VINTAGE KENNEDY

TOGETHER AND APART

CONTENTS

PART Four – TIME AND CHANGE

About the Book

Betsy Canning is dissatisfied with life. She has always taken pains to be healthy, popular and well-treated, but despite her wealth, her comfortable homes and beautiful children, happiness eludes her. The problem must lie, she thinks, in her marriage to Alec, and a neat, civilised divorce seems the perfect solution.

But talk of divorce sparks interference from family and friends, and soon public opinion tears into the fragile fabric of family life and private desire. Alec and Betsy’s marriage will not be the only casualty, and in this newly complicated world, happiness is more elusive than ever.

About the Author

Margaret Kennedy was born in 1896. Her first novel, *The Ladies of Lyndon*, was published in 1923. Her second novel, *The Constant Nymph*, became an international bestseller. She then met and married a barrister, David Davies, with whom she had three children. She went on to write a further fifteen novels, to much critical acclaim. She was also a playwright, adapting two of her novels – *Escape Me Never* and *The Constant Nymph* – into successful productions. Three different film versions of *The Constant Nymph* were made, and featured stars of the time such as Ivor Novello and Joan Fontaine; Kennedy subsequently worked in the film industry for a number of years. She also wrote a biography of Jane Austen and a work of literary criticism, *The Outlaws of Parnassus*. Margaret Kennedy died in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, in 1967.

ALSO BY MARGARET KENNEDY

Ladies of Lyndon
The Constant Nymph
Red Sky at Morning
The Fool of the Family
Return I Dare Not
A Long Time Ago
The Midas Touch
The Feast
Troy Chimneys
Lucy Carmichael
The Oracles
The Wild Swan
A Night in Cold Harbour
The Forgotten Smile

To Rose Macaulay

MARGARET KENNEDY

Together and Apart

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Alas! They had been friends in youth;
But whispering tongues can poison truth;
And constancy lives in realms above;
And life is thorny; and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love,
Doth work like madness in the brain.

* * *

Each spake words of high disdain
And insult to his heart's best brother:
They parted—ne'er to meet again!
But never either found another
To free the hollow heart from paining—
They stood aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
A dreary sea now flows between;
But neither heat, not frost, nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away, I ween,
With marks of that which once hath been.

COLERIDGE (from *Christabel*)

PART ONE

TOGETHER

Together

I

Letter from Betsy Canning to her mother.

Pandy Madoc,
North Wales,
August 8th.

DEAREST MOTHER,

I'm sorry the Engadine isn't being a success, but I'm not surprised. Why on earth did you trust the Gordons to choose a hotel? You might have known better. How is father's lumbago? For heaven's sake don't go on sleeping in damp beds till you both have pneumonia. Move to somewhere more comfortable. You are both too old to camp out in mouldy little inns.

Here it is lovely – fine and hot. All the children are back from school, and we have a school friend of Kenneth's staying, Mark Hannay, so the house is pretty full. We can't overflow into the cottage, because Alec, in an expansive moment, has lent it to the Blochs. You know? He's that very clever Jew who designed the sets for the German production of *Caroline.* That's how Alec got to know him. Now they are persecuted, and had to escape in the middle of the night or something, in the clothes they stood up in.

Absolutely penniless and swarms of rather uninviting children. He is trying to get work over here. I feel one ought to be sorry for them. But being persecuted doesn't make people nicer somehow, and I do wish Alec had told me before he offered them the cottage; it's very inconvenient – right in the middle of the summer holidays.

Well now mother, listen. I have something to tell you that you won't like at all. In fact, I'm afraid that it will be a terrible shock and you will hate it at first. But do try to get used to the idea and bring father round to it.

Alec and I are parting company. We are going to get a divorce.

I know this will horrify you: the more so because I have, perhaps mistakenly, tried very hard to conceal our unhappiness during these last years. I didn't, naturally, want anybody to know while there was still a chance of keeping things going. But the fact is, we have been quite miserable, *both of us.* We simply are unsuited to one another and unable to get on. How much of this have you guessed?

Life is so different from what we expected when we first married. Alec has quite changed, and he needs a different sort of wife. I never wanted all this money and success. I married a very nice but quite undistinguished civil servant. With my money we had quite enough to live on in a comfortable and civilised way. We had plenty of friends, our little circle, people like ourselves, amusing and well bred, not rich, but decently well off. Alec says now that they bored him. But he didn't say so at the time.

