness seemed to startle her out of her depression. She looked round again, as though seeking for somebody ... somebody to say something to. Her glance fastened for a moment on Aunt Lot and then on Constance. Suddenly she rose, with a little laugh, as though she wanted to speak to Louise, farther away. But the nervous pressure of her hand seemed to be urging Constance also to get up, to go with her, somewhere, anywhere.... They went through the other drawing-room, past the card-table at which Uncle, Adolphine, Karel and Dotje were sitting, past the other with Cateau, Van Saetzema, Dijkerhof and Pop; and the conversation at both tables at once flagged; the cards fell hurriedly one after the other.... They were talking about Bertha, thought Constance, as Bertha drew her gently to the little boudoir, the room where the wine and cakes were set out, where Papa van Lowe's portrait hung, stern and inexorable; the little room where they all of them went when they had anything confidential to say to one another, when there was a scene, or a difference, or a private discussion. And Constance at once remembered how, five months ago, she had appealed to Van Naghel and Bertha in this very room; how they had refused to receive her "officially" at their house; how Van der Welcke had lost his temper, flown into a rage, made a rush for Van Naghel.... She was now here with Bertha once more; and Papa's portrait stared down coldly and severely upon the two sisters.

They looked at each other in silence. Bertha glanced round timidly: she felt that, in the big drawing-room, at the card-tables, the brothers and sisters had at once begun to talk again, criticizing her, because she had retired for a moment with Constance ... with Constance. And, lowering her voice to a hardly audible whisper, she murmured:

"Constance ... Constance ..."

"What is it, Bertha?"

"Help me ... help me ... be kind to me."

"But what's the matter?"

"Oh dear, nobody knows about it yet, but I can't keep it all ... here ... to myself!"

"Tell me what it is and what I can do."

"I don't know what you can do. But, Constance, I felt I had to ... had to ... tell you...."

"Tell me then."

"Nobody, nobody knows yet ... except Louise and Marianne."

"What is it?"

"Emilie ... Emilie has...."

"Has what?"

"She has gone away ... with Henri...."

"Gone away?"

"Run away perhaps ... with Henri.... I don't know where. Van Raven doesn't know where. Nobody knows. Adolph van Naghel, my brother-in-law the commissary, has made enquiries ... and has found out nothing.... We dissuaded her from seeking a divorce; so did Adolph. Then, no doubt because of that, she ran away with Henri, with her brother. She absolutely refuses to live with Eduard. She has run away.... Constance, where has she gone to? I don't know! Constance, it's a terrible thing! But keep it to yourself, don't tell anybody. Mamma doesn't know. I want to pretend, if there's nothing else for it, if they don't come back, that she has gone on a little journey, a trip somewhere, alone with her brother. We must pretend that, Constance. I don't think they intend to come back. Henri has been very excited lately: he fought Eduard, came to blows with him, for ill-treating his sister. You know how fond they are of each other, Emilie and Henri. It's almost unnatural, in a brother and sister. Now they've run away.... Oh dear, Constance, I am so terribly unhappy!"

She threw herself into Constance's arms, sobbed, with her arms round Constance's neck:

"Constance, Constance, help me!... I have no one to turn to, no one I can talk to. Adolph is helping me with the business-matters; Otto too. Louise is very kind; but she and Otto think that Emilie ought to divorce her husband, on the ground of cruelty. But, Constance, in our class, men don't beat their wives! It never happens. It's an awful thing. It only happens with the lower orders!... Oh dear, Constance, I am so unhappy!... The business-matters will be settled.... But there are debts. I thought that we were living within our income, but I don't know: there appear to be debts. Bills mount up so.... I did so hope that the boys would finish their course. Frans will; but now Henri ... that mad idea ... going away with Emilie ... running away ... nobody knows where.... Oh dear, Constance, I am so unhappy: help me, do help me!"

She lay back limply in Constance' arms and the tears flowed incessantly down her pale face, which in those few weeks had fallen away till it was the face of an old woman. She lay there feeble and ill; and it seemed as if Van Naghel's death, coming suddenly as an additional catastrophe on that evening of misfortunes—her guests in the drawing-room, Emilie hiding upstairs, Van Raven waiting below—had so terribly shaken her composure, the composure of a prudent, resourceful woman of the world, that she was simply compelled to speak of private matters which she would never have mentioned before.... An instinct drove her into Constance' arms, drove her to unbosom herself to Constance as the only one who could understand her. Her near-sighted, blinking eyes sought anxiously, through her tears, to read the expression on Constance' face. And she was so broken, so shattered that Constance had to make an effort to realize that it was really Bertha whom she held in her arms.

The ill-feeling which she had cherished for months past was gone. None of it remained in her soul, in her heart, as though she had passed out of the depths of that atmosphere to purer heights of understanding and feeling. Only for a moment did she still remember that evening when she herself, in this same room, had implored Bertha and Van Naghel to help her "rehabilitate" herself in the eyes of their friends and of the Hague. It seemed long ago, years ago. She could hardly understand herself: that she could have begged so earnestly for something that was so small, of such little importance to her soul, to the world. She could not have done it now.... She did not understand how she could so long have cherished a grudge against Van Naghel, against Bertha ... because they did not ask her to their official dinners, when the invitation would have given her the rehabilitation which she sought. At the present moment, she did not even desire that rehabilitation, did not care about it, treated it as something that had become of no value: an idea which had withered and shrivelled within her and which blew away like a dead leaf to far-off spacious skies.... Addie? He did not need his mother's rehabilitation in the eyes of the Hague. The boy would make his own way in life.... Oh, how small she had been, to beg for it; to go on bearing a grudge, months on end, for something so little, so infinitesimal ... so absolutely non-existent!... She felt that something had grown up inside her and was looking down upon all that earlier business.... No, there was no bitterness left. She felt a deep pity and a sisterly affection for this poor, old woman, Bertha, who now lay feebly and impotently in her arms, begging ... for what? She collected her thoughts: what could she do, how could she help Bertha? Her thoughts crowded upon one another rapidly; she thought vaguely of Van der Welcke, of Addie: what could they do, how could they help Bertha, how get upon the track of Emilie and Henri? And in the end she could think of nothing to say but:

"Yes, Bertha, the best thing will be to pretend that Emilie has gone for a trip with her brother. We will put it like that, if necessary. What does Van Raven want to do?"

"He won't consent to a divorce.... And it would be an awful thing, you know.... Oh, Constance, they have not been married ten months!"

A weariness suddenly came over her, like the abrupt extinction of all the little mundane interests that had always meant so much to her.

"But," she murmured, "if he beats her ... perhaps it is better that they should be divorced.... I don't know.... We are going to Baarn: there is a small villa to let there. I should prefer to take it at once and go down there with Louise and Marianne.... Karel gives me a lot of trouble: he doesn't behave well, no, he doesn't behave well. And he is still so young. Perhaps he will go to live with Adolph, his guardian, who will be very strict with him. I don't know what to do, I can do nothing.... I used to do everything with Van Naghel, he and I together. He was really good and kind. We were always thinking of the children, both of us. He was tired ... of being in the Cabinet; but he went on, for the children's sake...."

Her unconscious simplicity, in implying that Van Naghel was in the Cabinet for the sake of his children and not of his country, seemed to strike Constance for the first time: she almost smiled, held Bertha closer to her.

"He couldn't very well resign ... and he didn't want to," Bertha continued, feebly. "And now I don't know what to do. I feel so very much alone; and yet I was once a capable woman, wasn't I, Constance? Now I no longer feel capable. Perhaps that life was too crowded. And, Constance, what was the use of it all? My children, our children, for whom we lived, are none of them happy. I have grown weary and old ... for nothing. I wish that we were at Baarn now. I want to live there quietly, with the two girls. Louise is nice, so is Marianne. They neither of them want to go about any more. They're not happy, no, they are not happy. Oh, my poor, poor children!... You must never tell Mamma, Constance. Mamma doesn't know: dear Mamma! There is no need for her to know, poor dear! Better leave her under the impression that all is well with us, even though Van Naghel is gone...."

And she sobbed at the thought that she was alone. Then, suddenly, she drew herself up a little, made Constance take a chair, sat down beside her and asked, peering anxiously through her tears into Constance's face:

"Constance, tell me ... Marianne?"

"Yes, Bertha?"

"Are you fond of Marianne?"

"Yes, very."

"Still?"

"Yes, still."

"Constance...."

"Yes, Bertha?"

"It is just as well ... that we are going to Baarn.... Tell me, Constance: Van der Welcke...."

"Well?"

"What sort of a man is he?"

"What do you mean, Bertha?" asked Constance, gently.

"Is ... is it his fault?... Is he a gentleman?"

Constance defended her husband calmly, but not without astonishment that Bertha could speak so frankly about that ... as if they both knew all about it:

"No, Bertha, I don't think that Henri ... that it is Henri's fault. I don't think it's Marianne's fault either. Bertha, I don't believe they can help it. They have an attraction for each other, a very great attraction...."

A tenderness came over her soul, like a glow, like a glowing compassion.

"Constance, they must not let themselves go. They must struggle against it."

"Who can tell what they are doing, Bertha? Who can tell what goes on inside them?"

"No, they are not struggling."

"Who can tell?"

"No, no.... Constance, it is just as well that we are going to Baarn."

They heard voices in the drawing-room, loud voices, with an Indian accent. The Ruyvenaers were going:

"Good-bye, Ber-r-rtha," said Aunt Lot, looking through the door. "We're going, Ber-r-rtha."

Constance and Bertha went back to the drawing-room. Bertha forgot to wipe the tears from her eyes, kissed Aunt Lot. Adolphine and Cateau came up to Bertha:

"Ber-tha," whined Cateau; and this time she whined with a vengeance. "We just want-ed to say a word to you. Emilie-tje mustnot get a di-vorce."

"No," said Adolphine, "if she goes and gets a divorce, the family will become impossible. It'll create a scandal, if they are divorced."

"Ye-es," Cateau droned aloud, "it would be a scan-dal, Ber-tha. Don't you think so too, Constance?"

"There's no question of it ... for the moment," said Constance. "Emilie has gone abroad for a bit with Henri; and the change is sure to do her good and make her a little calmer."

"Oh?... Has she gone a-broad?"

"Where to?" asked Adolphine, all agog.

"They were to go to Paris," said Constance, without hesitating.

"O-oh?... Has Emilie-tje gone to ... Pa-ris?"

"Yes, with her brother," Constance repeated.

A minute later, she found an opportunity of saying quietly to Bertha:

"It's better like that, Bertha; better to say it as if it was quite natural... If you don't say it yourself ... and they come to hear..."

"Thank you, Constance ... thank you."

"Oh, Bertha.... I wish I could do something for you!"

"You have helped me as it is.... Thank you.... That's all that I can say...."

She lay back helplessly in her chair, staring dimly before her. Constance followed her glance. She saw that Van der Welcke had come, very late. He was sitting in the conservatory—where the boys had cleared away the cards after their game, as Grandmamma always expected them to do—sitting a little in the shadow, but still visible. He was bending over towards Marianne, who sat beside him, her face a white patch in the darkness: a frail little black figure making a faint blur in the dim conservatory, where the gas was now turned out. She seemed to be weeping silently, sat crushing her handkerchief. He appeared to be saying something, anxiously and tenderly, while he bent still nearer to her. Then, suddenly, he took her hand, pressed it impulsively. Marianne looked up in alarm. Her eyes met, at the far end of the long drawing-room, the eyes of Aunt Constance, the dull, staring eyes of her mother. She drew away her hand ... and her pale face flushed with a glow of shame....

Grandmamma stood in the middle of the drawing-room, a little sad at the gloom which the recent mourning had cast over her rooms. The children took their leave.

1Poor thing!

Chapter XXII

Constance began to love her loneliness more and more.

Her daily life was very uneventful: she could count the people with whom she came into contact. First her husband and her son: there was something gentler in her attitude towards Van der Welcke, something almost motherly, which prevented her from getting angry with him, even though the inclination welled up within her. Addie was as usual, perhaps even a little more serious: this disquieted her. Then there was Brauws, who came regularly. He dined with them regularly, on a fixed day in the week, quite informally; and moreover he had become the friend of both Van der Welcke and Constance and even of Addie. Then there were Mamma, Gerrit and his little tribe and, now and again, Paul. And then there was Van Vreeswijk; and Marianne, of course; and latterly she had seen more of Bertha. For the rest she seemed to drift away from all the others, even from warm-hearted Aunt Lot. She kept in touch only with those with whom she was really in sympathy.

Still, though she had these few friends, she often had quite lonely afternoons. But they did not depress her; she gazed out at the rain, at the cloud-phantoms. And she dreamed ... along the path of light. She smiled at her dream. Even though she very much feared the absurdity of it for herself, she could not help it: a new youthfulness filled her with a gentle glow, a new tenderness, like the delicate bloom of a young girl's soul dreaming of the wonderful future.... And then she would come back to herself suddenly and smile at her sentimentality and summon up all her matronly common-sense; and she would think:

"Come, I oughtn't to be sitting like this!... Come, I oughtn't to be acting like this and thinking of everything and nothing!... Certainly, I like him very much; but why cannot I do that without these strange thoughts, without dreaming and picturing all manner of things and filling my head with romantic fancies ... as if I were a girl of eighteen or twenty?... Oh, those are the things which we do not speak about, the deep secret things which we never tell to anybody!... I should never have suspected them in myself ... or that they could be so exquisitely sweet to me. How strangely sweet, to dream myself back to youth in visions which, though they never really take shape, yet make a shining path to those cloudy skies, to imagine myself young again in those dreams!... If I never had these thoughts and dreams before, why do I have them now? Come, I oughtn't to be sitting like this and thinking like this!... I make up a host of pretty stories, sentimental little stories, and see myself, see us both, years ago, as quite young children, both of us. He played and I played ... almost the same game: he a boy, I a girl. It was as though he were seeking me. It was as though I, in my childish dreams, divined something of him, far, far away, as though there were a part of me that wanted to go to him, a part of him that wanted to come to me.... Stop, I am giving way again to those secret enthusiasms which lie deep down in my soul

like strange, hidden streams, those vague, romantic ferments such as I imagined that young girls might have, but not I, a woman of my years, a woman with my past, the mother of a big son.... I will not do it any more, I will not.... It is morbid to be like this.... And yet ... and yet ... when the wind blows and the rain comes down, it is, it still is the dear secret that brings the tears to my eyes.... If I love him, quite silently, deep down within myself, why may I not just dream like that? The absurdity of it exists only for me: nobody, nobody knows of it. I have some one else hidden within me: a younger woman, a sister, a young sister-soul, a girl's soul almost. It is absurd, I know; but sometimes, sometimes it is so strong in me and I love him so well and feel, just like a girl, that he is the first man I have ever loved.... Oh, Henri! I can see now what that was: he was young; it was at first mere play-acting, just like a comedy; then it became passion, very quickly, a mad impulse, an almost feverish impulse to hold him in my arms. That is all dead. Passion is dead.... This is a dream, a young girl's dream. It is the beginning. It is absurd; and I am often ashamed of it, for my own sake. But I cannot resist it: it envelops me, just as the spring sunshine and the scent of the may and the cherry-blossom in the Woods envelop one with languorous sweetness. I cannot resist it, I can not resist it. My eyes go towards those clouds, my soul goes towards those clouds, my dreams go towards them ... and I love him, I love him.... I feel ashamed: sometimes I dare not look my son in the face.... I love him, I love him; and I feel ashamed: sometimes I dare not go across the street, as though people would notice it, by the light on my face.... But ah, no, that light does not shine from me, because I am old! It does from Marianne, poor child, but not from me ... oh, thank God for that!... I want to struggle against it, but it is stronger than I; and, when I think of him, I feel as if I were numbed here in my chair. When he comes into the room, I tremble, powerless to make a movement. Let me be ashamed of myself, argue with myself, struggle as I may, it is so, it is something real, as though I had never felt anything real in my life: it is a dream and it is also reality...."

