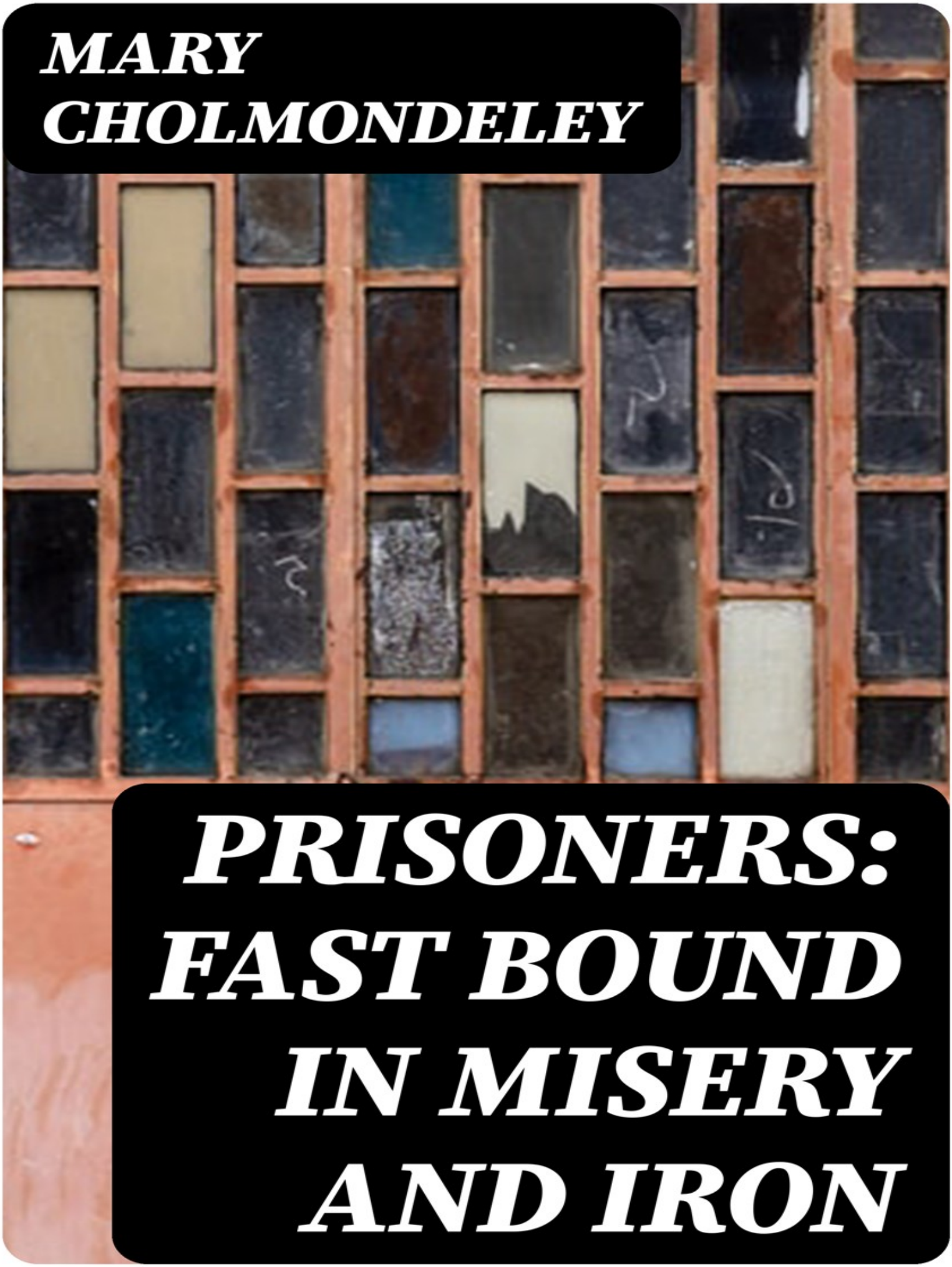
MARY
CHOLMONDELEY
PRISONERS:
FAST BOUND
IN MISERY
AND IRON

Mary Cholmondeley

Prisoners: Fast Bound In Misery And Iron

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CHAPTER I

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Grim Fate was tender, contemplating you,
And fairies brought their offerings at your birth; You take the rose-leaf pathway as your due,
Your rightful meed the choicest gifts of earth.

—Arthur C. Legge.