I must say it's rather hard on me that he took so long to find out what he really wanted. He says it's all his mother's fault, and that she bullied him so that he was past thirty before it ever occurred to him to call his soul his own. I dare say this is true, but I have to suffer for it.

If I had known I was marrying a professional librettist I should never have taken it on. I always loved the things

which he and Johnnie Graham wrote together: I do think he is inspired when he writes words for Johnnie's music. But I never imagined that they were going to turn into the Gilbert and Sullivan of this generation, and, when they got their first operetta produced, I was always against it. I would so much rather it had just been a hobby. I wanted it to be produced by amateurs, by their friends. When it was such an enormous success, of course I was pleased in a way, but I felt even then that there was something just a little vulgar about it all. And when, after the success of the second opera, he gave up the Civil Service, I was horrified.

Of course he has made a lot of money and is, I suppose, quite famous. But I never could feel that it was a worthwhile profession for an educated man like Alec. It isn't as if he and Johnnie were producing great works of art. They don't pretend to be; they say themselves that they are only out to provide entertainment. I cannot respect Alec as much as I did when he was at the Ministry doing an obscure, dull, but useful job, 'helping to get the world washed and dressed.' And he knows it. Can you understand this, you and father? I know you would never have breathed a word of it to me, but I always felt that you weren't quite happy about it in your heart of hearts – that you thought it a pity when he left the Ministry.

We no longer have the same friends. He seems to be completely submerged in the stage world. He is so popular and so genial. Everybody likes him and he likes everybody. Our house is perpetually crammed with people with whom I have nothing in common, who simply regard me as 'Alec's wife' if they even know me by sight, which often they don't, I really believe. They've never heard of father, or, if they have, the word 'professor' merely suggests to them a sort of stage cartoon, an absent-minded old man with a beard and a butterfly net. They *are* the most complete set of Yahoos; however, they're Alec's friends, and he has a right to his own tastes, though how a man of his brains and

sensibilities can like to hobnob with such a crew is something which I cannot understand. *My* friends, as you can imagine, don't mix with them at all well.

Reading this over, I feel it sounds rather like a list of grievances, as if I were the only sufferer. But indeed Alec has suffered equally. I'm not the right woman for him any more, and he can't be happy with me. I will tell you two things to prove this which I would never have told you if we had not decided to make a break. He does, now, drink a good deal more than he ought. Not that he's ever *drunk*, I mean; but in London he does drink all the time – he lives in a sort of genial, gregarious, alcoholic mist, not *quite* himself. That's why I'm always so thankful to get him away into the country. It's much better there. And the other thing: for some years there has been another woman. He has been pretty openly unfaithful to me. Had you heard any gossip about this? Of course, as long as we lived together I never discussed it with anybody. I ignored it. And, mind you, I don't blame him. But I think it all goes to show that I am not the right wife for him.

Then why didn't I divorce him before? Because of the children. I felt they ought to have a home, that we must all stay together as long as any decent appearance of harmony could be kept up. And now, *because* of the children, I have changed my mind. I now think that *they* would be happier if Alec and I gave up this miserable attempt. They are getting old enough to feel the strain and the tension, especially Kenneth, who quite realizes that Alec doesn't always treat me considerately, and resents it violently. A father and son can mean so much to one another; it would be terrible if they become permanently alienated. I don't want the children to grow up with a distorted idea of marriage, got from the spectacle of parents who can't get on. I think the time has come to be quite open with them about it. I shall say:

‘Your father and I have made a mistake. It’s a pity, but people do make these mistakes sometimes, and if they are candid and sensible it can be set right. It is nobody’s fault. We are not suited to one another, but we have not quarrelled, and nobody is going to be angry or bitter. We are going to part in a friendly and civilized way. You will see quite as much of both of us in the future as you always have, and everybody will be happier all round.’

Now, mother darling, do try to look at this quite rationally. Don’t just cry out that a divorce in the family is a disgrace and that such a thing has never happened to us before. Who is going to suffer? Doesn’t it mean a better life for everybody? Isn’t it really sensible? Alec can marry the woman who really suits him, I can live my own life with my own friends, and the children will grow up free from resentment and bewilderment. I know it’s very sad that my marriage is a failure. But what’s the good of pretending that it isn’t? We have both tried to make it a success and it doesn’t work.