She often strove against it, but the dream was always too strong for her, enveloping her as with a multitude of languorous spring scents. It imparted a strange tenderness to her, to her fresh, round face, the face of a woman in her prime, with the strange, soft, curly hair, which the years were changing without turning grey. If he came, she awoke from that dream, but felt herself blissfully languid and faint.

"I am not a girl," she thought, now that she heard herself speak; but her fixed idea, that she was old, quite old, retreated a little way into the background.

But, though she now no longer felt so old in her dream, after her dream she thought herself ignorant. Oh, how ignorant she was! And why had she never acquired an atom of knowledge in her wasted days, in her squandered, empty years. When she

was talking to Brauws – and now that he came regularly, they often talked together, long and earnestly, in the friendly twilight – she thought:

“How ignorant I am!”

She had to make an effort sometimes to follow him in the simplest things that he said. She was obliged to confess to him that she had never learnt very much. But he said that that was a good thing, that it had kept her mind fresh. She shook her head in disclaimer; she confessed that she was ignorant and stupid. He protested; but she told him frankly that it sometimes tired her to follow him. And she was so honest with him that she herself was sometimes surprised at it. If ever their conversation became too hopelessly deep, she preferred to be silent rather than lie or even seek an evasion in words.... Ignorant, yes; and it distressed her to such an extent that, one afternoon, when Henri was out and Addie at school, she went to her son’s room and opened his book-case. In addition to the ordinary school-manuals, it contained a few boys’-books; and she laughed at herself, her little tender, mocking laugh of gentle irony. But she found a couple of volumes on Universal History, a present from Van der Welcke to Addie, who was very fond of history; and she opened them where she stood. She turned the pages. She was afraid that some one might come in: the maid, perhaps, by accident. She sat down in the only easy-chair, impregnated with the smoke of the cigarettes which Van der Welcke smoked one after the other, silently, while Addie was preparing his lessons; and she turned the pages and read. She continued to suffer from that sense of her own absurdity. She felt like a schoolgirl dreaming ... and learning her lessons. She went on reading; and, when Truitje was looking for her all over the house and she heard her ask the cook where on earth mevrouw could be, she blushed violently, quickly put the books back on the shelves and left the room. She would have liked to take the books with her, but dared not; however, that evening at dinner she plucked up courage and said:

“Addie, Mr. Brauws was saying something about the French Revolution the other day; and I felt so stupid at being so ignorant on the subject. Have you any books about it?”

Yes, he had this book and that book, in fact he had always been attracted by that period and had collected as many books upon it as his scanty pocket-money permitted. He would bring them to her after dinner. And she acquired a sort of passion for reading and learning. She indulged it almost hastily, feverishly, without any method, as though nervously anxious to make up for the deficiencies of her own education. And at the same time she was frightened lest other people – even Van der Welcke and Addie – should notice that fevered haste; and she devoured book after book with studied cunning, sometimes turning the pages over hurriedly, feverishly, then again reading more attentively, but never leaving the books about, always replacing them on her boy’s shelves, or returning them to Brauws and Paul when

they had been borrowed from them, or carefully putting away those which she had bought herself, so that her room apparently remained the same, without the confusion and untidiness of a lot of books. Her reading was a strange medley: a volume of Quack's Socialists, which Brauws lent her; Zola's novel, *L'Œuvre*; a pamphlet by Bakunin and an odd number of the *Gids*; a copy of *The Imitation* which had strayed among Van der Welcke's books; Gonse on Japanese Art; Tolstoi's novels and pamphlets. But it was a strange bold power of discrimination that at once taught her to pick and choose amid the chaos of all this literature, made her accept this and reject that: a psychological analysis; a new work on modern social evolution; an æsthetic rhapsody about a Japanese vase. She learnt quickly to look into them boldly and to take from them what was able as it were to develop her; and out of many of those books there flashed forth such entirely new revelations of hitherto unperceived truths that often, tired, dazed, astounded, she asked herself:

"Is there so much then? Is so much thought about, dreamt about, so much sought for, lived for? Do people have those visions then, those dreams? And does it all exist? And can it all be taken in by me, by my intelligence?"

And, as she thought, it seemed as if crape veils were being raised everywhere from before her and as if she, whose gaze had never wandered from her family and friends, now saw, suddenly, through the distant clouds, right into those cities, right into those civilizations, into the future, into the past, into so much of the present as still hovered closely around her own existence. She experienced shock after shock: she felt dimly that even the terrible French Revolution, though it did cost Marie-Antoinette her life, had its good side. Zola seemed to her so magnificent that she was almost frightened at her own enthusiasm and dared not put her feeling into words. And the noble dreams of those apostles of humanity, even though they anathematized the power of the State and money – all that she had unconsciously looked upon, all her life, as indispensable to civilized society – made her quiver first with alarm, then with compassion, then with terror, with despair, with exultation.... She did not utter her thoughts; only, in her conversations with Brauws, she felt that she was gradually better able to follow him, that she was more responsive, less vague in her replies.... If in all this, this new self-education, there was something hurried and superficial, the tremulous haste of an eager, nervous woman who fears that she is devoting herself too late to what is vitally necessary, there was at the same time something fresh and ingenuous, something youthful and unspoilt, like the enthusiasm of a woman still young who, after her girlish dreams, wants to grasp some part of the vivid, many-coloured, radiant life around her, who grasps with joyous open hands at the colours and the sunbeams and who, though she grasps wildly, nevertheless gathers fresh life in her illusion.... She gathered fresh life. The wind that blew outside seemed to blow through her soul; the rain that pelted seemed actually to wash her face; the continual gusts on every hand blew the mist

from before her eyes, drew it aside like a curtain.... Her eyes sparkled; and, when the winter had done blowing and raining, when suddenly, without any transition, a breath of spring – the limpid blue of the sky, the tender green of the stirring earth – floated over and through the Woods, it was as though she yearned for movement. She managed, every afternoon that Addie was free, to take him away from Van der Welcke and to lure him out for a long walk, out of the town, over the dunes, ever so far. Addie, with his eyes bright with laughing surprise, thought it very jolly of her and would go with her, though he was no walker and preferred bicycling, athirst for speed. But, in his young, gallant boy's soul, he laughed softly, thought Mamma charming: grown years younger, grown into a young woman, suddenly, in her short skirt, her little cloth cape, with the sailor-hat on her curly hair and the colour in her cheeks, slim-waisted, quick-footed, her voice clear, her laugh sometimes ringing out suddenly. He thought of Papa and that she was now becoming as young as he; and Addie felt himself old beside her. He saw nothing of what was happening in his mother, even as nobody saw it, for she kept it to herself, was no different to the others, spoke no differently to the others, perhaps only just with a brighter laugh. What she read, what she learnt, what she felt, what she thought: all this was not perceptible to the others. It did not shine out from her; and her foot merely moved a shade quicker, her speech became a shade more spontaneous. But everything that blossomed and flamed up in her she kept to herself, in the vast silence of her broad but unshared vistas. To her husband she was gentler, to her son she was younger. Only now, in those walks, perhaps Addie was the one person in her life who noticed that, when Mamma happened to mention Mr. Brauws' name, an unusual note sounded in her brighter, younger voice. A boy of his age does not analyse a subtle perception of this kind; only, without reasoning, without analysing, just instinctively, this boy of fourteen thought of his father, whom he worshipped with a strange, protecting adoration such as one gives to a brother or a friend – a younger brother, a younger friend – and felt a pang of jealousy on his behalf, jealousy of this man who did what Papa never did, talked with Mamma for hours three or four times a week, so often in fact that she was growing younger, that she had taken to reading, so as no longer to be ignorant, that she had developed a need for walking great distances. But the lad kept this jealousy locked up within himself, allowed none to perceive it. Perhaps he was just a trifle colder to him, to this man, the friend of the family, though Brauws was so fond of him, Addie, almost passionately fond of him indeed: Addie knew that. This jealousy for his father, jealousy of that friend of the family, was very strong in him; and he felt himself to be the child of both his parents, felt within himself their double heritage of jealousy. The image of his father appeared constantly before him, appeared between the images of Brauws and of his mother. But he let her see nothing of it.

She gathered fresh life in those walks. When Addie was at school, she walked alone, no longer fearing the loneliness out of doors, she who had come to love her indoor loneliness and the still deeper loneliness of her soul. It was as though, after dreaming and educating herself—quickly, nervously, superficially and with youthful simplicity—in what great men had thought and written, she felt herself breathe again in the midst of nature. No longer from her arm-chair, through the windows, along the bend of the curtains did she see the great clouds, but she now saw them out of doors and overhead, blue, white, immense, irradiated by the sun in the vault of the boundless spring skies all vocal with birds, saw them as she stood on the dunes, with the wind all round her head, all round her hair and blowing through her skirts....

"I love him, I love him," a voice inside her sang softly and yet insistently, while the wind's strong passion seemed to lift her up and waft her along.

But in the movement of her hands there was something as though she were resisting the wind, with a smile of gentle irony, of tender mockery. The wind blew past, as if grumbling, and she walked on, saw the sea. She seemed to look upon the sea for the first time. It was as though, in the strong wind, under the blue-white clouds, the sea streamed to her for the first time from the ethereal fount of the horizon and were now rushing towards her, roaring and frothing, like a triumph of multitudinous, white-crested horses. And the sky and the sea were as one great triumph of mighty, omnipotent nature. A nameless but overwhelming triumph seemed from out of those clouds to hold reins in thousands of fists, the reins of the multitudinous white-crested horses; and all that triumph of nature advanced towards her like a riot of youth. It was as though every atom of her former life, every memory flew away around her like sand, like dust, like straw. It all flew away; and the waves broke, the sea uplifted itself like an exulting menace, as though to carry her with it in the riotous rush of its triumphant crested steeds, over all that small life, over everything ... if she did not take care.

It was all big, wide, far-reaching, like a world. When she reached home, she was tired out, sobered by the tram-ride and the last bit of walking, past casual, shadowy people. Worn out, she fell asleep, woke shortly before dinner, welcomed Addie in a dream. Until sometimes she read her son's eyes, made an effort, plunged her face in a basin of water, tried to be, to appear as she had always been. And then, in the glass, she saw herself like that, to all appearance the same woman, with just something livelier in her eyes, her gait, her movements. But inside her everything was changed.

At home sometimes the past would still rise up before her, but different, quite different. She seemed to withdraw from her former personality and it was as though, far removed from the woman that she had once been, she was now for the first time

able to judge her past from another point of view than her own. She saw suddenly what her father must have suffered, Mamma, the brothers even, the sisters. She realized for the first time the sacrifice which those old, pious people, Henri's parents, had made. She thought in dismay of the injury which she had done her first husband, De Staffelaer. She thought of them all, in dismay at herself, in compassion for them. And she felt sorry even for her husband and for what he had always querulously resented, his shattered career, which had constituted his grudge, his obsession, the excuse for his inertia: for Van der Welcke and even for that grudge she felt compassion. How young he was when she met him, when they had acted their comedy, their comedy which had become deadly earnest! And she had at once fettered him to herself, in ever-increasing antagonism! Then her eyes would rest on him with a more understanding glance, sometimes almost with a certain pity, as she looked into his eyes, his young blue boyish eyes, which Addie had inherited from him, but which in the father looked younger, more boyish than in the son. If, at the sound of his voice, the inclination to speak to him irritably welled up in her from the eternal antagonism between them, as from a gloomy spring deep down in her, she would restrain herself, control herself with that new sympathy and pity, answer gently, almost jokingly, and would let him have the last word. And, now that she herself was in love and felt herself live again, she had a sympathy that was almost motherly for his love, even though she herself was beginning to feel young again, and with it a strange tenderness for the two of them, Marianne and Henri. She did not think of the danger for him; she still had only, in her new world of romance, a sympathy for romance. He was her husband, but she felt none of a wife's jealousy. And for Marianne she felt the same strange compassion, as for a younger sister-in-love....

There came to her scarcely a fleeting thought of the immorality which the world, people, small people – the whirlers in the little circle, with their little prejudices and dogmas, their little creeds and philosophies – would see in such strange views from a married woman concerning herself and a friend, concerning her husband and the little niece with whom her husband was evidently in love. She was a small creature like all of them, she was a small soul, like all of them; but her soul at least was growing, growing upwards and outwards; she no longer felt depressed; and it seemed as if she were being borne on wings to the greater cloud-worlds yonder, to the far cities, where flashed the lightnings of the new revelations, the new realities....

Everything in her was changed....

Chapter XXIII

Max Brauws was a thinker as well as a man of action; and each of these two personalities insisted on having its period of domination. After his college days, he had wandered over Europe for years, vaguely seeking an object in life. Deep down in himself, notwithstanding all his restless activity, he remained a dreamer, as he had been in his childhood and boyhood. It seemed as if that which he had sought in his dreams when playing as a boy on the fir-clad hills and over the moors went on beckoning him, darkly and elusively, a mystic, nebulous veil on the dim horizons of the past; and, when he ran towards them, those far horizons, they receded more and more into the distance, fading little by little; and the veil was like a little cloud, melting into thin air.... He had wandered about for years, his soul oppressed by a load of knowledge, by the load of knowing all that men had thought, planned, believed, dreamed, worshipped, achieved. An almost mechanically accurate memory had arranged those loads in his brain in absolute order; and, if he had not been above all things driven by the unrest of his imagination, with its eternal dreaming and its eternal yearning to find what it sought, he would have become a quiet scholar, living in the country, far from cities, with a great library around him; for very often, when spent with weariness, he had a vision of an ideal repose. But the unrest and the yearning had always driven him on, driven him through the world; and they had both made him seek, for himself as well as for others, because, if he had found for others, he would also have found for himself. They, the unrest and the yearning, had driven him on towards the great centres of life, towards the black gloom of the English and German manufacturing-towns, towards the unhappy moujiks in Russia, towards the famine-stricken villages of Sicily, all in a heart-rending passion to know, to have seen, penetrated and experienced all the misery of the world. And the capitals had risen up around him like gigantic Babels of fevered pride, accumulations of egotisms; the smoke of the manufacturing-towns had smeared along the horizon of his life the soot-black clouds through which he could not see and in which the days remained eternally defiled; the Russian snow-landscapes had spread out as eternal, untraversable steppes—steppes and steppes and steppes—of absolutely colourless despair; in Italy he had beheld an appalling contrast between the magnificence of the country—the glory of its scenery, the melancholy of its art—and the sorrows of the afflicted nation, which, as in a haze of gold, against a background of sublime ruins and shimmering blue, along rows of palaces full of noble treasures, uttered its cry of hunger, shook its threatening fist, because the old ground brought forth not another olive, not one, after the excesses of the past, exhausted by the birth-pangs of the untold glories of old....

His mind, schooled in book-lore, also read life itself, learnt to know it, fathomed it with a glance. He saw the world, saw its wickedness, its selfishness, saw especially its awful, monstrous hypocrisy. Like so many leering, grinning masks, with

treacherous honeyed smiles, contradicting the furtive glances of the diabolical eyes, he saw the powers of the world above the world itself: a huge nightmare of compact distress, the greedy, covetous, grasping fingers hidden as though ready to clutch at the folds of the majestic purple, ready to strike like vultures' claws. And he saw — O terrible vision! — the world as a helpless, quivering mass lying for centuries under that eternal menace. He saw it everywhere. Then he wanted to free himself with a gigantic effort from the sphinx-like domination of his impotence, with its eternally unseeing eyes, its eternally silent lips, its undivining mind; and his movement was as that of one who lies crushed under granite, the granite of that omnipotent sphinx of impotence, who, with her eternal immovability, seemed to be saying nothing but this:

"I am unchangeable, eternally; against me everything is eternally dashing itself to pieces; against me your dreams scatter into mist. I alone am, but I am that which is unchangeable: human impotence, your own impotence. Lie still at my feet, do not move: I alone am."

