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A detailed oil painting portrait of Henry James, an elderly man with a receding hairline, wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a dark bow tie. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face against a dark background.

**SHORT STORIES
VOLUME 3**

HENRY JAMES

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Short Stories, Volume 3 by Henry James.

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Contents

The Coxon Fund

The Altar of the Dead

The Next Time

Glasses

The Figure In The Carpet

The Way It Came

Covering End

Paste

The Tree Of Knowledge

Mrs. Medwin

The Beldonald Holbein

The Story In It

Flickerbridge

The Birthplace

The Beast in the Jungle

Julia Bride

The Jolly Corner

The Velvet Glove

Crapy Cornelia

The Bench Of Desolation

A Round Of Visits

The Coxon Fund

I

“They’ve got him for life!” I said to myself that evening on my way back to the station; but later on, alone in the compartment (from Wimbledon to Waterloo, before the glory of the District Railway) I amended this declaration in the light of the sense that my friends would probably after all not enjoy a monopoly of Mr. Saltram. I won’t pretend to have taken his vast measure on that first occasion, but I think I had achieved a glimpse of what the privilege of his acquaintance might mean for many persons in the way of charges accepted. He had been a great experience, and it was this perhaps that had put me into the frame of foreseeing how we should all, sooner or later, have the honour of dealing with him as a whole. Whatever impression I then received of the amount of this total, I had a full enough vision of the patience of the Mulvilles. He was to stay all the winter: Adelaide dropped it in a tone that drew the sting from the inevitable emphasis. These excellent people might indeed have been content to give the circle of hospitality a diameter of six months; but if they didn’t say he was to stay all summer as well it was only because this was more than they ventured to hope. I remember that at dinner that evening he wore slippers, new and predominantly purple, of some queer carpet-stuff; but the Mulvilles were still in the stage of supposing that he might be snatched from them by higher bidders. At a later time they grew, poor dears, to fear no snatching; but theirs was a fidelity which needed no help from competition to make them proud. Wonderful indeed as, when all was said, you inevitably pronounced Frank Saltram, it was not to be overlooked that the Kent Mulvilles were in their way still more extraordinary: as striking an instance as could easily be encountered of the familiar truth that remarkable men find remarkable conveniences.

They had sent for me from Wimbledon to come out and dine, and there had been an implication in Adelaide’s note—judged by her notes alone she might have been thought silly—that it was a case in which something momentous was to be determined or done. I had never known them not be in a “state” about somebody, and I dare say I tried to be droll on this point in accepting their invitation. On finding myself in the presence of their latest discovery I had not at first felt irreverence droop—and, thank heaven, I have never been absolutely deprived of that alternative in Mr. Saltram’s company. I saw, however—I hasten to declare it—that compared to this specimen their other phoenixes had been birds of inconsiderable feather, and I afterwards took credit to myself for not having even in primal bewilderments made a mistake about the essence of the man. He had an incomparable gift; I never was blind to it—it dazzles me still. It dazzles me perhaps even more in remembrance than in fact, for I’m not unaware that for so rare a subject the imagination goes to some expense, inserting a jewel here and there or giving a twist to a plume. How the art of portraiture would rejoice in this figure if the art of portraiture had only the canvas! Nature, in truth, had largely rounded it, and if memory, hovering about it, sometimes holds her breath, this is because the voice that comes back was really golden.

Though the great man was an inmate and didn’t dress, he kept dinner on this occasion waiting, and the first words he uttered on coming into the room were an elated announcement to Mulville that he had found out something. Not catching the allusion and gaping doubtless a little at his face, I privately asked Adelaide what he had found out. I shall never forget the look she gave me as she replied: “Everything!” She really believed it. At that moment, at any rate, he had found out that the mercy of the Mulvilles was infinite. He had previously of

course discovered, as I had myself for that matter, that their dinners were soigné. Let me not indeed, in saying this, neglect to declare that I shall falsify my counterfeit if I seem to hint that there was in his nature any ounce of calculation. He took whatever came, but he never plotted for it, and no man who was so much of an absorbent can ever have been so little of a parasite. He had a system of the universe, but he had no system of sponging—that was quite hand-to-mouth. He had fine gross easy senses, but it was not his good-natured appetite that wrought confusion. If he had loved us for our dinners we could have paid with our dinners, and it would have been a great economy of finer matter. I make free in these connexions with the plural possessive because if I was never able to do what the Mulvilles did, and people with still bigger houses and simpler charities, I met, first and last, every demand of reflexion, of emotion—particularly perhaps those of gratitude and of resentment. No one, I think, paid the tribute of giving him up so often, and if it's rendering honour to borrow wisdom I've a right to talk of my sacrifices. He yielded lessons as the sea yields fish—I lived for a while on this diet. Sometimes it almost appeared to me that his massive monstrous failure—if failure after all it was—had been designed for my private recreation. He fairly pampered my curiosity; but the history of that experience would take me too far. This is not the large canvas I just now spoke of, and I wouldn't have approached him with my present hand had it been a question of all the features. Frank Saltram's features, for artistic purposes, are verily the anecdotes that are to be gathered. Their name is legion, and this is only one, of which the interest is that it concerns even more closely several other persons. Such episodes, as one looks back, are the little dramas that made up the innumerable facets of the big drama—which is yet to be reported.

II

It is furthermore remarkable that though the two stories are distinct—my own, as it were, and this other—they equally began, in a manner, the first night of my acquaintance with Frank Saltram, the night I came back from Wimbledon so agitated with a new sense of life that, in London, for the very thrill of it, I could only walk home. Walking and swinging my stick, I overtook, at Buckingham Gate, George Gravener, and George Gravener's story may be said to have begun with my making him, as our paths lay together, come home with me for a talk. I duly remember, let me parenthesise, that it was still more that of another person, and also that several years were to elapse before it was to extend to a second chapter. I had much to say to him, none the less, about my visit to the Mulvilles, whom he more indifferently knew, and I was at any rate so amusing that for long afterwards he never encountered me without asking for news of the old man of the sea. I hadn't said Mr. Saltram was old, and it was to be seen that he was of an age to outweather George Gravener. I had at that time a lodging in Ebury Street, and Gravener was staying at his brother's empty house in Eaton Square. At Cambridge, five years before, even in our devastating set, his intellectual power had seemed to me almost awful. Some one had once asked me privately, with blanched cheeks, what it was then that after all such a mind as that left standing. "It leaves itself!" I could recollect devoutly replying. I could smile at present for this remembrance, since before we got to Ebury Street I was struck with the fact that, save in the sense of being well set up on his legs, George Gravener had actually ceased to tower. The universe he laid low had somehow bloomed again—the usual eminences were visible. I wondered whether he had lost his humour, or only, dreadful thought, had never had any—not even when I had fancied him most Aristophanesque. What was the need of appealing to laughter, however, I could enviously enquire, where you might appeal so confidently to measurement? Mr. Saltram's queer figure, his thick nose and hanging lip, were fresh to me: in the light of my old friend's fine cold symmetry they presented mere success in amusing as the refuge of conscious ugliness. Already, at hungry twenty-six, Gravener looked as blank and parliamentary as if he

were fifty and popular. In my scrap of a residence—he had a worldling’s eye for its futile conveniences, but never a comrade’s joke—I sounded Frank Saltram in his ears; a circumstance I mention in order to note that even then I was surprised at his impatience of my enlivenment. As he had never before heard of the personage it took indeed the form of impatience of the preposterous Mulvilles, his relation to whom, like mine, had had its origin in an early, a childish intimacy with the young Adelaide, the fruit of multiplied ties in the previous generation. When she married Kent Mulville, who was older than Gravener and I and much more amiable, I gained a friend, but Gravener practically lost one. We reacted in different ways from the form taken by what he called their deplorable social action—the form (the term was also his) of nasty second-rate gush. I may have held in my ‘for intérieur’ that the good people at Wimbledon were beautiful fools, but when he sniffed at them I couldn’t help taking the opposite line, for I already felt that even should we happen to agree it would always be for reasons that differed. It came home to me that he was admirably British as, without so much as a sociable sneer at my bookbinder, he turned away from the serried rows of my little French library.

“Of course I’ve never seen the fellow, but it’s clear enough he’s a humbug.”

“Clear ‘enough’ is just what it isn’t,” I replied; “if it only were!” That ejaculation on my part must have been the beginning of what was to be later a long ache for final frivolous rest. Gravener was profound enough to remark after a moment that in the first place he couldn’t be anything but a Dissenter, and when I answered that the very note of his fascination was his extraordinary speculative breadth my friend retorted that there was no cad like your cultivated cad, and that I might depend upon discovering—since I had had the levity not already to have enquired—that my shining light proceeded, a generation back, from a Methodist cheesemonger. I confess I was struck with his insistence, and I said, after reflexion: “It may be—I admit it may be; but why on earth are you so sure?”—asking the question mainly to lay him the trap of saying that it was because the poor man didn’t dress for dinner. He took an instant to circumvent my trap and come blandly out the other side.

“Because the Kent Mulvilles have invented him. They’ve an infallible hand for frauds. All their geese are swans. They were born to be duped, they like it, they cry for it, they don’t know anything from anything, and they disgust one—luckily perhaps!—with Christian charity.” His vehemence was doubtless an accident, but it might have been a strange foreknowledge. I forget what protest I dropped; it was at any rate something that led him to go on after a moment: “I only ask one thing—it’s perfectly simple. Is a man, in a given case, a real gentleman?”

“A real gentleman, my dear fellow—that’s so soon said!”

“Not so soon when he isn’t! If they’ve got hold of one this time he must be a great rascal!”

“I might feel injured,” I answered, “if I didn’t reflect that they don’t rave about me.”

“Don’t be too sure! I’ll grant that he’s a gentleman,” Gravener presently added, “if you’ll admit that he’s a scamp.”

“I don’t know which to admire most, your logic or your benevolence.”

My friend coloured at this, but he didn’t change the subject. “Where did they pick him up?”

“I think they were struck with something he had published.”

“I can fancy the dreary thing!”

“I believe they found out he had all sorts of worries and difficulties.”

“That of course wasn’t to be endured, so they jumped at the privilege of paying his debts!” I professed that I knew nothing about his debts, and I reminded my visitor that though the dear Mulvilles were angels they were neither idiots nor millionaires. What they mainly aimed at was reuniting Mr. Saltram to his wife. “I was expecting to hear he has basely abandoned her,” Gravener went on, at this, “and I’m too glad you don’t disappoint me.”

I tried to recall exactly what Mrs. Mulville had told me. “He didn’t leave her—no. It’s she who has left him.”

“Left him to us?” Gravener asked. “The monster—many thanks! I decline to take him.”

“You’ll hear more about him in spite of yourself. I can’t, no, I really can’t resist the impression that he’s a big man.” I was already mastering—to my shame perhaps be it said—just the tone my old friend least liked.

“It’s doubtless only a trifle,” he returned, “but you haven’t happened to mention what his reputation’s to rest on.”

“Why on what I began by boring you with—his extraordinary mind.”

“As exhibited in his writings?”

“Possibly in his writings, but certainly in his talk, which is far and away the richest I ever listened to.”

“And what’s it all about?”

“My dear fellow, don’t ask me! About everything!” I pursued, reminding myself of poor Adelaide. “About his ideas of things,” I then more charitably added. “You must have heard him to know what I mean—it’s unlike anything that ever was heard.” I coloured, I admit, I overcharged a little, for such a picture was an anticipation of Saltram’s later development and still more of my fuller acquaintance with him. However, I really expressed, a little lyrically perhaps, my actual imagination of him when I proceeded to declare that, in a cloud of tradition, of legend, he might very well go down to posterity as the greatest of all great talkers. Before we parted George Gravener had wondered why such a row should be made about a chatterbox the more and why he should be pampered and pensioned. The greater the wind-bag the greater the calamity. Out of proportion to everything else on earth had come to be this wagging of the tongue. We were drenched with talk—our wretched age was dying of it. I differed from him here sincerely, only going so far as to concede, and gladly, that we were drenched with sound. It was not however the mere speakers who were killing us—it was the mere stammerers. Fine talk was as rare as it was refreshing—the gift of the gods themselves, the one starry spangle on the ragged cloak of humanity. How many men were there who rose to this privilege, of how many masters of conversation could he boast the acquaintance? Dying of talk?—why we were dying of the lack of it! Bad writing wasn’t talk, as many people seemed to think, and even good wasn’t always to be compared to it. From the best talk indeed the best writing had something to learn. I fancifully added that we too should peradventure be gilded by the legend, should be pointed at for having listened, for having actually heard. Gravener, who had glanced at his watch and discovered it was midnight, found to all this a retort beautifully characteristic of him.

“There’s one little fact to be borne in mind in the presence equally of the best talk and of the worst.” He looked, in saying this, as if he meant great things, and I was sure he could only mean once more that neither of them mattered if a man wasn’t a real gentleman. Perhaps it was what he did mean; he deprived me however of the exultation of being right by putting the truth in a slightly different way. “The only thing that really counts for one’s estimate of a person is his conduct.” He had his watch still in his palm, and I reproached him with unfair

play in having ascertained beforehand that it was now the hour at which I always gave in. My pleasantry so far failed to mollify him that he promptly added that to the rule he had just enunciated there was absolutely no exception.

“None whatever?”

“None whatever.”

“Trust me then to try to be good at any price!” I laughed as I went with him to the door. “I declare I will be, if I have to be horrible!”

III

If that first night was one of the liveliest, or at any rate was the freshest, of my exaltations, there was another, four years later, that was one of my great discomposures. Repetition, I well knew by this time, was the secret of Saltram’s power to alienate, and of course one would never have seen him at his finest if one hadn’t seen him in his remorse. They set in mainly at this season and were magnificent, elemental, orchestral. I was quite aware that one of these atmospheric disturbances was now due; but none the less, in our arduous attempt to set him on his feet as a lecturer, it was impossible not to feel that two failures were a large order, as we said, for a short course of five. This was the second time, and it was past nine o’clock; the audience, a muster unprecedented and really encouraging, had fortunately the attitude of blandness that might have been looked for in persons whom the promise of (if I’m not mistaken) *An Analysis of Primary Ideas* had drawn to the neighbourhood of Upper Baker Street. There was in those days in that region a petty lecture-hall to be secured on terms as moderate as the funds left at our disposal by the irrepressible question of the maintenance of five small Saltrams—I include the mother—and one large one. By the time the Saltrams, of different sizes, were all maintained we had pretty well poured out the oil that might have lubricated the machinery for enabling the most original of men to appear to maintain them.

It was I, the other time, who had been forced into the breach, standing up there for an odious lamplit moment to explain to half a dozen thin benches, where earnest brows were virtuously void of anything so cynical as a suspicion, that we couldn’t so much as put a finger on Mr. Saltram. There was nothing to plead but that our scouts had been out from the early hours and that we were afraid that on one of his walks abroad—he took one, for meditation, whenever he was to address such a company—some accident had disabled or delayed him. The meditative walks were a fiction, for he never, that any one could discover, prepared anything but a magnificent prospectus; hence his circulars and programmes, of which I possess an almost complete collection, are the solemn ghosts of generations never born. I put the case, as it seemed to me, at the best; but I admit I had been angry, and Kent Mulville was shocked at my want of public optimism. This time therefore I left the excuses to his more practised patience, only relieving myself in response to a direct appeal from a young lady next whom, in the hall, I found myself sitting. My position was an accident, but if it had been calculated the reason would scarce have eluded an observer of the fact that no one else in the room had an approach to an appearance. Our philosopher’s “tail” was deplorably limp. This visitor was the only person who looked at her ease, who had come a little in the spirit of adventure. She seemed to carry amusement in her handsome young head, and her presence spoke, a little mystifyingly, of a sudden extension of Saltram’s sphere of influence. He was doing better than we hoped, and he had chosen such an occasion, of all occasions, to succumb to heaven knew which of his fond infirmities. The young lady produced an impression of auburn hair and black velvet, and had on her other hand a companion of obscurer type, presumably a waiting-maid. She herself might perhaps have been a foreign countess, and before she addressed me I had beguiled our sorry interval by finding in her a vague recall of

the opening of some novel of Madame Sand. It didn't make her more fathomable to pass in a few minutes from this to the certitude that she was American; it simply engendered depressing reflexions as to the possible check to contributions from Boston. She asked me if, as a person apparently more initiated, I would recommend further waiting, and I answered that if she considered I was on my honour I would privately deprecate it. Perhaps she didn't; at any rate our talk took a turn that prolonged it till she became aware we were left almost alone. I presently ascertained she knew Mrs. Saltram, and this explained in a manner the miracle. The brotherhood of the friends of the husband was as nothing to the brotherhood, or perhaps I should say the sisterhood, of the friends of the wife. Like the Kent Mulvilles I belonged to both fraternities, and even better than they I think I had sounded the abyss of Mrs. Saltram's wrongs. She bored me to extinction, and I knew but too well how she had bored her husband; but there were those who stood by her, the most efficient of whom were indeed the handful of poor Saltram's backers. They did her liberal justice, whereas her mere patrons and partisans had nothing but hatred for our philosopher. I'm bound to say it was we, however—we of both camps, as it were—who had always done most for her.