Fay stood on her balcony, and looked over the ilexes of her villa at Frascati; out across the grey-green of the Campagna to the little compressed city which goes by the great name of Rome.

How small it looked, what a huddled speck with a bubble dome, to be represented by so stupendous a name!

She gazed at it without seeing it. Her eyes turned towards it mechanically because it contained somewhere within its narrow precincts the man of whom she was thinking, of whom she was always thinking.

It was easy to see that Fay—the Duchess of Colle Alto—was an Englishwoman, in spite of her historic Italian name.

She had the look of perfect though not robust health, the reflection over her whole being of a childhood spent much in the open air. She was twenty-three, but her sweet fair face, with its delicate irregular features, was immature, childish. It gave no impression of experience, or thought, or of having met life. She was obviously not of those who criticise or judge themselves. In how many faces we see the conflict, or the remains of conflict with a dual nature. Fay, as she was

called by her family, seemed all of a piece with herself. Her unharassed countenance showed it, especially when, as at this moment, she looked harassed. Anxiety was evidently a foreign element. It sat ill upon her smooth face, as if it might slide off at any moment. Fay's violet eyes were her greatest charm. She looked at you with a deprecating, timid, limpid gaze, in which no guile existed, any more than steadfastness, any more than unselfishness, any more than courage.

Fay had come into the world anxious to please. She had never shown any particular wish to give pleasure. If she had been missed out of her somewhat oppressed and struggling home when she married, it is probable that the sense of her absence was tinged by relief.

She had never intended to marry the Duke of Colle Alto. It is difficult to say why that sedate distinguished personage married her.

Fay's face had a very sweet and endearing promise in it which drew men's eyes after her. I don't know what it meant, and they did not know either, but they instinctively lessened the distance between themselves and it. A very thin string will tow a very heavy body if there is no resistance, and the pace is slow. The duke looked at Fay, who was at that moment being taken out for her first season by her grandmother, Lady Bellairs. Fay tried to please him, as was her wont with all except men with beards. She liked to have him in attendance. Her violet eyes lighted up with genuine pleasure when he came to see her.

It is perhaps difficult for the legions of women who do not please easily, and for the handful whose interests lie outside

themselves, and who are not desirous of pleasing indiscriminately, it is difficult for either to realise the passionate desire to please which possesses and saps the life of some of their sisters. Admiration with them is not a luxury, any more than a hot-water bottle is a luxury to the aged, or a foot rest to a gouty foot. It is a necessity of life. After a becoming interval, the interstices of which had been filled with flowers, the duke proposed to Lady Bellairs for Fay's hand. Fay did not wish to marry him. He was not in the least her ideal. Neither did she wish to remain unmarried, neither did she wish to part with her grave, distinguished suitor who was an ornament to herself. And she was distinctly averse to living any longer in the paternal home, lost in a remote crease in a Hampshire down. Poor women have only too frequently to deal with these complicated situations, with which blundering, egotistic male minds are seldom in perfect sympathy.

Fay had never willingly relinquished any of the men who had cared for her, and some had cared much. These last had as a rule torn themselves away from her, leaving hearts, or other fragments of themselves, behind, and were not to be cajoled back again, even by one of her little gilt-edged notes. But the duke did not break away. He had selected her, she pleased him, he desired to marry an Englishwoman. He had the approval of Lady Bellairs.

The day came when Fay was suddenly and adroitly confronted with the fact that she must marry him, or lose him.

Many confirmed bachelors who openly regret that they have never come across a woman to whom they cared to tie

themselves for life might be in a position to descant on the inability of wives to enter into their husbands' inmost feelings, if only they—the bachelors—had known on a past occasion how to act with sudden promptitude on the top of patience.

The duke played the waiting game, and then hit hard. He had coolly allowed himself to be trifled with, until the moment arrived when it did not suit him to be trifled with any longer.

The marriage had not proved a marked success, nor an entire failure. The duke was an irreproachable husband, but, like many men who marry when they are no longer young, he aged suddenly after marriage. He quickly became bald and stout. His tact except in these two particulars remained flawless. He never allowed his deep chagrin to appear when, three years after his marriage, he still remained without a son to continue his historic name.

