

"Don't look at me like that, Tib. I'm all right, quite all right. I was sorry not to come to the station, but Madge is a dear. She steps into every breach at the right moment, and without a word. I'm so glad Madge is here."

Tibbie caught her close, and kissed her with a sort of hungry tenderness. But Alison seemed to hold her away, to be mortally afraid of her loving scrutiny, to be feverishly anxious just to keep to commonplace and outside topics.

"I told them to get ready the blue room because you used to admire it so much, and it will match your eyes," she said, as she began to move rapidly up the few steps to the first-floor landing. "When did you come to London, and how and where did you leave the rest of my family?"

"At Ischl, in Tyrol; they seemed charmed with that, and Stephen was doing no end of sketching. He is so much better, you would hardly know him, Alison. But he doesn't want to come back. He sent a message by me for you. Will you get leave from his father for him to go to Florence or Milan for the winter, where he can have some proper lessons?"

"I daresay that can be arranged," said Alison, as she went to the window for the purpose of putting straight a blind that was slightly awry. "You would think it worth while, Tibbie? I mean, do you think the boy will ever do any good as an artist?"

"One never knows, and at any rate it is worth trying, since to be happy everyone must work. Madge is a case in point. She's alive, every inch of her; and Anne told me how difficult she was in the year she spent at home after she left school, and before she went to college."

"Yes, of course, you are quite right," answered Alison, coming back rather slowly to the brighter light shining above the dressing-table. She feared acutely the scrutiny, the questioning that was bound