I thought my young lady looked rich—I scarcely knew why; and I hoped she had put her hand in her pocket. I soon made her out, however, not at all a fine fanatic—she was but a generous, irresponsible enquirer. She had come to England to see her aunt, and it was at her aunt's she had met the dreary lady we had all so much on our mind. I saw she'd help to pass the time when she observed that it was a pity this lady wasn't intrinsically more interesting. That was refreshing, for it was an article of faith in Mrs. Saltram's circle—at least among those who scorned to know her horrid husband—that she was attractive on her merits. She was in truth a most ordinary person, as Saltram himself would have been if he hadn't been a prodigy. The question of vulgarity had no application to him, but it was a measure his wife kept challenging you to apply. I hasten to add that the consequences of your doing so were no sufficient reason for his having left her to starve. “He doesn't seem to have much force of character,” said my young lady; at which I laughed out so loud that my departing friends looked back at me over their shoulders as if I were making a joke of their discomfiture. My joke probably cost Saltram a subscription or two, but it helped me on with my interlocutress. “She says he drinks like a fish,” she sociably continued, “and yet she allows that his mind's wonderfully clear.” It was amusing to converse with a pretty girl who could talk of the clearness of Saltram's mind. I expected next to hear she had been assured he was awfully clever. I tried to tell her—I had it almost on my conscience—what was the proper way to regard him; an effort attended perhaps more than ever on this occasion with the usual effect of my feeling that I wasn't after all very sure of it. She had come to-night out of high curiosity—she had wanted to learn this proper way for herself. She had read some of his papers and hadn't understood them; but it was at home, at her aunt's, that her curiosity had been kindled—kindled mainly by his wife's remarkable stories of his want of virtue. “I suppose they ought to have kept me away,” my companion dropped, “and I suppose they'd have done so if I hadn't somehow got an idea that he's fascinating. In fact Mrs. Saltram herself says he is.”

“So you came to see where the fascination resides? Well, you've seen!”

My young lady raised fine eyebrows. “Do you mean in his bad faith?”

“In the extraordinary effects of it; his possession, that is, of some quality or other that condemns us in advance to forgive him the humiliation, as I may call it, to which he has subjected us.”

“The humiliation?”

“Why mine, for instance, as one of his guarantors, before you as the purchaser of a ticket.”

She let her charming gay eyes rest on me. “You don’t look humiliated a bit, and if you did I should let you off, disappointed as I am; for the mysterious quality you speak of is just the quality I came to see.”

“Oh, you can’t ‘see’ it!” I cried.

“How then do you get at it?”

“You don’t! You mustn’t suppose he’s good-looking,” I added.

“Why his wife says he’s lovely!”

My hilarity may have struck her as excessive, but I confess it broke out afresh. Had she acted only in obedience to this singular plea, so characteristic, on Mrs. Saltram’s part, of what was irritating in the narrowness of that lady’s point of view? “Mrs. Saltram,” I explained, “undervalues him where he’s strongest, so that, to make up for it perhaps, she overpraises him where he’s weak. He’s not, assuredly, superficially attractive; he’s middle-aged, fat, featureless save for his great eyes.”

“Yes, his great eyes,” said my young lady attentively. She had evidently heard all about his great eyes—the beaux yeux for which alone we had really done it all.

“They’re tragic and splendid—lights on a dangerous coast. But he moves badly and dresses worse, and altogether he’s anything but smart.”

My companion, who appeared to reflect on this, after a moment appealed. “Do you call him a real gentleman?”

I started slightly at the question, for I had a sense of recognising it: George Gravener, years before, that first flushed night, had put me face to face with it. It had embarrassed me then, but it didn’t embarrass me now, for I had lived with it and overcome it and disposed of it. “A real gentleman? Emphatically not!”

My promptitude surprised her a little, but I quickly felt how little it was to Gravener I was now talking. “Do you say that because he’s—what do you call it in England?—of humble extraction?”

“Not a bit. His father was a country school-master and his mother the widow of a sexton, but that has nothing to do with it. I say it simply because I know him well.”

“But isn’t it an awful drawback?”

“Awful—quite awful.”

“I mean isn’t it positively fatal?”

“Fatal to what? Not to his magnificent vitality.”

Again she had a meditative moment. “And is his magnificent vitality the cause of his vices?”

“Your questions are formidable, but I’m glad you put them. I was thinking of his noble intellect. His vices, as you say, have been much exaggerated: they consist mainly after all in one comprehensive defect.”

“A want of will?”

“A want of dignity.”

“He doesn’t recognise his obligations?”

“On the contrary, he recognises them with effusion, especially in public: he smiles and bows and beckons across the street to them. But when they pass over he turns away, and he speedily loses them in the crowd. The recognition’s purely spiritual—it isn’t in the least social. So he leaves all his belongings to other people to take care of. He accepts favours, loans, sacrifices—all with nothing more deterrent than an agony of shame. Fortunately we’re a little faithful band, and we do what we can.” I held my tongue about the natural children, engendered, to the number of three, in the wantonness of his youth. I only remarked that he did make efforts—often tremendous ones. “But the efforts,” I said, “never come to much: the only things that come to much are the abandonments, the surrenders.”

“And how much do they come to?”

“You’re right to put it as if we had a big bill to pay, but, as I’ve told you before, your questions are rather terrible. They come, these mere exercises of genius, to a great sum total of poetry, of philosophy, a mighty mass of speculation, notation, quotation. The genius is there, you see, to meet the surrender; but there’s no genius to support the defence.”

“But what is there, after all, at his age, to show?”

“In the way of achievement recognised and reputation established?” I asked. “To ‘show’ if you will, there isn’t much, since his writing, mostly, isn’t as fine, isn’t certainly as showy, as his talk. Moreover two-thirds of his work are merely colossal projects and announcements. ‘Showing’ Frank Saltram is often a poor business,” I went on: “we endeavoured, you’ll have observed, to show him to-night! However, if he had lectured he’d have lectured divinely. It would just have been his talk.”

“And what would his talk just have been?”

I was conscious of some ineffectiveness, as well perhaps as of a little impatience, as I replied: “The exhibition of a splendid intellect.” My young lady looked not quite satisfied at this, but as I wasn’t prepared for another question I hastily pursued: “The sight of a great suspended swinging crystal—huge lucid lustrous, a block of light—flashing back every impression of life and every possibility of thought!”

This gave her something to turn over till we had passed out to the dusky porch of the hall, in front of which the lamps of a quiet brougham were almost the only thing Saltram’s treachery hadn’t extinguished. I went with her to the door of her carriage, out of which she leaned a moment after she had thanked me and taken her seat. Her smile even in the darkness was pretty. “I do want to see that crystal!”

“You’ve only to come to the next lecture.”

“I go abroad in a day or two with my aunt.”

“Wait over till next week,” I suggested. “It’s quite worth it.”

She became grave. “Not unless he really comes!” At which the brougham started off, carrying her away too fast, fortunately for my manners, to allow me to exclaim “Ingratitude!”

IV

Mrs. Saltram made a great affair of her right to be informed where her husband had been the second evening he failed to meet his audience. She came to me to ascertain, but I couldn’t satisfy her, for in spite of my ingenuity I remained in ignorance. It wasn’t till much later that I found this had not been the case with Kent Mulville, whose hope for the best never twirled the thumbs of him more placidly than when he happened to know the worst. He had known it on the occasion I speak of—that is immediately after. He was impenetrable then, but

ultimately confessed. What he confessed was more than I shall now venture to make public. It was of course familiar to me that Saltram was incapable of keeping the engagements which, after their separation, he had entered into with regard to his wife, a deeply wronged, justly resentful, quite irreproachable and insufferable person. She often appeared at my chambers to talk over his lapses; for if, as she declared, she had washed her hands of him, she had carefully preserved the water of this ablution, which she handed about for analysis. She had arts of her own of exciting one's impatience, the most infallible of which was perhaps her assumption that we were kind to her because we liked her. In reality her personal fall had been a sort of social rise—since I had seen the moment when, in our little conscientious circle, her desolation almost made her the fashion. Her voice was grating and her children ugly; moreover she hated the good Mulvilles, whom I more and more loved. They were the people who by doing most for her husband had in the long run done most for herself; and the warm confidence with which he had laid his length upon them was a pressure gentle compared with her stiffer persuadability. I'm bound to say he didn't criticise his benefactors, though practically he got tired of them; she, however, had the highest standards about eleemosynary forms. She offered the odd spectacle of a spirit puffed up by dependence, and indeed it had introduced her to some excellent society. She pitied me for not knowing certain people who aided her and whom she doubtless patronised in turn for their luck in not knowing me. I dare say I should have got on with her better if she had had a ray of imagination—if it had occasionally seemed to occur to her to regard Saltram's expressions of his nature in any other manner than as separate subjects of woe. They were all flowers of his character, pearls strung on an endless thread; but she had a stubborn little way of challenging them one after the other, as if she never suspected that he had a character, such as it was, or that deficiencies might be organic; the irritating effect of a mind incapable of a generalisation. One might doubtless have overdone the idea that there was a general licence for such a man; but if this had happened it would have been through one's feeling that there could be none for such a woman.

I recognised her superiority when I asked her about the aunt of the disappointed young lady: it sounded like a sentence from an English-French or other phrase-book. She triumphed in what she told me and she may have triumphed still more in what she withheld. My friend of the other evening, Miss Anvoy, had but lately come to England; Lady Coxon, the aunt, had been established here for years in consequence of her marriage with the late Sir Gregory of that name. She had a house in the Regent's Park, a Bath-chair and a fernery; and above all she had sympathy. Mrs. Saltram had made her acquaintance through mutual friends. This vagueness caused me to feel how much I was out of it and how large an independent circle Mrs. Saltram had at her command. I should have been glad to know more about the disappointed young lady, but I felt I should know most by not depriving her of her advantage, as she might have mysterious means of depriving me of my knowledge. For the present, moreover, this experience was stayed, Lady Coxon having in fact gone abroad accompanied by her niece. The niece, besides being immensely clever, was an heiress, Mrs. Saltram said; the only daughter and the light of the eyes of some great American merchant, a man, over there, of endless indulgences and dollars. She had pretty clothes and pretty manners, and she had, what was prettier still, the great thing of all. The great thing of all for Mrs. Saltram was always sympathy, and she spoke as if during the absence of these ladies she mightn't know where to turn for it. A few months later indeed, when they had come back, her tone perceptibly changed: she alluded to them, on my leading her up to it, rather as to persons in her debt for favours received. What had happened I didn't know, but I saw it would take only a little more or a little less to make her speak of them as thankless subjects of social countenance—people for whom she had vainly tried to do something. I confess I saw how it wouldn't be in a mere week or two that I should rid myself of the image of Ruth Anvoy, in

whose very name, when I learnt it, I found something secretly to like. I should probably neither see her nor hear of her again: the knight's widow (he had been mayor of Clockborough) would pass away and the heiress would return to her inheritance. I gathered with surprise that she had not communicated to his wife the story of her attempt to hear Mr. Saltram, and I founded this reticence on the easy supposition that Mrs. Saltram had fatigued by overpressure the spring of the sympathy of which she boasted. The girl at any rate would forget the small adventure, be distracted, take a husband; besides which she would lack occasion to repeat her experiment.

We clung to the idea of the brilliant course, delivered without an accident, that, as a lecturer, would still make the paying public aware of our great man, but the fact remained that in the case of an inspiration so unequal there was treachery, there was fallacy at least, in the very conception of a series. In our scrutiny of ways and means we were inevitably subject to the old convention of the synopsis, the syllabus, partly of course not to lose the advantage of his grand free hand in drawing up such things; but for myself I laughed at our playbills even while I stickled for them. It was indeed amusing work to be scrupulous for Frank Saltram, who also at moments laughed about it, so far as the comfort of a sigh so unstudied as to be cheerful might pass for such a sound. He admitted with a candour all his own that he was in truth only to be depended on in the Mulvilles' drawing-room. "Yes," he suggestively allowed, "it's there, I think, that I'm at my best; quite late, when it gets toward eleven—and if I've not been too much worried." We all knew what too much worry meant; it meant too enslaved for the hour to the superstition of sobriety. On the Saturdays I used to bring my portmanteau, so as not to have to think of eleven o'clock trains. I had a bold theory that as regards this temple of talk and its altars of cushioned chintz, its pictures and its flowers, its large fireside and clear lamplight, we might really arrive at something if the Mulvilles would but charge for admission. Here it was, however, that they shamelessly broke down; as there's a flaw in every perfection this was the inexpugnable refuge of their egotism. They declined to make their saloon a market, so that Saltram's golden words continued the sole coin that rang there. It can have happened to no man, however, to be paid a greater price than such an enchanted hush as surrounded him on his greatest nights. The most profane, on these occasions, felt a presence; all minor eloquence grew dumb. Adelaide Mulville, for the pride of her hospitality, anxiously watched the door or stealthily poked the fire. I used to call it the music-room, for we had anticipated Bayreuth. The very gates of the kingdom of light seemed to open and the horizon of thought to flash with the beauty of a sunrise at sea.

In the consideration of ways and means, the sittings of our little board, we were always conscious of the creak of Mrs. Saltram's shoes. She hovered, she interrupted, she almost presided, the state of affairs being mostly such as to supply her with every incentive for enquiring what was to be done next. It was the pressing pursuit of this knowledge that, in concatenations of omnibuses and usually in very wet weather, led her so often to my door. She thought us spiritless creatures with editors and publishers; but she carried matters to no great effect when she personally pushed into back-shops. She wanted all moneys to be paid to herself: they were otherwise liable to such strange adventures. They trickled away into the desert—they were mainly at best, alas, a slender stream. The editors and the publishers were the last people to take this remarkable thinker at the valuation that has now pretty well come to be established. The former were half-distraught between the desire to "cut" him and the difficulty of finding a crevice for their shears; and when a volume on this or that portentous subject was proposed to the latter they suggested alternative titles which, as reported to our friend, brought into his face the noble blank melancholy that sometimes made it handsome. The title of an unwritten book didn't after all much matter, but some masterpiece of Saltram's may have died in his bosom of the shudder with which it was then

convulsed. The ideal solution, failing the fee at Kent Mulville's door, would have been some system of subscription to projected treatises with their non-appearance provided for—provided for, I mean, by the indulgence of subscribers. The author's real misfortune was that subscribers were so wretchedly literal. When they tastelessly enquired why publication hadn't ensued I was tempted to ask who in the world had ever been so published. Nature herself had brought him out in voluminous form, and the money was simply a deposit on borrowing the work.

V

I was doubtless often a nuisance to my friends in those years; but there were sacrifices I declined to make, and I never passed the hat to George Gravener. I never forgot our little discussion in Ebury Street, and I think it stuck in my throat to have to treat him to the avowal I had found so easy to Miss Anvoy. It had cost me nothing to confide to this charming girl, but it would have cost me much to confide to the friend of my youth, that the character of the "real gentleman" wasn't an attribute of the man I took such pains for. Was this because I had already generalised to the point of perceiving that women are really the unfastidious sex? I knew at any rate that Gravener, already quite in view but still hungry and frugal, had naturally enough more ambition than charity. He had sharp aims for stray sovereigns, being in view most from the tall steeple of Clockborough. His immediate ambition was to occupy à lui seul the field of vision of that smokily-seeing city, and all his movements and postures were calculated for the favouring angle. The movement of the hand as to the pocket had thus to alternate gracefully with the posture of the hand on the heart. He talked to Clockborough in short only less beguilingly than Frank Saltram talked to his electors; with the difference to our credit, however, that we had already voted and that our candidate had no antagonist but himself. He had more than once been at Wimbledon—it was Mrs. Mulville's work not mine—and by the time the claret was served had seen the god descend. He took more pains to swing his censer than I had expected, but on our way back to town he forestalled any little triumph I might have been so artless as to express by the observation that such a man was—a hundred times!—a man to use and never a man to be used by. I remember that this neat remark humiliated me almost as much as if virtually, in the fever of broken slumbers, I hadn't often made it myself. The difference was that on Gravener's part a force attached to it that could never attach to it on mine. He was able to use people—he had the machinery; and the irony of Saltram's being made showy at Clockborough came out to me when he said, as if he had no memory of our original talk and the idea were quite fresh to him: "I hate his type, you know, but I'll be hanged if I don't put some of those things in. I can find a place for them: we might even find a place for the fellow himself." I myself should have had some fear—not, I need scarcely say, for the "things" themselves, but for some other things very near them; in fine for the rest of my eloquence.

