

"You knew we had kept those two things from you, Vere and I?"

"Vere and you—yes."

Now, he understood almost all, or quite all, that had been strange to him in her recent conduct.

"Sometimes—have you almost hated us for keeping those two secrets?"

"I don't think I have ever hated Vere."

"But me?"

"Do you know why I told Vere she might read your books?"

"Why?"

"Because I thought they might make her feel differently towards you?"

"Less—less kindly?"

"Yes."

She spoke very quietly, but he felt—he did not know why—that it had cost her very much to say what she had said.

"You wanted Vere to think badly of me!"

He was honouring her for the moral courage which enabled her to tell him. Yet he felt as if she had struck him. And so absolutely was he accustomed to delicate tenderness, and the most thoughtful, anxious kindness from her, that he suffered acutely, and from a double distress. The thing itself was cruel, and hurt him. But that Hermione had done it hurt him far more. He could hardly believe it. That by any road she could travel to such an action seemed incredible to him. He stood, realising it. And the bitter sharpness of his suffering made him understand something. In all its fulness he understood what Hermione's tenderness had been in his life for many, many years. And then—his mind seemed to take another step. "Why does a woman do such a thing as this?" he asked himself. "Why does such a woman as Hermione do such a thing?" And he knew what her suffering must have been, and how her heart must have been storm-tossed, before it was driven to succumb to such an impulse.

And he came quite close to her. And he felt a strange, sudden nearness to her that was no nearness of body.

"Hermione," he said, "I could never judge your character by that action. Don't—don't judge mine by any cruelty of which I have been guilty during this summer. You have told me something that it was very difficult for you to tell. I have something to tell you. And it is—it is not easy to tell."

"Tell it me."

He looked at her. He was now quite close to her and could see the outline of her face, but not the expression in her eyes.

"My interest in Vere increased. I believed it to be an in-