

He looked up at Hannah, and ground his teeth. "It is an accursed law," he said. "A law made only for fools, or sinners; and yet it may suffice to blast both our lives."

"No," Hannah answered, "nothing could do that—except ourselves."

"A commonplace truth!" and Bernard laughed bitterly.

"It is God's truth, though; His right and wrong are much simpler than man's."

"What is right and what is wrong? for I am growing so mad I hardly know. Show me—preach to me—I used to tell you you could preach better than the clergyman. Only love me, Hannah—if there is any love in that pale, pure face of yours. Sometimes I think there is none."

"None—oh, Bernard, none?"

For a minute she stooped over him; for a minute he felt that she had not a stone for a heart. And then the strong, firm, righteous will of the woman who, however deeply loving, could die, but would not do wrong, forced itself upon him, lulling passion itself into a temporary calm. He leant his head against her; he sobbed upon her arm like a child; and she soothed him almost as if he had been a child.

"Listen to me," she said. "We must endure—there is no help for it. It is a cruel, unjust law, but it is the law, and while it exists we cannot break it. I could not twist my conscience in any possible way so as to persuade myself to break it. No form of marriage could ever make me legally your wife."

"Not in England. Out of England it could."

"But then—as soon as we came back to England, what should I be? And if, in the years to come—Oh Bernard, it is impossible, impossible."

She said no more than that—how could she? But she felt it so intensely that, had it been necessary, she would have smothered down all natural shame, and said out to him—as solemnly as if it had been a vow before God—her determination never, for any personal happiness of her own, to entail upon innocent children the curse of a tainted name.

"I understand," Bernard replied humbly. "Forgive me; I ought never to have said a word about our marrying. It must not be. I must go on my way alone to the end."

"Not quite alone—oh, not quite alone."

But, as if more afraid of her tenderness than of her coldness, Bernard rose, and began walking about the room.

"You must decide—as I said: for my own judgment altogether fails me. We cannot go on living as we do; some change must be thought of; but I cannot tell what it should be."

"Why need it be?" said Hannah timidly. "Can we not continue as we are?"

"No." A fierce, abrupt, undeniable No.

"Then—I had better go away." He looked so terrified that she hastily added, "Only for a time, of course—till the bitterness between you and your people softens—till we can see our way a little.