Later on I could see that the oracle of Wimbledon was not in this case so appropriate as he would have been had the politics of the gods only coincided more exactly with those of the party. There was a distinct moment when, without saying anything more definite to me, Gravener entertained the idea of annexing Mr. Saltram. Such a project was delusive, for the discovery of analogies between his body of doctrine and that pressed from headquarters upon Clockborough—the bottling, in a word, of the air of those lungs for convenient public uncorking in corn-exchanges—was an experiment for which no one had the leisure. The only thing would have been to carry him massively about, paid, caged, clipped; to turn him on for a particular occasion in a particular channel. Frank Saltram's channel, however, was essentially not calculable, and there was no knowing what disastrous floods might have ensued. For what there would have been to do The Empire, the great newspaper, was there to look to; but it was no new misfortune that there were delicate situations in which The Empire

broke down. In fine there was an instinctive apprehension that a clever young journalist commissioned to report on Mr. Saltram might never come back from the errand. No one knew better than George Gravener that that was a time when prompt returns counted double. If he therefore found our friend an exasperating waste of orthodoxy it was because of his being, as he said, poor Gravener, up in the clouds, not because he was down in the dust. The man would have been, just as he was, a real enough gentleman if he could have helped to put in a real gentleman. Gravener's great objection to the actual member was that he was not one.

Lady Coxon had a fine old house, a house with "grounds," at Clockborough, which she had let; but after she returned from abroad I learned from Mrs. Saltram that the lease had fallen in and that she had gone down to resume possession. I could see the faded red livery, the big square shoulders, the high-walled garden of this decent abode. As the rumble of dissolution grew louder the suitor would have pressed his suit, and I found myself hoping the politics of the late Mayor's widow wouldn't be such as to admonish her to ask him to dinner; perhaps indeed I went so far as to pray, they would naturally form a bar to any contact. I tried to focus the many-buttoned page, in the daily airing, as he perhaps even pushed the Bath-chair over somebody's toes. I was destined to hear, none the less, through Mrs. Saltram—who, I afterwards learned, was in correspondence with Lady Coxon's housekeeper—that Gravener was known to have spoken of the habitation I had in my eye as the pleasantest thing at Clockborough. On his part, I was sure, this was the voice not of envy but of experience. The vivid scene was now peopled, and I could see him in the old-time garden with Miss Anvoy, who would be certain, and very justly, to think him good-looking. It would be too much to describe myself as troubled by this play of surmise; but I occur to remember the relief, singular enough, of feeling it suddenly brushed away by an annoyance really much greater; an annoyance the result of its happening to come over me about that time with a rush that I was simply ashamed of Frank Saltram. There were limits after all, and my mark at last had been reached.

I had had my disgusts, if I may allow myself to-day such an expression; but this was a supreme revolt. Certain things cleared up in my mind, certain values stood out. It was all very well to have an unfortunate temperament; there was nothing so unfortunate as to have, for practical purposes, nothing else. I avoided George Gravener at this moment and reflected that at such a time I should do so most effectually by leaving England. I wanted to forget Frank Saltram—that was all. I didn't want to do anything in the world to him but that. Indignation had withered on the stalk, and I felt that one could pity him as much as one ought only by never thinking of him again. It wasn't for anything he had done to me; it was for what he had done to the Mulvilles. Adelaide cried about it for a week, and her husband, profiting by the example so signally given him of the fatal effect of a want of character, left the letter, the drop too much, unanswered. The letter, an incredible one, addressed by Saltram to Wimbledon during a stay with the Pudneys at Ramsgate, was the central feature of the incident, which, however, had many features, each more painful than whichever other we compared it with. The Pudneys had behaved shockingly, but that was no excuse. Base ingratitude, gross indecency—one had one's choice only of such formulas as that the more they fitted the less they gave one rest. These are dead aches now, and I am under no obligation, thank heaven, to be definite about the business. There are things which if I had had to tell them—well, would have stopped me off here altogether.

I went abroad for the general election, and if I don't know how much, on the Continent, I forgot, I at least know how much I missed, him. At a distance, in a foreign land, ignoring, abjuring, unlearning him, I discovered what he had done for me. I owed him, oh unmistakably, certain noble conceptions; I had lighted my little taper at his smoky lamp, and

lo it continued to twinkle. But the light it gave me just showed me how much more I wanted. I was pursued of course by letters from Mrs. Saltram which I didn't scruple not to read, though quite aware her embarrassments couldn't but be now of the gravest. I sacrificed to propriety by simply putting them away, and this is how, one day as my absence drew to an end, my eye, while I rummaged in my desk for another paper, was caught by a name on a leaf that had detached itself from the packet. The allusion was to Miss Anvoy, who, it appeared, was engaged to be married to Mr. George Gravener; and the news was two months old. A direct question of Mrs. Saltram's had thus remained unanswered—she had enquired of me in a postscript what sort of man this aspirant to such a hand might be. The great other fact about him just then was that he had been triumphantly returned for Clockborough in the interest of the party that had swept the country—so that I might easily have referred Mrs. Saltram to the journals of the day. Yet when I at last wrote her that I was coming home and would discharge my accumulated burden by seeing her, I but remarked in regard to her question that she must really put it to Miss Anvoy.

VI

I had almost avoided the general election, but some of its consequences, on my return, had smartly to be faced. The season, in London, began to breathe again and to flap its folded wings. Confidence, under the new Ministry, was understood to be reviving, and one of the symptoms, in a social body, was a recovery of appetite. People once more fed together, and it happened that, one Saturday night, at somebody's house, I fed with George Gravener. When the ladies left the room I moved up to where he sat and begged to congratulate him. "On my election?" he asked after a moment; so that I could feign, jocosely, not to have heard of that triumph and to be alluding to the rumour of a victory still more personal. I dare say I coloured however, for his political success had momentarily passed out of my mind. What was present to it was that he was to marry that beautiful girl; and yet his question made me conscious of some discomposure—I hadn't intended to put this before everything. He himself indeed ought gracefully to have done so, and I remember thinking the whole man was in this assumption that in expressing my sense of what he had won I had fixed my thoughts on his "seat." We straightened the matter out, and he was so much lighter in hand than I had lately seen him that his spirits might well have been fed from a twofold source. He was so good as to say that he hoped I should soon make the acquaintance of Miss Anvoy, who, with her aunt, was presently coming up to town. Lady Coxon, in the country, had been seriously unwell, and this had delayed their arrival. I told him I had heard the marriage would be a splendid one; on which, brightened and humanised by his luck, he laughed and said "Do you mean for her?" When I had again explained what I meant he went on: "Oh she's an American, but you'd scarcely know it; unless, perhaps," he added, "by her being used to more money than most girls in England, even the daughters of rich men. That wouldn't in the least do for a fellow like me, you know, if it wasn't for the great liberality of her father. He really has been most kind, and everything's quite satisfactory." He added that his eldest brother had taken a tremendous fancy to her and that during a recent visit at Coldfield she had nearly won over Lady Maddock. I gathered from something he dropped later on that the free-handed gentleman beyond the seas had not made a settlement, but had given a handsome present and was apparently to be looked to, across the water, for other favours. People are simplified alike by great contentments and great yearnings, and, whether or no it was Gravener's directness that begot my own, I seem to recall that in some turn taken by our talk he almost imposed it on me as an act of decorum to ask if Miss Anvoy had also by chance expectations from her aunt. My enquiry drew out that Lady Coxon, who was the oddest of women, would have in any contingency to act under her late husband's will, which was odder still, saddling her with a mass of queer obligations

complicated with queer loopholes. There were several dreary people, Coxon cousins, old maids, to whom she would have more or less to minister. Gravener laughed, without saying no, when I suggested that the young lady might come in through a loophole; then suddenly, as if he suspected my turning a lantern on him, he declared quite dryly: "That's all rot—one's moved by other springs!"

A fortnight later, at Lady Coxon's own house, I understood well enough the springs one was moved by. Gravener had spoken of me there as an old friend, and I received a gracious invitation to dine. The Knight's widow was again indisposed—she had succumbed at the eleventh hour; so that I found Miss Anvoy bravely playing hostess without even Gravener's help, since, to make matters worse, he had just sent up word that the House, the insatiable House, with which he supposed he had contracted for easier terms, positively declined to release him. I was struck with the courage, the grace and gaiety of the young lady left thus to handle the fauna and flora of the Regent's Park. I did what I could to help her to classify them, after I had recovered from the confusion of seeing her slightly disconcerted at perceiving in the guest introduced by her intended the gentleman with whom she had had that talk about Frank Saltram. I had at this moment my first glimpse of the fact that she was a person who could carry a responsibility; but I leave the reader to judge of my sense of the aggravation, for either of us, of such a burden, when I heard the servant announce Mrs. Saltram. From what immediately passed between the two ladies I gathered that the latter had been sent for post-haste to fill the gap created by the absence of the mistress of the house. "Good!" I remember crying, "she'll be put by me;" and my apprehension was promptly justified. Mrs. Saltram taken in to dinner, and taken in as a consequence of an appeal to her amiability, was Mrs. Saltram with a vengeance. I asked myself what Miss Anvoy meant by doing such things, but the only answer I arrived at was that Gravener was verily fortunate. She hadn't happened to tell him of her visit to Upper Baker Street, but she'd certainly tell him to-morrow; not indeed that this would make him like any better her having had the innocence to invite such a person as Mrs. Saltram on such an occasion. It could only strike me that I had never seen a young woman put such ignorance into her cleverness, such freedom into her modesty; this, I think, was when, after dinner, she said to me frankly, with almost jubilant mirth: "Oh you don't admire Mrs. Saltram?" Why should I? This was truly a young person without guile. I had briefly to consider before I could reply that my objection to the lady named was the objection often uttered about people met at the social board—I knew all her stories. Then as Miss Anvoy remained momentarily vague I added: "Those about her husband."

"Oh yes, but there are some new ones."

"None for me. Ah novelty would be pleasant!"

"Doesn't it appear that of late he has been particularly horrid?"

"His fluctuations don't matter", I returned, "for at night all cats are grey. You saw the shade of this one the night we waited for him together. What will you have? He has no dignity."

Miss Anvoy, who had been introducing with her American distinctness, looked encouragingly round at some of the combinations she had risked. "It's too bad I can't see him."

"You mean Gravener won't let you?"

"I haven't asked him. He lets me do everything."

"But you know he knows him and wonders what some of us see in him."

"We haven't happened to talk of him," the girl said.

“Get him to take you some day out to see the Mulvilles.”

“I thought Mr. Saltram had thrown the Mulvilles over.”

“Utterly. But that won’t prevent his being planted there again, to bloom like a rose, within a month or two.”

Miss Anvoy thought a moment. Then, “I should like to see them,” she said with her fostering smile.

“They’re tremendously worth it. You mustn’t miss them.”

“I’ll make George take me,” she went on as Mrs. Saltram came up to interrupt us. She sniffed at this unfortunate as kindly as she had smiled at me and, addressing the question to her, continued: “But the chance of a lecture—one of the wonderful lectures? Isn’t there another course announced?”

“Another? There are about thirty!” I exclaimed, turning away and feeling Mrs. Saltram’s little eyes in my back. A few days after this I heard that Gravener’s marriage was near at hand—was settled for Whitsuntide; but as no invitation had reached me I had my doubts, and there presently came to me in fact the report of a postponement. Something was the matter; what was the matter was supposed to be that Lady Coxon was now critically ill. I had called on her after my dinner in the Regent’s Park, but I had neither seen her nor seen Miss Anvoy. I forget to-day the exact order in which, at this period, sundry incidents occurred and the particular stage at which it suddenly struck me, making me catch my breath a little, that the progression, the acceleration, was for all the world that of fine drama. This was probably rather late in the day, and the exact order doesn’t signify. What had already occurred was some accident determining a more patient wait. George Gravener, whom I met again, in fact told me as much, but without signs of perturbation. Lady Coxon had to be constantly attended to, and there were other good reasons as well. Lady Coxon had to be so constantly attended to that on the occasion of a second attempt in the Regent’s Park I equally failed to obtain a sight of her niece. I judged it discreet in all the conditions not to make a third; but this didn’t matter, for it was through Adelaide Mulville that the side-wind of the comedy, though I was at first unwitting, began to reach me. I went to Wimbledon at times because Saltram was there, and I went at others because he wasn’t. The Pudneys, who had taken him to Birmingham, had already got rid of him, and we had a horrible consciousness of his wandering roofless, in dishonour, about the smoky Midlands, almost as the injured Lear wandered on the storm-lashed heath. His room, upstairs, had been lately done up (I could hear the crackle of the new chintz) and the difference only made his smirches and bruises, his splendid tainted genius, the more tragic. If he wasn’t barefoot in the mire he was sure to be unconventionally shod. These were the things Adelaide and I, who were old enough friends to stare at each other in silence, talked about when we didn’t speak. When we spoke it was only about the brilliant girl George Gravener was to marry and whom he had brought out the other Sunday. I could see that this presentation had been happy, for Mrs. Mulville commemorated it after her sole fashion of showing confidence in a new relation. “She likes me—she likes me”: her native humility exulted in that measure of success. We all knew for ourselves how she liked those who liked her, and as regards Ruth Anvoy she was more easily won over than Lady Maddock.

VII

One of the consequences, for the Mulvilles, of the sacrifices they made for Frank Saltram was that they had to give up their carriage. Adelaide drove gently into London in a one-horse greenish thing, an early Victorian landau, hired, near at hand, imaginatively, from a broken-down jobmaster whose wife was in consumption—a vehicle that made people turn round all

the more when her pensioner sat beside her in a soft white hat and a shawl, one of the dear woman's own. This was his position and I dare say his costume when on an afternoon in July she went to return Miss Anvoy's visit. The wheel of fate had now revolved, and amid silences deep and exhaustive, compunctions and condonations alike unutterable, Saltram was reinstated. Was it in pride or in penance that Mrs. Mulville had begun immediately to drive him about? If he was ashamed of his ingratitude she might have been ashamed of her forgiveness; but she was incorrigibly capable of liking him to be conspicuous in the landau while she was in shops or with her acquaintance. However, if he was in the pillory for twenty minutes in the Regent's Park—I mean at Lady Coxon's door while his companion paid her call—it wasn't to the further humiliation of any one concerned that she presently came out for him in person, not even to show either of them what a fool she was that she drew him in to be introduced to the bright young American. Her account of the introduction I had in its order, but before that, very late in the season, under Gravener's auspices, I met Miss Anvoy at tea at the House of Commons. The member for Clockborough had gathered a group of pretty ladies, and the Mulvilles were not of the party. On the great terrace, as I strolled off with her a little, the guest of honour immediately exclaimed to me: "I've seen him, you know—I've seen him!" She told me about Saltram's call.

"And how did you find him?"

"Oh so strange!"

"You didn't like him?"

"I can't tell till I see him again."

"You want to do that?"

She had a pause. "Immensely."

We went no further; I fancied she had become aware Gravener was looking at us. She turned back toward the knot of the others, and I said: "Dislike him as much as you will—I see you're bitten."

"Bitten?" I thought she coloured a little.

"Oh it doesn't matter!" I laughed; "one doesn't die of it."

"I hope I shan't die of anything before I've seen more of Mrs. Mulville." I rejoiced with her over plain Adelaide, whom she pronounced the loveliest woman she had met in England; but before we separated I remarked to her that it was an act of mere humanity to warn her that if she should see more of Frank Saltram—which would be likely to follow on any increase of acquaintance with Mrs. Mulville—she might find herself flattening her nose against the clear hard pane of an eternal question—that of the relative, that of the opposed, importances of virtue and brains. She replied that this was surely a subject on which one took everything for granted; whereupon I admitted that I had perhaps expressed myself ill. What I referred to was what I had referred to the night we met in Upper Baker Street—the relative importance (relative to virtue) of other gifts. She asked me if I called virtue a gift—a thing handed to us in a parcel on our first birthday; and I declared that this very enquiry proved to me the problem had already caught her by the skirt. She would have help however, the same help I myself had once had, in resisting its tendency to make one cross.

"What help do you mean?"

"That of the member for Clockborough."

She stared, smiled, then returned: "Why my idea has been to help him!"

She had helped him—I had his own word for it that at Clockborough her bedevilment of the voters had really put him in. She would do so doubtless again and again, though I heard the very next month that this fine faculty had undergone a temporary eclipse. News of the catastrophe first came to me from Mrs. Saltram, and it was afterwards confirmed at Wimbledon: poor Miss Anvoy was in trouble—great disasters in America had suddenly summoned her home. Her father, in New York, had suffered reverses, lost so much money that it was really vexatious as showing how much he had had. It was Adelaide who told me she had gone off alone at less than a week's notice.

“Alone? Gravener has permitted that?”

“What will you have? The House of Commons!”

I'm afraid I cursed the House of Commons: I was so much interested. Of course he'd follow her as soon as he was free to make her his wife; only she mightn't now be able to bring him anything like the marriage-portion of which he had begun by having the virtual promise. Mrs. Mulville let me know what was already said: she was charming, this American girl, but really these American fathers—! What was a man to do? Mr. Saltram, according to Mrs. Mulville, was of opinion that a man was never to suffer his relation to money to become a spiritual relation—he was to keep it exclusively material. “Moi pas comprendre!” I commented on this; in rejoinder to which Adelaide, with her beautiful sympathy, explained that she supposed he simply meant that the thing was to use it, don't you know? but not to think too much about it. “To take it, but not to thank you for it?” I still more profanely enquired. For a quarter of an hour afterwards she wouldn't look at me, but this didn't prevent my asking her what had been the result, that afternoon—in the Regent's Park, of her taking our friend to see Miss Anvoy.