That was the vision of his hopeless eyes. But desperation drove him on, wandering ever on and on to other lands, to other capitals, to other towns black with smoke: the smoke through which nothing shone, not a single gleam of hope. And for years it was the same: wandering, seeking, not finding; only seeing, knowing, realizing. But the more he saw, knew and realized, the more terrible it was to him that he could not find the very first word of the solution, the more terrible it became to him that only the sphinx remained, the immovable granite impotence; and her blank gaze seemed to utter her solitary revelation:

"I alone am. I am impotence; but I am immovable, I am omnipotent."

Then he had felt in himself the need to do still more, to be really a doer, a common workman, as they all were, everywhere, the poor and wretched. And he went to America, in order no longer to think, read, ponder, dream, see or know, but to do what they were all doing, the poor and wretched. And it was as he had succeeded in telling Constance at last, after so many hesitations: everything that was atavistic in him had prevented him from becoming a brother, a fellow-worker. But he was scarcely back in Europe before he felt the air around him full of noble aims, passionate hopes; and Peace had shone before his eyes. He spoke; and his words were as the words of one inspired; and everybody went to hear him. He had spoken in Holland; he now went to Germany and spoke there. He wrote his book there: Peace. He went on doing and moving, until he was laid low not only with the fatigue of thinking and meditating, but also with the strain of constantly travelling hither and thither, of constantly appearing in overcrowded halls, of speaking in a clear, resonant voice to thousands of people. For a moment he said to himself that he was doing something, something even greater and better than his manual labour in

America had been. For a moment he said to himself that he had found, if not everything, at least something, an atom of absolute good, and that he was imparting that atom to the world. But dull discouragement came and smote him, as well as physical strain, and left him saying to himself:

"They cheer and applaud, but nothing is changed. Everything remains as it is, as if I had never spoken."

His impatience demanded an immediate realization and the sight of the ideal flashing across the horizon. And then he lost all hope even for the future, for the brighter ages that were dawning. A mocking laugh, a sarcastic word in a report on his lectures was enough to shatter him for weeks. He hid himself like a leper, or allowed himself to be luxuriously lapped in the leafy melancholy of the German mountain-forests, or went, farther and higher, into the Alps, made reckless ascents, just himself and a guide, as though, along the pure world of the slippery glaciers, he hoped to find what he had sought in vain in the Old World and the New, in the world of all and of himself.

Then he remained for weeks lingering on in a lonely little village in Switzerland, high up among the eternal snows, as though he wished to purify himself of all the dust of his humanity. Merely through breathing the exquisite rareness of the air, especially at night, when in the higher heavens the stars shone nearer to him, twinkling out their living rays, it seemed as if the pure cold were cleansing him to his marrow, to his soul. He gazed back almost peacefully upon his life as a man of thought and action, thought and action being two things in which a man is able to indulge only if he be willing to live, for others and for himself. If anything of his thought, of his action remained drifting in those lower atmospheres of the suffering world, he was certain that this would be so little, so infinitesimally small, that he himself did not perceive it, like an atom of dust floating in the immensity of the future. Perhaps then the atom would prove to be a little grain and, as such, be built into the substance of the ideal. But, even if this were so, his thought and his action and their possible results seemed to him so small, so slight that he was filled with humility. And in this humility there was a pride in being humble; for did he not remember all the complacency, the dogmatism, the conviction, the assurance, the self-consciousness, all the pedantry that battened down there?

Amid the serenity of the mountains, as he sent his gaze roaming over the frost-bound horizons, all within him became pure and crystal-clear, his soul a very prism. He saw its colours lying there plainly, shining, glittering, with none of the foulness of that lower world. And these weeks were weeks of the deepest and most health-giving rest that he had ever known.

He now felt very lonely. He was not the man to give himself up to the simple enjoyment of this healing rest. He loved best to feel the multitude around him, to

fling out his strong arms wide towards humanity, feeling his most ardent and happiest glow when embracing humanity. But, after his discouragements, he seemed to have thrust it gently, though kindly, a little farther from him, had abandoned it, had sequestered himself, in order to recover from himself and from humanity in the ample, restful silence of utter solitude. He now felt very lonely. And a longing awoke in him, stirring but feebly as yet, for love to come towards him now, because hitherto love had always gone out from him, eager and passionate; a longing to be sought himself, for once in his life; to see arms opened to him this time, waiting to embrace him, to press him to a loving heart.... A feeling of melancholy softened him, made him small and human, while the mountain-wind swept past on giant wings....

He looked back upon his life. That was one thing which it had never known: that concentration of all feeling on an individual. With him, any whole-hearted feeling had always been for the many. When he looked back, he saw spectres wandering through the past: the individual, the unit, just a faint blur here and there; he had never felt that all-devouring passion for them, the individuals. And yet, as a child, as a boy, playing his dream-game amid woods, fields, heather and stream, for whom had his longing been? To find all of them, humanity, or the one individual soul? He did not know; but a dreamer he had always remained, for all his thinking and doing. And now, after the many had brought him sorrow, he began to dream, for the first time, of the one....

Of the one ... the one individual soul that would open wide arms to him and approach him with a loving embrace ... one individual soul.... Had his quest always been the self-deception of impotence and was it possible that now that quest had become a search for the one individual soul? Suddenly, through his longing, he remembered an evening: a table with flowers and candles; men talking amid the smoke of their cigars; the burly figure of a fair-haired officer; and some strange words which that officer had just uttered as though unconsciously, in the course of ordinary conversation: a vision calling up early years of childhood, childish play, a little girl, fair, with red flowers at her temples, dressed in white, running barefoot over great boulders in a river full of rocks, under the heavy foliage of the tropical trees, and beckoning, beckoning with her little hand to the two elder brothers who were playing with her, fascinated by their little sister....

There, in that room, through the smoke of the cigars, amid the hum of indifferent talk, in three or four sentences, no more, that big, fair-haired man had said it, said it just casually, with a softening of his rough, noisy voice:

"It was wonderful, the way she had of playing. She would run over the rocks and pluck the flowers. Lord, how adorable she looked, the little witch! And we boys used to run with her, run after her, as far as ever she pleased. She only had to beckon to us ... the damned, adorable little witch!"

And the oath sounded like a caress; and the whole thing was only a picture lasting two or three seconds, no more; and then they returned to the smell of coffee and liqueurs, the cigar-smoke, the noisy voice growing rough again, becoming coarse and jovial as the burly, fair-haired soldier told some mess-room tale immediately afterwards, after that reminiscence. But in him, Brauws, the reminiscence had lingered, as though always visible: the picture shining in the tenderness with which the brother had spoken of his sister; and it seemed to him as though he himself had seen, but more vaguely and dimly, once in his life, on those Dutch horizons of his childhood, a blur like that of the little figure, the bright, fair-faced child, even the little red note of her flowers.... Oh, how vague it was, how visionary! You thought of it ... and it had gone, all of it, leaving hardly the memory of a perfume, nay, hardly the reflection of a memory! Really, it was nothing, nothing, too airy for thought and impossible to describe in words, however tenderly chosen. It was nothing: if he thought about it for more than the one second that the reflection flashed across him, it was gone, quite lost....

He was feeling very lonely now.... Oh, to think of the passing years with their millions of meetings, so many men and women just brushing against one another, in that casual passing, just looking into one another's eyes, with the indifferent look of non-recognition, and then passing one another again, never seeing one another after!... And perhaps among them the one had passed, her eyes looking indifferently into his eyes, a bit of her body or dress brushing against his body or dress ... and she was gone, gone, lost altogether forever. Was that how it had happened in his life? Or not? Was life sometimes merciful at the eleventh hour, giving the one, the individual soul, as a consolation, as a reward for that love for the many?

Now he felt quite lonely, he who was a dreamer as well as a thinker and a man of action. And an irresistible wish to be no longer lonely made him come down suddenly from that ring of glittering peaks. There was nothing waiting for him in Holland, nothing to draw him towards those low lands of his birth, into the swarm of utterly indifferent people, full of petty insignificance, save alone, perhaps, that it was there – in the same house where the vision had been conjured up – there that the soul was waiting, there that the one individual soul would bide his coming.

"It is only a fancy," he now thought. "A fancy ... at my age! No, if any such thing had to happen, it would have happened in the years of youth in which we have the right to feel, to dream, to seek ... to seek for the one. Now that so many years, silent, dead years, lie heaped up around her and around me ... and between us, now it becomes absurd to feel, to dream, to seek those sweet solaces which we feel, dream and seek only when we are very young, but not when we have lost even our right to the remembrance of our youth, the reflection of our childish memories...."

Still he came down from the mountains....

Chapter XXIV

It was not until he was standing in front of her, at the Hague, that he knew, in his innermost soul, that he had come back to Holland because of her and of her alone. It struck him at once that her eyes were brighter, her movements younger, that her voice sounded clearer.

"I have read your book!" was the first thing that she said to him, radiantly.

"Well?" he asked, while his deep, almost sombre eyes laughed in his rough, bronzed face.

She would not tell him that the book, *Peace*, written in his clear, luminous style, prophesying in ringing tones the great watchword of the future, had consoled her for his three months' absence. She managed to speak of it in terms of quiet appreciation, betraying no sign of her enthusiasm except by an added brightness in her eyes and a curious lilt in her voice, with its echo of summer and of carolling birds. The book was a great success, written as it were in one breath, as though he had uttered it in a single sentence of quiet knowledge, warning them of the coming changes in the world; in a single sentence of quiet consolation, foretelling its future destinies. There was in his words, in that one long sentence of prophetic consolation, an irresistible sweetness, a magic charm which affected for a moment even the most sceptical of his readers, even though they scoffed at it immediately afterwards; something wonderful, inspired ... and so simple that the word was spoken almost without art, only with a note that sounded strangely clear, as though echoing from some higher plane. He had thought out the book during his lecturing-period in Holland and Germany; he had written it up there, high up in the Alps, with his eyes roaming over the ice-bound horizons; and it had often seemed to him as if *Peace* were waving her argent banners in the pure air, her joyous processions descending from the eternal snows of the upper air to the pollution of the lower, to trumpet forth with blithe clarions the holy tidings, the fair, unfaltering prophecy.... The book had comforted her; she had read it in the Woods, on the dunes, by the sea; and, in the warm summer air, with its tang of salt, she had sat with the book in her hands and felt him with her, though absent.... She knew the sentences by heart; but she tempered her enthusiasm, lest she should betray herself. And, when she had spoken of the book and was silent for a moment, he said:

"And now tell me about yourself! What have you been doing all these months?"

"What have I been doing?..."

"Yes. You must have done something besides reading my *Peace*!"

She almost blushed; and a thrill went through her, that catch at her throat and grip at her heart which his step, his voice, his glance could still always give her; and she was not able to answer at once. Yes, really she had done nothing that summer except

read his Peace! So it seemed to her for a moment. But, when she recovered from that sudden wave of emotion, she reflected that it was not so; that she had read other things; that she had dreamt, had thought; that she had lived! It was very strange, but she reflected ... that she had lived!

It was as though both of them had much to say to each other and yet did not know how to say it. Van der Welcke was not at home; and they talked together for a long time of indifferent things. He felt all the while that a vague question was rising to his lips, a question hardly formulated even in his mind. He longed to ask her something, such a question as a brother's tenderness might have prompted, to which she would answer with a sister's ready sympathy. But he did not know how to speak; and so he buried within himself that strange bright tenderness which longed to give itself expression, to ask its questions; and he locked himself up in his deep, mournful seriousness, the sombreness of a middle-aged man. She also, opposite him, was the same, sat and spoke like a middle-aged woman; he remarked the soft grey of her curling hair; and both of them, serious, almost indifferent, talked quietly, if sympathetically, of casual things.... And yet he felt that, deep down in herself, she was changed. She had never looked like that before, never spoken so clearly, with such young and lively gestures. He noticed that she had been reading, that she had read other books than his Peace; and, when he told her of the world of misery which he had seen quite lately in Germany, she replied in a tone of compassion which struck him, because it was no more the shuddering pity of a woman of the world for the misery that swarms far beneath her like vermin, but true compassion, the welling up of a new and generous youth in her soul, an enthusiasm now experienced for the very first time. How sincerely her answer rang, how fervent were the words in which she uttered it! He was astonished and told her so, told her that he would never have suspected such sincerity, such fervour, such capacity for pity in a woman of her caste. But she defended her caste, especially because she did not wish to be too exuberant in her new youth and new life and was perpetually suppressing herself. And so now, to hide her feelings, she defended her caste: did he not think that there were others who had the power of feeling as she did for the misery of the world, women like herself, women of her caste, not merely those who perform their perfunctory little works of charity, but other women who welcome the new ideas and above all the new sentiments of universal brotherhood, women who will perhaps stamp them on their coming children, are already implanting them, germ by germ, so that later, soon indeed, they will bear a new generation whose lives will be based on those sentiments of brotherhood? He was surprised at what she said, but he brushed it aside with a rough gesture, while a glance of hatred flashed from his sombre, brooding eyes, deep-set in his rough face—a glance that was sometimes anguished as though with pain—and he said to her that this was not true, that it could not be, that her whole caste was nothing but egoism, nothing but hypocrisy,

vast and monstrous, its hypocrisy perhaps even more colossal than its egoism, and that he was surprised at himself for having any friendly feeling towards her, a woman of her caste. A rough candour made his voice sound harsh. But she was not offended by it; she listened to him although out of his rough words there came a gust which seemed likely to overthrow all that she had long looked upon as cultured, correct, respectable, irreproachable, moral and aristocratic. It was as though her reading, like a breeze from the sea or the dunes, had suddenly removed and blown away from her all the pettiness, the miserable distortion of the dwarf plant with its aping of greatness; all the everlasting strife of opinions, interests and prejudices waged in and around all those creatures of the world, the women of her set. He noticed it, with a thrill of happiness; and he knew that they understood each other. There had sprung up between them the common understanding, the common discussion of things that are never discussed in current conversation.

And, because of his happiness, he knew that he loved her, even though it was late in the day, even though it was too late. He had never known a love like that; he felt it now for the first, the very first time, that wave of exultant, smiling happiness, but at the same time he felt it like a shadow, a grief, a regret for what might have been. She had not yet felt it like that, a regret for what might have been, because she was living again, because she was living for the first time, late but not too late, since she was living at last in a real, intense, pulsating life; but to him, the man who had lived but only never loved, it came at once, came as regret for what might have been....

And his love seemed never likely to become anything else than just that: regret....

Chapter XXV

In these days, when Constance felt herself becoming so strangely young and alive – she who for so long believed that she had never, never lived – she was compelled to step outside that life dominated purely by feeling. Van Vreeswijk came to her one evening and sat talking for hours. She liked him; she valued him as a good friend who, notwithstanding that he really belonged to the most insufferable section of the Court set, had shown that he was not too much afraid of degrading himself by associating with Van der Welcke, with her or even with Brauws, though he loudly and sweepingly condemned Brauws' views. She, in her new pride of life, looked down upon him, with a kindly contempt, as one of the little people in the narrow little circle, a humming-top spinning around itself and around other humming-tops, just another figure in the merry-go-round which they represented to her, all of them; but she valued his unaffected friendship and, though she thought him anything but a great soul, she did not think him a base or evil soul. And so she spoke to him sympathetically that evening and promised to help him.

She promised; and yet it was exceedingly difficult. A new honesty had sprung up in her, making her hesitate to whom to turn first. She had meant to speak to Van der Welcke the next morning, in quite an ordinary way. But, when she saw him for a moment before he went out, he seemed to her to be suppressing some secret grief deep down in himself: his blue boyish eyes were overcast, his mouth half-sulking, as on rainy days when he was not able to go cycling; and yet it was fine now, a fine autumn day, and he came down in his cycling-suit, fetched his bicycle, said that he was going a long way, that he would perhaps not be back for lunch. She suspected in him a craving to get away, as fast as possible and as far as possible, and to deaden with that wild speed the pain of his gnawing grief. But, in the soft glow of her new youth, which illuminated everything within her and around her, she had not the heart to tell him what she was going to do, what she had promised to do, though in her secret self she thought it dishonest not to tell him straight out. So she said nothing, let him go. She looked after him for a moment, watched the angry curve of his shoulders, as he pedalled desperately, in his mad craving to get away, far away.