He was polite to his wife at all times, mildly sarcastic as to her extravagance. Fay was not exorbitantly extravagant; but then the duke was not exorbitantly rich. One of Fay's arts, as unconscious as that of a kitten, was to imply past unhappiness, spoken of with a cheerful resignation which greatly endeared her to others—and to herself. The duke had understood that she had not had a very happy home, and he had honestly endeavoured to make her new home happy. In the early days of his marriage he made many small experiments in the hope of pleasing the pretty creature who had thrown in her lot with his. Possibly also there may have been other subtle, patient attempts to win somewhat from her of another nature. Possibly there may

have been veiled disappointments, and noiseless retreats under cover of night.

However these things may have been, after the first year Fay made the discovery that she was unhappily married. The duke was kind, in kindness he never failed; but he was easily jealous—at least she thought so; and he appeared quite unable to see in their true light her amicable little flirtations with his delightful compatriots. After one or two annoying incidents, in which the compatriots had shown several distinctly un-English characteristics, the duke became, in his wife's eyes, tiresome, strict, a burden. Perhaps, also, she felt the Englishwoman's surprise at the inadequate belief in a woman's power of guarding her own virtue, which remains in some nations an hereditary masculine instinct. She felt that she could take care of herself, which was, in reality, just what she could not do, as her imperturbable, watchful husband was well aware.

But was he aware of the subject of her thoughts at this moment? It was more than probable that he was. But Fay had not the faintest suspicion that he had guessed anything.

One of her many charms was a certain youthful innocence of mind, which imputed no evil to others, which never suspected that others would impute it to her. Her husband was wearisome. He looked coldly on her if she smiled on young men, and she had to smile at them when they smiled at her. But, she reasoned, of course all the time he really knew that he could trust her entirely. There was no harm in Fay's nature, no venom, there were no dark places, no strong passions, with their awful possibilities for good

and evil. She had already given much pain in her short life, but inadvertently. She was of that large class of whom it may truly be said when evil comes, that they are more sinned against than sinning. They always somehow gravitate into the places where people *are* sinned against, just as some people never attend a cricket-match without receiving a ball on their persons.

And now trouble had come upon her. She had at last fallen in love. I would not venture to assert that she had fallen in very deep, that the "breakers of the boundless deep" had engulfed her. Some of us make shipwreck in a teacup tempest, and when our serenity is restored—there is nothing calmer than a teacup after its storm—our experience serves, after a decent interval, as an agreeable fringe to our confidential conversation.

Anyhow, Fay had fallen in love. I feel bound to add that for some time before that event happened life had become intolerably dull. The advent to Rome of her distant connection, Michael Carstairs, had been at this juncture a source of delight to her. She had, before her marriage, flirted with him a very little—not as much as she could have wished; but Lady Bellairs, who was fond of him, had promptly intervened, and the young man had disappeared into his examinations. That was four years ago.

In reality Fay had half-forgotten him; but when she saw him suddenly, pale, handsome, distinguished, across a ballroom in Rome, and, after a moment's uncertainty, realised who he was, she felt the same pleasurable surprise, soft as the fall of dew, which pervades the feminine heart when, in looking into an unused drawer, it inadvertently

haps upon a length of new ribbon, bought, carefully put away, and forgotten.

Fay went gently up to Michael, conscious of her beauty and her wonderful jewels, and held out her hand with a little deprecating smile.

"And so we meet again at last," she said.

He turned red and white.

"At last," he said with difficulty.

She looked more closely at him. The dreamy, poetic face had changed during those four years. She became dimly aware that he had not only grown from a youth into a man, but that some other transformation had been painfully wrought in him.

Instinctively her beaming face became grave to match his. She was slow to see what others were feeling, but quick to reflect their mood. She sighed gently, vaguely stirred, in spite of herself, by something—she knew not what—in her companion's face.

"It is four years since I saw you," she said.

And from her lowered voice it seemed as if her life were rooted in memory alone.

"Four years," said Michael, who, promising young diplomat as he was, appeared only able to repeat parrot-wise her last words after her.

A pause.

"Do you know my husband?"

"I do not."

"May I introduce him to you?"

Fay made a little sign, and the duke approached, superb, decorated, dignified, with the polished pallor as if the skin

were a little too tight, which is the Charybdis of many who have avoided the Scylla of wrinkles.

The elder Italian and the grave, fair, young Englishman bowed to each other, were made known to each other.

That night as the duke drove home with his wife he said to her in his admirable English:

"Your young cousin is an enthusiast, a dreamer, a sensitive, what your Tennyson calls a Sir Galahad. In Italy we make of such men a priest, a cardinal. He is not an *homme d'affaires*. It was not well to put him into diplomacy. One may make a religion of art. One may even for a time make a religion of a woman. But of the English diplomacy one does not make a religion."