“Oh so charming!” she answered, brightening. “He said he recognised in her a nature he could absolutely trust.”

“Yes, but I'm speaking of the effect on herself.”

Mrs. Mulville had to remount the stream. “It was everything one could wish.”

Something in her tone made me laugh. “Do you mean she gave him—a dole?”

“Well, since you ask me!”

“Right there on the spot?”

Again poor Adelaide faltered. “It was to me of course she gave it.”

I stared; somehow I couldn't see the scene. “Do you mean a sum of money?”

“It was very handsome.” Now at last she met my eyes, though I could see it was with an effort. “Thirty pounds.”

“Straight out of her pocket?”

“Out of the drawer of a table at which she had been writing. She just slipped the folded notes into my hand. He wasn't looking; it was while he was going back to the carriage.” “Oh,” said Adelaide reassuringly, “I take care of it for him!” The dear practical soul thought my agitation, for I confess I was agitated, referred to the employment of the money. Her disclosure made me for a moment muse violently, and I dare say that during that moment I wondered if anything else in the world makes people so gross as unselfishness. I uttered, I suppose, some vague synthetic cry, for she went on as if she had had a glimpse of my inward amaze at such passages. “I assure you, my dear friend, he was in one of his happy hours.”

But I wasn't thinking of that. "Truly indeed these Americans!" I said. "With her father in the very act, as it were, of swindling her betrothed!"

Mrs. Mulville stared. "Oh I suppose Mr. Anvoy has scarcely gone bankrupt—or whatever he has done—on purpose. Very likely they won't be able to keep it up, but there it was, and it was a very beautiful impulse."

"You say Saltram was very fine?"

"Beyond everything. He surprised even me."

"And I know what you've enjoyed." After a moment I added: "Had he peradventure caught a glimpse of the money in the table-drawer?"

At this my companion honestly flushed. "How can you be so cruel when you know how little he calculates?"

"Forgive me, I do know it. But you tell me things that act on my nerves. I'm sure he hadn't caught a glimpse of anything but some splendid idea."

Mrs. Mulville brightly concurred. "And perhaps even of her beautiful listening face."

"Perhaps even! And what was it all about?"

"His talk? It was apropos of her engagement, which I had told him about: the idea of marriage, the philosophy, the poetry, the sublimity of it." It was impossible wholly to restrain one's mirth at this, and some rude ripple that I emitted again caused my companion to admonish me. "It sounds a little stale, but you know his freshness."

"Of illustration? Indeed I do!"

"And how he has always been right on that great question."

"On what great question, dear lady, hasn't he been right?"

"Of what other great men can you equally say it?—and that he has never, but never, had a deflexion?" Mrs. Mulville exultantly demanded.

I tried to think of some other great man, but I had to give it up. "Didn't Miss Anvoy express her satisfaction in any less diffident way than by her charming present?" I was reduced to asking instead.

"Oh yes, she overflowed to me on the steps while he was getting into the carriage." These words somehow brushed up a picture of Saltram's big shawled back as he hoisted himself into the green landau. "She said she wasn't disappointed," Adelaide pursued.

I turned it over. "Did he wear his shawl?"

"His shawl?" She hadn't even noticed.

"I mean yours."

"He looked very nice, and you know he's really clean. Miss Anvoy used such a remarkable expression—she said his mind's like a crystal!"

I pricked up my ears. "A crystal?"

"Suspended in the moral world—swinging and shining and flashing there. She's monstrously clever, you know."

I thought again. "Monstrously!"

VIII

George Gravener didn't follow her, for late in September, after the House had risen, I met him in a railway-carriage. He was coming up from Scotland and I had just quitted some relations who lived near Durham. The current of travel back to London wasn't yet strong; at any rate on entering the compartment I found he had had it for some time to himself. We fared in company, and though he had a blue-book in his lap and the open jaws of his bag threatened me with the white teeth of confused papers, we inevitably, we even at last sociably conversed. I saw things weren't well with him, but I asked no question till something dropped by himself made, as it had made on another occasion, an absence of curiosity invidious. He mentioned that he was worried about his good old friend Lady Coxon, who, with her niece likely to be detained some time in America, lay seriously ill at Clockborough, much on his mind and on his hands.

"Ah Miss Anvoy's in America?"

"Her father has got into horrid straits—has lost no end of money."

I waited, after expressing due concern, but I eventually said: "I hope that raises no objection to your marriage."

"None whatever; moreover it's my trade to meet objections. But it may create tiresome delays, of which there have been too many, from various causes, already. Lady Coxon got very bad, then she got much better. Then Mr. Anvoy suddenly began to totter, and now he seems quite on his back. I'm afraid he's really in for some big reverse. Lady Coxon's worse again, awfully upset by the news from America, and she sends me word that she *must* have Ruth. How can I supply her with Ruth? I haven't got Ruth myself!"

"Surely you haven't lost her?" I returned.

"She's everything to her wretched father. She writes me every post—telling me to smooth her aunt's pillow. I've other things to smooth; but the old lady, save for her servants, is really alone. She won't receive her Coxon relations—she's angry at so much of her money going to them. Besides, she's hopelessly mad," said Gravener very frankly.

I don't remember whether it was this, or what it was, that made me ask if she hadn't such an appreciation of Mrs. Saltram as might render that active person of some use.

He gave me a cold glance, wanting to know what had put Mrs. Saltram into my head, and I replied that she was unfortunately never out of it. I happened to remember the wonderful accounts she had given me of the kindness Lady Coxon had shown her. Gravener declared this to be false; Lady Coxon, who didn't care for her, hadn't seen her three times. The only foundation for it was that Miss Anvoy, who used, poor girl, to chuck money about in a manner she must now regret, had for an hour seen in the miserable woman—you could never know what she'd see in people—an interesting pretext for the liberality with which her nature overflowed. But even Miss Anvoy was now quite tired of her. Gravener told me more about the crash in New York and the annoyance it had been to him, and we also glanced here and there in other directions; but by the time we got to Doncaster the principal thing he had let me see was that he was keeping something back. We stopped at that station, and, at the carriage-door, some one made a movement to get in. Gravener uttered a sound of impatience, and I felt sure that but for this I should have had the secret. Then the intruder, for some reason, spared us his company; we started afresh, and my hope of a disclosure returned. My companion held his tongue, however, and I pretended to go to sleep; in fact I really dozed for discouragement. When I reopened my eyes he was looking at me with an injured air. He tossed away with some vivacity the remnant of a cigarette and then said: "If you're not too sleepy I want to put you a case." I answered that I'd make every effort to attend, and welcomed the note of interest when he went on: "As I told you a while ago, Lady Coxon,

poor dear, is demented.” His tone had much behind it—was full of promise. I asked if her ladyship’s misfortune were a trait of her malady or only of her character, and he pronounced it a product of both. The case he wanted to put to me was a matter on which it concerned him to have the impression—the judgement, he might also say—of another person. “I mean of the average intelligent man, but you see I take what I can get.” There would be the technical, the strictly legal view; then there would be the way the question would strike a man of the world. He had lighted another cigarette while he talked, and I saw he was glad to have it to handle when he brought out at last, with a laugh slightly artificial: “In fact it’s a subject on which Miss Anvoy and I are pulling different ways.”

“And you want me to decide between you? I decide in advance for Miss Anvoy.”

“In advance—that’s quite right. That’s how I decided when I proposed to her. But my story will interest you only so far as your mind isn’t made up.” Gravener puffed his cigarette a minute and then continued: “Are you familiar with the idea of the Endowment of Research?”

“Of Research?” I was at sea a moment.

“I give you Lady Coxon’s phrase. She has it on the brain.”

“She wishes to endow—?”

“Some earnest and ‘loyal’ seeker,” Gravener said. “It was a sketchy design of her late husband’s, and he handed it on to her; setting apart in his will a sum of money of which she was to enjoy the interest for life, but of which, should she eventually see her opportunity—the matter was left largely to her discretion—she would best honour his memory by determining the exemplary public use. This sum of money, no less than thirteen thousand pounds, was to be called The Coxon Fund; and poor Sir Gregory evidently proposed to himself that The Coxon Fund should cover his name with glory—be universally desired and admired. He left his wife a full declaration of his views, so far at least as that term may be applied to views vitiated by a vagueness really infantine. A little learning’s a dangerous thing, and a good citizen who happens to have been an ass is worse for a community than bad sewerage. He’s worst of all when he’s dead, because then he can’t be stopped. However, such as they were, the poor man’s aspirations are now in his wife’s bosom, or fermenting rather in her foolish brain: it lies with her to carry them out. But of course she must first catch her hare.”

“Her earnest loyal seeker?”

“The flower that blushes unseen for want of such a pecuniary independence as may aid the light that’s in it to shine upon the human race. The individual, in a word, who, having the rest of the machinery, the spiritual, the intellectual, is most hampered in his search.”

“His search for what?”

“For Moral Truth. That’s what Sir Gregory calls it.”

I burst out laughing. “Delightful munificent Sir Gregory! It’s a charming idea.”

“So Miss Anvoy thinks.”

“Has she a candidate for the Fund?”

“Not that I know of—and she’s perfectly reasonable about it. But Lady Coxon has put the matter before her, and we’ve naturally had a lot of talk.”

“Talk that, as you’ve so interestingly intimated, has landed you in a disagreement.”

“She considers there’s something in it,” Gravener said.

“And you consider there’s nothing?”

“It seems to me a piece of solemn twaddle—which can’t fail to be attended with consequences certainly grotesque and possibly immoral. To begin with, fancy constituting an endowment without establishing a tribunal—a bench of competent people, of judges.”

“The sole tribunal is Lady Coxon?”

“And any one she chooses to invite.”

“But she has invited you,” I noted.

“I’m not competent—I hate the thing. Besides, she hasn’t,” my friend went on. “The real history of the matter, I take it, is that the inspiration was originally Lady Coxon’s own, that she infected him with it, and that the flattering option left her is simply his tribute to her beautiful, her aboriginal enthusiasm. She came to England forty years ago, a thin transcendental Bostonian, and even her odd happy frumpy Clockborough marriage never really materialised her. She feels indeed that she has become very British—as if that, as a process, as a ‘Werden,’ as anything but an original sign of grace, were conceivable; but it’s precisely what makes her cling to the notion of the ‘Fund’—cling to it as to a link with the ideal.”

“How can she cling if she’s dying?”

“Do you mean how can she act in the matter?” Gravener asked. “That’s precisely the question. She can’t! As she has never yet caught her hare, never spied out her lucky impostor—how should she, with the life she has led?—her husband’s intention has come very near lapsing. His idea, to do him justice, was that it *should* lapse if exactly the right person, the perfect mixture of genius and chill penury, should fail to turn up. Ah the poor dear woman’s very particular—she says there must be no mistake.”

I found all this quite thrilling—I took it in with avidity. “And if she dies without doing anything, what becomes of the money?” I demanded.

“It goes back to his family, if she hasn’t made some other disposition of it.”

“She may do that then—she may divert it?”

“Her hands are not tied. She has a grand discretion. The proof is that three months ago she offered to make the proceeds over to her niece.”

“For Miss Anvoy’s own use?”

“For Miss Anvoy’s own use—on the occasion of her prospective marriage. She was discouraged—the earnest seeker required so earnest a search. She was afraid of making a mistake; every one she could think of seemed either not earnest enough or not poor enough. On the receipt of the first bad news about Mr. Anvoy’s affairs she proposed to Ruth to make the sacrifice for her. As the situation in New York got worse she repeated her proposal.”

“Which Miss Anvoy declined?”

“Except as a formal trust.”

“You mean except as committing herself legally to place the money?”

“On the head of the deserving object, the great man frustrated,” said Gravener. “She only consents to act in the spirit of Sir Gregory’s scheme.”

“And you blame her for that?” I asked with some intensity.

My tone couldn't have been harsh, but he coloured a little and there was a queer light in his eye. "My dear fellow, if I 'blamed' the young lady I'm engaged to I shouldn't immediately say it even to so old a friend as you." I saw that some deep discomfort, some restless desire to be sided with, reassuringly, approvingly mirrored, had been at the bottom of his drifting so far, and I was genuinely touched by his confidence. It was inconsistent with his habits; but being troubled about a woman was not, for him, a habit: that itself was an inconsistency. George Gravener could stand straight enough before any other combination of forces. It amused me to think that the combination he had succumbed to had an American accent, a transcendental aunt and an insolvent father; but all my old loyalty to him mustered to meet this unexpected hint that I could help him. I saw that I could from the insincere tone in which he pursued: "I've criticised her of course, I've contended with her, and it has been great fun." Yet it clearly couldn't have been such great fun as to make it improper for me presently to ask if Miss Anvoy had nothing at all settled on herself. To this he replied that she had only a trifle from her mother—a mere four hundred a year, which was exactly why it would be convenient to him that she shouldn't decline, in the face of this total change in her prospects, an accession of income which would distinctly help them to marry. When I enquired if there were no other way in which so rich and so affectionate an aunt could cause the weight of her benevolence to be felt, he answered that Lady Coxon was affectionate indeed, but was scarcely to be called rich. She could let her project of the Fund lapse for her niece's benefit, but she couldn't do anything else. She had been accustomed to regard her as tremendously provided for, and she was up to her eyes in promises to anxious Coxons. She was a woman of an inordinate conscience, and her conscience was now a distress to her, hovering round her bed in irreconcilable forms of resentful husbands, portionless nieces and undiscoverable philosophers.

We were by this time getting into the whirr of fleeting platforms, the multiplication of lights. "I think you'll find," I said with a laugh, "that your predicament will disappear in the very fact that the philosopher *is* undiscoverable."

He began to gather up his papers. "Who can set a limit to the ingenuity of an extravagant woman?"

"Yes, after all, who indeed?" I echoed as I recalled the extravagance commemorated in Adelaide's anecdote of Miss Anvoy and the thirty pounds.

IX

The thing I had been most sensible of in that talk with George Gravener was the way Saltram's name kept out of it. It seemed to me at the time that we were quite pointedly silent about him; but afterwards it appeared more probable there had been on my companion's part no conscious avoidance. Later on I was sure of this, and for the best of reasons—the simple reason of my perceiving more completely that, for evil as well as for good, he said nothing to Gravener's imagination. That honest man didn't fear him—he was too much disgusted with him. No more did I, doubtless, and for very much the same reason. I treated my friend's story as an absolute confidence; but when before Christmas, by Mrs. Saltram, I was informed of Lady Coxon's death without having had news of Miss Anvoy's return, I found myself taking for granted we should hear no more of these nuptials, in which, as obscurely unnatural, I now saw I had never *too* disconcertedly believed. I began to ask myself how people who suited each other so little could please each other so much. The charm was some material charm, some affinity, exquisite doubtless, yet superficial some surrender to youth and beauty and passion, to force and grace and fortune, happy accidents and easy contacts. They might dote on each other's persons, but how could they know each other's souls? How could they have the same prejudices, how could they have the same horizon? Such questions, I confess,

seemed quenched but not answered when, one day in February, going out to Wimbledon, I found our young lady in the house. A passion that had brought her back across the wintry ocean was as much of a passion as was needed. No impulse equally strong indeed had drawn George Gravener to America; a circumstance on which, however, I reflected only long enough to remind myself that it was none of my business. Ruth Anvoy was distinctly different, and I felt that the difference was not simply that of her marks of mourning. Mrs. Mulville told me soon enough what it was: it was the difference between a handsome girl with large expectations and a handsome girl with only four hundred a year. This explanation indeed didn't wholly content me, not even when I learned that her mourning had a double cause—learned that poor Mr. Anvoy, giving way altogether, buried under the ruins of his fortune and leaving next to nothing, had died a few weeks before.

“So she has come out to marry George Gravener?” I commented. “Wouldn't it have been prettier of him to have saved her the trouble?”

“Hasn't the House just met?” Adelaide replied. “And for Mr. Gravener the House—!” Then she added: “I gather that her having come is exactly a sign that the marriage is a little shaky. If it were quite all right a self-respecting girl like Ruth would have waited for him over there.”

I noted that they were already Ruth and Adelaide, but what I said was: “Do you mean she'll have had to return to *make* it so?”

“No, I mean that she must have come out for some reason independent of it.” Adelaide could only surmise, however, as yet, and there was more, as we found, to be revealed. Mrs. Mulville, on hearing of her arrival, had brought the young lady out in the green landau for the Sunday. The Coxons were in possession of the house in Regent's Park, and Miss Anvoy was in dreary lodgings. George Gravener had been with her when Adelaide called, but had assented graciously enough to the little visit at Wimbledon. The carriage, with Mr. Saltram in it but not mentioned, had been sent off on some errand from which it was to return and pick the ladies up. Gravener had left them together, and at the end of an hour, on the Saturday afternoon, the party of three had driven out to Wimbledon. This was the girl's second glimpse of our great man, and I was interested in asking Mrs. Mulville if the impression made by the first appeared to have been confirmed. On her replying after consideration, that of course with time and opportunity it couldn't fail to be, but that she was disappointed, I was sufficiently struck with her use of this last word to question her further.