She sighed, felt sorry for him, she no longer knew why or wherefore ... But she had promised Van Vreeswijk; and perhaps, she thought, it would be best so. She went out therefore, took the tram to the Bezuidenhout, rang at Bertha's door, found her at home. In the hall, the removers' men were busy packing china and glass in big cases. Louise and Frans were going from room to room with a list in their hands, making notes of the furniture which Mamma would want at Baarn. The little villa had been taken.

Constance found Bertha upstairs in Van Naghel's study. She was sitting at an open window in the large room with its dark, heavy furniture, gazing into the garden,

with her hands in her lap. She seemed calmer than she had been the other evening, at Mamma's. She sat there in her black dress, her face old and drawn, but calmer now; and her eyes never left the garden, a town garden full of rose-trees and fragrant in the late summer air. But all around her the room was gloomy and deadly and desolate. The book-cases were empty: the books had been taken out and divided among the boys. Only the large bronze inkstand remained on the writing-table. The furniture stood stiff, formal, stripped, unused, lifeless, as though awaiting the day of the sale. The bare walls showed the marks of the etchings and family-portraits that had been taken down.

Bertha rose when Constance entered; she kissed her and sat down again at once, sinking into her chair and folding her hands in her lap. And Constance asked if she could have a moment's serious conversation with her. A shade of weariness passed over Bertha's face, as if to convey that she had had so many serious conversations lately and would rather go on gazing into the garden. She lifted her eyes almost sorrowfully from the riot of roses, turned them on Constance, asked what it was about. And Constance began to tell her: Van Vreeswijck had been with her for a long time the evening before and had told her that he had loved Marianne for so long, so long....

Bertha was interested for a moment, seemed to wake from a dream:

"Van Vreeswijck?" she asked.

Constance went on. He had never said a word to Marianne, because he feared, was almost certain, indeed, that she did not care for him. Had it not been mentioned that they were moving to Baarn, he would perhaps not have ventured to speak even now. But this threatened change had suddenly compelled him to open his heart ... to her, to Constance. And he had begged Constance to ask Bertha, to ask Marianne herself if he might hope ... perhaps later....

"Van Vreeswijck?" Bertha repeated.

Two months ago, though she had never been a match-making mother, she would have welcomed this proposal, would have rejoiced at it: Van Vreeswijck was a man of good family, belonged to their own circle and to the Court set, had a little money; not very young, perhaps, but a good-looking, pleasant, well-bred fellow. But now she did not know, showed little or no interest after that momentary flicker and went on dully, with her hands lying motionless on her black dress:

"Well, I have nothing against it, Constance. If Marianne likes the idea, I do too."

Her voice sounded as if she were withdrawing herself from everything, including her children's interests. She sat there, just blankly staring, leaving everything to them. Louise and Frans went through the house looking out the furniture for which there would be room at Baarn. Constance heard their voices on the stairs:

"So," Louise was saying, "we have, in addition to the furniture in Mamma's bedroom, in Marianne's and mine, enough for one spare-room; then there's the piano, from the drawing-room, and the china-cabinet...."

"Isn't the china-cabinet ever so much too big ... for those small rooms down there?"

"Yes, perhaps.... Perhaps we had better leave the china-cabinet...."

Bertha heard as well as Constance: perhaps Louise and Frans were speaking loudly in the passage on purpose. Bertha, however, did not stir: her eyes remained vague, her hands lifeless. It was obviously a matter of supreme indifference to her whether they took the china-cabinet with them or not....

And, as she did not speak at all, Constance was obliged to ask:

"Would you mind, Bertha, if I just spoke to Marianne?"

"Very well," said Bertha, "do."

"Now? Here?"

"Yes," said Bertha.

Constance rose, opened the door.

"So that's two more tables ... two sofas," Frans counted, making notes on his list.

"Louise," said Constance, at the door, "would you ask Marianne to come here a moment?"

She sat down again by her sister, affectionately, took her hand, brimming over with pity for the tired woman whom she had always looked upon as an ever capable, busy woman of the world, now exhausted with all the thousand cares of her life and smitten by the sudden blow that had befallen her. And Constance's heart beat anxiously in dread of what was coming: she trembled, felt her eyes become wet....

Marianne entered, pale, almost diaphanous; and her black blouse made her look a frail little figure of mourning, slender and drooping. For the thing which she could not conceal in her innermost self was no longer a light shining from her, visible to all: it was now a cloud around her, still visible, but as a shadow of grief, whereas but lately it had been a glow of happiness. Constance at once drew her to her, kissed her, held her to her. And she could not find words. Bertha did not speak.

"Marianne ..." Constance began.

"Are you angry, Aunt Constance?"

"No, darling, why...."

"Yes, you are angry with me."

"Why, Marianne!"

"Yes, you are different. I have seen it for some time; there's something, I know...."

It was no longer the joyous, playful, almost mischievous voice in which she had said this before. It now sounded rather like a cry of fear, because it, "that," seemed so obvious that every one was bound to see it, that Aunt Constance herself must needs see it ... and be angry.

"Really, Marianne, I am not angry. But I wanted to speak to you alone...."

"Oh, then you are angry!" she said, passionately, almost hiding herself in Constance's arms. "Don't be angry!" she said, almost entreatingly. "Do tell me that you will try ... not to be angry with me!"

She betrayed herself almost entirely, incapable of keeping back that which had once shone from her and which now nearly threatened to sob itself from her. Constance could find no words.

"We shall soon be going away, Auntie!" said Marianne, her features wrung with grief. "And then you will not see me any more ... and then ... then perhaps you will never have any reason to be angry with me again...."

And then, all at once, she gave a sob, an irresistible sob, jarring every nerve with a shock that seemed to leave her rigid. She shut her eyes, buried her face in Constance's shoulder and remained lying like this, after that one convulsive sob, motionless, pale, as though she were dying, as though devastated with sorrow. Bertha, opposite her, stared at her vaguely, with her hands lying helplessly on her black dress.

And Constance could find no words. Time after time she thought of mentioning Van Vreeswijck's name, time after time the name died away on her lips. She gently urged Marianne to control herself, assuring her that she was not angry, had never been angry. And for a moment, thinking of herself, she felt afraid.

If love could be now gladness and now mourning, as it had been and was in this suffering, love-stricken child, should it not be the same with her—that gladness and oh, perhaps later, O God, that mourning!—with her, the middle-aged woman, who felt herself growing younger and a new life coursing through her: at first, in the soft spring flush of a girl's dreams; now in the summer glory of a woman's—a young woman's—love? But there was a mirror opposite her; and she saw Marianne grief-stricken, shaken with sobs ... and in herself she saw nothing! She seemed to have the power to hide her happiness in her secret self: her agony—O God!—she would also hide later in her secret self. She saw nothing in herself. And she knew that nobody saw it in her. It remained secretly, mysteriously hidden. Adolphine, Cateau, the Ruyvenaers, all of them talked about her husband and Marianne: she knew it; but she also knew that they never talked about herself and Brauws ... though she had now known him for months, though he was the friend of the house and came to their house almost daily. He was a friend of Van der Welcke's, he was a friend of the

house and a very well-known man; and that was all. It was not visible to anybody, to anybody....

Oh, was it not strange? That this same feeling, which she bore in her innermost self, unseen by any, should shine within her as a sun, while with Marianne it had shone out, for all the world to see, as an illicit joy ... and was now streaming forth from her, in a convulsive sob, as an illicit sorrow. What she, the woman, hid within her the child could not hide within her, as though her soul were too slight for it, so slight that it had glowed through her soul as through alabaster and now flowed from it as from alabaster.... Oh, was it not strange, was it not strange? After all, she did not hide it intentionally, for she, the middle-aged woman had never, in her new young life, thought of the people outside ... in connection with her reviving youth! But it was so, it was so, beyond a doubt.... And it made her feel strong: it seemed to her a grace that had been accorded her, this power to live and go on living a new life deep in her secret self, invisible to the people outside, this power to live and love....

She felt grateful: something sang in her like a hymn of thanksgiving; but she was filled with compassion for Marianne. The girl, despite Constance' cheering words, still lay motionless against her shoulder, with closed eyes, as though dead. Constance now gently forced her to rise, led her away without a word ... while Bertha remained sitting, just followed them both with her dull, indifferent eyes, then looked out at the roses in the garden, her hands lying helplessly in her black lap.

Constance opened the door, led the girl into the drawing-room. The carpet had been taken up, the curtains taken down; the furniture stood cold and lifeless on the bare boards.

"Marianne, darling, do listen to me now!" Constance forced herself to say, in a firmer voice. "I am not angry and I wanted to speak to you ... and I have something to ask you.... But first tell me: do you believe that I care for you and that anything I say and ask comes from nothing but my love for you?"

Marianne opened her eyes:

"Yes, Auntie."

"Well, then," said Constance, "Van Vreeswijck...."

But Marianne suddenly drew herself up where they were sitting—she with Constance' arms around her—nervous, terrified, at once knowing, understanding:

"No, Auntie, no!" she almost screamed.

"Marianne!..."

"No, Auntie, oh, no, no, no! I can't do it, I can't do it!"

And she threw herself back, sobbed out her words, as though she no longer dared fling herself into Constance's arms.

"Marianne, he is very fond of you ... and he is such a good fellow...."

"Oh, Auntie, no, no, no!... No, no, Auntie, no!... I can't do it!"

Constance was silent. Then she said:

"So, it's no, darling?"

"No, Auntie, no, no!... I don't care for him, I can never, never care for him! Oh, no, no, it is cruel of you, if you ask that of me, if you want to force me into it!... I don't care for him.... There is ... there is some one else...."

She was silent, stared before her like a madwoman, with the same fixed stare as her mother. And suddenly she became very still, accepting her anguish, and said, gently, with a heart-rending smile:

"No, Auntie ... no. I would rather go ... with Mamma and Louise ... to Baarn. We shall live very pleasantly there ... cosily, the three of us together.... Marietje will join us later, from her boarding-school.... Karel...."

She tried to utter just a word of interest in her mother, sisters and brothers, but her indifferent, dead voice belied her. There was nothing in her but what had once shone from her, what was now trying to sob from her....

Constance clasped her in her arms:

"My child!"

"No, Auntie, you will tell him, won't you?... Tell him that I am sorry ... but ... but that I don't care for him.... I care ... I care for some one else...."

And now, without speaking a word, raising her beseeching, tear-filled eyes to her aunt's, she said to Constance, without speaking a word, told her only with her beseeching glance, told her that she loved ... that she loved Uncle Henri ... and that she couldn't help it; that she knew it was very wrong of her; that she begged her aunt to forgive her and implored her please not to be angry; that she entreated only to be allowed to suffer and sob about it; but that for the rest she hoped for nothing more from life, nothing, nothing; that she would go quietly to Baarn, with her mother and sisters, and try to manage to live there and pine away silently in her grief....

And Constance, as she held her in her arms, thought:

"Living ... Living.... This child ... this poor child ... is living early; and, if I have begun to live late ... O God, O God, must I also suffer as she is doing ... must I also suffer some day ... soon, perhaps ... if one cannot have life without suffering?..."

Chapter XXVI

When Constance returned home, she was even more troubled than she had been in the morning by what she called her dishonesty towards Van der Welcke. She lunched alone with Addie; Van der Welcke did not come in, was evidently trying to lose himself on his bicycle in the roads outside the Hague and lunching off a sandwich and a glass of beer at a country inn. He did not come home till very late, tired and dusty, and he was in an unbearable mood, as though his surfeit of movement and speed and space had produced nothing but an evil intoxication and not the beneficent anæsthesia which he had expected of it. Roughly, as though dispirited and disgusted, he put away his machine, without bestowing on it the care which he usually gave to it after a long ride, angry with the lifeless steel which had not consoled him, which had not shown itself a friend this time. It was three o'clock; and he went straight to his room to change his clothes.

Constance, in her drawing-room, remained uneasy. In her heart there was a deep pity for Marianne; and for him too an almost motherly pity, which made her eyes fill with tears. Oh, when she had found so very much for herself, so much that was broad and lofty, radiant and lovely, of which she asked no more than that it should exist, exist in soft radiance within herself, a mystic sun, a glowing mystery, invisible to all but her, it pained her that those two, Henri and Marianne, could find nothing for themselves and for each other!... She listened anxiously to the sounds upstairs. She heard his footsteps tramping overhead, heard him even throwing his clothes about, splashing the water noisily, almost breaking the jug and basin in his savage recklessness, his violent resentment against everything. It all reechoed in her; she kept on starting: there he was flinging his boots across the room; bang went the door of his wardrobe; and, when he had finished, she heard him go to his den. Everything became still; the warmth of the summer afternoon floated in through the open windows; a heat mist hung over the garden of the little villa; in the kitchen, the maid was droning out a sentimental song, in a dreary monotone....

Constance' uneasiness increased. Yes, she must, she must tell him something: she almost became frightened at the idea of telling him nothing, of concealing from him entirely that Van Vreeswijck had asked her to go to Marianne. And yet nothing compelled her to say anything to Henri; and it would perhaps not even, she thought, be fair to Van Vreeswijck. She did not know; her thoughts rambled on uneasily. But persistently, as though from out of the new, fresh youth that was hers, one ideaobtruded itself: it would not be honest to tell Henri nothing, not even a casual word, so that at any rate he should not imagine, if he came to hear later, that she had been plotting behind his back....

All of a sudden, the anxiety, the uneasiness became so great in her that she rose, impulsively, and went upstairs. The servant was droning sentimentally. Constance

quietly opened the door of Henri's little den. He was sitting in a chair, with his arms hanging down beside him; he was not even smoking.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked. "I should like to speak to you for a moment...."

He gave her a sharp look. Usually, when she came in like that, it meant that she had something to reproach him with, that she was spoiling for a scene ... about a trifle, sometimes about nothing. She would come in then with the same words; and her voice at once sounded aggressive. This time, though she tried to speak gently, her voice, because of her uneasiness and anxiety, sounded harsh and discordant; and he, with his irritated nerves, seemed to hear the aggressive note, the prelude to a scene. It was as though his nerves at once became set, as though he were pulling himself together in self-defence:

"What is it now?" he asked, roughly.

She sat down, outwardly calm, inwardly trembling, anxious, uneasy. And she made an effort to clear her hoarse voice and to speak calmly ... so that he might know:

"Oh," she began, reflectively, wishing to show him at once that she had not come to make reproaches, that she did not wish to make a scene, "I wanted to speak to you ... to ask your advice...."

Her voice, now under control, sounded soft, as she wished it; and he was astonished for a second, just remembered, almost unconsciously, that she had not been so quick-tempered lately, that in fact they had not had a scene for weeks. Still he continued suspicious: she, who never asked his advice! And he echoed:

"To ask my advice?"

"Yes," she went on, in that same calm, reflective tone, with a certain constraint, "I wanted to tell you – what do you think? – Vreeswijck stayed talking to me for a long time yesterday evening ... and he wanted absolutely...."

"Wanted what?"

She saw him turn pale; his eyes blazed angrily, as though sparks were flashing from that vivid blue, generally so young and boyish.

"He would so much like ... he asked me...."

She could not get the words out, looked at him, afraid of his eyes, now that she was in no mood for a scene of mutual recrimination. But she could not keep silent either:

"He asked me ... if I thought ... that Marianne...."

She saw him give a shiver. He understood it all. Nevertheless, she went on:

"That Marianne could get to care for him.... He asked me to go to Bertha ... and ask her...."

"Van Vreeswijck? Marianne?" he repeated; and his eyes were almost black. "Asked you ... to go to Bertha?... Well, you're not mixing yourself up in it, are you? You're not going, surely?"

"I went this morning," she said; and her voice once more sounded discordant.

He seemed to hear a hostile note in it. And, unable to contain himself, he flew into a passion:

"You went? You went this morning?" he raved; and even in his raving she saw the suffering. "Why need you mix yourself up in it? What business has Van Vreeswijck to come asking you?... Van Vreeswijck...."

