

"Promise me you will not be shocked or startled."

"What is it, dearest?" he repeated, although he knew too well.

"It is nothing. . . . Yes, hold my hands tight. So! . . . Really, it's nothing. And yet it is everything. It is . . . it is death."

"Roma!"

Her eyelids trembled, but she tried to laugh.

"Yes, dear. True! Not immediately. Oh no, not immediately. But signed and sealed, you know, and not to be put aside that anybody may be happy much longer."

She was laughing almost gaily. But all the same she was watching him closely, and now that her word was spoken she suddenly became conscious of a secret desire which she had not suspected. She wanted him to contradict her, to tell her she was quite wrong, to convince and defeat her.

"Poor little me! Pity, isn't it? It would have been so sweet to go on a little longer—especially after this reconciliation. And when one has kept one's heart under bolt and bar so long . . ."

Her sad gaiety was breaking down. "But it's better so, isn't it?"

He did not reply.

"Ah, yes, it's better so when you come to think of it."

"It's terrible!" said Rossi.

"Don't say that. It's a thing of every day. Here, there, everywhere. God wouldn't allow it to go on if it were terrible."

"It's bitterly cruel for all that."

"Not so cruel as life. Not nearly. For instance—the world wants you, dear, but it doesn't want me any more. You would have to put me away, and that would be harder to bear than death—far harder."

"My darling! What are you saying?"

"It's true, dear. You know it's true. God can forgive a woman even if she's a sinner, but the world can't if she's only a victim of sin. It's part of the cruelty of things, but there's no use repining."

"Roma," said Rossi, "I take God to witness that if that were all that stood between us nothing and nobody should separate you and me. They who wanted me would have to take you also. I would tell the world that you had every virtue and every heroism, and without you I could do nothing."

Her eyes filled with a fresh joy.