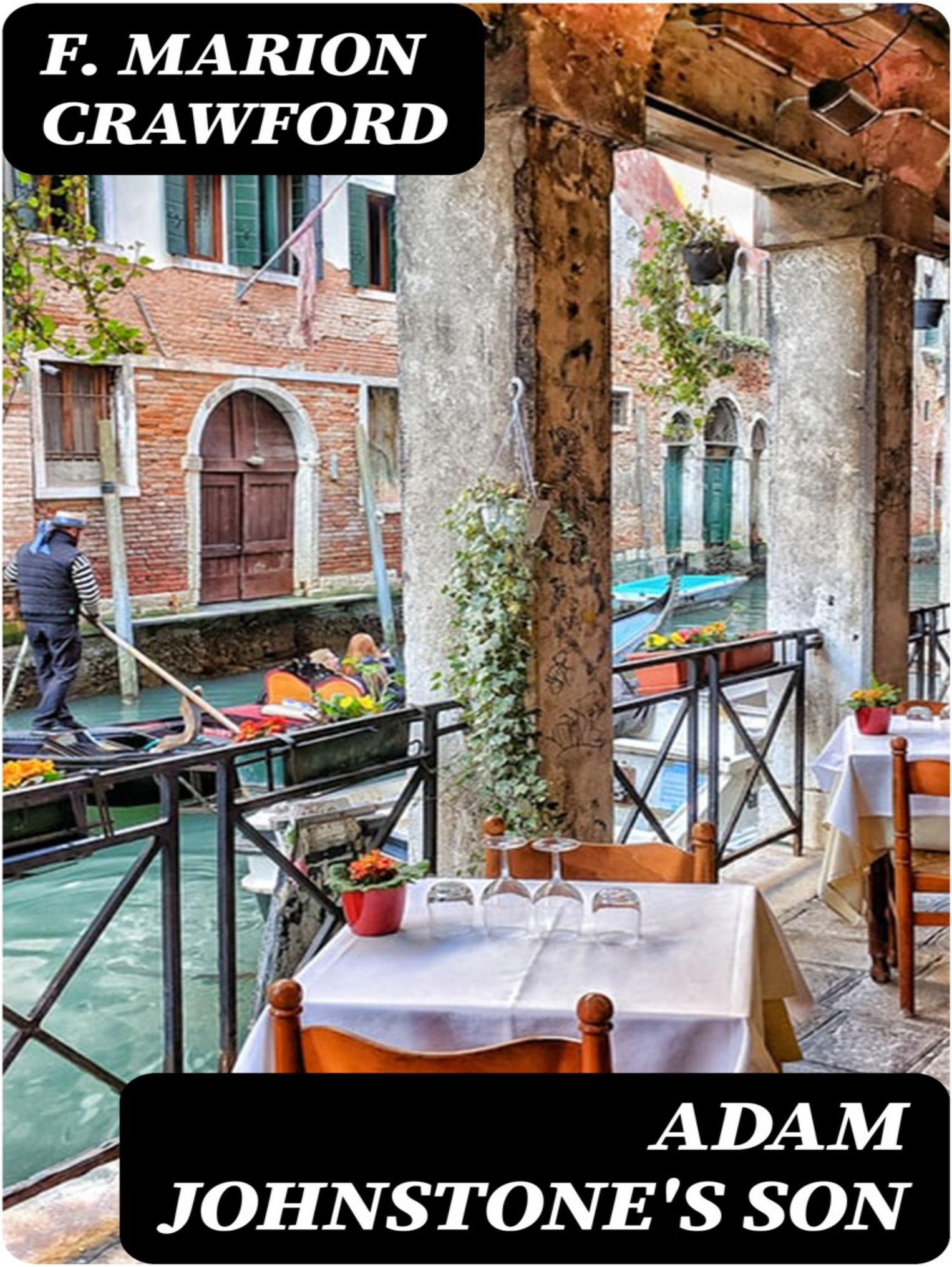
F. MARION CRAWFORD



ADAM JOHNSTONE'S SON

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

“I sometimes think that one’s past life is written in a foreign language,” said Mrs. Bowring, shutting the book she held, but keeping the place with one smooth, thin forefinger, while her still, blue eyes turned from her daughter’s face towards the hazy hills that hemmed the sea thirty miles to the southward. “When one wants to read it, one finds ever so many words which one cannot understand, and one has to look them out in a sort of unfamiliar dictionary, and try to make sense of the sentences as best one can. Only the big things are clear.”