I’m writing to tell you now because we have decided to end it all rather quickly. Alec is going off on Wednesday with the Hamiltons, on their yacht, as he does every summer. He is never coming back, and he’s going to write to me and say so, and send me the necessary evidence, so that I can divorce him. (Naturally I wouldn’t dream of dragging the other woman into it. It will be a pure matter of form.) Perhaps you had better burn this letter. Anyway, don’t show it to father; just tell him what I’ve said and try to make him see it in a sensible light. Leave out this bit about the evidence – that we have settled it all beforehand, I mean. He is so conscientious about things like income tax, etc., he might think it was collusion.

Now I must stop, as the post is just going, though I feel as if there was a great deal more to say. Do try to understand. And please don’t blame Alec. It has been quite as much my fault.

Your very loving
BETSY.

P.S. – Alec's mother knows nothing of this. We shan't tell her till it is too late for her to interfere.

Telegram from Mrs Hewitt to her daughter.

engadine horrified letter am returning england immediately entreat do nothing irrevocable till I see you expect me wales wednesday evening have said nothing to father mother.

The Grandmothers

Emily Canning, mother of Alec, was a widow and lived on Campden Hill with one old servant. But her existence was not lonely or inactive. She had a large circle of friends, varied interests, and a craving for power which preserved her from the lethargy of old age.

The desire to influence and to dominate, to play a leading part in the lives of other people, had always been her ruling passion: her talents and capacities were such that she had been able to indulge in it freely. She had beauty, charm and wit. She had the gift of creating drama, of raising the emotional temperature, of charging any relationship with an intense personal feeling. To be a friend was, for her, to be a partisan. A difference of opinion was disloyalty. People of both sexes and all ages fell easily in love with her. Those who did not were provoked to an irrational, a too violent dislike. But very few were able to remain entirely indifferent to her, or to preserve their peace of mind if once she had crossed their orbit.

She had one quality which is not infrequently found in characters of this type – the gift of second sight. Her feats of divination were well authenticated; even her enemies admitted them, while to her friends they were a source of pride. She had seen several genuine ghosts. Sometimes, when the telephone rang, she knew who was trying to speak to her before she had taken off the receiver. She had

premonitions about unexpected letters or visits, and her dreams were, beyond all doubt, prophetic.

On Tuesday night, or rather very early on Wednesday, she had a most remarkable dream. It seemed to be morning and a person was bringing in her breakfast tray. But this person was not old Maggie, her maid; it was Henrietta Hewitt, mother of Alec's wife, once her friend and now, for many years, an enemy.

Mrs Canning was furious at this intrusion, but pretended to take no notice of it and began to eat her breakfast. Presently, however, she was forced to raise her eyes. Henrietta's face was hanging over the end of the bed. The body seemed to have vanished; that long, stupid, mulish face hung solitary in the air, like a mask. It looked pinched and grey. Eyes and nose were red and the pale lips were working. A torrent of words came out of the mouth, every one of which was inaudible. Tears poured down the haggard cheeks. But no sound came to Mrs Canning, who stared and said coldly:

'I think you will regret this.'

Which she had said before at the end of their great fight years ago. And now she could hear faint snatches of words:

'… So ill … my temperature is going up … up … so ill … cold wind … I can't go on … I can't….'

'I'll make you sorry for this,' cried Mrs Canning fiercely.

Suddenly she threw a large card-case which was there. The face made a ghastly, shrill twittering noise and vanished. In an abrupt transition to the waking world she was sitting up and staring at the foot of the bed, where no face was. Morning, early sunlight, filled the room. London sparrows were making a terrific noise, twittering in the plane tree outside the window.

After a few seconds she threw off the nightmare bewilderment and realized that she had been dreaming. The clock on her dressing-table stood at a quarter to six.

She lay back on her pillows, and thought how odd a dream it was, and wished, as all dreamers do, to tell somebody about it immediately. Gradually the conviction gained upon her that this was one of her prophetic dreams. Today she would certainly receive a visit from Henrietta, and the unlikelihood of the thing only made her the more positive. She began to be agreeably excited, already telling the story of it to her friends.