“Do you mean you're disappointed because you judge Miss Anvoy to be?”

“Yes; I hoped for a greater effect last evening. We had two or three people, but he scarcely opened his mouth.”

“He'll be all the better to-night,” I opined after a moment. Then I pursued: “What particular importance do you attach to the idea of her being impressed?”

Adelaide turned her mild pale eyes on me as for rebuke of my levity. “Why the importance of her being as happy as *we* are!”

I'm afraid that at this my levity grew. “Oh that's a happiness almost too great to wish a person!” I saw she hadn't yet in her mind what I had in mine, and at any rate the visitor's actual bliss was limited to a walk in the garden with Kent Mulville. Later in the afternoon I also took one, and I saw nothing of Miss Anvoy till dinner, at which we failed of the company of Saltram, who had caused it to be reported that he was indisposed and lying down. This made us, most of us—for there were other friends present—convey to each other in silence some of the unutterable things that in those years our eyes had inevitably acquired

the art of expressing. If a fine little American enquirer hadn't been there we would have expressed them otherwise, and Adelaide would have pretended not to hear. I had seen her, before the very fact, abstract herself nobly; and I knew that more than once, to keep it from the servants, managing, dissimulating cleverly, she had helped her husband to carry him bodily to his room. Just recently he had been so wise and so deep and so high that I had begun to get nervous—to wonder if by chance there were something behind it, if he were kept straight for instance by the knowledge that the hated Pudneys would have more to tell us if they chose. He was lying low, but unfortunately it was common wisdom with us in this connexion that the biggest splashes took place in the quietest pools. We should have had a merry life indeed if all the splashes had sprinkled us as refreshingly as the waters we were even then to feel about our ears. Kent Mulville had been up to his room, but had come back with a face that told as few tales as I had seen it succeed in telling on the evening I waited in the lecture-room with Miss Anvoy. I said to myself that our friend had gone out, but it was a comfort that the presence of a comparative stranger deprived us of the dreary duty of suggesting to each other, in respect of his errand, edifying possibilities in which we didn't ourselves believe. At ten o'clock he came into the drawing-room with his waistcoat much awry but his eyes sending out great signals. It was precisely with his entrance that I ceased to be vividly conscious of him. I saw that the crystal, as I had called it, had begun to swing, and I had need of my immediate attention for Miss Anvoy.

Even when I was told afterwards that he had, as we might have said to-day, broken the record, the manner in which that attention had been rewarded relieved me of a sense of loss. I had of course a perfect general consciousness that something great was going on: it was a little like having been etherised to hear Herr Joachim play. The old music was in the air; I felt the strong pulse of thought, the sink and swell, the flight, the poise, the plunge; but I knew something about one of the listeners that nobody else knew, and Saltram's monologue could reach me only through that medium. To this hour I'm of no use when, as a witness, I'm appealed to—for they still absurdly contend about it—as to whether or no on that historic night he was drunk; and my position is slightly ridiculous, for I've never cared to tell them what it really was I was taken up with. What I got out of it is the only morsel of the total experience that is quite my own. The others were shared, but this is incommunicable. I feel that now, I'm bound to say, even in thus roughly evoking the occasion, and it takes something from my pride of clearness. However, I shall perhaps be as clear as is absolutely needful if I remark that our young lady was too much given up to her own intensity of observation to be sensible of mine. It was plainly not the question of her marriage that had brought her back. I greatly enjoyed this discovery and was sure that had that question alone been involved she would have stirred no step. In this case doubtless Gravener would, in spite of the House of Commons, have found means to rejoin her. It afterwards made me uncomfortable for her that, alone in the lodging Mrs. Mulville had put before me as dreary, she should have in any degree the air of waiting for her fate; so that I was presently relieved at hearing of her having gone to stay at Coldfield. If she was in England at all while the engagement stood the only proper place for her was under Lady Maddock's wing. Now that she was unfortunate and relatively poor, perhaps her prospective sister-in-law would be wholly won over.

There would be much to say, if I had space, about the way her behaviour, as I caught gleams of it, ministered to the image that had taken birth in my mind, to my private amusement, while that other night I listened to George Gravener in the railway-carriage. I watched her in the light of this queer possibility—a formidable thing certainly to meet—and I was aware that it coloured, extravagantly perhaps, my interpretation of her very looks and tones. At Wimbledon for instance it had appeared to me she was literally afraid of Saltram, in dread of

a coercion that she had begun already to feel. I had come up to town with her the next day and had been convinced that, though deeply interested, she was immensely on her guard. She would show as little as possible before she should be ready to show everything. What this final exhibition might be on the part of a girl perceptibly so able to think things out I found it great sport to forecast. It would have been exciting to be approached by her, appealed to by her for advice; but I prayed to heaven I mightn't find myself in such a predicament. If there was really a present rigour in the situation of which Gravener had sketched for me the elements, she would have to get out of her difficulty by herself. It wasn't I who had launched her and it wasn't I who could help her. I didn't fail to ask myself why, since I couldn't help her, I should think so much about her. It was in part my suspense that was responsible for this; I waited impatiently to see whether she wouldn't have told Mrs. Mulville a portion at least of what I had learned from Gravener. But I saw Mrs. Mulville was still reduced to wonder what she had come out again for if she hadn't come as a conciliatory bride. That she had come in some other character was the only thing that fitted all the appearances. Having for family reasons to spend some time that spring in the west of England, I was in a manner out of earshot of the great oceanic rumble—I mean of the continuous hum of Saltram's thought—and my uneasiness tended to keep me quiet. There was something I wanted so little to have to say that my prudence surmounted my curiosity. I only wondered if Ruth Anvoy talked over the idea of The Coxon Fund with Lady Maddock, and also somewhat why I didn't hear from Wimbledon. I had a reproachful note about something or other from Mrs. Saltram, but it contained no mention of Lady Coxon's niece, on whom her eyes had been much less fixed since the recent untoward events.

X

Poor Adelaide's silence was fully explained later—practically explained when in June, returning to London, I was honoured by this admirable woman with an early visit. As soon as she arrived I guessed everything, and as soon as she told me that darling Ruth had been in her house nearly a month I had my question ready. "What in the name of maidenly modesty is she staying in England for?"

"Because she loves me so!" cried Adelaide gaily. But she hadn't come to see me only to tell me Miss Anvoy loved her: that was quite sufficiently established, and what was much more to the point was that Mr. Gravener had now raised an objection to it. He had protested at least against her being at Wimbledon, where in the innocence of his heart he had originally brought her himself; he called on her to put an end to their engagement in the only proper, the only happy manner.

"And why in the world doesn't she do do?" I asked.

Adelaide had a pause. "She says you know."

Then on my also hesitating she added: "A condition he makes."

"The Coxon Fund?" I panted.

"He has mentioned to her his having told you about it."

"Ah but so little! Do you mean she has accepted the trust?"

"In the most splendid spirit—as a duty about which there can be no two opinions." To which my friend added: "Of course she's thinking of Mr. Saltram."

I gave a quick cry at this, which, in its violence, made my visitor turn pale. "How very awful!"

"Awful?"

“Why, to have anything to do with such an idea one’s self.”

“I’m sure *you* needn’t!” and Mrs. Mulville tossed her head.

“He isn’t good enough!” I went on; to which she opposed a sound almost as contentious as my own had been. This made me, with genuine immediate horror, exclaim: “You haven’t influenced her, I hope!” and my emphasis brought back the blood with a rush to poor Adelaide’s face. She declared while she blushed—for I had frightened her again—that she had never influenced anybody and that the girl had only seen and heard and judged for herself. *He* had influenced her, if I would, as he did every one who had a soul: that word, as we knew, even expressed feebly the power of the things he said to haunt the mind. How could she, Adelaide, help it if Miss Anvoy’s mind was haunted? I demanded with a groan what right a pretty girl engaged to a rising M.P. had to *have* a mind; but the only explanation my bewildered friend could give me was that she was so clever. She regarded Mr. Saltram naturally as a tremendous force for good. She was intelligent enough to understand him and generous enough to admire.

“She’s many things enough, but is she, among them, rich enough?” I demanded. “Rich enough, I mean, to sacrifice such a lot of good money?”

“That’s for herself to judge. Besides, it’s not her own money; she doesn’t in the least consider it so.”

“And Gravener does, if not *his* own; and that’s the whole difficulty?”

“The difficulty that brought her back, yes: she had absolutely to see her poor aunt’s solicitor. It’s clear that by Lady Coxon’s will she may have the money, but it’s still clearer to her conscience that the original condition, definite, intensely implied on her uncle’s part, is attached to the use of it. She can only take one view of it. It’s for the Endowment or it’s for nothing.”

“The Endowment,” I permitted myself to observe, “is a conception superficially sublime, but fundamentally ridiculous.”

“Are you repeating Mr. Gravener’s words?” Adelaide asked.

“Possibly, though I’ve not seen him for months. It’s simply the way it strikes me too. It’s an old wife’s tale. Gravener made some reference to the legal aspect, but such an absurdly loose arrangement has *no* legal aspect.”

“Ruth doesn’t insist on that,” said Mrs. Mulville; “and it’s, for her, exactly this technical weakness that constitutes the force of the moral obligation.”

“Are you repeating *her* words?” I enquired. I forget what else Adelaide said, but she said she was magnificent. I thought of George Gravener confronted with such magnificence as that, and I asked what could have made two such persons ever suppose they understood each other. Mrs. Mulville assured me the girl loved him as such a woman could love and that she suffered as such a woman could suffer. Nevertheless she wanted to see *me*. At this I sprang up with a groan. “Oh I’m so sorry!—when?” Small though her sense of humour, I think Adelaide laughed at my sequence. We discussed the day, the nearest it would be convenient I should come out; but before she went I asked my visitor how long she had been acquainted with these prodigies.

“For several weeks, but I was pledged to secrecy.”

“And that’s why you didn’t write?”

“I couldn’t very well tell you she was with me without telling you that no time had even yet been fixed for her marriage. And I couldn’t very well tell you as much as that without telling you what I knew of the reason of it. It was not till a day or two ago,” Mrs. Mulville went on, “that she asked me to ask you if you wouldn’t come and see her. Then at last she spoke of your knowing about the idea of the Endowment.”

I turned this over. “Why on earth does she want to see me?”

“To talk with you, naturally, about Mr. Saltram.”

“As a subject for the prize?” This was hugely obvious, and I presently returned: “I think I’ll sail to-morrow for Australia.”

“Well then—sail!” said Mrs. Mulville, getting up.

But I frivolously, continued. “On Thursday at five, we said?” The appointment was made definite and I enquired how, all this time, the unconscious candidate had carried himself.

“In perfection, really, by the happiest of chances: he has positively been a dear. And then, as to what we revere him for, in the most wonderful form. His very highest—pure celestial light. You *won’t* do him an ill turn?” Adelaide pleaded at the door.

“What danger can equal for him the danger to which he’s exposed from himself?” I asked. “Look out sharp, if he has lately been too prim. He’ll presently take a day off, treat us to some exhibition that will make an Endowment a scandal.”

“A scandal?” Mrs. Mulville dolorously echoed.

“Is Miss Anvoy prepared for that?”

My visitor, for a moment, screwed her parasol into my carpet. “He grows bigger every day.”

“So do you!” I laughed as she went off.

That girl at Wimbledon, on the Thursday afternoon, more than justified my apprehensions. I recognised fully now the cause of the agitation she had produced in me from the first—the faint foreknowledge that there was something very stiff I should have to do for her. I felt more than ever committed to my fate as, standing before her in the big drawing-room where they had tactfully left us to ourselves, I tried with a smile to string together the pearls of lucidity which, from her chair, she successively tossed me. Pale and bright, in her monotonous mourning, she was an image of intelligent purpose, of the passion of duty; but I asked myself whether any girl had ever had so charming an instinct as that which permitted her to laugh out, as for the joy of her difficulty, into the priggish old room. This remarkable young woman could be earnest without being solemn, and at moments when I ought doubtless to have cursed her obstinacy I found myself watching the unstudied play of her eyebrows or the recurrence of a singularly intense whiteness produced by the parting of her lips. These aberrations, I hasten to add, didn’t prevent my learning soon enough why she had wished to see me. Her reason for this was as distinct as her beauty: it was to make me explain what I had meant, on the occasion of our first meeting, by Mr. Saltram’s want of dignity. It wasn’t that she couldn’t imagine, but she desired it there from my lips. What she really desired of course was to know whether there was worse about him than what she had found out for herself. She hadn’t been a month so much in the house with him without discovering that he wasn’t a man of monumental bronze. He was like a jelly minus its mould, he had to be embanked; and that was precisely the source of her interest in him and the ground of her project. She put her project boldly before me: there it stood in its preposterous beauty. She was as willing to take the humorous view of it as I could be: the

only difference was that for her the humorous view of a thing wasn't necessarily prohibitive, wasn't paralysing.

Moreover she professed that she couldn't discuss with me the primary question—the moral obligation: that was in her own breast. There were things she couldn't go into—injunctions, impressions she had received. They were a part of the closest intimacy of her intercourse with her aunt, they were absolutely clear to her; and on questions of delicacy, the interpretation of a fidelity, of a promise, one had always in the last resort to make up one's mind for one's self. It was the idea of the application to the particular case, such a splendid one at last, that troubled her, and she admitted that it stirred very deep things. She didn't pretend that such a responsibility was a simple matter; if it *had* been she wouldn't have attempted to saddle me with any portion of it. The Mulvilles were sympathy itself, but were they absolutely candid? Could they indeed be, in their position—would it even have been to be desired? Yes, she had sent for me to ask no less than that of me—whether there was anything dreadful kept back. She made no allusion whatever to George Gravener—I thought her silence the only good taste and her gaiety perhaps a part of the very anxiety of that discretion, the effect of a determination that people shouldn't know from herself that her relations with the man she was to marry were strained. All the weight, however, that she left me to throw was a sufficient implication of the weight *he* had thrown in vain. Oh she knew the question of character was immense, and that one couldn't entertain any plan for making merit comfortable without running the gauntlet of that terrible procession of interrogation-points which, like a young ladies' school out for a walk, hooked their uniform noses at the tail of governess Conduct. But were we absolutely to hold that there was never, never, never an exception, never, never, never an occasion for liberal acceptance, for clever charity, for suspended pedantry—for letting one side, in short, outbalance another? When Miss Anvoy threw off this appeal I could have embraced her for so delightfully emphasising her unlikeness to Mrs. Saltram. “Why not have the courage of one's forgiveness,” she asked, “as well as the enthusiasm of one's adhesion?”

“Seeing how wonderfully you've threshed the whole thing out,” I evasively replied, “gives me an extraordinary notion of the point your enthusiasm has reached.”

She considered this remark an instant with her eyes on mine, and I divined that it struck her I might possibly intend it as a reference to some personal subjection to our fat philosopher, to some aberration of sensibility, some perversion of taste. At least I couldn't interpret otherwise the sudden flash that came into her face. Such a manifestation, as the result of any word of mine, embarrassed me; but while I was thinking how to reassure her the flush passed away in a smile of exquisite good nature. “Oh you see one forgets so wonderfully how one dislikes him!” she said; and if her tone simply extinguished his strange figure with the brush of its compassion, it also rings in my ear to-day as the purest of all our praises. But with what quick response of fine pity such a relegation of the man himself made me privately sigh “Ah poor Saltram!” She instantly, with this, took the measure of all I didn't believe, and it enabled her to go on: “What can one do when a person has given such a lift to one's interest in life?”

“Yes, what can one do?” If I struck her as a little vague it was because I was thinking of another person. I indulged in another inarticulate murmur—“Poor George Gravener!” What had become of the lift *he* had given that interest? Later on I made up my mind that she was sore and stricken at the appearance he presented of wanting the miserable money. This was the hidden reason of her alienation. The probable sincerity, in spite of the illiberality, of his scruples about the particular use of it under discussion didn't efface the ugliness of his demand that they should buy a good house with it. Then, as for *his* alienation, he didn't,

pardonably enough, grasp the lift Frank Saltram had given her interest in life. If a mere spectator could ask that last question, with what rage in his heart the man himself might! He wasn't, like her, I was to see, too proud to show me why he was disappointed.