Clare glanced at her mother, smiling innocently and half mechanically, without much definite expression, and quite without curiosity. Youth can be in sympathy with age, while not understanding it, while not suspecting, perhaps, that there is anything to understand beyond the streaked hair and the pale glance and the little torture-lines which paint the portrait of fifty years for the eyes of twenty.

Every woman knows the calendar of her own face. The lines are years, one for such and such a year, one for such and such another; the streaks are months, perhaps, or weeks, or sometimes hours, where the tear-storms have bleached the brown, the black, or the gold. “This little wrinkle—it was so very little then!” she says. “It came when I doubted for a day. There is a shadow there, just at each temple, where the cloud passed, when my sun went out. The bright hair grew lower on my forehead. It is worn away, as though by a crown, that was not of gold. There are

hollows there, near the ears, on each side, since that week when love was done to death before my eyes and died—intestate—leaving his substance to be divided amongst indifferent heirs. They wrangle for what he has left, but he himself is gone, beyond hearing or caring, and, thank God, beyond suffering. But the marks are left."

Youth looks on and sees alike the ill-healed wounds of the martyrdom and the rough scars of sin's scourges, and does not understand. Clare Bowring smiled, without definite expression, just because her mother had spoken and seemed to ask for sympathy; and then she looked away for a few moments. She had a bit of work in her hands, a little bag which she was making out of a piece of old Italian damask, to hold a needle-case and thread and scissors. She had stopped sewing, and instinctively waited before beginning again, as though to acknowledge by a little affectionate deference that her mother had said something serious and had a right to expect attention. But she did not answer, for she could not understand.

Her own young life was vividly clear to her; so very vividly clear, that it sometimes made her think of a tiresome chromolithograph. All the facts and thoughts of it were so near that she knew them by heart, as people come to know the patterns of the wall-paper in the room they inhabit. She had nothing to hide, nothing to regret, nothing which she thought she should care very much to recall, though she remembered everything. A girl is very young when she can recollect distinctly every frock she has had, the first long one, and the second, and the third; and the first ball gown, and the second, and no third, because that is still in the

future, and a particular pair of gloves which did not fit, and a certain pair of shoes she wore so long because they were so comfortable, and the precise origin of every one of the few trinkets and bits of jewellery she possesses. That was Clare Bowring’s case. She could remember everything and everybody in her life. But her father was not in her memories, and there was a little motionless grey cloud in the place where he should have been. He had been a soldier, and had been killed in an obscure skirmish with black men, in one of England’s obscure but expensive little wars. Death is always very much the same thing, and it seems unfair that the guns of Balaclava should still roar “glory” while the black man’s quick spear-thrust only spells “dead,” without comment. But glory in death is even more a matter of luck than fame in life. At all events, Captain Bowring, as brave a gentleman as ever faced fire, had perished like so many other brave gentlemen of his kind, in a quiet way, without any fuss, beyond killing half a dozen or so of his assailants, and had left his widow the glory of receiving a small pension in return for his blood, and that was all. Some day, when the dead are reckoned, and the manner of their death noted, poor Bowring may count for more than some of his friends who died at home from a constitutional inability to enjoy all the good things fortune set before them, complicated by a disposition incapable of being satisfied with only a part of the feast. But at the time of this tale they counted for more than he; for they had been constrained to leave behind them what they could not consume, while he, poor man, had left very little besides the aforesaid interest in the investment of his blood, in the form

of a pension to his widow, and the small grey cloud in the memory of his girl-child, in the place where he should have been. For he had been killed when she had been a baby.

