

They were sitting in the small reception-room of the presbytery, the same room wherein Téphany had been prepared for Confirmation. It had changed but little. The walls were whitewashed as of yore, the chairs were uncomfortably hard; but the view from the window revealed a tiny garden, gay with geraniums, roses, and some tall nodding hollyhocks. The garden symbolised the beauty of the world outside; the flowers might be compared to ephemeral joys, innocent and sweet, but destined to wither and decay within a few brief hours.

The curé hesitated; when he spoke his manner had changed subtly. Téphany realised that she had led him out of familiar channels into unknown waters. He had always dealt, sturdily and capably, with his like, peasants and fishermen. To such a man Ossory must seem a creature of another world. For an instant she feared that the priest would ascend his pulpit, and proclaim his gospel in obvious time-worn phrases. Her respect for him expanded enormously, her belief in his goodness and sympathy became impregnable, when he answered with humility:

“My daughter, if I could see my way, or any way, to help our friend, I should place myself at his service. From the day when we first met, some years ago now, he has had my prayers. Well, I,” his voice became virile, infused with an extraordinary virtue, as he concluded, “I know that some prayers are answered, and perhaps for him the prayers of his friends are the only help they can offer.”

Téphany twisted her slender fingers.

“Let us assume,” she said abruptly, “that you and I divine that a shadow—ah! why should we veil our words?—let us assume, you and I, his friends, that some sin,” her voice sank to a whisper, “stands between him and us——”

“Go on, my daughter.”

“And if it be so, if one’s intuition is not at fault, if this barrier shuts him from us, ought we not to pull it down, to destroy it—if we can?”