Fay lay awake that night. From a disused pigeon-hole in her mind she drew out and unfolded to its short length that attractive remnant, that half-forgotten episode of her teens. She remembered everything—I mean everything she wished to remember. Michael's face had recalled it all, those exquisite days which he had taken so much more seriously than she had, the sudden ruthless intervention of Lady Bellairs, the end of the daydream. Fay, whose attention had been adroitly diverted to other channels, had never wondered how he took their separation at the time. Now that she saw him again she was aware that he had taken it —to heart.

During that sleepless night Fay persuaded herself that Michael had not been alone in his suffering. She also had felt the parting with equal poignancy.

They met again a few days later by chance in an old cloistered, deserted garden. How often she had walked in

that garden as she was doing now with English friends! His presence gave the place its true significance. They met as those who have between them the bond of a common sorrow.

"And what have you been doing all these four years?" she asked him, as they wandered somewhat apart.

"I have been working."

"You never came to say good-bye before you went to that place in Germany to study."

"I was told I had better not come."

"I suppose grandmamma told you that."

"She did, most kindly and wisely."

A pause.

She was leaning in the still May sunshine against an old grey tomb of carved stone. Two angels with spread wings upheld the defaced inscription. Above it, over it, round it, like desire impotently defying death, a flood of red roses clambered and clung. Were they trying to wake some votary who slept below? A great twisted sentinel cypress kept its own dark counsel. Against its shadow Fay's figure in her white gossamer gown showed more ethereal and exquisite even than in memory. She seemed at one with this wonderful, passionate southern spring, which trembled between rapture and anguish. The red roses and the white irises were everywhere. Even the unkept grass in which her light feet were set was wild with white daisies.

"Do you remember our last walk on the down that day in spring?" she said suddenly.

She had forgotten it until last night.

"I remember it."

"It was May then. It is May again now."

He did not answer. The roses left off calling to the dead, and suddenly enfolded the two young grave creatures leaning against the tomb, in a gust of hot perfume.

"Do you remember," Fay's voice was tremulous, "how you gave me a bit of pink may?"

"I remember."

"I was looking at it yesterday. It is not very pink now."

It was true. In all shallow meanings, and when she had not had time to get her mind into a tangle, Fay was perfectly truthful. She had yesterday been turning over the contents of a little cedar box in which she kept her childish possessions, and she had found in an envelope a brown unsightly ghost of what had once been a may-blossom on a Hampshire down. She had remembered the vivid sunshine, the wheeling seagull, the soft south wind blowing in from the sea. Michael had kissed her under the thin dappled shade of the flowering tree, and she had kissed him back.

Michael's eyes turned for a long moment to the yellow weather-stained arches of the cloister, and then he looked full at Fay with a certain peculiar detached glance which had first made her endeavour to attract him. There is a look in a man's face which women like Fay cannot endure, because it means independence of them.

"I thought," he said, with the grave simplicity which apparently was unchangeable in him whatever else might change, "that it was only I who remembered. It has always been a comfort to me that any unhappiness which my want of forethought, my—my culpable selfishness may have caused, was borne by myself alone."

"I was unhappy too," she said, speaking as simply as he. She looked up at him suddenly as she said it. There was a wet glint in her deep violet eyes. She believed absolutely at that moment that she had been as unhappy as he for four years. There was no suspicion in her mind that she was not genuine. Only the sincere ever doubt their sincerity. Fay never doubted hers. She felt what she said, and the sweet eyes turned on Michael had the transparent fixity of a child's.

They walked unsteadily back to the others and spoke no more to each other that day. Conscience pricked Fay that night.

"Leave him alone," it said. "You have both suffered. Let the dead past bury its dead."

Fay's conscience was a wonderfully adaptable one with a tendency to poetic quotation. It showed considerable tact in adopting her point of view. Nevertheless from that generally fallacious standpoint it often gave her quite respectable advice. "Leave him alone," said the hoodwinked monitor. "You are married and Andrea is easily jealous. Michael is sensitive, and has been deeply in love with you. Don't stir him up to fall in love with you again. *Leave him alone.*"

The young British matron waxed indignant. Was she, Fay, the kind of woman to forget her duty to her husband? Was Michael the kind of man to make love to a married woman? Such an idea was preposterous, unjust to both of them. And people would begin to talk at once if she and her cousin (Michael was only a distant connection) were studiously to avoid each other, if they could not exchange a few words simply like old friends. No one had suggested an attitude of

rigid avoidance; but throughout life Fay had always convinced herself of the advisability of a certain wished-for course by conjuring up, only to discard it, the extreme and most obviously senseless opposite of that course—as the only alternative.