The mother and daughter were lonely, if not alone in the world; for when one has no money to speak of, and no relations at all, the world is a lonely place, regarded from the ordinary point of view—which is, of course, the true one. They had no home in England, and they generally lived abroad, more or less, in one or another of the places of society's departed spirits, such as Florence. They had not, however, entered into Limbo without hope, since they were able to return to the social earth when they pleased, and to be alive again, and the people they met abroad sometimes asked them to stop with them at home, recognising the fact that they were still socially living and casting shadows. They were sure of half a hundred friendly faces in London and of half a dozen hospitable houses in the country; and that is not little for people who have nothing wherewith to buy smiles and pay for invitations. Clare had more than once met women of her mother's age and older, who had looked at her rather thoughtfully and longer than had seemed quite natural, saying very quietly that her father had been "a great friend of theirs." But those were not the women whom her mother liked best, and Clare sometimes wondered whether the little grey cloud in her memory, which represented her father, might not be there to hide away something more human than an ideal. Her mother spoke of him, sometimes gravely, sometimes with a far-away smile, but never tenderly. The smile did not mean much, Clare thought. People often spoke of dead people with a sort of

faint look of uncertain beatitude—the same which many think appropriate to the singing of hymns. The absence of anything like tenderness meant more. The gravity was only natural and decent.

“Your father was a brave man,” Mrs. Bowring sometimes said. “Your father was very handsome,” she would say. “He was very quick-tempered,” she perhaps added.

But that was all. Clare had a friend whose husband had died young and suddenly, and her friend’s heart was broken. She did not speak as Mrs. Bowring did. When the latter said that her past life seemed to be written in a foreign language, Clare did not understand, but she knew that the something of which the translation was lost, as it were, belonged to her father. She always felt an instinctive desire to defend him, and to make her mother feel more sympathy for his memory. Yet, at the same time, she loved her mother in such a way as made her feel that if there had been any trouble, her father must have been in the wrong. Then she was quite sure that she did not understand, and she held her tongue, and smiled vaguely, and waited a moment before she went on with her work.

Besides, she was not at all inclined to argue anything at present. She had been ill, and her mother was worn out with taking care of her, and they had come to Amalfi to get quite well and strong again in the air of the southern spring. They had settled themselves for a couple of months in the queer hotel, which was once a monastery, perched high up under the still higher overhanging rocks, far above the beach and the busy little town; and now, in the May afternoon, they sat side by side under the trellis of vines on the terraced walk,

their faces turned southward, in the shade of the steep mountain behind them; the sea was blue at their feet, and quite still, but farther out the westerly breeze that swept past the Conca combed it to crisp roughness; then it was less blue to southward, and gradually it grew less real, till it lost colour and melted into a sky-haze that almost hid the southern mountains and the lizard-like head of the far Licosa.

A bit of coarse faded carpet lay upon the ground under the two ladies' feet, and the shady air had a soft green tinge in it from the young vine-leaves overhead. At first sight one would have said that both were delicate, if not ill. Both were fair, though in different degrees, and both were pale and quiet, and looked a little weary.

The young girl sat in the deep straw chair, hatless, with bare white hands that held her work. Her thick flaxen hair, straightly parted and smoothed away from its low growth on the forehead, half hid small fresh ears, unpierced. Long lashes, too white for beauty, cast very faint light shadows as she looked down; but when she raised the lids, the dark-blue eyes were bright, with wide pupils and a straight look, quick to fasten, slow to let go, never yet quite softened, and yet never mannishly hard. But, in its own way, perhaps, there is no look so hard as the look of maiden innocence can be. There can even be something terrible in its unconscious stare. There is the spirit of God's own fearful directness in it. Half quibbling with words perhaps, but surely with half truth, one might say that youth "is," while all else "has been"; and that youth alone possesses the present, too innocent to know it all, yet too selfish even to doubt of what is its own—

too sure of itself to doubt anything, to fear anything, or even truly to pray for anything. There is no equality and no community in virtue; it is only original sin that makes us all equal and human. Old Lucifer, fallen, crushed, and damned, knows the worth of forgiveness—not young Michael, flintily hard and monumentally upright in his steel coat, a terror to the devil himself. And youth can have something of that archangelic rigidity. Youth is not yet quite human.