He could not find the words. All that he could get out was a rough word, cruel, hard and insulting:

"Plotting and scheming ... if you want to go plotting...."

Her eyes flamed; she felt his intention to insult her. But his suffering was so obvious, she saw him so plainly writhing under his pain, that the angry tempest died down at once and she merely said, very gently:

"She has refused him."

He looked at her. The black cloud lifted from his eyes, which turned blue again, and his gloomy frown gave way to his usual boyish expression, full of wide-eyed astonishment now. His features relaxed, his whole body relaxed; he gave a shiver and sat down, as though all his temper and rage were subsiding like a sudden storm that had arisen for no reason at all. And he asked, slowly:

"She ... has refused him?"

"Yes. Of course, Bertha had nothing against it. But Marianne, when I spoke to her, declined at once. I did not insist. Poor Vreeswijck!"

"Yes, poor fellow!" he said, mechanically.

"I wanted to tell you, because ..."

"Because what?"

"Because Vreeswijck is a friend and I thought it better that you should know. I meant to tell you this morning, before I started. But you went out...."

He looked at her again, with a keen glance, wondering if she was sincere or if there was anything behind her words; wondering what she thought, knew or guessed about him and Marianne; what she would really have liked; if it was a disappointment to her that Marianne had declined so promptly: so promptly that Constance had not insisted for a moment. But she was so calm and gentle, as she stood leaning against his table, that he found her incomprehensible and was only

conscious of breathing again after that first moment when it had seemed to him that his throat, lungs, chest and heart were all gripped in one hideous constriction.

They were silent, she standing there and he looking at her, with his keen glance. A heat haze hung over the garden; the heavy summer scent floated up to them; from the kitchen came the monotonous voice of the housemaid droning out her love-song. And suddenly a sort of remorse loomed as a spectre before Constance, because she had fettered him to her life, for all his life, years ago; because she had fettered him to her then by accepting his sacrifice and that of his parents in her despair and helplessness, reviled outcast as she then was. It flashed before her: the recollection of that day when he came to her in Florence, when he made his gift of himself to her, made it despairingly, feeling even then perhaps, despite the forced love-illusion of passion, the life-long mistake which they were mutually making. She had accepted his gift, taken his youth; she had rendered him aimless, him and his life, his career and his happiness: all that he might perhaps yet have found. It flashed before her again: the recollection of that good-looking boy, the way he had come to her in Florence and the way she had taken everything, without having anything to give him in exchange. Oh, how the past oppressed her now, how it hung round her shoulders, crushing her like a nightmare that was not to be shaken off, like the embrace of some leering monster! Oh, the remorse, the remorse that was beginning to torture her!

She stared before her as she stood leaning against the table; and beads of perspiration began to come out on her forehead in the small, warm room, full of summer haze. He continued to look at her, penetratingly. And suddenly he heard her voice speak his name:

"Henri...."

He did not answer, thought her strange, did not recognize her; and again he wondered what she thought, guessed or knew ... and what else she wanted to say. But she, while a sweat of fear broke from her, made a great inward effort to release herself from the oppression of her past and her remorse, to be once more the woman that she had become: the woman young again; the woman whose life was beginning for the first time; the woman who thought, dreamed and loved; the woman in whom nowadays the thoughts and dreams sometimes darted and darted like multitudes of laughing butterfly fancies, swiftly, swiftly in front of them; the woman who loved so deeply that she floated in ecstasy as in the mystic sun of herself. Did she not now see farther than the usual little circle which had bounded her vision for years: the little circle of the little prejudices, the little moralities, the little follies; the little circle in which all the others—her own people, people like herself, the small people—felt happy and comfortable with their little philosophies, their little religions, their little dogmas? Had she not, for weeks and months past, been contemplating more distant

prospects, all the distant cities of light on the horizons above which sailed the spacious cloud-worlds and across which shot the revealing lightning-flashes? In the love which she had already confessed to herself so honestly that it etherealized into sheer ecstasy, had she not risen above all that was still left in her and about her of prejudice and insincerity, that sneering at herself and others, with all the rest of that feeble cynicism? If she wanted to live, must she not be honest, honest in all things? Oh, she felt—in these thoughts which rushed through her mind in those few seconds while she leant against the table, her forehead bedewed with heat and excitement—that she was shaking off the nightmare of the past and that, if she felt remorse, she must also try to give back what she had taken ... and what had never belonged to her, because it had never been her right, because it had never been her happiness, any more than his, nor her life, any more than his life! No, she had grown out of that prejudice, the horror of making herself ridiculous; and what she had stolen she would like to give back now ... in so far as was possible to her!

“Henri,” she repeated, for her whole thought had rushed through her in those two or three seconds, “there is something more I want to say to you. I should like to talk frankly to you. Promise me to keep calm; and do not let us lose our tempers. It is not necessary to lose our tempers, Henri, in order to understand each other at last....”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I have been thinking a great deal lately,” she continued, turning her steady eyes towards him. “I have been thinking a very great deal, about our life, about both our lives ... and about the mistake we made....”

He became impatient:

“What on earth are you driving at and what is it all about?” he asked, with an irritable shake of his shoulders.

“Come, Henri,” she said, gently, “let us talk for once, for once in our lives, and be quite frank and serious. Our life has been a mistake. And the fault....”

“Is mine, I suppose?” he broke in, angrily, aggressively, working himself up for the scene which he foresaw.

She looked at him long and deeply and then said, firmly:

“The fault is mine.”

He remained silent, again shook his shoulders, restlessly, not understanding her, not recognizing her at all. This woman was now a stranger to him; and, above all, her calm seriousness confused him: he would almost have preferred that she should fly out at him and have done with it and tell him that he had no business to go bicycling alone with Marianne.

But she did not do this, she merely repeated, calmly:

"The fault is mine. The fault, the blame is mine alone, Henri. I ought not, in Florence, to have accepted the sacrifice which you made for me, which your father and mother made for me. It was my fault that your life did not become ... what it might have been."

Yes, she was frank and calm: he had to admit that; and it was not a crafty prelude leading up to one of her angry scenes. She was speaking so quietly and gently; her voice had a note of sorrowful humility that almost touched him.

"But what are you driving at?" he said, nevertheless, in a voice that was still nervous and jerky. "You are very frank and honest in looking at things like that; but what is the use of it all now? It is so long ago. It is the past. And it was my duty then to make up for the wrong which I had done you."

"I had done you quite as great a wrong, Henri. I should not have accepted your sacrifice. I ought not to have become your wife."

"But what would you have done then?"

"I should have gone away, somewhere or other. If I had been then the woman that I am now, I should have gone away, somewhere or other. And I should have left you to your life ... and to the happiness that was perhaps awaiting you elsewhere...."

"I should have had to give up the service just the same...."

"But you would have been freer without me. You were still so young; you had your whole life before you; and you would perhaps have found your happiness. As it is, you have never found it ... or ... perhaps too late."

He stood up, very restless and nervous, and his boyish eyes pleaded anxiously:

"Constance, I can't talk in this way. I'm not used to it...."

"Can't you face things seriously for a moment?..."

"No, I can't. It upsets me. I don't know: you mean to be nice, I believe, but please don't let us talk like this. We're not accustomed to it. And I ... I can't do it. You can see for yourself, it upsets me."

"Come," she said, in a motherly tone, "you are not so much upset as all that. You can have a bicycle-ride afterwards and you will feel better. But first let us talk seriously for a moment...."

He sighed, sank into his chair, submitted to her stronger will. If only she had flown out at him, he would have stormed back at her; but she was saying such strange things, the sort of things that people never said, and she was so calm and frank about it, calmer and franker than people ever were.

"You will listen seriously for a moment? Well, what I want to ask you is this: have you never thought that it would be better ... if we just quietly separated, Henri?"

He said nothing, looked at her with his great wondering eyes.

"It is certainly very late," she said, "very late for me to propose it. But it is perhaps not too late.... Let us be honest, Henri: we have never been happy together. You might perhaps still be happy without me, released from me, free...."

He continued to look at her, his eyes still full of amazement; and it seemed as though he was afraid to turn his gaze towards a life of such transcendent peace and quietness and sincerity. It seemed to him that she was urging him to take a road which grew fainter and fainter as it took its mystic, winding way towards clouds ... towards things that did not exist.

"I?... Happy?" he stammered, not knowing what to say.

But a more concrete thought now came into his mind:

"And Addie?" he asked.

"I am not forgetting him," she said, gently. "He is the child of both of us, whom we both love. If we quietly ... quietly separate, if you become happy later, he will be able to understand that his parents, however passionately they both loved him, separated because it was better that they should. He need not suffer through it. He will not suffer through it. At least, I like to think that he will not. If we are only honest, Henri, he cannot suffer through it."

"And you ... what would you do?"

She blushed, but did not lose her composure; he did not see her blush. She had not yet thought of herself for a moment: she was thinking, had been thinking, after that wave of remorse and after holding Marianne that morning in her arms, only of him and Marianne, of their happiness, his and Marianne's, even though she did not mention the girl's name again, once she had told him that Marianne had refused Van Vreeswijck. She was thinking only of the two of them.... What would she do? She did not know. Her love, it is true, rose radiantly before her: her love, her new life; but she was not thinking of outward change. Life, the real life, was an inward thing; outwardly she was the mother of her son and would remain so....

"I?" she asked. "Nothing. I should simply stay as I am. Addie could be with us in turns."

"It would distress him, Constance...."

"Perhaps, at first.... But he would soon understand."

"Constance, tell me, why are you speaking like this?"

"In what way?"

"What do you really mean, Constance? What do you mean by my happiness?"

"Only what I say, Henri: that you may still be able to find your happiness."

"You are frank," he said, forcing himself to adopt her tone, though it was difficult for him to speak like that. "You are frank. I will also try to be frank. My happiness? You speak of my happiness?... I am too old to find that now."

"No, you are not old. You are young."

"And you?"

"I ... am old. But there is no question about me. I am thinking ... of you."

She looked at him and he suddenly understood her. He understood her, but he writhed under so much frankness and at seeing life so honestly:

"No, no, Constance," he mumbled.

"Think it over," she said, gently. "If you like ... I will agree. Only ... let us do it quietly, Henri, ... let us do it, if possible, with something of affection for each other."

Her eyes filled with tears. He was very much moved:

"No, Constance, no," he mumbled.

"Henri, have the courage to be honest. Have the courage and do not be weak. Be a man. I am only a woman and I have the courage."

"Constance, people ..."

"No, Henri, you must not hesitate because of people. If we cannot do it, it would be because of Addie. But I like to think that, if he understands, he will not suffer through it. He must not suffer through it: that would be selfish of him; and he is not selfish."

"No, Constance, no!" he protested again.

"Think it over, Henri," she repeated. "Think it all out. I shall think of Addie also. You know how passionately devoted I am to him. But ..."

"Constance, it is all too late."

"But think it over, Henri."

"Yes, yes, Constance, I shall ... I shall think it over."

"And, if we decide upon it ... let us do it ... let us decide to do it with something of affection for each other ..."

"Yes, Constance ... yes, with affection ... You are nice ... you are kind ..."

He looked at her, his chest heaving with emotion; a haze dimmed the boyish glance of his eyes. She had meant to go, quietly, to leave him alone. She went to the door, without another word, another look, wishing to leave him alone with his thoughts.

“Constance!” he cried, hoarsely.

She looked round. He was standing before her; and she saw him quivering, trembling with the emotion, the shock which the reality of life had sent shuddering through him. For a moment they stood in front of each other; and, because they saw into each other’s eyes, they told each other once more – silently, without words – that they understood each other! A great gratitude, an emotion that to him was almost superhuman shot through his small soul and flowed over her. And, impotently, he cried once more, like a man in a fever:

“Constance!”

He flung himself, distractedly, desperately, with a wild impulse, into her arms; bursting into sobs, he buried his head in her breast. She started violently; she felt his convulsive tremors against her heart. Then she threw her arm around him, stroked his hair. It was as though she were comforting her son.

“I am mad, I am mad!” he muttered.

He released himself, hurriedly pressed a quivering kiss on her forehead and tore down the stairs. And, when she went down to her drawing-room, she suddenly heard the front-door slam and saw him bicycling away like a madman, his back arched like a professional’s. He pedalled, pedalled furiously: she watched him lose himself ... in movement, speed and space ...

“Poor boy!” she thought.

Then she sank into a chair, while the room swam round her. She closed her eyes and her hands fell limply at her side. So she sat for half an hour, unconscious, alone ... as if the new life had been too keen, too intense, with its pure air, its honesty ... too rare and keen in its cold-blue ether ... and as if she were swooning away in it....

Chapter XXVII

She came to herself with a start and did not know whether she had been unconscious or asleep. At the same moment, she heard the bell and through the curtain she saw Brauws, standing outside the door.

"It is he, it is he!" an exultant voice cried inside her.

But at the same time she felt too nervous and overwrought to receive him, just ordinarily and naturally. She stopped Truitje in the hall, said that she had a headache and the girl must say not at home; and she fled to her bedroom and locked herself in.

"It was he, it was he!" the voice still sang, almost sorrowfully.

But she could not have talked ordinarily and naturally.... Suddenly she did what she had not yet done that day: she thought of herself. If they were to separate, Henri and she, then she herself would be free!... Free! A violent longing surged up in her to see Brauws, to speak to him, to say just one word to him, to ask his advice, to abandon herself, as it were, to that advice!... At this moment, for the first time, the thought occurred to her that he must love her too. Would he come so often, if not? Would he speak as he did, reveal himself so completely, otherwise? Would he otherwise ... she did not know what; but, as she recalled him since he returned from Switzerland, she felt, indeed she was certain that his whole being was permeated with love for her ... a love that was strangely akin to regret, but still love ... Was her love regret? No.... Was her love hope? No, not hope either.... Her love, hers, was only life, had hitherto been only life: the lives which another woman lives from her eighteenth year onwards she had as it were hastened to live now, late as it was. Oh, to live right on from those first young girlish dreams which had danced along radiant paths towards the high clouds above her ... while all the time her incredulous little laugh had tempered their eager joy!... But now, since she had spoken to Van der Welcke, now, suddenly, since she had awakened from her sleep or her swoon after that breath of pure ether, that perfect sincerity, now she felt that her love was not only just existence, just life—the real existence, the real life—but that the most human emotions were suddenly passing through her soul; that she herself regretted what might have been; that she herself hoped—O Heaven!—for what might yet be. It was suddenly as though all her past had fallen from her and as though she saw a number of new paths winding towards new years, towards the wide fields of the future, nothing but the future. It was as though this new inner life of thinking and feeling, this new life of her soul, were also about to begin a new actual life, a life of fresh seasons, which lay spread before her broad and generous as summer and towards which she would fly in joyous haste, because it was already so late ... but not yet too late, not yet too late....

She thought of herself, for the first time that day; and a violent emotion throbbed within her, almost taking away her breath. Henri would be back presently: would he tell her that that was best, that they would separate, with still something of affection and gratitude for each other, heedless of people and of everything that made up their world, because they were at last entitled to their own happiness, to the happiness of their own souls and to the happiness of those who loved them really? They would shake from them all that had been falsehood during all those long, long years; and they would now be true, honest with themselves and with every one; and they would be happy.... It was as if these dreams were already lifting her up out of the ring of falsehood, the ring of small people, small souls. Sitting there in her chair, she hid her face in her hands, compressed her closed eyes until, in their blindness, they saw all the colours of the rainbow flashing before them ... so as not to see her room, so as to see nothing but her dreams....

“Mamma!...”

She started: it was Addie come home. And the start which she gave was a violent one, for she had forgotten him; and a quick compunction shot through those last flashes. She had forgotten him; and yet time after time she had said to herself that she must speak to him as if he were a man.

She now called to him to come in, for he always looked in on her when he returned from school in the afternoon. And, when she saw him, she felt as if she were waking from a dream. Still the violent emotion continued to throb in her; and she felt that she could not be silent. She began, at once:

“Addie, I have been talking to Papa.”