'I hadn't the least reason to suppose she was coming. I knew the Hewitts were in Switzerland. And … as you know … there is no love lost between us … oh, yes … it's all old history now … one tries to forget it … but Henrietta was unforgivable … she behaved abominably….'

Twelve years ago Henrietta, her friend, her ally, had suddenly turned against her. She had come and said the most monstrous things, come with a card-case, too, which was the height of absurdity between intimates and co-grandmothers. The hen-witted creature must have thought that this touch of formality would give her confidence. An inveterate fidget, she kept turning it round and round in her hands as she talked, giving her antagonist a chance for a jibe.

'I see you hold all the cards,' Mrs Canning had exclaimed.

Whereat poor Henrietta had flushed and started and dropped her case on the floor. She was easily routed. But unfortunately the jibe had a double edge. She did hold all the cards. From a spate of ill-chosen, incoherent words her meaning became clear.

'… Young people do resent interference. One must let them make their own mistakes, though, of course, Betsy has always been a very practical girl; still, there are many occasions when I've wished she would let me advise her: that nursery-maid, for instance, I could have told her. I've had so much experience of girls from orphanages, I mean, it's only one instance, and indeed, dear Emily, you mustn't think that I don't sympathize and understand. We mothers

are all the same, and it does seem very hard, because we only want to help. But, you see, in Wales there is very good bathing.'

'My dear, I quite believe it. But are we talking of Wales?'

'Oh, yes. That's why I came. You see, this cottage is quite a bargain … right on the coast, an ideal holiday house. Betsy knows it; she's stayed there. It belongs to our friends the Aylmers. You may have met them? Dr Aylmer, of Corpus …'

'They want to buy it?' interrupted Mrs Canning sharply.

'They … they've bought it.'

They had. And sent Henrietta with a card case to say so. They had behaved so badly that they were ashamed, and took shelter behind Betsy's imbecile mother.

None of Mrs Canning's friends could believe their ears when they heard of it. For the whole world knew that she was planning to give them a perfect holiday house, a delightful old place in Gloucestershire. It was, in name, to be her house. She would live there, in two rooms, and run it for them; but they were to come whenever they liked, and send the children whenever the nursery party was in need of a change of air. They would have no holiday expenses and Betsy would be freed from the burdens of housekeeping, so that it was an ideal arrangement for them.

Now she learnt from Henrietta that they had never liked the plan. They wanted a cottage of their own. Of course, in a way, she had known that, but they were wrong to want it, and she had managed to ignore their tentative objections. For this reason she had hurried on the negotiations for the purchase of Marstock Hall without consulting them, hoping to have concluded the whole business before they had time to protest.

In her dismay she made a serious blunder. She said:

'They can't. It's impossible. I've bought Marstock Hall.'

This was not, unfortunately, true. She had been put to great trouble and expense. She had been down to Gloucestershire several times, had paid a surveyor, and had put the Bedford Gardens house in the hands of an agent. All her friends had been apprised of her intended removal from London and had duly commented upon Alec's luck in possessing such a mother. But she had not, actually, signed any agreement, and it was still possible to withdraw from the purchase. This she was obliged, in the end, to admit. To be thus put out of countenance made her more angry than anything else could.

'Why have they sent you?' she asked.

Henrietta explained that she had not been sent. She had come unprompted, because poor Betsy was really dreading the explanation, and it was bad for her to be upset while she was nursing dear little Daphne.

'You bully people so, Emily dear. You always have, ever since you were a child. I must say it, because I think it is having a very bad effect on Alec and Betsy. I know you mean the very best, it's only because you're fond of them, but you not only criticize people, you try to actually force them…. Betsy is very independent, and you can't expect Alec to put your wishes first now he's married. You spoil their happiness….'

Wrath must vent itself. If no other breast is available it will plunge a dagger into its own. Mrs Canning felt herself pass the sentinels of conscience with a fatal, light-hearted ecstasy. She was quite free. Nothing, no scruple, held her back, and she could say what she liked.

'Perhaps,' she began, almost gaily, 'you would like to hear some criticisms of Betsy….'

'Oh, no, no … no, I shouldn't,' protested Betsy's mother.