But there was much in Clare Bowring's face which told that she was to be quite human some day. The lower features were not more than strong enough—the curved lips would be fuller before long, the small nostrils, the gentle chin, were a little sharper than was natural, now, from illness, but round in outline and not over prominent; and the slender throat was very delicate and feminine. Only in the dark-blue eyes there was still that unabashed, quick glance and long-abiding straightness, and innocent hardness, and the unconscious selfishness of the uncontaminated.

Standing on her feet, she would have seemed rather tall than short, though really but of average height. Seated, she looked tall, and her glance was a little downward to most people's eyes. Just now she was too thin, and seemed taller than she was. But the fresh light was already in the young white skin, and there was a soft colour in the lobes of the little ears, as the white leaves of daisies sometimes blush all round their tips.

The nervous white hands held the little bag lightly, and twined it and sewed it deftly, for Clare was clever with her fingers. Possibly they looked even a little whiter than they were, by contrast with the dark stuff of her dress, and illness

had made them shrink at the lower part, robbing them of their natural strength, though not of their grace. There is a sort of refinement, not of taste, nor of talent, but of feeling and thought, and it shows itself in the hands of those who have it, more than in any feature of the face, in a sort of very true proportion between the hand and its fingers, between each finger and its joints, each joint and each nail; a something which says that such a hand could not do anything ignoble, could not take meanly, nor strike cowardly, nor press falsely; a quality of skin neither rough and coarse, nor over smooth like satin, but cool and pleasant to the touch as fine silk that is closely woven. The fingers of such hands are very straight and very elastic, but not supple like young snakes, as some fingers are, and the cushion of the hand is not over full nor heavy, nor yet shrunken and undeveloped as in the wasted hands of old Asiatic races.

In outward appearance there was that sort of inherited likeness between mother and daughter which is apt to strike strangers more than persons of the same family. Mrs. Bowring had been beautiful in her youth—far more beautiful than Clare—but her face had been weaker, in spite of the regularity of the features and their faultless proportion. Life had given them an acquired strength, but not of the lovely kind, and the complexion was faded, and the hair had darkened, and the eyes had paled. Some faces are beautified by suffering. Mrs. Bowring’s face was not of that class. It was as though a thin, hard mask had been formed and closely moulded upon it, as the action of the sea overlays some sorts of soft rock with a surface thin as paper

but as hard as granite. In spite of the hardness, the features were not really strong. There was refinement in them, however, of the same kind which the daughter had, and as much, though less pleasing. A fern—a spray of maiden's-hair—loses much of its beauty but none of its refinement when petrified in limestone or made fossil in coal.

As they sat there, side by side, mother and daughter, where they had sat every day for a week or more, they had very little to say. They had exhausted the recapitulation of Clare's illness, during the first days of her convalescence. It was not the first time that they had been in Amalfi, and they had enumerated its beauties to each other, and renewed their acquaintance with it from a distance, looking down from the terrace upon the low-lying town, and the beach and the painted boats, and the little crowd that swarmed out now and then like ants, very busy and very much in a hurry, running hither and thither, disappearing presently as by magic, and leaving the shore to the sun and the sea. The two had spoken of a little excursion to Ravello, and they meant to go thither as soon as they should be strong enough; but that was not yet. And meanwhile they lived through the quiet days, morning, meal times, evening, bed time, and round again, through the little hotel's programme of possibility; eating what was offered them, but feasting royally on air and sunshine and spring sweetness; moistening their lips in strange southern wines, but drinking deep draughts of the rich southern air-life; watching the people of all sorts and of many conditions, who came and stayed a day and went away again, but social only in each other's lives, and even that by sympathy rather than in

speech. A corner of life’s show was before them, and they kept their places on the vine-sheltered terrace and looked on. But it seemed as though nothing could ever possibly happen there to affect the direction of their own quietly moving existence.

