

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE DESERT OF BEREAVEMENT

It was the blank emptiness of her heart that baffled and distressed her. She had expected the intruding of a rich tumultuous grief; and she was experiencing nothing of the kind. On the journey, after the little pricking shock of the telegram, she had enjoyed quite a real, anticipatory pain; now, face to face with the dead body of her father, the last puff of her emotion collapsed like wind in a punctured balloon. Lying sleepless while the train rushed through the dark, she had worked herself into a fine frenzy, a frenzy that had produced some rather good verse. The lines had sung from her brain with intoxicating ease, rhythmised to the engine's pounding roar; while she rolled from side to side in her berth, staring in an ecstatic vision at the heavy curtains closing her into her jolting solitude.

In the morning she had scribbled the poem down on paper, wondering lackadaisically how it had ever come into being, and had then spent some hours alternately stuffing her brain with magazine stories and picturing complacently to herself what it would mean to be mistress of her own fortune. The tragic aspect of her inheritance had become distractingly tinged with the colours of many picturesque possibilities. She beheld herself an heiress, and a beauty, the cynosure of admiring, covetous eyes; she stared into the mirror opposite her with excited scrutiny, gambling in