XI

I was unable this time to stay to dinner: such at any rate was the plea on which I took leave. I desired in truth to get away from my young lady, for that obviously helped me not to pretend to satisfy her. How *could* I satisfy her? I asked myself—how could I tell her how much had been kept back? I didn't even know and I certainly didn't desire to know. My own policy had ever been to learn the least about poor Saltram's weaknesses—not to learn the most. A great deal that I had in fact learned had been forced upon me by his wife. There was something even irritating in Miss Anvoy's crude conscientiousness, and I wondered why, after all, she couldn't have let him alone and been content to entrust George Gravener with the purchase of the good house. I was sure he would have driven a bargain, got something excellent and cheap. I laughed louder even than she, I temporised, I failed her; I told her I must think over her case. I professed a horror of responsibilities and twitted her with her own extravagant passion for them. It wasn't really that I was afraid of the scandal, the moral discredit for the Fund; what troubled me most was a feeling of a different order. Of course, as the beneficiary of the Fund was to enjoy a simple life-interest, as it was hoped that new beneficiaries would arise and come up to new standards, it wouldn't be a trifle that the first of these worthies shouldn't have been a striking example of the domestic virtues. The Fund would start badly, as it were, and the laurel would, in some respects at least, scarcely be greener from the brows of the original wearer. That idea, however, was at that hour, as I have hinted, not the source of solicitude it ought perhaps to have been, for I felt less the irregularity of Saltram's getting the money than that of this exalted young woman's giving it up. I wanted her to have it for herself, and I told her so before I went away. She looked graver at this than she had looked at all, saying she hoped such a preference wouldn't make me dishonest.

It made me, to begin with, very restless—made me, instead of going straight to the station, fidget a little about that many-coloured Common which gives Wimbledon horizons. There was a worry for me to work off, or rather keep at a distance, for I declined even to admit to myself that I had, in Miss Anvoy's phrase, been saddled with it. What could have been clearer indeed than the attitude of recognising perfectly what a world of trouble The Coxon Fund would in future save us, and of yet liking better to face a continuance of that trouble than see, and in fact contribute to, a deviation from attainable bliss in the life of two other persons in whom I was deeply interested? Suddenly, at the end of twenty minutes, there was projected across this clearness the image of a massive middle-aged man seated on a bench under a tree, with sad far-wandering eyes and plump white hands folded on the head of a stick—a stick I recognised, a stout gold-headed staff that I had given him in devoted days. I stopped short as he turned his face to me, and it happened that for some reason or other I took in as I had perhaps never done before the beauty of his rich blank gaze. It was charged with experience as the sky is charged with light, and I felt on the instant as if we had been overspanned and conjoined by the great arch of a bridge or the great dome of a temple. Doubtless I was rendered peculiarly sensitive to it by something in the way I had been giving him up and sinking him. While I met it I stood there smitten, and I felt myself responding to it with a sort of guilty grimace. This brought back his attention in a smile which expressed for me a cheerful weary patience, a bruised noble gentleness. I had told Miss Anvoy that he had no dignity, but what did he seem to me, all unbuttoned and fatigued as he waited for me to come up, if he didn't seem unconcerned with small things, didn't seem

in short majestic? There was majesty in his mere unconsciousness of our little conferences and puzzlements over his maintenance and his reward.

After I had sat by him a few minutes I passed my arm over his big soft shoulder—wherever you touched him you found equally little firmness—and said in a tone of which the suppliancy fell oddly on my own ear: “Come back to town with me, old friend—come back and spend the evening.” I wanted to hold him, I wanted to keep him, and at Waterloo, an hour later, I telegraphed possessively to the Mulvilles. When he objected, as regards staying all night, that he had no things, I asked him if he hadn’t everything of mine. I had abstained from ordering dinner, and it was too late for preliminaries at a club; so we were reduced to tea and fried fish at my rooms—reduced also to the transcendent. Something had come up which made me want him to feel at peace with me—and which, precisely, was all the dear man himself wanted on any occasion. I had too often had to press upon him considerations irrelevant, but it gives me pleasure now to think that on that particular evening I didn’t even mention Mrs. Saltram and the children. Late into the night we smoked and talked; old shames and old rigours fell away from us; I only let him see that I was conscious of what I owed him. He was as mild as contrition and as copious as faith; he was never so fine as on a shy return, and even better at forgiving than at being forgiven. I dare say it was a smaller matter than that famous night at Wimbledon, the night of the problematical sobriety and of Miss Anvoy’s initiation; but I was as much in it on this occasion as I had been out of it then. At about 1.30 he was sublime.

He never, in whatever situation, rose till all other risings were over, and his breakfasts, at Wimbledon, had always been the principal reason mentioned by departing cooks. The coast was therefore clear for me to receive her when, early the next morning, to my surprise, it was announced to me his wife had called. I hesitated, after she had come up, about telling her Saltram was in the house, but she herself settled the question, kept me reticent by drawing forth a sealed letter which, looking at me very hard in the eyes, she placed, with a pregnant absence of comment, in my hand. For a single moment there glimmered before me the fond hope that Mrs. Saltram had tendered me, as it were, her resignation and desired to embody the act in an unsparing form. To bring this about I would have feigned any humiliation; but after my eyes had caught the superscription I heard myself say with a flatness that betrayed a sense of something very different from relief: “Oh the Pudneys!” I knew their envelopes though they didn’t know mine. They always used the kind sold at post-offices with the stamp affixed, and as this letter hadn’t been posted they had wasted a penny on me. I had seen their horrid missives to the Mulvilles, but hadn’t been in direct correspondence with them.

“They enclosed it to me, to be delivered. They doubtless explain to you that they hadn’t your address.”

I turned the thing over without opening it. “Why in the world should they write to me?”

“Because they’ve something to tell you. The worst,” Mrs. Saltram dryly added.

It was another chapter, I felt, of the history of their lamentable quarrel with her husband, the episode in which, vindictively, disingenuously as they themselves had behaved, one had to admit that he had put himself more grossly in the wrong than at any moment of his life. He had begun by insulting the matchless Mulvilles for these more specious protectors, and then, according to his wont at the end of a few months, had dug a still deeper ditch for his aberration than the chasm left yawning behind. The chasm at Wimbledon was now blessedly closed; but the Pudneys, across their persistent gulf, kept up the nastiest fire. I never doubted they had a strong case, and I had been from the first for not defending him—reasoning that if they weren’t contradicted they’d perhaps subside. This was above all what I wanted, and I so

far prevailed that I did arrest the correspondence in time to save our little circle an infliction heavier than it perhaps would have borne. I knew, that is I divined, that their allegations had gone as yet only as far as their courage, conscious as they were in their own virtue of an exposed place in which Saltram could have planted a blow. It was a question with them whether a man who had himself so much to cover up would dare his blow; so that these vessels of rancour were in a manner afraid of each other. I judged that on the day the Pudneys should cease for some reason or other to be afraid they would treat us to some revelation more disconcerting than any of its predecessors. As I held Mrs. Saltram's letter in my hand it was distinctly communicated to me that the day had come—they had ceased to be afraid. "I don't want to know the worst," I presently declared.

"You'll have to open the letter. It also contains an enclosure."

I felt it—it was fat and uncanny. "Wheels within wheels!" I exclaimed. "There's something for me too to deliver."

"So they tell me—to Miss Anvoy."

I stared; I felt a certain thrill. "Why don't they send it to her directly?"

Mrs. Saltram hung fire. "Because she's staying with Mr. and Mrs. Mulville."

"And why should that prevent?"

Again my visitor faltered, and I began to reflect on the grotesque, the unconscious perversity of her action. I was the only person save George Gravener and the Mulvilles who was aware of Sir Gregory Coxon's and of Miss Anvoy's strange bounty. Where could there have been a more signal illustration of the clumsiness of human affairs than her having complacently selected this moment to fly in the face of it? "There's the chance of their seeing her letters. They know Mr. Pudney's hand."

Still I didn't understand; then it flashed upon me. "You mean they might intercept it? How can you imply anything so base?" I indignantly demanded.

"It's not I—it's Mr. Pudney!" cried Mrs. Saltram with a flush. "It's his own idea."

"Then why couldn't he send the letter to you to be delivered?"

Mrs. Saltram's embarrassment increased; she gave me another hard look. "You must make that out for yourself."

I made it out quickly enough. "It's a denunciation?"

"A real lady doesn't betray her husband!" this virtuous woman exclaimed.

I burst out laughing, and I fear my laugh may have had an effect of impertinence. "Especially to Miss Anvoy, who's so easily shocked? Why do such things concern *her*?" I asked, much at a loss.

"Because she's there, exposed to all his craft. Mr. and Mrs. Pudney have been watching this: they feel she may be taken in."

"Thank you for all the rest of us! What difference can it make when she has lost her power to contribute?"

Again Mrs. Saltram considered; then very nobly: "There are other things in the world than money." This hadn't occurred to her so long as the young lady had any; but she now added, with a glance at my letter, that Mr. and Mrs. Pudney doubtless explained their motives. "It's all in kindness," she continued as she got up.

“Kindness to Miss Anvoy? You took, on the whole, another view of kindness before her reverses.”

My companion smiled with some acidity “Perhaps you’re no safer than the Mulvilles!”

I didn’t want her to think that, nor that she should report to the Pudneys that they had not been happy in their agent; and I well remember that this was the moment at which I began, with considerable emotion, to promise myself to enjoin upon Miss Anvoy never to open any letter that should come to her in one of those penny envelopes. My emotion, and I fear I must add my confusion, quickly deepened; I presently should have been as glad to frighten Mrs. Saltram as to think I might by some diplomacy restore the Pudneys to a quieter vigilance.

“It’s best you should take *my* view of my safety,” I at any rate soon responded. When I saw she didn’t know what I meant by this I added: “You may turn out to have done, in bringing me this letter, a thing you’ll profoundly regret.” My tone had a significance which, I could see, did make her uneasy, and there was a moment, after I had made two or three more remarks of studiously bewildering effect, at which her eyes followed so hungrily the little flourish of the letter with which I emphasised them that I instinctively slipped Mr. Pudney’s communication into my pocket. She looked, in her embarrassed annoyance, capable of grabbing it to send it back to him. I felt, after she had gone, as if I had almost given her my word I wouldn’t deliver the enclosure. The passionate movement, at any rate, with which, in solitude, I transferred the whole thing, unopened, from my pocket to a drawer which I double-locked would have amounted, for an initiated observer, to some such pledge.

XII

Mrs. Saltram left me drawing my breath more quickly and indeed almost in pain—as if I had just perilously grazed the loss of something precious. I didn’t quite know what it was—it had a shocking resemblance to my honour. The emotion was the livelier surely in that my pulses even yet vibrated to the pleasure with which, the night before, I had rallied to the rare analyst, the great intellectual adventurer and pathfinder. What had dropped from me like a cumbersome garment as Saltram appeared before me in the afternoon on the heath was the disposition to haggle over his value. Hang it, one had to choose, one had to put that value somewhere; so I would put it really high and have done with it. Mrs. Mulville drove in for him at a discreet hour—the earliest she could suppose him to have got up; and I learned that Miss Anvoy would also have come had she not been expecting a visit from Mr. Gravener. I was perfectly mindful that I was under bonds to see this young lady, and also that I had a letter to hand to her; but I took my time, I waited from day to day. I left Mrs. Saltram to deal as her apprehensions should prompt with the Pudneys. I knew at last what I meant—I had ceased to wince at my responsibility. I gave this supreme impression of Saltram time to fade if it would; but it didn’t fade, and, individually, it hasn’t faded even now. During the month that I thus invited myself to stiffen again, Adelaide Mulville, perplexed by my absence, wrote to me to ask why I *was* so stiff. At that season of the year I was usually oftener “with” them. She also wrote that she feared a real estrangement had set in between Mr. Gravener and her sweet young friend—a state of things but half satisfactory to her so long as the advantage resulting to Mr. Saltram failed to disengage itself from the merely nebulous state. She intimated that her sweet young friend was, if anything, a trifle too reserved; she also intimated that there might now be an opening for another clever young man. There never was the slightest opening, I may here parenthesise, and of course the question can’t come up to-day. These are old frustrations now. Ruth Anvoy hasn’t married, I hear, and neither have I. During the month, toward the end, I wrote to George Gravener to ask if, on a special errand, I might come to see him, and his answer was to knock the very next day at my door. I saw he had immediately connected my enquiry with the talk we had had in the

railway-carriage, and his promptitude showed that the ashes of his eagerness weren't yet cold. I told him there was something I felt I ought in candour to let him know—I recognised the obligation his friendly confidence had laid on me.

"You mean Miss Anvoy has talked to you? She has told me so herself," he said.

"It wasn't to tell you so that I wanted to see you," I replied; "for it seemed to me that such a communication would rest wholly with herself. If however she did speak to you of our conversation she probably told you I was discouraging."

"Discouraging?"

"On the subject of a present application of The Coxon Fund."

"To the case of Mr. Saltram? My dear fellow, I don't know what you call discouraging!" Gravener cried.

"Well I thought I was, and I thought she thought I was."

"I believe she did, but such a thing's measured by the effect. She's not 'discouraged,'" he said.

"That's her own affair. The reason I asked you to see me was that it appeared to me I ought to tell you frankly that—decidedly!—I can't undertake to produce that effect. In fact I don't want to!"

"It's very good of you, damn you!" my visitor laughed, red and really grave. Then he said: "You'd like to see that scoundrel publicly glorified—perched on the pedestal of a great complimentary pension?"

I braced myself. "Taking one form of public recognition with another it seems to me on the whole I should be able to bear it. When I see the compliments that *are* paid right and left I ask myself why this one shouldn't take its course. This therefore is what you're entitled to have looked to me to mention to you. I've some evidence that perhaps would be really dissuasive, but I propose to invite Mss Anvoy to remain in ignorance of it."

"And to invite me to do the same?"

"Oh you don't require it—you've evidence enough. I speak of a sealed letter that I've been requested to deliver to her."

"And you don't mean to?"

"There's only one consideration that would make me," I said.

Gravener's clear handsome eyes plunged into mine a minute, but evidently without fishing up a clue to this motive—a failure by which I was almost wounded. "What does the letter contain?"

"It's sealed, as I tell you, and I don't know what it contains."

"Why is it sent through you?"

"Rather than you?" I wondered how to put the thing. "The only explanation I can think of is that the person sending it may have imagined your relations with Miss Anvoy to be at an end—may have been told this is the case by Mrs. Saltram."

"My relations with Miss Anvoy are not at an end," poor Gravener stammered.

Again for an instant I thought. "The offer I propose to make you gives me the right to address you a question remarkably direct. Are you still engaged to Miss Anvoy?"

“No, I’m not,” he slowly brought out. “But we’re perfectly good friends.”

“Such good friends that you’ll again become prospective husband and wife if the obstacle in your path be removed?”

“Removed?” he anxiously repeated.

“If I send Miss Anvoy the letter I speak of she may give up her idea.”

“Then for God’s sake send it!”

“I’ll do so if you’re ready to assure me that her sacrifice would now presumably bring about your marriage.”

“I’d marry her the next day!” my visitor cried.

“Yes, but would she marry *you*? What I ask of you of course is nothing less than your word of honour as to your conviction of this. If you give it me,” I said, “I’ll engage to hand her the letter before night.”

Gravener took up his hat; turning it mechanically round he stood looking a moment hard at its unruffled perfection. Then very angrily honestly and gallantly, “Hand it to the devil!” he broke out; with which he clapped the hat on his head and left me.

“Will you read it or not?” I said to Ruth Anvoy, at Wimbledon, when I had told her the story of Mrs. Saltram’s visit.

She debated for a time probably of the briefest, but long enough to make me nervous. “Have you brought it with you?”

“No indeed. It’s at home, locked up.”

There was another great silence, and then she said “Go back and destroy it.”

I went back, but I didn’t destroy it till after Saltram’s death, when I burnt it unread. The Pudneys approached her again pressingly, but, prompt as they were, The Coxon Fund had already become an operative benefit and a general amaze: Mr. Saltram, while we gathered about, as it were, to watch the manna descend, had begun to draw the magnificent income. He drew it as he had always drawn everything, with a grand abstracted gesture. Its magnificence, alas, as all the world now knows, quite quenched him; it was the beginning of his decline. It was also naturally a new grievance for his wife, who began to believe in him as soon as he was blighted, and who at this hour accuses us of having bribed him, on the whim of a meddling American, to renounce his glorious office, to become, as she says, like everybody else. The very day he found himself able to publish he wholly ceased to produce. This deprived us, as may easily be imagined, of much of our occupation, and especially deprived the Mulvilles, whose want of self-support I never measured till they lost their great inmate. They’ve no one to live on now. Adelaide’s most frequent reference to their destitution is embodied in the remark that dear far-away Ruth’s intentions were doubtless good. She and Kent are even yet looking for another prop, but no one presents a true sphere of usefulness. They complain that people are self-sufficing. With Saltram the fine type of the child of adoption was scattered, the grander, the elder style. They’ve got their carriage back, but what’s an empty carriage? In short I think we were all happier as well as poorer before; even including George Gravener, who by the deaths of his brother and his nephew has lately become Lord Maddock. His wife, whose fortune clears the property, is criminally dull; he hates being in the Upper House, and hasn’t yet had high office. But what are these accidents, which I should perhaps apologise for mentioning, in the light of the great eventual boon promised the patient by the rate at which The Coxon Fund must be rolling up?

The Altar of the Dead

CHAPTER I.