Seeing that her daughter did not say anything in answer to the remark about the past being written in a foreign language, Mrs. Bowring looked at the distant sky-haze thoughtfully for a few moments, then opened her book again where her thin forefinger had kept the place, and began to read. There was no disappointment in her face at not being understood, for she had spoken almost to herself and had expected no reply. No change of expression softened or accentuated the quiet hardness which overspread her naturally gentle face. But the thought was evidently still present in her mind, for her attention did not fix itself upon her book, and presently she looked at her daughter, as the latter bent her head over the little bag she was making.

The young girl felt her mother’s eyes upon her, looked up herself, and smiled faintly, almost mechanically, as before. It was a sort of habit they both had—a way of acknowledging one another’s presence in the world. But this time it seemed to Clare that there was a question in the look, and after she had smiled she spoke.

“No,” she said, “I don’t understand how anybody can forget the past. It seems to me that I shall always remember why I did things, said things, and thought things. I should, if I lived a hundred years, I’m quite sure. ”

“Perhaps you have a better memory than I,” answered Mrs. Bowring. “But I don’t think it is exactly a question of memory either. I can remember what I said, and did, and thought, well—twenty years ago. But it seems to me very strange that I should have thought, and spoken, and acted, just as I did. After all isn’t it natural? They tell us that our bodies are quite changed in less time than that.”

“Yes—but the soul does not change,” said Clare with conviction.

“The soul—”

Mrs. Bowring repeated the word, but said nothing more, and her still, blue eyes wandered from her daughter’s face and again fixed themselves on an imaginary point of the far southern distance.

“At least,” said Clare, “I was always taught so.”

She smiled again, rather coldly, as though admitting that such teaching might not be infallible after all.

“It is best to believe it,” said her mother quietly, but in a colourless voice. “Besides,” she added, with a change of tone, “I do believe it, you know. One is always the same, in the main things. It is the point of view that changes. The best picture in the world does not look the same in every light, does it? ”

“No, I suppose not. You may like it in one light and not in another, and in one place and not in another.”

“Or at one time of life, and not at another,” added Mrs. Bowring, thoughtfully.

“I can’t imagine that.” Clare paused a moment. “Of course you are thinking of people,” she continued presently, with a little more animation. “One always means people,

when one talks in that way. And that is what I cannot quite understand. It seems to me that if I liked people once I should always like them."

Her mother looked at her.

"Yes—perhaps you would," she said, and she relapsed into silence.

Clare's colour did not change. No particular person was in her thoughts, and she had, as it were, given her own general and inexperienced opinion of her own character, quite honestly and without affectation.

"I don't know which are the happier," said Mrs. Bowring at last, "the people who change, or the people who can't."

"You mean faithful or unfaithful people, I suppose," observed the young girl with grave innocence.

A very slight flush rose in Mrs. Bowring's thin cheeks, and the quiet eyes grew suddenly hard, but Clare was busy with her work again and did not see.

"Those are big words," said the older woman in a low voice.

"Well—yes—of course!" answered Clare. "So they ought to be! It is always the main question, isn't it? Whether you can trust a person or not, I mean."

"That is one question. The other is, whether the person deserves to be trusted."

"Oh—it's the same thing!"

"Not exactly."

"You know what I mean, mother. Besides, I don't believe that any one who can't trust is really to be trusted. Do you?"

"My dear Clare!" exclaimed Mrs. Bowring. "You can't put life into a nutshell, like that!"

“No. I suppose not, though if a thing is true at all it must be always true.”

“Saving exceptions.”

“Are there any exceptions to truth?” asked Clare incredulously. “Truth isn’t grammar—nor the British Constitution.”

