

"We should have rung for lights," cried Bernard, pulling violently at the bell. "You know how I hate the dark."

And when lights came, they saw one another's faces—his burning crimson, her's pale and in tears.

"Oh, Hannah, Hannah, how miserable we are! As I said, if this goes on much longer, how shall we bear it?"

"I do not know." Then, steeling herself against both anger and pain, "Bernard," she said, "what did you wish me to do? Your family have no claim upon me, nor I upon them. We are, as things stand, mere strangers. Are they to throw me off and pick me up again, when and how they choose? Am I to submit to it?"

"I did not ask you."

"No, but you looked it. You would have liked me to go to the Moat-House."

"Yes. I wish you to be friends with them. I want them to love you."

"They do not love me—they only receive me on sufferance, and I will go nowhere on sufferance. I can live alone. I want no society; but where I do go I want to be loved, I want to be respected. Oh, Bernard!" and she looked piteously in his face, "sometimes I am tempted to say with you,—if this lasts long, how shall I ever bear it?"

"How shall I bear it? It is harder for me than you."

"Perhaps. But you forget it was your doing, not mine."

And then both drew back, appalled at the sharpness of their words—at the bitterness of these mutual recriminations.

Bernard held out his hand. "Forgive me. You are right. It was I who brought all this trouble upon you, and now I have not strength to meet it—either for you or for myself. I am so miserable that it makes me wicked. Something must be done. What shall it be?"

"What indeed?"

"Hannah, decide. Don't look at me in that dead silence. Speak out, for I can bear it no longer. Shall we part? Or—will you marry me at once?"

He could hardly have known what he was saying, or else, in his despair, anything seemed possible to him. Not to her. She was very gentle. She did not even draw away her hands which he had grasped: she scarcely seemed to recognise the insult he was unwittingly offering her. She only answered, sorrowfully, yet without the slightest indecision, "We will part."

Three little words—but they brought Bernard to his senses immediately. He fell on his knees before her, and passionately begged her forgiveness.

"But you do not know what I suffer. Inwardly, outwardly—life is one long torment. At the Moat-House I have no peace. They talk at me—and at you; they try every means of worming out my secret from me. But they shall not. I will hide it at all costs. People may guess what they like—but we are safe so long as they know nothing. God help me! I talk as if we were committing a deadly sin, when my love of you is the best thing—the only good thing in me."