She imagined her husband saying: "Why won't you ask Mr. Carstairs to dinner? He is your cousin and he is charming. What can the reason be that you so earnestly refuse to meet him?" And then Andrea, who always "got ideas into his head," would begin to suspect that there had been "something" between them.

No. No. It would be far wiser to meet naturally now and then, and to treat Michael like an old friend. Fay had a somewhat muffled conception of what an old friend might be. After deep thought she came to the conclusion that it was her duty to ask Michael frequently to the house. When Fay once recognised a duty she performed it without delay.

She met with an unexpected obstacle in the way of its adequate performance. The obstacle was Michael.

The young man came once, and then again after an interval of several months, but apparently nothing would induce him to frequent the house.

Fay did not recognise her boyish eager lover in the grave sedate man, old of his age, who had replaced him. His dignified and quite unobtrusive resistance, which had not indifference at its core, added an intense, a feverish, interest to Fay's life. She saw that he still cared for her, and that he did not intend to wound himself a second time. He had had enough. She put out all her little transparent arts during the months that followed. The duke watched.

She had implied to her husband with a smile that she had not been very happy at home. She implied to Michael with a smile that it was not the duke's fault, but that she was not very happy in her married life, that he did not care much about her, and that they had but few tastes in common. Each lived their own life on amicable terms, but somewhat apart from each other. She owned that she had hoped for something rather different in marriage. She had, it seemed, started life with a very exalted ideal of married life, which the duke's

coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb.

Michael remained outwardly obdurate, but inwardly he weakened. His tender adoration and respect for Fay, wounded and mutilated though they had been, had nevertheless survived what in many minds must have proved their death-blow. He still believed implicitly all she said.

But to him her marriage was the impassable barrier, a barrier as enfranchisable as the brown earth on a coffin lid.

After many months Fay at last vaguely realised his attitude towards her. She told herself that she respected it, that it was just what she wished, was in fact the result of her own tactfully expressed wishes. She seemed to remember things she had said which would have led him to behave just as he had done. And then she turned heaven and earth to regain her personal ascendency over him. She never would have regained it if an accident had not befallen her. She fell in love with him during the process.

The day came, an evil day for Michael, when he could no longer doubt it, when he was not permitted to remain in

doubt. Who shall say what waves of boundless devotion, what passionate impulses of protection, of compassion, of intense longing to shield her from the fire which had devastated his own youth, passed in succession over him as he looked at the delicate little creature who was to him the only real woman in the world—all the rest were counterfeits—and who now, as he believed, loved him as he had long loved her.

Michael was one of the few men who bear through life the common masculine burden of a profound ignorance of women, coupled with an undeviating loyalty towards them. He supposed she was suffering as he had suffered, that it was with her now beside the fountain, under the ilexes of her Italian garden, as it had been with him during these five intolerable years.

How Fay wept! What a passion of tears, till her small flower-like face was bereft of all beauty, of everything except a hideous contraction of grief!

He stood near her, not touching her, in anguish far deeper than hers. At last he took her clenched hand in his.

"Do not grieve so," he said brokenly. "It is not our fault. It is greater than either of us. It has come upon us against our wills. We have both struggled. You don't know how I have struggled, Fay, day and night since I came to Rome. But I have been in fault. I ought never to have come, for I knew you were living near Rome. But I did not know it had touched you, and for myself I had hoped—I thought—that it was past—in as far as it could pass—that I was accustomed to it. Listen, Fay, and do not cry so bitterly. I will leave Rome at once. I will not see you again. My poor darling, we have

come to a hard place in life, but we can do the only thing left to us—our duty."

Fay's heart contracted, and she suddenly ceased sobbing. She had never thought of this horrible possibility that he would leave her.

She drew the hand that clasped hers to her lips and held it tightly against her breast.

"Don't leave me," she stammered, trembling from head to foot, from sheer terror at the thought; "I will be good. I will do what is right. We are not like other people. We can trust each other. But I can't live without seeing you sometimes, I could not bear it."