“No. But then, we don’t know everything. What we call truth is what we know. It is only what we know. All that we don’t know, but which is, is true, too—especially, all that we don’t know about people with whom we have to live. ”

“Oh—if people have secrets!” The young girl laughed idly. “But you and I, for instance, mother—we have no secrets from each other, have we? Well? Why should any two people who love each other have secrets? And if they have none, why, then, they know all that there is to be known about one another, and each trusts the other, and has a right to be trusted, because everything is known—and everything is the whole truth. It seems to me that is simple enough, isn’t it?”

Mrs. Bowring laughed in her turn. It was rather a hard little laugh, but Clare was used to the sound of it, and joined in it, feeling that she had vanquished her mother in argument, and settled one of the most important questions of life for ever.

“What a pretty steamer!” exclaimed Mrs. Bowring suddenly.

“It’s a yacht,” said Clare after a moment. “The flag is English, too. I can see it distinctly.”

She laid down her work, and her mother closed her book upon her forefinger again, and they watched the graceful

white vessel as she glided slowly in from the Conca, which she had rounded while they had been talking.

“It’s very big, for a yacht,” observed Mrs. Bowring. “They are coming here. ”

“They have probably come round from Naples to spend a day,” said Clare. “We are sure to have them up here. What a nuisance!”

“Yes. Everybody comes up here who comes to Amalfi at all. I hope they won’t stay long.”

“There is no fear of that,” answered Clare. “I heard those people saying the other day that this is not a place where a vessel can lie any length of time. You know how the sea sometimes breaks on the beach.”

Mrs. Bowring and her daughter desired of all things to be quiet. The visitors who came, stayed a few days at the hotel, and went away again, were as a rule tourists or semi-invalids in search of a climate, and anything but noisy. But people coming in a smart English yacht would probably be society people, and as such Mrs. Bowring wished that they would keep away. They would behave as though the place belonged to them, so long as they remained; they would get all the attention of the proprietor and of the servants for the time being; and they would make everybody feel shabby and poor.

The Bowrings were poor, indeed, but they were not shabby. It was perhaps because they were well aware that nobody could mistake them for average tourists that they resented the coming of a party which belonged to what is called society. Mrs. Bowring had a strong aversion to making new acquaintances, and even disliked being thrown into the

proximity of people who might know friends of hers, who might have heard of her, and who might talk about her and her daughter. Clare said that her mother's shyness in this respect was almost morbid; but she had unconsciously caught a little of it herself, and, like her mother, she was often quite uselessly on her guard against strangers, of the kind whom she might possibly be called upon to know, though she was perfectly affable and at her ease with those whom she looked upon as undoubtedly her social inferiors.

They were not mistaken in their prediction that the party from the yacht would come up to the Cappuccini. Half an hour after the yacht had dropped anchor the terrace was invaded. They came up in twos and threes, nearly a dozen of them, men and women, smart-looking people with healthy, sun-burnt faces, voices loud from the sea as voices become on a long voyage—or else very low indeed. By contrast with the frequenters of Amalfi they all seemed to wear overpoweringly good clothes and perfectly new hats and caps, and their russet shoes were resplendent. They moved as though everything belonged to them, from the wild crests of the hills above to the calm blue water below, and the hotel servants did their best to foster the agreeable illusion. They all wanted chairs, and tables, and things to drink, and fruit. One very fair little lady with hard, restless eyes, and clad in white serge, insisted upon having grapes, and no one could convince her that grapes were not ripe in May.

"It's quite absurd!" she objected. "Of course they're ripe! We had the most beautiful grapes at breakfast at Leo

Cairngorm’s the other day, so of course they must have them here. Brook! Do tell the man not to be absurd!”

“Man!” said the member of the party she had last addressed. “Do not be absurd!”

“Sì, Signore,” replied the black-whiskered Amalfitan servant with alacrity.

“You see!” cried the little lady triumphantly. “I told you so! You must insist with these people. You can always get what you want. Brook, where’s my fan?”

She settled upon a straw chair—like a white butterfly. The others walked on towards the end of the terrace, but the young man whom she called Brook stood beside her, slowly lighting a cigarette, not five paces from Mrs. Bowring and Clare.

