

"He said nothing hard about me?"

"No—nothing. He did not mention you."

"I have been an unhappy woman, dear."

"I feared it," said Esther, pressing her gently.

"Men are selfish. They are selfish and cruel. What they care for is their own pleasure and their own pride."

"Not all," said Esther, on whom these words fell with a painful jar.

"All I have ever loved," said Mrs. Transome. She paused a moment or two, and then said, "For more than twenty years I have not had an hour's happiness. Harold knows it, and yet he is hard to me."

"He will not be. To-morrow he will not be. I am sure he will be good," said Esther, pleadingly. "Remember—he said to me his trouble was new—he has not had time."

"It is too hard to bear, dear," Mrs. Transome said, a new sob rising as she clung fast to Esther in return. "I am old, and expect so little now—a very little thing would seem great. Why should I be punished any more?"

Esther found it difficult to speak. The dimly suggested tragedy of this woman's life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection, afflicted her even to horror. It seemed to have come as a last vision to urge her toward the life where the draughts of joy sprang from the unchanging fountains of reverence and devout love.

But all the more she longed to still the pain of this heart that beat against hers.

"Do let me go to your own room with you, and let me undress you, and let me tend upon you," she said, with a woman's gentle instinct. "It will be a very great thing to me. I shall seem to have a mother again. Do let me."

Mrs. Transome yielded at last, and let Esther soothe her with a daughter's tendance. She was undressed and went to bed; and at last dozed fitfully, with frequent starts. But Esther watched by her till the chills of morning came, and then she only wrapped more warmth around her, and slept fast in the chair till Denner's movement in the room roused her. She started out of a dream in which she was telling Felix what had happened to her that night.