It was impossible for her to go on. Not until he sat down beside her, took her hand in his, did she continue, with difficulty:

“Addie, would it make you very unhappy ... if ...”

“If what, Mamma?”

“If we, Papa and I ... quite quietly, Addie ... without any bitterness ... were to separate?”

He started inwardly, but remained outwardly calm. He knew the struggle that was going on in both of them. Had he not constantly heard his father’s name mixed up with Marianne’s? Did he not know and had not he—he alone, within himself, without even letting his mother notice it—had he not guessed the real reason why Mamma had had a different expression, a different voice, a different step during the last few months? Did he not feel what prompted her to go for long, long walks—sometimes with him, sometimes alone—over the dunes, towards the sea?... Though he did not know her new life, he had guessed her love....

There was a buzzing in his ears as she talked, as she explained to him how it would be better like that, for Papa, and how they both loved him, their child. She mentioned no names, neither Marianne's nor Brauws'. He remained quiet; and she did not see what was passing within him, not even when he said:

"If you think ... if Papa is of opinion ... that it will be better so, Mamma...."

She went on speaking, while her heart throbbed violently with the force of her emotion. She spoke of honesty and sincerity ... of happiness for Papa ... perhaps. A curious shyness made her shrink from speaking of herself. He hardly heard her words. But he understood her: he understood what she actually wanted, the future which she wished to bring about and compel. But a passion of melancholy overwhelmed him and his heart was weighed down with grief. He heard her speak of her life—his father's and hers—as a chain, a yoke, a lie. He felt dimly that she perhaps was right; and the light of those glowing dreams of hers made something shine vaguely before his childish eyes. But he found in it only sadness; and his heart was still heavy with grief. He was their child; and it seemed as though something in his soul would be rent asunder if they separated, even though their life together was a lie, a chain, a yoke. He tried to weigh those words, to sound their depths, to feel them. But it was only his sadness that he measured, only the depth of his own sorrow. If they were to separate, his parents whom he loved so well, both of them, each of them, whom he had learnt to love so well just perhaps because they did not love each other, then his love, so it suddenly appeared to him, was something which they could both do without, something of no value, to either of them. That was how he felt it, though he could not have put it into words; and he felt it even more profoundly than any words could have expressed.... But she noticed nothing in him. It was not the first time that he had felt the cruelty of life, even towards a child, a boy; and it was not his nature to show weakness. That other time, after his childish soul had suffered so grievously, when he had doubted whether he was his father's son, he had resolved to triumph over life's cruelties and not to show anything and to be strong. Now the moment seemed to have come. He remembered his first great trouble, he remembered his resolve: the resolve to be always strong after that first childish weakness; and he was able to repeat, calmly:

"If you think ... that it will be better for both of you, Mamma ... then it is not for me to object...."

She thought him almost cold; but he kissed her, said that he, whatever happened, would remain the child and the son of both of them, that he would love them both, equally....

But, because of that coldness, the shadow of a doubt suddenly crossed her mind; and it seemed as though her dreams grew dark and cloudy....

"Addie," she asked again, "tell me frankly, tell me honestly that I am right, that it will be a good thing ... for Papa...."

"And for you?..."

"And for me," she echoed; and he saw her blush. "Or ... or, Addie, my boy, my darling, is ... is it all too late? Is it too late ... for Papa's happiness?"

"And for yours too, you mean.... Too late? Why should it be too late?"

She looked at him, thought him hard, but guessed that he was suffering more than he was willing to admit....

"I thought first ... of Papa's happiness, Addie," she said, softly. "Because Papa has never been happy with me ... with me who took everything from him and gave him nothing in return, I thought first of all ... of Papa's happiness and afterwards ... afterwards...."

"Afterwards...?"

"Yes, Addie, then I thought ... of my own! But perhaps it is not all as I picture it, Addie ... and perhaps it is all too late...."

Then he took her in his arms; and she felt his young, sturdy, boyish body against hers, felt it all at once, as a pillar of strength.

"Too late? Why should it be, Mamma? Let us first hear what Papa thinks. Too late? No, Mamma. If you see it in this light for the first time now, why ... why should it be too late?"

She threw her arms round his neck and laid her head on his shoulder:

"I don't know, dear. I thought ... I thought that it would be a good thing ... for everybody ... for all of us ... Perhaps I am wrong. I can't tell.... I am tired, dear. Leave me here by myself. Have your dinner with Papa: I don't want any dinner, I am tired, I sha'n't come down.... Hark, there's Papa coming in. Go and tell him that I am tired. Go now, go at once.... I can't say: perhaps it is not as I thought, Addie, and perhaps ... perhaps it is all ... too late!"

She saw his eyes grow softer, full of pity; he pressed her to him.

"Addie!" she suddenly implored. "Whatever I may lose, never, never let me lose you! For all the rest is perhaps illusion ... and all too late, too late.... But you ... you are real, you exist!"

She held him, clung to his strong shoulders; and he saw her very pale, anxious-eyed:

"Mamma...."

"No, leave me now, my boy ... leave me alone ... and go to Papa...."

He kissed her once more and went away.

She stayed behind, looked at herself in the glass. She saw herself, after all this emotion, saw her pale face, her grey hair:

"I don't know," she murmured. "Oh, to live really, I must not ... I must not think of myself!... For me ... it is all too late! If it has to be so, if we separate, it must be only ... only for him, for Henri ... and for ... and for Marianne!"

She sank into her chair, covered her face, kept her eyes tightly closed; but their blindness no longer saw the rainbow-colours flashing before them....

Chapter XXVIII

Addie, downstairs, helped his father with the bicycle, took it for him to the little room by the kitchen, promised Papa to see to it for him in the morning.

"Am I late for dinner?" asked Van der Welcke.

He was tired and hot; his clothes were sticking to him.

"Mamma has a head-ache," said Addie. "Go and change your things first: dinner can wait."

Van der Welcke dragged himself upstairs. He had bicycled so hard that day – both morning and afternoon – with his eyes fixed in front of him, his thoughts fixed in front of him, that his body was tingling with weariness, his eyes blind with that fixed staring, as if they had been full of dust and sand.

"Come and help me," he said to Addie.

And, going to the bathroom, he flung off all his clothes and took a shower-bath, while Addie brought him fresh things.

He was ready in ten minutes, doing everything in a feverish, tired hurry:

"Now we can have dinner. Isn't Mamma coming down?"

"No."

They sat down opposite each other, but Van der Welcke was not hungry, did not eat. The servant took something up to Constance. Dinner was over in a quarter of an hour.

"I am tired!" Van der Welcke confessed.

The maid had soon cleared the table. And they remained in the dining-room, which was now growing dark.

The French windows were open and the sultry evening filled the room. Van der Welcke, who had thrown himself into a chair, got up restlessly, strode into the garden, came back again. When he saw Addie sitting quietly on the sofa, he flung himself beside him, laid his head on the boy's knees. Then, with a deep sigh, he fell asleep, almost immediately.

Addie sat without moving, let his father sleep there, with his head on his son's knees.

From another villa, a stream of yellow light flowed across the garden and cast dim shadows in the dark dining-room. And in the kitchen the maid went on drearily humming the same tune as in the afternoon, as though she were humming unconsciously.

The boy sat still, with set lips, looking down at his father, whose chest rose and fell peacefully, with the deep breathing which Addie felt against his hand....

That afternoon, those two, his father and mother, had spoken to each other, for the first time, seriously, in truth and sincerity, as his mother had told him. And now the thought was whirling in both their minds that, after years and years of wretchedness and disunion, they were going to separate after all! For Papa's happiness, Mamma had said; and Addie believed that that was how she meant it.

Apart from this, there had been no names mentioned; but Addie knew that both Mamma and Papa, that afternoon, had thought—as he was thinking now—had thought, behind their spoken words, of Marianne. And now jealousy—that heritage from both his parents—sprang up in the boy's breast, jealousy no longer vague and formless. He felt it with a keener pang because Papa, at this moment, cared more for Marianne than for him. He felt too, for the first time, that, though he did not mean to, he loved his father better than his mother: his father who was like a child, who was himself a boy, a brother, a friend to him, something more than a father almost. In their brotherly comradeship, they had seemed gradually to lose sight of the difference in age, of filial respect; and in Addie's love for his father there was an element—not yet fully developed, but slowly gathering strength—of protection almost, a feeling that he was perhaps not yet the stronger, but that he would become so when he was a little older. It was a strange feeling, but it had always come natural to him, that way of looking upon his father as a younger brother to be loved and protected.

It was perhaps all for nothing, useless, he thought, and worthless. It was Marianne that Papa cared for now. And he remembered how he had sometimes thought that Papa was so young that one could imagine him with a very young wife, a young girl like Addie's cousins, a girl like ... Marianne.

So it was to happen ... Papa and Mamma ... would separate ... and....

He felt the sadness of it all ... and his heart was very heavy ... and his lips became still more compressed because he did not want to cry. He wanted to stand firm against the cruelties of life; and, if Papa could do without him, if Mamma also thought it better so, if perhaps it was also better for Mamma and would make her happier, why, then it was all right and he could bear it with strength and fortitude. He was a child, a boy; but he felt vaguely that soon the world would open before him. He must forget everything therefore: everything about his parents, their ill-assorted lives, in which he had been the only comfort and consolation. No, it would all be different in future; and, if nothing else could be done, well then, it must be like that. When Papa, later on, was tired or in the blues or anything, he would not lay his head on Addie's knees, just like a little brother, and go to sleep: Marianne would comfort him instead.

Addie tried to suppress that feeling of jealousy, but it kept on shooting through him, like a painful, smarting sting.... But suddenly, in the dark room, in the silent house – the servant was no longer singing – Van der Welcke woke, drew himself up, rubbed his neck, which was stiff with lying down.

“Well, you’ve had a good long nap!” said Addie, making his voice sound rough.

There was nothing in that voice and in the boyish phrase to suggest the jealousy, the melancholy and the great sorrow that was weighing down his childish soul.

Van der Welcke seemed to be waking up to life and reality after his vain attempt to lose himself in that mad devouring of distance. He remembered his conversation with his wife, in which she had been so unusually gentle, so indulgent, showing such self-effacement and self-sacrifice ... so much indeed that he had had to kiss her in spite of himself.

“I have been speaking to Mamma,” said he.

But he was silent again, could get no further.

“So have I,” said Addie, to make it easier for him.

But he also did not know what to say; and they remained sitting side by side in the dark dining-room, both staring at the shaft of yellow light that streamed across the garden from the villa at the back. Each now knew, however, that the other knew; and Addie threw his arm over his father’s shoulder, almost protectingly.

“It is an idea of Mamma’s, Addie ... that it would be better....”

“For both of you.”

“For me, Mamma thought.”

“And for her too.”

“And you, my boy, what would you think ... if it did come to that ... at last?...”

“If you both consider ... calmly and dispassionately ... that it would be a good thing....”

“And you, you would spend a part of the year with Mamma and a part with me....”

“Yes, of course.”

“You’re taking it very coolly, Addie.”

“Dad, what else is there to do? If it’s better like that ... for the two of you ... I’m bound to think it all right.”

“If you can talk like that, it’s because you’re not so fond of us....”

“No, I’m just as fond of you: of Mamma, Dad, and of you. But, if it’s got to be, it’s got to be....”

"It's strange, Addie, how everything suddenly, one fine day, seems likely to become different...."

"Mamma saw it like that...."

"Yes. Mamma has changed lately, don't you think?"

"Mamma has become rather gentler, not so quick-tempered."

"Yes, not so quick-tempered."

"That's all...."

"Yes, that's all. Tell me, Addie, tell me honestly: do people, as far as you know, still ... talk about us ... as much as they did?"

"I don't know, Dad. I don't bother about 'people.' I just go to school, you see. But I think...."

"Do they talk about Mamma?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"I never hear anything."

"About me?"

"Yes."

"They talk about me?"

"Yes, they talk about you, Dad."

"What do they say?"

"They talk of you, Dad, and...."

"Well?"

"Marianne."

"She is going to Baarn ... and then we sha'n't see each other any more. People are always ready to jabber ... because I've gone cycling and motoring ... with Marianne."

It was as though he were confessing and denying in the same breath.

"Addie," he continued, "I cycled a great way to-day."

"Yes, Dad."

"I can always think best when I'm cycling like mad."

"Yes, Dad, I know."

"When I'm scorching along the roads, like a lunatic, I can think. At any other time, I can't."

"Yes."

"And I thought a great deal to-day, Addie. As a rule, I never think about anything. It tired me to-day even more than the cycling itself. I'm tremendously tired."

"Well, Dad, go to bed."

"No, I want to talk to you. I want to sit with you like this. You're my friend, aren't you, your father's friend? Or aren't you that any longer?"

"Of course I am."

"You're so cold, Addie, you don't care a bit."

"Yes, Dad, I do care."

And he pulled Van der Welcke to him and pressed his father's head against his chest:

"Lie like that now and talk away. I do care."

"I thought a great deal, Addie, cycling. This morning, I was angry, furious, desperate. I could have done something violent, broken something, murdered somebody."

"Come, come!..."

"Yes, murdered ... I don't know whom ... I felt, Addie, that I could have become very happy if...."

"Yes, Dad, I know...."

"You know?"

"Yes."

"You understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"When I came home, I was tired and mad with misery. Mamma came upstairs and talked to me. She told me that Van Vreeswijck ... had asked her to go to the Bezuidenhout and speak to Aunt Bertha ... and to Marianne, because Van Vreeswijck ... do you understand?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Mamma went. I was furious when I heard that she had been. But she said that Marianne refused...."

"Marianne refused him?"

"Yes. Then ... then Mamma said ... then she asked ... if it wouldn't be better that we — she and I — do you understand?"

"Yes, Dad."

"She said it in a very nice way. She said it gently, not at all angrily. It was nice of her to think of it, you know, Addie."

"Yes, Dad, she is nice."

"Well, old chap, then ... then I gave her a kiss ... because she was so nice about it and said it so kindly. And then ... then I went cycling again."

"Yes."

"I can think best when I'm cycling. I rode and rode. Meanwhile, I was thinking, would it be a good thing?... My boy, you are more than my son, aren't you: you're my friend?"

"Yes."

"All the time, I was thinking ... of Marianne. I am fond of her, Addie."

"Yes, Father."

"I tried to imagine it ... I know ... that she is fond of me, Addie."

"Yes."

"I tried to picture it ... And then, Addie ... then I thought myself old. Tell me, I am old, don't you think?"

"You are not old, Father."

"No, perhaps not.... Still, Addie, I don't know, I really don't know.... Then, Addie, I thought...."

"Of what, Dad, of whom?"

"I went on riding, like a madman. That's how I think best. Then I thought of ... you."

"Of me?"

"Yes, of you.... Tell me, my boy, if we did that ... if everything was changed ... wouldn't you be unhappy?"

"If it was for the happiness of both of you, no. Then I should not be unhappy."

"Yes, so you say. But you would have to be unhappy ... inside. If you still love us both. I thought it all out till I was dog-tired. For I never think as a rule. Thinking bores me. This time, I had to ... because Mamma had spoken as she did. Yes, you are bound to be unhappy ... if you still care ... for both of us."

"I tell you again, Dad...."

"Yes, I know. But I, Addie, I should be unhappy ... afterwards, when it had once happened ... I should be unhappy ... because of you."

"Because of me?"

"Because of you. You would no longer have a home."

"I should have two homes."

"No, no, you would have none. You would go wandering to and fro between your parents. True, you will soon be a man. You will soon be leaving your parents. But I do feel now that you would have no home and that you would have a father and a mother ... but no parents. Do you follow me? No parents. Even though they quarrel, you have parents now. Perhaps, in a few years, you won't care about them ... and about their home. But just now, Addie, just for the present, you would be losing a great deal.... You see, old chap, your father has thought it all out ... and I frankly confess, it's made me dog-tired. I'm resting now, while I tell it you like this, leaning up against you."

"Yes, Dad."

"My boy, my own boy!.... Well, you see, when your father had got so far ... then he felt...."

"What?"

