

terest aroused in me by the discovery of this talent in her. I believed the new fondness I felt for her to be a very natural fondness, caused by her charming confidence in me. Our little secret drew us together. And I understand now, Hermione, that it seemed to set you apart from us. I believe I understand all now, all the circumstances that have seemed strange to me this summer. I wanted Vere's talent to develop naturally, unhindered, unaffected—I thought it was merely that!—and I became exigent, I even became jealous of all outside interference. On the night we dined at Frisio's I felt strongly irritated at Panacci's interest in Vere. And there were other moments——”

He looked at her again. She stood perfectly still. Her head was slightly bent and she seemed to be looking at the ground.

“And then came the night of the Carmine. Hermione, after you and Vere had gone to bed Panacci and I had a quarrel. He attacked me violently. He told me—he told me that I was in love with Vere, and that you, and even—even that Gaspere knew it. At the moment I think I laughed at him. I thought his accusation ridiculous. But when he had gone—and afterwards—I examined myself. I tried to know myself. I spent hours in self-examination, cruel self-examination. I did not spare myself. Believe that, Hermione! Believe that!”

“I do believe it.”

“And at the end I knew that it was not true. I was not, I had never been in love with Vere. When I thought of Vere and myself in such a relation my spirit recoiled. Such a thing seemed to me monstrous. But though I knew that was not true, I knew also that I had been jealous of Vere, unjust to others because of Vere. I had been, perhaps, foolish, undignified. Perhaps—perhaps—for how can we be quite sure of ourselves, Hermione? how can we be certain of our own natures, our own conduct?—perhaps, if Panacci's coarse brutality had not waked up my whole being, I might have drifted on towards an affection for Vere that, in a man of my age, would have been absurd, have made me ridiculous in the eyes of others. I scarcely think so. But I want to be sincere. I would rather exaggerate than minimise my own shortcomings to you tonight. I scarcely believe it ever could have been so. But Panacci said it was so. And you—I don't know what you have thought——”

“What I have thought doesn't matter now.”

She spoke very quietly, but not with bitterness. She knew Artois. And even in that moment of emotion, and of a sort of strange exhaustion following upon emotion, she knew, as