

Once more Artois had his friend, released from the love of another man. But he wished it were not so. Hermione's generosity met with a full response of generosity from him. All his egotism and selfishness dropped from him then, shaken down like dead leaves by the tempest of a genuine emotion. His knowledge of her grief, his understanding of its depth, brought to him a sorrow that was keen, and even exquisitely painful. For a long while he was preoccupied by an intense desire to assuage it. He strove to do so by acting almost in defiance of his nature, by fostering deception. From the Abetone Hermione had written him letters, human documents—the tale of the suffering of a woman's heart. Many reserves she had from him and from every one. The most intimate agony was for her alone, and she kept it in her soul as the priest keeps the Sacred Host in its tabernacle. But some of her grief she showed in her letters, and some of her desire for comfort. And, without any definite intention, she indicated to her subtle and devoted friend the only way in which he could console her.

For once, driven by his emotion, he took that way.

He allowed Hermione to believe that he agreed with her in the conception she had formed of her husband's character and of her husband's love for her. It was difficult for him to do this, for he had an almost cruel passion for truth, and generally a clear insight into human character. Far less than many others would have condemned did he, in his mind, condemn the man who was dead for the sin against love that he had committed. He had understood Maurice as Hermione had not understood him, and knowledge is full of pardon. But though he could pardon easily he could not easily pretend. By pretending he sinned against himself, and helped his friend some steps along the way to peace. He thought he had helped her to go much farther along that way than she had gone. And he thought that Vere had helped her too.

Now the hollow mutterings of the rock in Virgil's Grotto seemed to be in his heart, as he realised how permanent was the storm in Hermione's nature. Something for her he had done. And something, much more no doubt, Vere had done. But how little it all was!

Their helplessness gave to him a new understanding of woman.

Hermione had allowed him great privileges, had allowed him to protect her, had taken his advice. After Vere was born she had wished to go back again to Sicily. The house of the priest, where she had been so happy, and so sad, drew her. She longed for it. She desired to make it her home. He