"That he cared more for you ... than for Marianne, poor darling. Differently, you know, but more. Much more. Poor darling!"

A passion of joy swept through the lad; his chest, on which his father's head lay, heaved. But he felt that it was wicked to have that joy:

"Dad, once more, if it means your happiness...."

"No, old chap ... for there would be something severed in me, something broken: I don't know how to put it. I should miss you all the time that you were not with me. I couldn't do it, Addie. It's an impossibility, Addie.... You know, old chap, I oughtn't to talk like this to a son of fifteen. Fifteen? No, you're only fourteen. Well, you look sixteen. But that's nothing to do with it. I oughtn't to talk like this. I'm a queer father, eh, Addie? I don't give you a proper upbringing: I just let you go your own way. Lord, old chap, I can't do it, I can't give you a proper upbringing! I shouldn't know how. You'll bring yourself up, won't you? You're sure to be good and clever and honourable and all the rest of it. I don't know how, you see: I just let you run wild, like a colt in a meadow. Well, you promise me to turn out all right, don't you? To do nothing mean and so on? You know, if Grandpapa were to hear all this, were to hear me talking like this, he would think it very odd. And it is odd. It's not right. But your father, Addie, is like that: he's hopeless, quite hopeless. So now you know all about

it. I couldn't do it.... Poor Marianne, poor darling! But she's young still; she'll have her happiness one day, a different happiness.... Well, Addie, tell Mamma to-morrow. Tell her I would rather, if Mamma agrees, leave everything as it is, old chap, even though it's not always a paradise, that I'd rather leave everything as it is, old chap, for your sake ... and also for my own: I could never do without you for six months. You may be going away quite soon: Leiden ... and then your service ... but, for the present ... for the present.... Will you tell Mamma to-morrow? Those serious conversations make me feel so tired ... in my head. I would rather cycle for a week on end without stopping than spend one day thinking as I have done to-day.... And now I'm going to bed, old chap, for I'm dead tired...."

He caught his son in his arms, held him closely, kissed him and went away abruptly. The boy remained alone in the dark room. The yellow shaft of light from the other villa died away. The house was quite silent; the servants had gone to bed. And the boy stayed on, knowing all the time that his parents upstairs, in their own rooms, were still separated, in spite of so much that might have united them; he sat there, still and silent, staring out into the hot summer night, through which the trees loomed like ghostly giants, sombre and oppressive....

Yet his soul was flooded with a great joy: his father loved him best!

Chapter XXIX

Constance remained alone the whole evening.

She had opened both her bedroom-windows wide; and she looked out over the road into the sultry night. She had undressed and put on a white wrapper; and she remained sitting, in the dark room, at the open window.

For a moment, she thought that Van der Welcke would come to her, to tell her his decision; but he did not come.... He seemed to be staying with Addie in the dining-room.... Then she heard him go to his own room....

In the silence, in the still, sultry darkness, which seemed to enter the room almost heavily, her restlessness, the doubt which she had felt rising in herself, during those few words with Addie, melted away. Sitting at the open window, she let herself be borne along by the silent, insidious magic of the late summer hour, as though something stronger than herself were overpowering her and compelling her to surrender herself, without further thinking or doubting, to a host of almost disquieting raptures, which came crowding in upon her....

Above the darkling masses of the Woods hung the sullen menace of heavy rain; and, just once or twice, there was a gleam of lightning yonder, in the direction of the sea, which she divined in the distance flashing with sudden illuminations, with noiseless reflections, and then vanishing in the low-hanging clouds of the night.

She lay back in her chair, at first oppressed by her doubt and by the heat, but gradually, gradually—her eyes fixed on the electric gleams far in the distance—all her doubts melted away, the enchantment penetrated yet deeper and the storm-charged sultriness seemed a languorous ecstasy in which her breast heaved gently, her lips opened and her eyes closed, only to open again, wider than before, and stare at the lightning that flashed and vanished, flashed and vanished, with intervals full of mystery....

No, she doubted no longer: all would be well, all would be well.... She could not make a mistake in this new life, this later life, this mature life, which she had lived, so to speak, in a few months, giving herself up entirely to sincerity and honesty and to the crowning love, the only really true and lofty love. Her love, that late love, had been her life, right from those girlish dreams of a few months past down to the moment of inward avowal; and what in another woman would have lasted years, in the slow falling of the days, which, like beads on a long string, fell one by one through the fingers of silent fate, the unrelenting teller of the beads, she had lived in a few months: after her dreaming had come her thinking; after her thinking, her wish to know; after her wish to know, her plunge into books and nature, until dreaming, thinking, knowledge and, above all, love supreme and triumphant had mingled to form a new existence and she had been reborn as it were out of herself.

She had dreamed and thought and questioned it all hastily and feverishly, as though afraid of being late, of feeling her senses numbed, her soul withered by the grey years, before she had lived ... before she had lived. Hastily, but in all sincerity; and her late awakening had been deep and intense, a mystery to herself and an impenetrable secret to all, for no one knew that she dreamed and thought and questioned knowledge and nature; no one knew that nowadays she looked on a tree, a cloud, a book, a picture with different eyes than in the past, when she had neither eyes nor understanding for tree or cloud, for book or picture, nor found beauty in any; no one saw that something cosmic and eternal flashed before her in that one swift glance of tardy recognition and knowledge; no one knew that she, the aristocrat, felt that keen pity for her day and generation, had learnt to feel it from him, through him. All of it, all of it, all her later life: no one knew it save herself alone.... And gradually, too, in those intimate conversations, they had come to know something of each other, had learnt—guessing first and then knowing—that they had found each other, late in life—she him, he her—as though at last, at last, after that vague instinctive seeking and trying to find each other in their childhood days, Heaven had been merciful! How vague it had been, that shadowy intuition, hardly to be uttered and vanishing as soon as uttered: on his side, that distant veil of mist, that cloud, on the horizon of the moors; on hers, that perpetual longing to go farther, to flit from boulder to boulder down the hurrying stream, as it rushed past under the dense canopy of those tropical trees: a pair of children knowing nothing of each other and all unconscious until years later that they were both seeking ... both seeking! Oh, that strange dream-quest, that nameless desire, which, when one breathed it, vanished, was no longer a quest! At a touch, it became intangible; as soon as one grasped it, it slipped away, became something different, something different.... But, unbreathed, untouched, ungrasped, just dreamed and dimly felt in those far-off childhood days, it was that: the mystic, wonderful reality, which was the only reality.... To both of them, in those days, it had been too gossamer-frail, too intangible and too incomprehensible to last beyond their childhood, that seed of reality working in the womb of time: vanity and frivolity had claimed her for their own, study and reflection had claimed him; and each had wandered farther and farther from that half-divined other, no longer even seeking the other....

The years had heaped themselves up between them, between her at the Hague, in Rome, in Brussels, and him in America, when she was an elegant young society-woman, he the workmen's friend and brother, their comrade who yearned to know and understand them. While she had danced and flirted in the ball-rooms of Rome, he had laboured in the docks, gone down the black shafts of the coal-mines. And all this which had really happened seemed unreal to her, a dream, a remote nightmare, by the side of that childish romance, those fairy visions of yesterday! And yet it had all happened, it had all happened. They had never been allowed to meet each other,

not even when they had been brought near each other – on the Riviera, in Brussels – as by an unconscious power! They had not been allowed to meet until now, late, very late, too late.... Oh, is it ever given too late, that blessed boon, to live at last, to find at last?

And they had both made mistakes. She had made her mistakes: her brief passion for Henri, the sudden kindling of the senses of a frivolous, bored and idle woman; then the marriage: mistake upon mistake, nothing but waste, waste, waste of her precious life. And he had made mistakes too: he had dreamed of being the brother of those men, a fellow-worker and comrade, and he had not become their brother. Oh, if they had once been allowed to know and find each other, in the years when they were both young, what a harmony their life together might have been: no jarring note in themselves or in each other, but perfect harmony in all things, attuned to the note of their day and generation; he by her side to understand and love her and support her when the sadness of it all oppressed her! Oh, to have lived, when still young, with him, in his heart, in his arms; and then to have loved, to have understood, to have done, with him and for his sake, all that can still be done for one's day and generation by those who themselves are strong and radiant in love and happiness and harmony!...

And it had not been so; the precious years, far from each other, had been wasted ... by him: he had told her so; by her: oh, her vain, wasted years!...

No, fate had not willed it. And yet, now that at last, at last, the honest, simple, true life had kindled into flame, now that, after first thinking of others – of Henri, of Marianne – she had also thought of herself, also thought of him, could not an outward physical life also be kindled after that inward, spiritual life, far from everything and everybody around them, in another country and another world, a life in which she would be beside him, a life of harmony which might be tinged with the melancholy of that late awakening but would still be perfect harmony and perfect happiness?...

She lay back in her chair, her hands hanging limply beside her, as if she lacked the energy now to grasp the tempting illusion, afraid of losing it and afraid of seizing it and then recognizing it as an illusion....

And the sultry air seemed to be pressing upon her softly and languorously until she panted and her lips parted and her eyes closed only to open again, wider than before; and in that atmosphere of ecstasy it appeared to her that the distant lightning-streaks yonder, the noiseless flashes over the wide sea which she divined yonder, yonder, far away, were themselves the swift effulgence of her thoughts and illusions and regrets: a gleam and gone, a gleam and gone. When it gleamed, came the smiling hope that things could become and remain as she thought; when the light faded, came doubt ... yet not so deep but that the night tempted and lured her:

"Hope again ... think once more ... dream again.... It may be ... it is not impossible.... It is reality, pure, simple reality; it will mean the happiness of those two poor children, Henri and Marianne; it will be the happiness of you two, him and you, the woman whose life blossomed late.... It is possible: hope it again, think, dream it again; for what is impossibility, when truth once stands revealed, however late? See, the truth stands revealed; the lightning flashes; sometimes the whole sky is illumined at once; the low clouds drift along; behind them ... behind them lies the infinity of eternity, of everything that may happen!"

The room was quite dark; she herself alone remained a white blur in the window-frame; and the night, the air, the lights were there outside, wide and eternal. And, in the sweet languor of the late summer hour, of the sultry night, of her uncontrollable illusion and hopes, she felt as though she were uplifted by a flood of radiant ecstasy, by a winged joy that carried her with it towards the sea yonder, towards the bright rifts of the lightning-flashes, towards the distance of futurity, eternity and everything that might happen.... And she let herself be borne along; and in that moment a certainty came over her, penetrated deep down in her, like a divinely-implanted conviction, that it would be as she had dreamed and hoped and wished, that so it would happen, at long last, because life's chiefest grace was at length descending upon her....

Yes, it would happen like that: she knew it, she saw it in the future. She saw herself living by his side, in his heart, in his arms; living for herself and him; living for each other in all things; she saw it shine out radiantly with each lightning-flash in the radiant shining of those future years. She saw them, those children of the past, with the dew upon them, smiling to each other as though they who, as boy and girl, had unconsciously sought each other had grown into a young man and a maiden who had found each other ... after the mystery of the cloud-veil and of the distant river under the spreading leaves; and they now went on together: their paths ran up towards the glittering cities of the future, which reared their crystal domes under the revealing skies, while from out their riot of towers sunbeams flashed and struck a thousand colours from the crystal domes....

A wind rose, as though waking in the very bed of the slumbering night, and leapt to the sky. A cool breath drifted straight out of the sultry, louring clouds; a few drops pattered upon the leaves. And the wind carried the storm farther, carried the revelation with it; the lightning flashed twice, thrice more ... vanished ... paled away.... Not until it had travelled far, very far, would the wind let loose the clouds, would the night-rain fall ... so Constance thought, vaguely....

And she sighed deeply, as though waking out of her languor of ecstasy, now that the night, after that rising wind, was no longer so sultry and oppressive. She stood up,

wearily, closed the window, saw a morning pallor already dawning through the trees....

And she lay down and fell asleep: yes, that was what would happen, it would be like that; she felt certain of it: that future would come; the paths ran to the crystal-domed city; she was going to it with him ... with him!...

Yes, it would come, it would come, to-morrow, yes, to-morrow....

And, while that hope still continued to transfigure her face, pale on the pillow in the dawning day, her eyes, blind from long gazing at the light, closed heavily; and she fell asleep, convinced ... convinced....

Chapter XXX

Conviction had conquered doubt and reigned triumphant. When Constance awoke early that morning, she was full of proud, calm confidence, as though she knew the future positively. She hesitated to go to her husband in his room; and he seemed to avoid her too, for as early as seven o'clock she saw him, from her window, riding off on his bicycle. Since their conversation, she had not seen him, did not know what he thought; and it struck her that he was not dashing away, as he had done so often lately, like a madman, but that he pedalled along quietly, with a certain melancholy resignation in his face, which she just saw flickering past under his bicycling-cap.

She listened to hear if Addie was awake, but he seemed to be still asleep; also it was holiday-time. And she began to think of Van Vreeswijck and made up her mind to write to him, just a line, to ask him to come, a single line which however would at once allow him to read, between the letters, that Marianne could not love him.... And, while thinking, with a tender pity for him amid her own calm certainty, she bit her pen, looked out of the window....

The August morning was already sunny at that hour: there was a blue sky with white, fleecy clouds, which passed like flocks of snowy sheep through a blue meadow; the wind urged the sheep before it, like an impetuous drover. And, while she searched for those difficult words, her mind recalled the night before and the lightning yonder, above the sea, which she divined in the distance.... It was strange, but now, in that morning light, with that placid sky at which she gazed, thinking of Van Vreeswijck and how to tell him in a single, merciful word—with that summer blue full of fleecy white, at which she was gazing so fixedly after the ecstasy and winged bliss that had uplifted her the night before—it was as if her calm, proud confidence in her knowledge of the future was wavering.... She did not know why, for after all she thought that Henri would consent to their divorcing....

They would be divorced....

And Marianne would....

Suddenly, she began to write. She wrote more than she intended to write: she now wrote the truth straight away, in an impulse of honesty, and at the end of her letter she asked Van Vreeswijck to call on her that evening.

She had just finished, when Addie came in. He kissed her and waited until she had signed her letter.

"Why aren't you bicycling with Papa?" she asked.

He said that his father had asked him to speak to her....

And now, sitting beside her, with her hand in his, he told her, without once mentioning Marianne's name, what Papa had said. His calm, almost cold, business-

like words sobered her completely, while she continued pensively to look at the sky, which seemed now to be wearing a blue smile of ignorance and indifference.... Suddenly it seemed to her as if she had been dreaming.... Not that her thoughts took any definite form, for first the ideal vision whose realization had seemed so certain, then the morning doubts and now the disenchantment of the sober facts had all followed too swiftly upon one another; and she could not take it all in; she did not know what she thought. It only seemed to her as if she had been dreaming.

Automatically, she said:

"Perhaps it is better so."

She had not expected it!

She had never thought that Henri's answer would be the one which she now heard from the mouth of their son!

Did one ever know another person, though one lived with that person for years? Did she know her son, did she know herself?

But the boy held her hand affectionately.

And he read the stupefaction in her eyes:

"Tell me, honestly, Mamma. Are you disappointed?"

She was silent, gazed at the placid sky.

"Would you rather have started a fresh life ... away from Papa?"

She bowed her head, let it rest upon his shoulder:

"Addie," she said.

She made an attempt to pick her words, but her honesty was once more too strong for her:

"Yes," she said, simply.

"Then you would rather have had it so ... for your own sake?"

"I would rather have had it so, yes."

They were silent.

"I had even pictured it ... like that," she said, presently.

"Shall I speak to Papa again then, Mamma? If I tell him that you had already been thinking of it...."

"You believe...?"

"He will agree."

"Do you think so?"

"If it means the "happiness of both of you...."

"Tell me what Papa said."

"I can't remember exactly.... Only Papa thought ... that not to see me for six months at a time would be more than he could bear."

"Is that all that Papa said?"

"Yes."

But he gave just a smile of melancholy resignation; and his look told that that was not all. She understood. She understood that they had spoken of Marianne.