'I don't mean merely mine. It may surprise you to know that I'm not the only person who considers her very conceited and very selfish. In fact most of our friends … please don't imagine that everybody thinks Alec as lucky as

you do. She's hopelessly spoilt. You've allowed her to grow up with a fantastic idea of her own importance. Of course she's very pretty, and, being her father's daughter, people have made much of her. But …'

'Oh dear, oh dear,' wailed Henrietta, bowing under the storm. 'I knew you'd be very angry, Emily. I'm sure I don't wonder. It's so disappointing for you, and they ought to have been firmer …'

'I'm not angry,' Emily asserted, 'I merely feel you ought to know.'

Conscious of frantic folly, but entirely delivered into the hands of her bad angel, she repeated every unkind thing which she had ever heard about her daughter-in-law.

'… and as for May Cameron, who is quite devoted to you and Arthur, I can assure you that, when she heard of the engagement, she was in despair. She said to me, quite candidly: 'Alec is much too good for her. His whole life will be sacrificed.' I said: 'Oh, she'll improve.' And May said: "No. The conceit is too ingrained. They've taught that girl to regard herself as something infinitely rare and precious. She'll always regard him as a sort of Prince Consort."'

'May Cameron … said that?' gasped Henrietta.

Wrath was satisfied by Henrietta's sick, heart-shattered look. The wound had been dealt and the giddy frenzy sub sided. Mrs Canning had got what she wanted, if to give pain had really been her desire. Henrietta was creeping away.

Something else must be said – something that would bring them back from the timeless regions of passion to the actual occasion. The interview should end on some calm and rational pronouncement. She said, as they parted:

'I think you will regret this.'

So Henrietta went home, grievously wounded, but with an unsullied conscience. She had been quite honest, quite sincere, in her attempt to speak out. No malice had inspired her; she only wished to do her duty. To forgive May

Cameron had seemed at first impossible, and, in great indignation, she had told her husband so. But he had convinced her that this was unreasonable. Betsy, he said, was extremely conceited. A fault which had long been obvious to her parents could hardly be overlooked by their friends. Had Henrietta never criticized the Cameron girls? Had she not frequently commented upon their thick ankles and their tendency to acne? Would not May Cameron resent this if she knew? Thus he induced her to forgive her friend. She did so, felt a great deal happier, began to be more sorry than ever for poor Emily, and forgot the whole incident.

Emily Canning fared worse, for her conscience could not help her. She, who had lied about Marstock Hall, who had recklessly betrayed many confidences, could not forget so easily. Moreover, she had nobody to tell her that she was being unreasonable. Her partisan friends were violently indignant on her behalf. But nobody could comfort her, or know how sorry she was to think that she had said such cruel things to Henrietta.

And now no ordinary justice could redress the balance between them. Only what she called poetic justice, by which she meant some unexpected turn of events which should prove that she had been, after all, in the right. She had said that they would regret it. If ever they showed signs of doing so, if ever they were forced to come to her for help or advice, that would be poetic justice.

I only wanted to devote my whole life to them, she thought. But they aren't grateful. They won't let me…. I'm so very lonely. They don't seem to think of that.

A heavy footstep passed her doorway and went down the stairs.

Maggie, she thought, glancing again at the clock.

Time had passed. It was after seven.

Lazy old thing! She thinks I shan't know how late she is. I'll go down and tickle her up.

This maid and mistress adored one another and squabbled continually. Maggie was doing the hall. When she heard Mrs Canning's door open she stuck out her lower lip and resolved instantly not to be tickled up. A slight skirmish before breakfast was not unusual, for Emily Canning was a bad sleeper, woke early, and was bored unless she could be up and doing.

'Good morning, Maggie!' came a voice from the top of the stairs.

'Good morning'm.'

The two old women eyed one another warily. Maggie was sixty-five, fat, rosy and asthmatic. Her mistress, though three years older, had retained a slim and girlish grace. In this dim light she might have been taken for quite a young woman. A white dressing gown wrapped her softly, and her face was just a pale triangle in which her green eyes flashed with an unquenchable fire. A black chenille net hid the tell-tale grey of her hair.

She opened fire:

'I suppose it's because you are late this morning that you ruin my nice floor. Just look how streaky the polish is!'