He withdrew his hand. They looked wildly into each other's eyes. His convulsed face paled and paled. Even as he stood before her she knew she was losing him, that something was tearing him from her. It was as certain that he was going from her as if she were standing by his deathbed.

He kissed her suddenly.

"I shall not come back," he said. And the next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER II

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Nous passons notre vie à nous forger des chaînes, et à nous plaindre de les porter.

—Valtour.

For a long time Fay had stood on her balcony looking out towards Rome, while the remembrance of the last few months pressed in upon her.

It was a week since she had seen Michael, since he had said, "I shall not come back."

And in the meanwhile she had heard that he had resigned his appointment, and was leaving Rome at once. She had never imagined that he would act so quickly, with such determination. She had vaguely supposed that he would send in his resignation, and then remain on. In novels in a situation like theirs the man never really went away, or if he did he came back. Fay knew very little of Michael, but nevertheless she instinctively felt and quailed before the conviction that he really was leaving her for ever, that he would reconstruct a life for himself somewhere in which she could not reach him, in which she would have no part or lot. He might suffer during the process, but he would do it. His yea was yea, and his nay, nay. She should see him no more. Some day, not for a long time perhaps, but some day, she should hear of his marriage.

Suddenly, without a moment's warning, her own life rose up before her, distorted, horrible, unendurable. The ilexes, solemn in the sunset, showed like foul shapes of disgust and

nausea. The quiet Campagna with its distant faintly outlined Sabine hills was rotten to the core.

The duke passed across a glade at a little distance, and, looking up, smiled gravely at her, with a slight courteous gesture of his brown hand.

She smiled mechanically in response and shrank back into her room. Her husband had suddenly become a thing to shudder at, repulsive as a reptile, intolerable. Her life with him, without Michael, stretched before her like a loathsome disease, a leprosy, which in the interminable years would gradually eat her away, a death by inches.

The first throes of a frustrated passion at the stake have probably seldom failed to engender a fierce rebellion against the laws which light the faggots round it.

The fire had licked Fay. She fled blindfold from it, not knowing whither, only away from that pain, over any precipice, into any slough.

"I cannot live without him," she sobbed to herself. "This is not just a common love affair like other people's. It is everything, my whole life! It is not as if we were bad people! We are both upright! We always have been! We have both done our best, but—I can't go on. What is reputation worth, the world's opinion of me?—*nothing*."

It was not worth more to Fay at that moment than it has ever been worth to any other poor mortal since the world's opinion first clashed with love.

To follow love shows itself time and time again alike to the pure and to the worldly as the only real life, the only path. But if we disbelieve in it, and framing our lives on other lines become voluntarily bedridden into selfishness

and luxury, can we—when that in which we have not believed comes to pass—can we suddenly rise and follow Love up his mountain passes? We try to rise when he calls us from our sick beds. We even go feverishly a little way with him. But unless we have learnt the beginnings of courage and self-surrender before we set out, we seem to turn giddy, and lose our footing. Certain precipices there are where only the pure and strong in heart may pass, at the foot of which are the piled bones of many passionate pilgrims.

Were Fay's delicate little bones, so subtly covered in soft white flesh, to be added to that putrefying heap? But can we blame anyone, be they who they may, placed howsoever they may be, who when first they undergo a real emotion try however feebly to rise to meet it?

Fay was not wholly wise, not wholly sincere, but she made an attempt to meet it. It was not to be expected that the attempt would be quite wise or quite sincere either. Still it was the best she could do. She would sacrifice herself for love. She would go away with Michael. No one would ever speak to her again, but she did not care.

Involuntarily she unclasped a diamond Saint-Esprit from her throat which the duke had given her, and laid it on her writing-table. She should never wear it again. She no longer had the right to wear it. It was a unique jewel. But what did she care for jewels now! They had served to pass the time in the sort of waking dream in which she had lived till Michael came. But she was awake now. She looked at herself in the glass long and fixedly. Yes, she was beautiful. How dreadful it must be for plain women when they loved!

They must know that men could not really care for them. They might, of course, respect and esteem them, and wish in a lukewarm way to marry them, but they could never really love them. She, Fay, carried with her the talisman.

A horrible doubt seized her, just when she was becoming calm. Supposing Michael would not! Oh! but he *would* if he cared as she did. The sacrifice was all on the woman's side. No one thought much the worse of men when they did these things. And Michael was so good, so honourable that he would certainly never desert her. They would become legal husband and wife directly Andrea divorced her.