"So Papa...." she repeated.

"Would rather stay with us, Mamma."

"With us," she repeated. "We three together?"

"Yes."

"It means going on living ... a lie," she said, in a blank voice.

"Then I will speak to Papa again."

"No, Addie."

"Why not?..."

"No, don't do that. Don't ask Papa ... to think it over again. It is perhaps too late, after all; and besides ... Papa is right. About you."

"About me?"

"He could not go six months without you. And I...."

"And you, Mamma...."

"I couldn't either."

"Yes, you could."

"No, I couldn't either."

She suddenly passed her hands along his face, along his shoulders, his knees, as though she wished to feel him, to feel the reality ... the reality of her life. He ... he was the real thing, the truth; but all the rest between her husband and her was falsehood, remained falsehood ... because of people. Could they not even for Addie's sake purge that falsehood into truth? No, no, not even for him. Would falsehood then always cleave to them?...

"We are too small," she thought and murmured her thought aloud.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing.... Very well, Addie.... Tell Papa that it shall be as he says, that I am quite content ... that I could not do without you either ... for six months!"

She looked at him, looked into his serious blue eyes, as though she had forgotten him and were now remembering him for the first time. Six months ... six months without him! The new life, the new paths, the new cities, on those far-off, new horizons ... and six months ... six months without Addie!...

Had she then been dreaming? Had she just been dazzled by that glittering vision? Was it just intoxication, ecstasy? Was it just glamour and enchantment?...

He left her. She dressed and went downstairs.

She felt as if she were back from a long journey and seeing her house again after an absence of months. Her movements were almost like those of a sleep-walker; the house seemed something remote and impersonal, though she had always loved it, looked after it, made it her beautiful home by a thousand intimate touches. She now went through the house mechanically performing her usual little housewifely duties, still half dreaming, in a condition of semi-consciousness. It was as if her thoughts were standing still, as if she no longer knew, nor for that matter thought, remembering only the night before, that lonely evening of inward conviction.... The morning had dawned, placid, with its cloudless sky; Addie had come: she now knew what Henri thought. It surprised her just a little that Henri thought like that ... and then she realized that, after all, he did not love Marianne very much ... that he must love her less than Addie. Poor Marianne, she thought; and she reflected that women love more absolutely than men.... She spoke to the servant, gave her orders, did all the actual, everyday things, in between her thoughts. And suddenly she looked deep down into herself, once more saw so completely into her own clear depths that she was startled at herself and shuddered. She saw that, if Henri had made the same proposal to her that she had made to him, she would have accepted it in her desire for happiness, for happiness with the man whom she loved and who – she felt it! – loved her. She saw that she would have accepted and that she would not have hesitated because of her son!... Her son! He was certain to be leaving them soon in any case ... to seek his own life!... Her son! To provide him for a few years more with the paternal house, that wretched fabric of lies, which he, the boy, alone kept together ... for his sake and for the sake of that joint falsehood, she would have to reject the new life of truth!... It was as if she were standing in a maze; but she was certain that she would not have hesitated in that maze, if the decision had been left to her ... that she would have known how to take the path of simple honesty ... that she would have elected to separate, in spite of Addie ... that she loved her new life – and the stranger – more than her child!

She had learnt to know herself in that new atmosphere of pure truth; and now ... now she saw so far into those translucent depths that she was frightened and

shuddered as in the presence of something monstrous; for it seemed monstrous to her to place anything above her child, above the dear solace of so many years....

Just then Van der Welcke came home; she heard him put away his bicycle, go up the stairs ... and then turn back, as if reflecting that he could no longer avoid his wife. He entered, abruptly. She, trembling, had sat down, because she felt on the verge of falling....

"Has Addie told you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, in a low voice.

"And ... you think it is the best thing?..."

"Yes ... I do...."

"So everything remains...." he said, hesitatingly.

"As it was," she replied, almost inaudibly; and her voice hesitated also.

"He told you ... the reason?" he went on.

"Yes."

"I could not do without him ... all the time that he would be with you, Constance. And you couldn't do without the boy either, could you, while he was with me?"

"No," she said, automatically; and, as her voice failed her, she repeated, more firmly, "No, I should not be able to do without him."

At that moment, she did not know if she was speaking the truth or not. Only she had a vague sensation ... as though that fair, unsullied truth were retreating a little farther from her ... like a glittering cloud....

"Then we might try to be more patient with each other," he said. "But still I should like to tell you, Constance, that I appreciate your thought ... your intention...."

"Yes," she said, vaguely.

"Your thought for me...."

"Yes."

But she now found it impossible to let that retreating truth slip still farther from her; and she said:

"I was thinking of myself also, Henri ... but it was not clear to me what I thought.... I don't quite know.... Henri, it is better like this, for everything to remain ... as it was."

"And we both of us love our boy."

"Yes, both of us...."

He saw her turn very pale as she leant back in her chair, her arms hanging limply beside her. He had a sudden impulse to say something kind, to give her a kiss; but at the same time he was conscious that neither his words nor his caress would reach her. And he thought, what was the good of it? They had no love for each other. They would remain strangers, in spite of all that they had felt for each other during these days: she suggesting for his happiness something dead against convention; he thrilling with genuine gratitude....

"Well, that is settled then," was all that he said in conclusion, quietly; and he went out, gently closing the door behind him.

She did not move, but sat there, gazing dully into space. Yes, she had counted her son a lesser thing than her new life! That was the simple truth, just as much as the new life itself.... And now ... now, as though her mind were wandering, she saw that new life like a crystal city around her, threatening to crack, to rend asunder, to be shattered in one mighty spasm of despair. Her eyes began to burn from staring into those distant, cruel thoughts. In her breast she felt a physical pain. The house, the room stifled her. She felt impelled to fly from that house, from the narrow circles, which whirled giddily around her, to fly from herself. She was so much perplexed in her own being, no longer knowing what was right, what was honest, what true ... that she yearned for space and air. Her breast was wrung with grief and that gasping for breath. Still, she controlled herself, took up a hat, pinned it on and found the strength to say to the servant:

"Truitje, I am going out...."

She was outside now, in the road. She had become afraid of the loneliness of her room and of herself, a loneliness which in other ways had become so dear to her. Now she was seeking something more than spaciousness of air and forest; but the road, in which a few people were walking, made her keep herself under control. She turned down a side-path, went through the Woods. Here again there were people taking their morning stroll.... Suddenly, she gave a violent start: she saw Brauws, sitting on a bench. She felt as if she would faint; and, without knowing what she was doing, she turned round and walked back.... By this time, she had lost all her self-command. He had seen her, however, and his hand had already gone up to his hat. Suddenly, she heard his step behind her; he came up with her:

"Is this how you run away from your friends?" he said, making an attempt to joke, but in obvious astonishment.

She looked at him; and he was struck with her confusion.

"Don't be angry," she said, frankly, "but I was startled at seeing you."

"I was not welcome," he said, roughly. "Forgive me, mevrouw. I ought not to have come after you. But I'm a tactless beggar in these matters. I am not one of your society-men."

"Don't be angry," she repeated, almost entreatingly. "Society indeed! I certainly showed myself no society-woman ... to ... unexpectedly to...."

She did not know what she wanted to say.

"To turn your back on me," he said, completing the sentence.

"To turn my back on you," she repeated.

"Well, now that I have said good-morning...."

He lifted his hat, moved as though to go back.

"Stay!" she entreated. "Walk a little way with me. Now that I happen to have met you...."

"I came back yesterday ... I meant to call on you to-day or to-morrow...."

"Walk with me," she said, almost entreatingly. "I want to speak to you...."

"What about?"

"I suggested to Henri...."

She drew a deep breath; there were people passing. They were near the Ponds. She ceased speaking; and they walked on silently....

"I suggested to Henri," she repeated, at last, "that we should...."

The word died away on her lips, but he understood. They were both silent, both walked on without speaking. He led the way; and it seemed to her that they were making for a goal, she knew not where, which he would know....

At last, she said:

"I wanted ... as you are our friend ... to tell you...."

He was determined to make her say the word:

"You suggested what?"

"That we should be divorced...."

They walked on for some minutes. Suddenly, round about her, she saw the dunes, the distant sea, the sea which she had divined the night before, over which the pale gleams, the lightning-flashes had revealed themselves. Now, the sky overhead was revealed, a vague opal, with white clouds curling like steam....

"I suggested that we should be divorced," she repeated.

He drew a breath, in the salt breath of the sea, even as he had breathed in the Alps, when contemplating those ice-bound horizons. And he remembered ... that vision ... and the yearning ... for the one soul ... the meeting with which would have been a consolation amid the constant disappointment encountered with the many souls, the thousands.... And a swift, keen hope seemed to flash before him ... not only of having found at last ... in silence ... but of venturing to utter it ... once; and so keen, so dazzling was the hope that at first he did not hear her say:

"But Henri ... thinks it is better ... not...."

"What?" he asked, as though deaf, as though blind.

She repeated:

"Henri thinks it is better not.... Because of our boy ... of Addie...."

The keen hope had flashed for only a second, swiftly, with its dizzying rays....

Uttered it would never be.... To have found in silence: alas, that was all illusion ... a dream ... when one is very young....

"He is right," he said, in a low voice.

"Is he right?" she asked, sadly. And, more firmly, she repeated, "Yes, he is right...."

"I should have been sorry ... for Addie's sake," he said.

"Yes," she repeated, as though in a trance. "I should have been sorry for Addie's sake. But I had thought that I should be able to live at last—my God, at last!—in absolute truth and sincerity.... and not in a narrow ring of convention, not in terror of people and what they may think absurd and cannot understand ... and ... and...."

"And...?" he asked.

"And ... in that thought, in that hope ... I had forgotten my boy. And yet he is the reality!"

"And yet he ... is the reality."

"And now I am sacrificing ... the dream ... the illusion ... to him."

"Yes ... the dream ... the illusion," he said, with a smile that was full of pain.

"It hurts me!" she confessed, with a sob. "Yesterday—oh, only yesterday, last night!—I thought that the dream, the illusion ... was truth.... But what for young people can be a dream, an illusion ... which comes true...."

"Is at our age...."

"Absurd?" she asked, still wavering.

"Not absurd perhaps ... but impossible. We go bent under too heavy a burden of the past to permit ourselves youthful dreams and illusions. We no longer have any right ... even to memories...."

"I have some ... from my childhood," she stammered, vaguely.

"There are no memories left for us," he said, gently, with his smile that was full of pain.

"No, there are none left for us," she repeated. And she confessed, "I have dreamed ... and thought ... too late. I ... I have begun to live too late...."

"I," he said, "I thought ... that I had lived; but I have done nothing ... but seek...."

"You never found?"

"Perhaps ... almost. But, when I had found ... I was not allowed to put out my hand...."

"Because ... of the past?" she asked, softly.

"And of the present. Because of what is and has younger, fresher rights than mine ... which are no rights ... but the forbidden illusions of an old man...."

"Not old...."

"Older every day. He alone is in the prime of life ... who has found ... or thinks that he has found...."

"Yes, that is so," she said; and her voice sounded like a wail. "I have begun to live too late. I could have lived ... even now ... perhaps; but it is all too late. I once told you ... that I was abdicating my youth...."

"Once, months ago...."

"Since then, I have thought, dreamt, lived too much ... not to feel young ... for a few moments.... But it was all an illusion ... and it is all too late...."

They looked at each other. He bowed his head, in gentle acquiescence, with his smile that was full of pain:

"Yes, it is so," he said; and it was almost as if he were joking. "Come, let us be strong. I shall go on seeking ... and you...."

"Oh, I have my boy!" she murmured. "He has always comforted me."

They walked back slowly and took leave of each other at the door, a friends' leave-taking.

"Will you come again soon?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "You know, you no sooner see me than I am gone.... I may go to England in the autumn, to lecture on Peace. The world is full of mighty problems; and we ... we are pigmies ... in the tiny worlds of our own selves...."

"Yes ... we are nothing...."

He left her; she was conscious of a sort of farewell in the pressure of his hand. She went in, with her head swimming; and her son was there. And she embraced him, as though asking his forgiveness.

"Addie," she said, softly, "Papa was right, Papa was right.... I believe that I now know for certain, dear, that I know for certain that Papa was right.... Oh, Addie, whatever I may lose ... you will not let me lose you?..."

Chapter XXXI

Had it all been an illusion then? Was it all for nothing?

The days passed slowly, one after the other. She saw Van Vreeswijck and felt for him, their friend, in his silent grief; she bade good-bye to Bertha and her children. She knew that Van der Welcke had seen Marianne once more before her departure; and her heart was full of pity for them both.

Had it all been an illusion then, this world of feeling, this little world of her own self? Oh, he was going to England, to lecture on Peace; for him there were always those mighty problems which consoled him for the smallness of that little world of self! But she, had she lost everything, now that the illusion no longer shone before her, now that the magic cities had fallen to pieces, now that everything had become very dreary in the disenchantment and self-reproach of realizing that she had not loved her son enough, that she had not loved him as well as his father loved him, not as well as she had loved the stranger, the friend who had taught her to live?...

Had she lost everything then? Now, ah now, she was really old, grey-haired; now her eye was no longer bright, her step no longer brisk; now it was really all over and it was over forever.... But had she lost everything then? This was what she often asked herself in the days that followed, those days of sadness, sadness for herself, for him, for her son, for her husband, for the girl whom she loved too ... for all those people, for all her life.... And what of the great questions, the mighty problems of life? Ah, they no longer stood out before her, now that he who had called her attention to them had gone straight towards those mighty problems as to the towers of the greater life! To her they seemed infinitely remote, shadowy cities on a far horizon behind her own shattered cities of fair translucent hopes.... Had she then lost her interest in all those things? And, having lost that interest, did she no longer care for her own development, for books, nature, art? Was the life that she had been living all illusion, a dream-life of love, lived under his influence, lived under his compelling eyes?

Yes, that was how it had been, that was how she would have to acknowledge it to herself!... That was how it was!... That was how it was!... Only with his eyes upon her had she felt herself born again ... born again from her childhood onwards ... until she had once more conjured up the fairy-vision of the little girl with the red flowers on her temples who ran over the boulders in the river under the spreading tropical leaves, beckoning the wondering little brothers.... And she, a middle-aged woman, had grown into a girl who dreamed the shimmering dreams that were wafted along rainbow paths towards the distant clouds high in the heavens.... In her maturity, she had developed herself hurriedly, as though afraid of being too late, into a thinking, feeling, loving woman.... She had been sincere in that new, hurried life; but it had

been nothing more than illusion and illusion alone, the illusion of a woman who felt herself growing old without ever, ever having lived....

But, though it had all been illusion, was illusion nothing then?... Or was illusion indeed something, something of no great account? And, even though she had lived only illusion, illusion under the compelling eyes of the man whom she loved, feeling love for the first and only time, under the brooding, anguished eyes of that thinker and seeker, had she not lived then, had she not lived then?

Yes, she had: she had lived, in the way in which a woman like herself—a woman who had never felt simply and sincerely except as a child in those far-off childish days, a woman whose life had been nothing but artificiality and failure—could live again, only later still, older still, old almost and finished; she had lived in illusions, in a fleeting illusion, which just for one moment she had tried to grasp, that day, now a few months ago....

She shook her head, her grey head; she was no longer blinded; she saw: she saw that it could never have been....

Yet she felt that they had—both of them—lived the illusion—both of them—for a little while....

And was nothing left of it?

Now that the long dreary days of sadness were drawing on, she saw: she saw that there was indeed something left, that a ray of light remained in her small soul, which had only been able to live like that, very late; for she saw that, in spite of all her repining, there was still gratitude....

Yes, she was grateful, for she had lived, even though everything had been illusion, the late blossoming of ephemeral dream-flowers....

And now—when she felt that strange question rise in her soul: is this life, this futile, endless round, or is there ... is there anything else? When she felt that bewildering, passionate doubt—then she was conscious, deep down in her heart, with a throb of gratitude, that there was something else....

Illusion, yes, only illusion, without which there is no life....

The End.