'It's the mop,' said Maggie. 'They go like that when they're worn out.'

'It was new in the spring.'

'No'm. Excuse me. Not new it wasn't. You got it at the St Mary Abbott's jumble.'

'You put on too much polish.'

'I have to. The more wore out it is, the more polish I have to put on. And then again, the more polish I put on the more wore out it gets.'

Mrs Canning lost time while she wondered if this was true. Maggie nipped in with an indulgent offer of a cup of tea….

'I've been awake a long time,' said Mrs Canning. 'I …'

She remembered her dream and realized that she must put it immediately on record. Horrid old Maggie had shown

signs of disbelief, occasionally, when she boasted of her own supernatural powers. If she mentioned this dream and it came true, as she was sure it would, there would be an end to that nonsense. The question of the mop could be shelved.

'Mrs Hewitt may be coming here today,' she said briskly. 'Possibly to breakfast. Have we any bacon?'

Maggie, who also knew that the Hewitts were in Switzerland, controlled her countenance with some difficulty.

'Yes'm,' she said. 'Four rashers.'

'I have had such a vivid dream that I feel sure there is something in it. She is on her way to see me.'

'Yes'm.'

'Oh, Maggie! You are an odious woman, really. I do think you might be a little bit surprised.'

'I'm ever so surprised.'

'I know you don't believe in my dreams. But you will admit that it will be very strange if she really does come this morning.'

'Very strange indeed, 'm.'

'You'll admit there's something in it?'

'I never said there was nothing in it,' declared Maggie. 'But I do say that you add on to it afterwards....'

The front door bell rang and she moved away down the hall to answer it. Mrs Canning, scuttling up the stairs out of sight, remained listening.

She could hear Maggie removing the door chain which was put up at night. Now the door was open. There was a mumble of talk. Somebody was being ushered into the house.

'She's been expecting you, 'm,' Maggie was saying.

Mrs Canning gave a little excited skip. She was psychic! She was! This proved it. This would make a wonderful tale.

Peeping over the bannisters she saw Henrietta's mule face in the hall, exactly as she had dreamt of it, except that

it was now surmounted by a sad-looking hat. All resentment, all memory of old injuries, vanished for the moment. She flew down the stairs, full of kindly welcome, and so pleased with herself, so overjoyed that she had trusted to her instinct and prophesied to Maggie. Now she had a witness, and Maggie would have to eat humble pie. Oh, she was pleased with herself. Dear Henrietta! But how ill … how frightfully ill….

'Emily! Don't come very near me. I've got influenza.'

'Oh, you poor thing!'

'My temperature has been going up all night. I won't stay…. I'm going to a nursing home. It's the only thing. You remember that place in Devonshire Street where Arthur went when he had his operation, very conveniently there was a telephone in my bedroom at the hotel so I rang them up, but I had to see you, I couldn't talk to you over the telephone, you never feel it's really private. I can't go on. I can't go to Wales. The Paddington Hotel it was; I went straight there when I got to London last night because I meant to catch the 11.5 this morning. Keep well away. You might put a handkerchief over your face with disinfectant. Of course it may not be catching, only a chill. The beds were very damp in Switzerland.'

Henrietta had sunk down upon a chair in the hall. She kept waving the other two away, refusing to go upstairs into the drawing-room.

'I'd better not move about much,' she explained.

Fever had made her a little light-headed. But at last they got her on to the drawing-room sofa, and Maggie went off to make a cup of tea. She would not, even then, explain herself until Mrs Canning had sprinkled lysol over a large handkerchief and put it on as a kind of mask. This was annoying.

What guys we both look, thought Emily. But I can make it sound very funny when I tell it. And I dreamt about the

temperature. Yes, I did. But I forgot to tell Maggie, idiot that I was. Now she'll say that I've added it on afterwards.

Then, as Henrietta babbled on about going to Wales, a sudden fear snatched at her heart.

'The most dreadful thing…. I rushed back by the next train….'

'Henrietta! Are they hurt? Are they ill? Is anyone …'

'No, no, nothing *dreadful*.'

This distinction was perfectly clear to Mrs Canning, who once more prepared to enjoy herself. But, as Maggie came in with the tea at that moment, she thought that she had better chalk up her score as a prophetess.