From underneath these matted commonplaces, Fay's muffled conscience strove to reach her with its weak voice.

"Stop, stop!" it said. "You will injure him. You will tie a noose round his neck. You will spoil his life. And Andrea! He has been kind in a way. And your marriage vows! And your own people at home! And Magdalen, the sister who loves you. Remember her! Stop, stop! Let Michael go. You were obliged to relinquish him once. Let him go again now."

Fay believed she went through a second conflict. Perhaps there lurked at the back of her mind the image of Michael's set face—set away from her; and that image helped her at last to say to herself, "Yes. It is right. I will let him go."

But did she really mean it? For while she said over and over again, "Yes, yes; we must part," she decided that it was necessary to see him just once again, to bid him a last farewell, to strengthen him to live without her. She could not reason it out, but she knew that it was absolutely essential to the welfare of both that they should see each other just once more before they parted—*for ever*. The parting no

longer loomed so awful in her mind if there was to be a meeting before it took place. She almost forgot it directly her mind could find a staying point on the thought of that one last sacred interview, of all she should say, of all they would both feel.

But how to see him! He had said he would not come back. He left Rome in a few days. She should see him officially on Thursday, when he was in attendance on his chief. But what was the use of that? He would hardly exchange a word with her. She might decide to see *him* alone; but what if he refused to see *her*? Instinctively Fay knew that he would so refuse.

"We must part." Just so. But how to hold him? How to draw him to her just once more? That was the crux.

In novels if a woman needs the help of the chivalrous man ever kneeling in the background, she sends him a ring. Fay looked earnestly at her rings. But Michael might not understand if she sent him one, and if the duke intercepted it he would certainly entirely misconstrue the situation.

Fay sat down at her writing-table, and got out her note-paper. Truth compels me to state that it was of blue linen, that it had a little gilt coronet on it, and that it was scented.

She thought a long time. At least she bit the little silver owl at the end of her pen for a long time. She tore up several sheets. At last she wrote in her large, slanting, dashing handwriting:

> "*I know that we must part. You are right and I wish it too. It is all like a terrible dream, and what will the awakening be?*" (Fay did not quite know what she meant by this, but it impressed her deeply as she

wrote it, and a tear dropped on "the awakening" and made it look like "reckoning." She was not of those, however, who having once written one word ever think it can be mistaken for another; and really reckoning did quite as well as awakening.) "*But I must see you once before you go. I have something of urgent importance to say to you.*" (It was not clear to Fay what the matter of importance was. But has not everyone in love laboured daily under a burden as big as Christian's, of subjects which demand instant discussion, or the bearer may fall into a state of melancholia? Fay was convinced as she wrote that there was something she ached to say to him: and also the point was to say something that would bring him.) "*Don't fail me. You have never failed me yet. You left me before when it was right we should part. Did I try to keep you then? Did I say one word to hold you back?*" (Fay's heart swelled as she wrote those words. She saw, bathed in a new light, her own courage and uprightness in the past. She realised her extraordinary strength of character. She had not faltered then.) "*I did not falter then. I will not do so now, though this time is harder than the first.*" (It certainly was.) "*You have to come to my little party on Thursday with your chief. I cannot speak to you then. I am closely watched. When the others have gone come back through the gardens. The door by the fountain will be unlocked, and come up the balcony steps to my sitting-room. The balcony window will be open. You know that I should not ask you to do this unless it was*

urgent. Will you fail me at the last? For we shall never meet again, Michael!"

Fay closed the note, directed it, pinned it into the lace of her inmost vest—the wife of an Italian distrusts pockets and postal arrangements—and then wept her heart out, her vain, selfish little heart, which for the first time in her life was not wholly vain, nor wholly selfish. Perhaps it was not her fault if she was cruel. It takes many steadfast years, many prayers, many acts of humble service before we may hope to reach the place where we are content to bear alone the brunt of that pang, and to guard the one we love even from ourselves.

CHAPTER III

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> There will no man do for your sake, I think,
> What I would have done for the least word said. I had
> wrung life dry for your lips to drink,
> Broken it up for your daily bread.

—A. C. Swinburne.