“I’m sure I don’t know where your fan is,” he said, with a short laugh, as he threw the end of the match over the wall.

“Well then, look for it!” she answered, rather sharply. “I’m awfully hot, and I want it.”

He glanced at her before he spoke again.

“I don’t know where it is,” he said quietly, but there was a shade of annoyance in his face.

“I gave it to you just as we were getting into the boat,” answered the lady in white. “Do you mean to say that you left it on board?”

“I think you must be mistaken,” said the young man. “You must have given it to somebody else.”

“It isn’t likely that I should mistake you for any one else—especially to-day.”

“Well—I haven’t got it. I’ll get you one in the hotel, if you’ll have patience for a moment.”

He turned and strode along the terrace towards the house. Clare Bowring had been watching the two, and she looked after the man as he moved rapidly away. He walked well, for he was a singularly well-made young fellow, who looked as though he were master of every inch of himself. She had liked his brown face and bright blue eyes, too, and somehow she resented the way in which the little lady ordered him about. She looked round and saw that her mother was watching him too. Then, as he disappeared, they both looked at the lady. She too had followed him with her eyes, and as she turned her face sideways to the Bowrings Clare thought that she was biting her lip, as though something annoyed her or hurt her. She kept her eyes on the door. Presently the young man reappeared, bearing a palm-leaf fan in his hand and blowing a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air. Instantly the lady smiled, and the smile brightened as he came near.

“Thank you—dear,” she said as he gave her the fan.

The last word was spoken in a lower tone, and could certainly not have been heard by the other members of the party, but it reached Clare’s ears, where she sat.

“Not at all,” answered the young man quietly.

But as he spoke he glanced quickly about him, and his eyes met Clare’s. She fancied that she saw a look of startled annoyance in them, and he coloured a little under his tan. He had a very manly face, square and strong. He bent down a little and said something in a low voice. The lady in white half turned her head, impatiently, but did not look quite round. Clare saw, however, that her expression had changed again, and that the smile was gone.

“If I don’t care, why should you?” were the next words Clare heard, spoken impatiently and petulantly.

The man who answered to the name of Brook said nothing, but sat down on the parapet of the terrace, looking out over his shoulder to seaward. A few seconds later he threw away his half-smoked cigarette.

“I like this place,” said the lady in white, quite audibly. “I think I shall send on board for my things and stay here.”

The young man started as though he had been struck, and faced her in silence. He could not help seeing Clare Bowring beyond her.

“I’m going indoors, mother,” said the young girl, rising rather abruptly. “I’m sure it must be time for tea. Won’t you come too?”

The young man did not answer his companion’s remark, but turned his face away again and looked seaward, listening to the retreating footsteps of the two ladies.

On the threshold of the hotel Clare felt a strong desire to look back again and see whether he had moved, but she was ashamed of it and went in, holding her head high and looking straight before her.

CHAPTER II

Table of Contents

The people from the yacht belonged to that class of men and women whose uncertainty, or indifference, about the future leads them to take possession of all they can lay hands on in the present, with a view to squeezing the world like a lemon for such enjoyment as it may yield. So long as they tarried at the old hotel, it was their private property. The Bowrings were forgotten; the two English old maids had no existence; the Russian invalid got no more hot water for his tea; the plain but obstinately inquiring German family could get no more information; even the quiet young French couple—a honeymoon couple—sank into insignificance. The only protest came from an American, whose wife was ill and never appeared, and who staggered the landlord by asking what he would sell the whole place for on condition of vacating the premises before dinner.

“They will be gone before dinner,” the proprietor answered.

But they did not go. When it was already late somebody saw the moon rise, almost full, and suggested that the moonlight would be very fine, and that it would be amusing to dine at the hotel table and spend the evening on the terrace and go on board late.

“I shall,” said the little lady in white serge, “whatever the rest of you do. Brook! Send somebody on board to get a lot of cloaks and shawls and things. I am sure it is going to be cold. Don’t go away! I want you to take me for a walk before dinner, so as to be nice and hungry, you know.”