'I knew you were coming. You appeared to me in a dream last night. I told Maggie. Didn't I, Maggie?'

'What?' asked Henrietta plaintively. 'I can't hear you inside that handkerchief.'

'I dreamt you were coming.'

'How odd! Do keep that handkerchief over your mouth. I can hear if you speak distinctly.'

As soon as Maggie had left them Henrietta came to the point.

'They say they're going to be divorced.'

'Oh! What? Not divorced? It's not true!'

'Yes! Yes! Betsy wrote and told me.'

'But why? Why? Is it because of that Mrs Thing? She can't! Not after all these years. She must have known. She must have condoned it.'

'Mrs Thing?'

'Mrs Adams.'

'Who is … oh, I see. I didn't know her name. Betsy didn't mention it.'

'Then it is because of her?'

'No. Not altogether. It was a very great shock to me. I knew nothing about it, not a word.'

'Really, Henrietta? But everyone knows. It's been going on for ages.'

‘I think it’s dreadful for Betsy. Surely you don’t …’

‘Of course I don’t. I blame Alec very much for it. But one can’t interfere, can one?’

This little dig was lost upon Henrietta who merely said:

‘I suppose not. Mrs Adams … what … what sort of person …?’

‘I’ve only seen her once,’ said Mrs Canning. ‘She was pointed out to me at the theatre. Very young, very fair, and as hard as nails. They tell me she’s a wanton creature. There are plenty of others besides Alec. But she made up her mind to get him and got him. It was on her side rather than his. He could have been kept out of it perfectly well, if only Betsy …’

‘But he wants to marry her.’

‘Good heavens! He can’t. How awful. Henrietta! It must be stopped. He mustn’t be allowed to do anything so frantic. Does Betsy say … what does she say exactly?’

Mrs Hewitt felt her head go round. Her throat was so sore that she could scarcely speak. To remember what, exactly, Betsy had said became more and more difficult. She fumbled in her handbag and found the letter, and then, while she was looking for her glasses, Emily took it away. A faint misgiving assailed her, for she half remembered that Betsy had not written very kindly about Alec’s mother. But she was too ill to protest. If Emily would read the letter it might be better. There would then be quite an interval when no speech, or thought, or effort would be demanded. One could lie back and suffer.

Her malady seemed to advance in definite stages, like a car changing gear. All night, while she lay tossing and debating, she had been unbearably hot. Now she was cold. She had never been so cold.

A voice reached her ear. She opened her eyes once more to look at the mobbed head of Emily. An angry, impatient voice came out from behind the handkerchief.

‘This is all nonsense. It’s as plain as a pikestaff. He doesn’t want the divorce. It’s she … she’s persuaded him …’

‘You think so?’

‘Indeed I do. There’s something behind all this. Something she doesn’t care to admit. She talks of being free to lead her own life with her friends … oh, she’s going to get more out of it than that. She’s talked him into it. He’s so weak, poor Alec.’

‘But it must be stopped,’ wailed Mrs Hewitt, who had begun to shiver violently.

‘Certainly it must. Do they know you are coming?’

‘Yes, I wired. But I can’t possibly go. I … you … must wire again….’

‘That’s all right. Don’t worry, Henrietta. Leave it all to me.’

The triumph in Mrs Canning’s voice rang out unmistakably, through the handkerchief. She could not but see the hand of Providence in all this. For poor Henrietta would have been quite the wrong person to deal with such a situation. She would most certainly have made a mess of it. She would have argued with Alec and Betsy, uniting them against her by tackling them together, when the obvious stratagem would be to divide them. This plan of a divorce was the outcome of some friendly agreement … Therefore, they must be made to quarrel. Alec must be provoked into such resentment that he would refuse to give his wife her freedom. He had been talked into it, probably, against his better judgment. As soon as one knew what was behind it all, what Betsy was really after, he could be talked out of it. Did Alec know? Had she been quite candid with him? If she had not, and he found it out …

Whatever it is, thought Mrs Canning, I’ll find it out. I’ll show her up.

She looked at her suffering companion who was now in the throes of a severe rigor. I think you will regret this, she

had said, and she was right. All this came of letting Betsy get so spoilt. This, she thought, is Poetic Justice.