A witty bishop was once heard to remark that one of the difficulties of his social life lay in the fact that all women of forty were exactly alike, and it was impossible to recall their individual label, to which archdeacon, or canon, or form of spinster good works, they belonged. It would be dangerous, irreverent, to pry further into the recesses of the episcopal, or even of the suffragan, mind. There are snowy peaks where we lay helpers should fear to tread. But it may be stated, without laying ourselves open to a suspicion of wishing to undermine the Church, that when the woman of forty in her turn acidly announces, as she not infrequently does, that all young men seem to her exactly alike, she is in a parlous condition.

Yet many women had said that Michael was exactly like every other young man. And to all except the very few who knew him well he certainly did appear to be—not an individual at all—but only an indistinguished unit of a vast army.

His obvious good looks were like the good looks of others. He looked well bred, but to look that is as common in

a certain class as it is rare in another. He had the spare, wiry figure, tall and lightly built, square in the shoulders, and thin in the flank; he had the clear weather-beaten complexion, the clean, nervous, capable hand, and the self-effacing manner, which we associate with myriads of well-born, machine-trained, perfectly groomed, expensively educated, uneducated Englishmen. Our public schools turn them out by the thousand. The "lost legion" is made up of them. The unburied bones of the pioneers of new colonies are mostly theirs. They die of thirst in "the never never country," under a tree, leaving their initials cut in its trunk; they fall by hundreds in our wars. They are born leaders where acumen and craft are not needed. Large game was made for them, and they for it. They are the vermin destroyers of the universe. They throw life from them with both hands, they play the game of life with a levity which they never showed in the business of cricket and football.

They are essentially not of the stuff of which those dull persons, the thinkers, the politicians, the educationalists, are made. No profession knows them except the army. They have no opinions worth hearing. Only the women who are to marry them listen to them. They are sometimes squeezed into Parliament and are borne with there like children. About one in a hundred of them can earn his own living, and then it is as a land agent.

They make adorable country squires, and picturesque, simple-minded, painstaking men of rank. They know by a sort of hereditary instinct how to deal with a labouring man, and a horse, and how to break in a dog. They give themselves no airs. We have *millions* of men like this, and it

is doubtful whether the nation finds much use for them, except at coronations, where they look beautiful; or on county councils, where they can hold an opinion without the preliminary fatigue of forming it; and on the bloodstained fringes of our empire, where they serenely meet their dreadful deaths.

In the ranks of that vast army I descry Michael, and I wonder what it is in him that makes me able to descry him at all. He is like thousands of other men. In what is he unlike?

I think it must be something in his expression. Of many ugly men it has been said with truth that one never observes their ugliness. Something in the character redeems it. With Michael's undeniable good looks it was the same. One did not notice them. They were not admired, except, possibly, for the first moment, or across a room. His rather insignificant grey eyes were the only thing one remembered him by, the only part of him which seemed to represent him.

It was as if out of the narrow window of a fortress *our friend* for a moment looked out; that "friend of our infinite dreams" who in dreams, but, alas! never by day, comes softly to us across the white fields of youth; who, later on, in dreams but never by day, overtakes us with unbearable happiness in his hand in which to steep our exhaustion on the hillside; who when our hair is grey comes to us still in dreams but never by day, down the darkening valley, to tell us that our worn out romantic hopes are but the alphabet of his language.

Such a look there was in Michael's eyes, and what it meant who shall say? Once and again at long intervals we pass in the thoroughfare of life young faces which have the same expression, as if they saw beyond, as if they looked past their own youth across to an immortal youth, from their own life to an unquenchable, upwelling spring of life. When Michael spoke, which was little, his words verged on the commonplace. He explained the obvious with modest directness. He had thought out and made his own a small selection of platitudes. It is at first a shock to some of us when we discover that a beautiful spiritual nature is linked with a tranquil commonplace mind and narrow abilities.

When Michael's eyes rested on anything his still glance seemed to pass through it, into its essence. An inscrutable Fate had willed that his eyes should not rest on any woman save Fay.

Was her little hand to rend his illusions from him; or did he perhaps see her as she was, as her husband, her shrewd old grandmother, her sister even, had never seen her? Fay had revealed to Michael that of which many men who write glibly of passion die in ignorance, the wonder and awe of love, clothed in a woman's form, walking the earth. And in a reverent and grateful loyalty Michael would have laid down his life for her, as gladly as Dante would have done for "his lady." But Michael would have laid down his in silence, as one casts off a glove. He had never read the "New Life." It is improbable that it would have made any impression on him if he had read it. He never associated words or books or poetry with feelings. What he felt he held sacred. He was unconsciously by nature that which others of the artistic