

tion ? And with Vere before you, can you regard her merely as a substitute, an understudy ? ”

An energy that was not free from passion suddenly flamed up in Hermione.

“ I love Vere,” she said. “ She is very close to me. She knows it. She does not doubt me or my love.”

“ But,” he quietly persisted, “ you still allow your mind to rove ungoverned among those dangerous ways of the past ? ”

“ Emile,” she said, still speaking with vehemence, “ it may be very easy to a strong man like you to direct his thoughts, to keep them out of one path and guide them along another. It may be—I don’t know whether it is ; but I don’t pretend to such strength. I don’t believe it is ever given to women. Perhaps even strength has its sex—I sometimes think so. I have my strength, believe me. But don’t require of me the peculiar strength that is male.”

“ The truth is that you love living in the past as the Bedouin loves living in the desert.”

“ It was my oasis,” she answered simply.

“ And all these years—they have made no difference ? ”

“ Did you think they would ? Did you think they had ? ”

“ I hoped so. I thought—I had begun to think that you lived again in Vere.”

“ Emile, you can always stand the truth, can’t you ? Don’t say you can’t. That would hurt me horribly. Perhaps you do not know how sometimes I mentally lean on you. And I like to feel that if you knew the absolute truth of me you would still look upon me with the same kind, understanding eyes as now. Perhaps no one else would. Would you, do you think ? ”

“ I hope and believe I could,” he said. “ You do not live in Vere. Is that it ? ”

“ I know it is considered the right, the perfectly natural thing that a mother, stricken as I have been, should find in time perfect peace and contentment in her child. Even you—you spoke of ‘ living again.’ It’s the consecrated phrase, Emile, isn’t it ? I ought to be living again in Vere. Well, I’m not doing that. With my nature I could never do that. Is that horrible ? ”

“ Ma pauvre amie ! ” he said.

He bent down and touched her hand.

“ I don’t know,” she said, more calmly, as if relieved, but still with an under-current of passion, “ whether I could ever live again in the life of another. But if I did it would be in the life of a man. I am not made to live in a woman’s life, really to live, giving out the force that is in me. I know I’m a middle-aged woman—to these Italians here more than that,