He had a mortal dislike, poor Stransom, to lean anniversaries, and loved them still less when they made a pretence of a figure. Celebrations and suppressions were equally painful to him, and but one of the former found a place in his life. He had kept each year in his own fashion the date of Mary Antrim's death. It would be more to the point perhaps to say that this occasion kept *him*: it kept him at least effectually from doing anything else. It took hold of him again and again with a hand of which time had softened but never loosened the touch. He waked to his feast of memory as consciously as he would have waked to his marriage-morn. Marriage had had of old but too little to say to the matter: for the girl who was to have been his bride there had been no bridal embrace. She had died of a malignant fever after the wedding-day had been fixed, and he had lost before fairly tasting it an affection that promised to fill his life to the brim.

Of that benediction, however, it would have been false to say this life could really be emptied: it was still ruled by a pale ghost, still ordered by a sovereign presence. He had not been a man of numerous passions, and even in all these years no sense had grown stronger with him than the sense of being bereft. He had needed no priest and no altar to make him for ever widowed. He had done many things in the world—he had done almost all but one: he had never, never forgotten. He had tried to put into his existence whatever else might take up room in it, but had failed to make it more than a house of which the mistress was eternally absent. She was most absent of all on the recurrent December day that his tenacity set apart. He had no arranged observance of it, but his nerves made it all their own. They drove him forth without mercy, and the goal of his pilgrimage was far. She had been buried in a London suburb, a part then of Nature's breast, but which he had seen lose one after another every feature of freshness. It was in truth during the moments he stood there that his eyes beheld the place least. They looked at another image, they opened to another light. Was it a credible future? Was it an incredible past? Whatever the answer it was an immense escape from the actual.

It's true that if there weren't other dates than this there were other memories; and by the time George Stransom was fifty-five such memories had greatly multiplied. There were other ghosts in his life than the ghost of Mary Antrim. He had perhaps not had more losses than most men, but he had counted his losses more; he hadn't seen death more closely, but had in a manner felt it more deeply. He had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead: it had come to him early in life that there was something one had to do for them. They were there in their simplified intensified essence, their conscious absence and expressive patience, as personally there as if they had only been stricken dumb. When all sense of them failed, all sound of them ceased, it was as if their purgatory were really still on earth: they asked so little that they got, poor things, even less, and died again, died every day, of the hard usage of life. They had no organised service, no reserved place, no honour, no shelter, no safety. Even ungenerous people provided for the living, but even those who were called most generous did nothing for the others. So on George Stransom's part had grown up with the years a resolve that he at least would do something, do it, that is, for his own—would perform the great charity without reproach. Every man *had* his own, and every man had, to meet this charity, the ample resources of the soul.

It was doubtless the voice of Mary Antrim that spoke for them best; as the years at any rate went by he found himself in regular communion with these postponed pensioners, those whom indeed he always called in his thoughts the Others. He spared them the moments, he organised the charity. Quite how it had risen he probably never could have told you, but what came to pass was that an altar, such as was after all within everybody's compass, lighted with perpetual candles and dedicated to these secret rites, reared itself in his spiritual spaces. He had wondered of old, in some embarrassment, whether he had a religion; being very sure, and not a little content, that he hadn't at all events the religion some of the people he had known wanted him to have. Gradually this question was straightened out for him: it became clear to him that the religion instilled by his earliest consciousness had been simply the religion of the Dead. It suited his inclination, it satisfied his spirit, it gave employment to his piety. It answered his love of great offices, of a solemn and splendid ritual; for no shrine could be more bedecked and no ceremonial more stately than those to which his worship was attached. He had no imagination about these things but that they were accessible to any one who should feel the need of them. The poorest could build such temples of the spirit—could make them blaze with candles and smoke with incense, make them flush with pictures and flowers. The cost, in the common phrase, of keeping them up fell wholly on the generous heart.

CHAPTER II.

He had this year, on the eve of his anniversary, as happened, an emotion not unconnected with that range of feeling. Walking home at the close of a busy day he was arrested in the London street by the particular effect of a shop-front that lighted the dull brown air with its mercenary grin and before which several persons were gathered. It was the window of a jeweller whose diamonds and sapphires seemed to laugh, in flashes like high notes of sound, with the mere joy of knowing how much more they were "worth" than most of the dingy pedestrians staring at them from the other side of the pane. Stransom lingered long enough to suspend, in a vision, a string of pearls about the white neck of Mary Antrim, and then was kept an instant longer by the sound of a voice he knew. Next him was a mumbling old woman, and beyond the old woman a gentleman with a lady on his arm. It was from him, from Paul Creston, the voice had proceeded: he was talking with the lady of some precious object in the window. Stransom had no sooner recognised him than the old woman turned away; but just with this growth of opportunity came a felt strangeness that stayed him in the very act of laying his hand on his friend's arm. It lasted but the instant, only that space sufficed for the flash of a wild question. Was *not* Mrs. Creston dead?—the ambiguity met him there in the short drop of her husband's voice, the drop conjugal, if it ever was, and in the way the two figures leaned to each other. Creston, making a step to look at something else, came nearer, glanced at him, started and exclaimed—behaviour the effect of which was at first only to leave Stransom staring, staring back across the months at the different face, the wholly other face, the poor man had shown him last, the blurred ravaged mask bent over the open grave by which they had stood together. That son of affliction wasn't in mourning now; he detached his arm from his companion's to grasp the hand of the older friend. He coloured as well as smiled in the strong light of the shop when Stransom raised a tentative hat to the lady. Stransom had just time to see she was pretty before he found himself gaping at a fact more portentous. "My dear fellow, let me make you acquainted with my wife."

Creston had blushed and stammered over it, but in half a minute, at the rate we live in polite society, it had practically become, for our friend, the mere memory of a shock. They stood there and laughed and talked; Stransom had instantly whisked the shock out of the way, to keep it for private consumption. He felt himself grimace, he heard himself exaggerate the proper, but was conscious of turning not a little faint. That new woman, that hired performer,

Mrs. Creston? Mrs. Creston had been more living for him than any woman but one. This lady had a face that shone as publicly as the jeweller's window, and in the happy candour with which she wore her monstrous character was an effect of gross immodesty. The character of Paul Creston's wife thus attributed to her was monstrous for reasons Stransom could judge his friend to know perfectly that he knew. The happy pair had just arrived from America, and Stransom hadn't needed to be told this to guess the nationality of the lady. Somehow it deepened the foolish air that her husband's confused cordiality was unable to conceal. Stransom recalled that he had heard of poor Creston's having, while his bereavement was still fresh, crossed the sea for what people in such predicaments call a little change. He had found the little change indeed, he had brought the little change back; it was the little change that stood there and that, do what he would, he couldn't, while he showed those high front teeth of his, look other than a conscious ass about. They were going into the shop, Mrs. Creston said, and she begged Mr. Stransom to come with them and help to decide. He thanked her, opening his watch and pleading an engagement for which he was already late, and they parted while she shrieked into the fog, "Mind now you come to see me right away!" Creston had had the delicacy not to suggest that, and Stransom hoped it hurt him somewhere to hear her scream it to all the echoes.

He felt quite determined, as he walked away, never in his life to go near her. She was perhaps a human being, but Creston oughtn't to have shown her without precautions, oughtn't indeed to have shown her at all. His precautions should have been those of a forger or a murderer, and the people at home would never have mentioned extradition. This was a wife for foreign service or purely external use; a decent consideration would have spared her the injury of comparisons. Such was the first flush of George Stransom's reaction; but as he sat alone that night—there were particular hours he always passed alone—the harshness dropped from it and left only the pity. *He* could spend an evening with Kate Creston, if the man to whom she had given everything couldn't. He had known her twenty years, and she was the only woman for whom he might perhaps have been unfaithful. She was all cleverness and sympathy and charm; her house had been the very easiest in all the world and her friendship the very firmest. Without accidents he had loved her, without accidents every one had loved her: she had made the passions about her as regular as the moon makes the tides. She had been also of course far too good for her husband, but he never suspected it, and in nothing had she been more admirable than in the exquisite art with which she tried to keep every one else (keeping Creston was no trouble) from finding it out. Here was a man to whom she had devoted her life and for whom she had given it up—dying to bring into the world a child of his bed; and she had had only to submit to her fate to have, ere the grass was green on her grave, no more existence for him than a domestic servant he had replaced. The frivolity, the indecency of it made Stransom's eyes fill; and he had that evening a sturdy sense that he alone, in a world without delicacy, had a right to hold up his head. While he smoked, after dinner, he had a book in his lap, but he had no eyes for his page: his eyes, in the swarming void of things, seemed to have caught Kate Creston's, and it was into their sad silences he looked. It was to him her sentient spirit had turned, knowing it to be of her he would think. He thought for a long time of how the closed eyes of dead women could still live—how they could open again, in a quiet lamplit room, long after they had looked their last. They had looks that survived—had them as great poets had quoted lines.

The newspaper lay by his chair—the thing that came in the afternoon and the servants thought one wanted; without sense for what was in it he had mechanically unfolded and then dropped it. Before he went to bed he took it up, and this time, at the top of a paragraph, he was caught by five words that made him start. He stood staring, before the fire, at the "Death of Sir Acton Hague, K.C.B.," the man who ten years earlier had been the nearest of his

friends and whose deposition from this eminence had practically left it without an occupant. He had seen him after their rupture, but hadn't now seen him for years. Standing there before the fire he turned cold as he read what had befallen him. Promoted a short time previous to the governorship of the Westward Islands, Acton Hague had died, in the bleak honour of this exile, of an illness consequent on the bite of a poisonous snake. His career was compressed by the newspaper into a dozen lines, the perusal of which excited on George Stransom's part no warmer feeling than one of relief at the absence of any mention of their quarrel, an incident accidentally tainted at the time, thanks to their joint immersion in large affairs, with a horrible publicity. Public indeed was the wrong Stransom had, to his own sense, suffered, the insult he had blankly taken from the only man with whom he had ever been intimate; the friend, almost adored, of his University years, the subject, later, of his passionate loyalty: so public that he had never spoken of it to a human creature, so public that he had completely overlooked it. It had made the difference for him that friendship too was all over, but it had only made just that one. The shock of interests had been private, intensely so; but the action taken by Hague had been in the face of men. To-day it all seemed to have occurred merely to the end that George Stransom should think of him as "Hague" and measure exactly how much he himself could resemble a stone. He went cold, suddenly and horribly cold, to bed.

CHAPTER III.

The next day, in the afternoon, in the great grey suburb, he knew his long walk had tired him. In the dreadful cemetery alone he had been on his feet an hour. Instinctively, coming back, they had taken him a devious course, and it was a desert in which no circling cabman hovered over possible prey. He paused on a corner and measured the dreariness; then he made out through the gathered dusk that he was in one of those tracts of London which are less gloomy by night than by day, because, in the former case of the civil gift of light. By day there was nothing, but by night there were lamps, and George Stransom was in a mood that made lamps good in themselves. It wasn't that they could show him anything, it was only that they could burn clear. To his surprise, however, after a while, they did show him something: the arch of a high doorway approached by a low terrace of steps, in the depth of which—it formed a dim vestibule—the raising of a curtain at the moment he passed gave him a glimpse of an avenue of gloom with a glow of tapers at the end. He stopped and looked up, recognising the place as a church. The thought quickly came to him that since he was tired he might rest there; so that after a moment he had in turn pushed up the leathern curtain and gone in. It was a temple of the old persuasion, and there had evidently been a function—perhaps a service for the dead; the high altar was still a blaze of candles. This was an exhibition he always liked, and he dropped into a seat with relief. More than it had ever yet come home to him it struck him as good there should be churches.

This one was almost empty and the other altars were dim; a verger shuffled about, an old woman coughed, but it seemed to Stransom there was hospitality in the thick sweet air. Was it only the savour of the incense or was it something of larger intention? He had at any rate quitted the great grey suburb and come nearer to the warm centre. He presently ceased to feel intrusive, gaining at last even a sense of community with the only worshipper in his neighbourhood, the sombre presence of a woman, in mourning unrelieved, whose back was all he could see of her and who had sunk deep into prayer at no great distance from him. He wished he could sink, like her, to the very bottom, be as motionless, as rapt in prostration. After a few moments he shifted his seat; it was almost indelicate to be so aware of her. But Stransom subsequently quite lost himself, floating away on the sea of light. If occasions like this had been more frequent in his life he would have had more present the great original type, set up in a myriad temples, of the unapproachable shrine he had erected in

his mind. That shrine had begun in vague likeness to church pomps, but the echo had ended by growing more distinct than the sound. The sound now rang out, the type blazed at him with all its fires and with a mystery of radiance in which endless meanings could glow. The thing became as he sat there his appropriate altar and each starry candle an appropriate vow. He numbered them, named them, grouped them—it was the silent roll-call of his Dead. They made together a brightness vast and intense, a brightness in which the mere chapel of his thoughts grew so dim that as it faded away he asked himself if he shouldn't find his real comfort in some material act, some outward worship.

This idea took possession of him while, at a distance, the black-robed lady continued prostrate; he was quietly thrilled with his conception, which at last brought him to his feet in the sudden excitement of a plan. He wandered softly through the aisles, pausing in the different chapels, all save one applied to a special devotion. It was in this clear recess, lampless and unapplied, that he stood longest—the length of time it took him fully to grasp the conception of gilding it with his bounty. He should snatch it from no other rites and associate it with nothing profane; he would simply take it as it should be given up to him and make it a masterpiece of splendour and a mountain of fire. Tended sacredly all the year, with the sanctifying church round it, it would always be ready for his offices. There would be difficulties, but from the first they presented themselves only as difficulties surmounted. Even for a person so little affiliated the thing would be a matter of arrangement. He saw it all in advance, and how bright in especial the place would become to him in the intermissions of toil and the dusk of afternoons; how rich in assurance at all times, but especially in the indifferent world. Before withdrawing he drew nearer again to the spot where he had first sat down, and in the movement he met the lady whom he had seen praying and who was now on her way to the door. She passed him quickly, and he had only a glimpse of her pale face and her unconscious, almost sightless eyes. For that instant she looked faded and handsome.

This was the origin of the rites more public, yet certainly esoteric, that he at last found himself able to establish. It took a long time, it took a year, and both the process and the result would have been—for any who knew—a vivid picture of his good faith. No one did know, in fact—no one but the bland ecclesiastics whose acquaintance he had promptly sought, whose objections he had softly overridden, whose curiosity and sympathy he had artfully charmed, whose assent to his eccentric munificence he had eventually won, and who had asked for concessions in exchange for indulgences. Stransom had of course at an early stage of his enquiry been referred to the Bishop, and the Bishop had been delightfully human, the Bishop had been almost amused. Success was within sight, at any rate from the moment the attitude of those whom it concerned became liberal in response to liberality. The altar and the sacred shell that half encircled it, consecrated to an ostensible and customary worship, were to be splendidly maintained; all that Stransom reserved to himself was the number of his lights and the free enjoyment of his intention. When the intention had taken complete effect the enjoyment became even greater than he had ventured to hope. He liked to think of this effect when far from it, liked to convince himself of it yet again when near. He was not often indeed so near as that a visit to it hadn't perforce something of the patience of a pilgrimage; but the time he gave to his devotion came to seem to him more a contribution to his other interests than a betrayal of them. Even a loaded life might be easier when one had added a new necessity to it.

How much easier was probably never guessed by those who simply knew there were hours when he disappeared and for many of whom there was a vulgar reading of what they used to call his plunges. These plunges were into depths quieter than the deep sea-caves, and the habit had at the end of a year or two become the one it would have cost him most to

relinquish. Now they had really, his Dead, something that was indefensibly theirs; and he liked to think that they might in cases be the Dead of others, as well as that the Dead of others might be invoked there under the protection of what he had done. Whoever bent a knee on the carpet he had laid down appeared to him to act in the spirit of his intention. Each of his lights had a name for him, and from time to time a new light was kindled. This was what he had fundamentally agreed for, that there should always be room for them all. What those who passed or lingered saw was simply the most resplendent of the altars called suddenly into vivid usefulness, with a quiet elderly man, for whom it evidently had a fascination, often seated there in a maze or a doze; but half the satisfaction of the spot for this mysterious and fitful worshipper was that he found the years of his life there, and the ties, the affections, the struggles, the submissions, the conquests, if there had been such, a record of that adventurous journey in which the beginnings and the endings of human relations are the lettered milestones. He had in general little taste for the past as a part of his own history; at other times and in other places it mostly seemed to him pitiful to consider and impossible to repair; but on these occasions he accepted it with something of that positive gladness with which one adjusts one's self to an ache that begins to succumb to treatment. To the treatment of time the malady of life begins at a given moment to succumb; and these were doubtless the hours at which that truth most came home to him. The day was written for him there on which he had first become acquainted with death, and the successive phases of the acquaintance were marked each with a flame.

The flames were gathering thick at present, for Stransom had entered that dark defile of our earthly descent in which some one dies every day. It was only yesterday that Kate Creston had flashed out her white fire; yet already there were younger stars ablaze on the tips of the tapers. Various persons in whom his interest had not been intense drew closer to him by entering this company. He went over it, head by head, till he felt like the shepherd of a huddled flock, with all a shepherd's vision of differences imperceptible. He knew his candles apart, up to the colour of the flame, and would still have known them had their positions all been changed. To other imaginations they might stand for other things—that they should stand for something to be hushed before was all he desired; but he was intensely conscious of the personal note of each and of the distinguishable way it contributed to the concert. There were hours at which he almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connexion more charming than, as it happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life. In regard to those from whom one was separated by the long curves of the globe such a connexion could only be an improvement: it brought them instantly within reach. Of course there were gaps in the constellation, for Stransom knew he could only pretend to act for his own, and it wasn't every figure passing before his eyes into the great obscure that was entitled to a memorial. There was a strange sanctification in death, but some characters were more sanctified by being forgotten than by being remembered. The greatest blank in the shining page was the memory of Acton Hague, of which he inveterately tried to rid himself. For Acton Hague no flame could ever rise on any altar of his.

CHAPTER IV.

Every year, the day he walked back from the great graveyard, he went to church as he had done the day his idea was born. It was on this occasion, as it happened, after a year had passed, that he began to observe his altar to be haunted by a worshipper at least as frequent as himself. Others of the faithful, and in the rest of the church, came and went, appealing sometimes, when they disappeared, to a vague or to a particular recognition; but this unflinching presence was always to be observed when he arrived and still in possession when he departed. He was surprised, the first time, at the promptitude with which it assumed an

identity for him—the identity of the lady whom two years before, on his anniversary, he had seen so intensely bowed, and of whose tragic face he had had so flitting a vision. Given the time that had passed, his recollection of her was fresh enough to make him wonder. Of himself she had of course no impression, or rather had had none at first: the time came when her manner of transacting her business suggested her having gradually guessed his call to be of the same order. She used his altar for her own purpose—he could only hope that sad and solitary as she always struck him, she used it for her own Dead. There were interruptions, infidelities, all on his part, calls to other associations and duties; but as the months went on he found her whenever he returned, and he ended by taking pleasure in the thought that he had given her almost the contentment he had given himself. They worshipped side by side so often that there were moments when he wished he might be sure, so straight did their prospect stretch away of growing old together in their rites. She was younger than he, but she looked as if her Dead were at least as numerous as his candles. She had no colour, no sound, no fault, and another of the things about which he had made up his mind was that she had no fortune. Always black-robed, she must have had a succession of sorrows. People weren't poor, after all, whom so many losses could overtake; they were positively rich when they had had so much to give up. But the air of this devoted and indifferent woman, who always made, in any attitude, a beautiful accidental line, conveyed somehow to Stransom that she had known more kinds of trouble than one.

He had a great love of music and little time for the joy of it; but occasionally, when workaday noises were muffled by Saturday afternoons, it used to come back to him that there were glories. There were moreover friends who reminded him of this and side by side with whom he found himself sitting out concerts. On one of these winter afternoons, in St. James's Hall, he became aware after he had seated himself that the lady he had so often seen at church was in the place next him and was evidently alone, as he also this time happened to be. She was at first too absorbed in the consideration of the programme to heed him, but when she at last glanced at him he took advantage of the movement to speak to her, greeting her with the remark that he felt as if he already knew her. She smiled as she said "Oh yes, I recognise you"; yet in spite of this admission of long acquaintance it was the first he had seen of her smile. The effect of it was suddenly to contribute more to that acquaintance than all the previous meetings had done. He hadn't "taken in," he said to himself, that she was so pretty. Later, that evening—it was while he rolled along in a hansom on his way to dine out—he added that he hadn't taken in that she was so interesting. The next morning in the midst of his work he quite suddenly and irrelevantly reflected that his impression of her, beginning so far back, was like a winding river that had at last reached the sea.

His work in fact was blurred a little all that day by the sense of what had now passed between them. It wasn't much, but it had just made the difference. They had listened together to Beethoven and Schumann; they had talked in the pauses, and at the end, when at the door, to which they moved together, he had asked her if he could help her in the matter of getting away. She had thanked him and put up her umbrella, slipping into the crowd without an allusion to their meeting yet again and leaving him to remember at leisure that not a word had been exchanged about the usual scene of that coincidence. This omission struck him now as natural and then again as perverse. She mightn't in the least have allowed his warrant for speaking to her, and yet if she hadn't he would have judged her an underbred woman. It was odd that when nothing had really ever brought them together he should have been able successfully to assume they were in a manner old friends—that this negative quantity was somehow more than they could express. His success, it was true, had been qualified by her quick escape, so that there grew up in him an absurd desire to put it to some better test. Save in so far as some other poor chance might help him, such a test could be only to meet her

afresh at church. Left to himself he would have gone to church the very next afternoon, just for the curiosity of seeing if he should find her there. But he wasn't left to himself, a fact he discovered quite at the last, after he had virtually made up his mind to go. The influence that kept him away really revealed to him how little to himself his Dead *ever* left him. He went only for *them*—for nothing else in the world.

The force of this revulsion kept him away ten days: he hated to connect the place with anything but his offices or to give a glimpse of the curiosity that had been on the point of moving him. It was absurd to weave a tangle about a matter so simple as a custom of devotion that might with ease have been daily or hourly; yet the tangle got itself woven. He was sorry, he was disappointed: it was as if a long happy spell had been broken and he had lost a familiar security. At the last, however, he asked himself if he was to stay away for ever from the fear of this muddle about motives. After an interval neither longer nor shorter than usual he re-entered the church with a clear conviction that he should scarcely heed the presence or the absence of the lady of the concert. This indifference didn't prevent his at once noting that for the only time since he had first seen her she wasn't on the spot. He had now no scruple about giving her time to arrive, but she didn't arrive, and when he went away still missing her he was profanely and consentingly sorry. If her absence made the tangle more intricate, that was all her own doing. By the end of another year it was very intricate indeed; but by that time he didn't in the least care, and it was only his cultivated consciousness that had given him scruples. Three times in three months he had gone to church without finding her, and he felt he hadn't needed these occasions to show him his suspense had dropped. Yet it was, incongruously, not indifference, but a refinement of delicacy that had kept him from asking the sacristan, who would of course immediately have recognised his description of her, whether she had been seen at other hours. His delicacy had kept him from asking any question about her at any time, and it was exactly the same virtue that had left him so free to be decently civil to her at the concert.

This happy advantage now served him anew, enabling him when she finally met his eyes—it was after a fourth trial—to predetermine quite fixedly his awaiting her retreat. He joined her in the street as soon as she had moved, asking her if he might accompany her a certain distance. With her placid permission he went as far as a house in the neighbourhood at which she had business: she let him know it was not where she lived. She lived, as she said, in a mere slum, with an old aunt, a person in connexion with whom she spoke of the engrossment of humdrum duties and regular occupations. She wasn't, the mourning niece, in her first youth, and her vanished freshness had left something behind that, for Stransom, represented the proof it had been tragically sacrificed. Whatever she gave him the assurance of she gave without references. She might have been a divorced duchess—she might have been an old maid who taught the harp.

CHAPTER V.

They fell at last into the way of walking together almost every time they met, though for a long time still they never met but at church. He couldn't ask her to come and see him, and as if she hadn't a proper place to receive him she never invited her friend. As much as himself she knew the world of London, but from an undiscussed instinct of privacy they haunted the region not mapped on the social chart. On the return she always made him leave her at the same corner. She looked with him, as a pretext for a pause, at the depressed things in suburban shop-fronts; and there was never a word he had said to her that she hadn't beautifully understood. For long ages he never knew her name, any more than she had ever pronounced his own; but it was not their names that mattered, it was only their perfect practice and their common need.

These things made their whole relation so impersonal that they hadn't the rules or reasons people found in ordinary friendships. They didn't care for the things it was supposed necessary to care for in the intercourse of the world. They ended one day—they never knew which of them expressed it first—by throwing out the idea that they didn't care for each other. Over this idea they grew quite intimate; they rallied to it in a way that marked a fresh start in their confidence. If to feel deeply together about certain things wholly distinct from themselves didn't constitute a safety, where was safety to be looked for? Not lightly nor often, not without occasion nor without emotion, any more than in any other reference by serious people to a mystery of their faith; but when something had happened to warm, as it were, the air for it, they came as near as they could come to calling their Dead by name. They felt it was coming very near to utter their thought at all. The word "they" expressed enough; it limited the mention, it had a dignity of its own, and if, in their talk, you had heard our friends use it, you might have taken them for a pair of pagans of old alluding decently to the domesticated gods. They never knew—at least Stransom never knew—how they had learned to be sure about each other. If it had been with each a question of what the other was there for, the certitude had come in some fine way of its own. Any faith, after all, has the instinct of propagation, and it was as natural as it was beautiful that they should have taken pleasure on the spot in the imagination of a following. If the following was for each but a following of one it had proved in the event sufficient. Her debt, however, of course was much greater than his, because while she had only given him a worshipper he had given her a splendid temple. Once she said she pitied him for the length of his list—she had counted his candles almost as often as himself—and this made him wonder what could have been the length of hers. He had wondered before at the coincidence of their losses, especially as from time to time a new candle was set up. On some occasion some accident led him to express this curiosity, and she answered as if in surprise that he hadn't already understood. "Oh for me, you know, the more there are the better—there could never be too many. I should like hundreds and hundreds—I should like thousands; I should like a great mountain of light."

Then of course in a flash he understood. "Your Dead are only One?"

She hung back at this as never yet. "Only One," she answered, colouring as if now he knew her guarded secret. It really made him feel he knew less than before, so difficult was it for him to reconstitute a life in which a single experience had so belittled all others. His own life, round its central hollow, had been packed close enough. After this she appeared to have regretted her confession, though at the moment she spoke there had been pride in her very embarrassment. She declared to him that his own was the larger, the dearer possession—the portion one would have chosen if one had been able to choose; she assured him she could perfectly imagine some of the echoes with which his silences were peopled. He knew she couldn't: one's relation to what one had loved and hated had been a relation too distinct from the relations of others. But this didn't affect the fact that they were growing old together in their piety. She was a feature of that piety, but even at the ripe stage of acquaintance in which they occasionally arranged to meet at a concert or to go together to an exhibition she was not a feature of anything else. The most that happened was that his worship became paramount. Friend by friend dropped away till at last there were more emblems on his altar than houses left him to enter. She was more than any other the friend who remained, but she was unknown to all the rest. Once when she had discovered, as they called it, a new star, she used the expression that the chapel at last was full.

"Oh no," Stransom replied, "there is a great thing wanting for that! The chapel will never be full till a candle is set up before which all the others will pale. It will be the tallest candle of all."

Her mild wonder rested on him. "What candle do you mean?"

"I mean, dear lady, my own."

He had learned after a long time that she earned money by her pen, writing under a pseudonym she never disclosed in magazines he never saw. She knew too well what he couldn't read and what she couldn't write, and she taught him to cultivate indifference with a success that did much for their good relations. Her invisible industry was a convenience to him; it helped his contented thought of her, the thought that rested in the dignity of her proud obscure life, her little remunerated art and her little impenetrable home. Lost, with her decayed relative, in her dim suburban world, she came to the surface for him in distant places. She was really the priestess of his altar, and whenever he quitted England he committed it to her keeping. She proved to him afresh that women have more of the spirit of religion than men; he felt his fidelity pale and faint in comparison with hers. He often said to her that since he had so little time to live he rejoiced in her having so much; so glad was he to think she would guard the temple when he should have been called. He had a great plan for that, which of course he told her too, a bequest of money to keep it up in undiminished state. Of the administration of this fund he would appoint her superintendent, and if the spirit should move her she might kindle a taper even for him.

"And who will kindle one even for me?" she then seriously asked.

CHAPTER VI.

She was always in mourning, yet the day he came back from the longest absence he had yet made her appearance immediately told him she had lately had a bereavement. They met on this occasion as she was leaving the church, so that postponing his own entrance he instantly offered to turn round and walk away with her. She considered, then she said: "Go in now, but come and see me in an hour." He knew the small vista of her street, closed at the end and as dreary as an empty pocket, where the pairs of shabby little houses, semi-detached but indissolubly united, were like married couples on bad terms. Often, however, as he had gone to the beginning he had never gone beyond. Her aunt was dead—that he immediately guessed, as well as that it made a difference; but when she had for the first time mentioned her number he found himself, on her leaving him, not a little agitated by this sudden liberality. She wasn't a person with whom, after all, one got on so very fast: it had taken him months and months to learn her name, years and years to learn her address. If she had looked, on this reunion, so much older to him, how in the world did he look to her? She had reached the period of life he had long since reached, when, after separations, the marked clock-face of the friend we meet announces the hour we have tried to forget. He couldn't have said what he expected as, at the end of his waiting, he turned the corner where for years he had always paused; simply not to pause was a efficient cause for emotion. It was an event, somehow; and in all their long acquaintance there had never been an event. This one grew larger when, five minutes later, in the faint elegance of her little drawing-room, she quavered out a greeting that showed the measure she took of it. He had a strange sense of having come for something in particular; strange because literally there was nothing particular between them, nothing save that they were at one on their great point, which had long ago become a magnificent matter of course. It was true that after she had said "You can always come now, you know," the thing he was there for seemed already to have happened. He asked her if it was the death of her aunt that made the difference; to which she replied: "She never knew I knew you. I wished her not to." The beautiful clearness of her candour—her faded beauty was like a summer twilight—disconnected the words from any image of deceit. They might have struck him as the record of a deep dissimulation; but she had always given him a sense of noble reasons. The vanished aunt was present, as he looked about him, in the small

complacencies of the room, the beaded velvet and the fluted moreen; and though, as we know, he had the worship of the Dead, he found himself not definitely regretting this lady. If she wasn't in his long list, however, she was in her niece's short one, and Stransom presently observed to the latter that now at least, in the place they haunted together, she would have another object of devotion.

"Yes, I shall have another. She was very kind to me. It's that that's the difference."

He judged, wondering a good deal before he made any motion to leave her, that the difference would somehow be very great and would consist of still other things than her having let him come in. It rather chilled him, for they had been happy together as they were. He extracted from her at any rate an intimation that she should now have means less limited, that her aunt's tiny fortune had come to her, so that there was henceforth only one to consume what had formerly been made to suffice for two. This was a joy to Stransom, because it had hitherto been equally impossible for him either to offer her presents or contentedly to stay his hand. It was too ugly to be at her side that way, abounding himself and yet not able to overflow—a demonstration that would have been signally a false note. Even her better situation too seemed only to draw out in a sense the loneliness of her future. It would merely help her to live more and more for their small ceremonial, and this at a time when he himself had begun wearily to feel that, having set it in motion, he might depart. When they had sat a while in the pale parlour she got up—"This isn't my room: let us go into mine." They had only to cross the narrow hall, as he found, to pass quite into another air. When she had closed the door of the second room, as she called it, he felt at last in real possession of her. The place had the flush of life—it was expressive; its dark red walls were articulate with memories and relics. These were simple things—photographs and water-colours, scraps of writing framed and ghosts of flowers embalmed; but a moment sufficed to show him they had a common meaning. It was here she had lived and worked, and she had already told him she would make no change of scene. He read the reference in the objects about her—the general one to places and times; but after a minute he distinguished among them a small portrait of a gentleman. At a distance and without their glasses his eyes were only so caught by it as to feel a vague curiosity. Presently this impulse carried him nearer, and in another moment he was staring at the picture in stupefaction and with the sense that some sound had broken from him. He was further conscious that he showed his companion a white face when he turned round on her gasping: "Acton Hague!"

She matched his great wonder. "Did you know him?"

"He was the friend of all my youth—of my early manhood. And *you* knew him?"

She coloured at this and for a moment her answer failed; her eyes embraced everything in the place, and a strange irony reached her lips as she echoed: "Knew him?"

Then Stransom understood, while the room heaved like the cabin of a ship, that its whole contents cried out with him, that it was a museum in his honour, that all her later years had been addressed to him and that the shrine he himself had reared had been passionately converted to this use. It was all for Acton Hague that she had kneeled every day at his altar. What need had there been for a consecrated candle when he was present in the whole array? The revelation so smote our friend in the face that he dropped into a seat and sat silent. He had quickly felt her shaken by the force of his shock, but as she sank on the sofa beside him and laid her hand on his arm he knew almost as soon that she mightn't resent it as much as she'd have liked.

CHAPTER VII.

He learned in that instant two things: one being that even in so long a time she had gathered no knowledge of his great intimacy and his great quarrel; the other that in spite of this ignorance, strangely enough, she supplied on the spot a reason for his stupor. "How extraordinary," he presently exclaimed, "that we should never have known!"

She gave a wan smile which seemed to Stransom stranger even than the fact itself. "I never, never spoke of him."

He looked again about the room. "Why then, if your life had been so full of him?"

"Mayn't I put you that question as well? Hadn't your life also been full of him?"

"Any one's, every one's life who had the wonderful experience of knowing him. *I* never spoke of him," Stransom added in a moment, "because he did me—years ago—an unforgettable wrong." She was silent, and with the full effect of his presence all about them it almost startled her guest to hear no protest escape her. She accepted his words, he turned his eyes to her again to see in what manner she accepted them. It was with rising tears and a rare sweetness in the movement of putting out her hand to take his own. Nothing more wonderful had ever appeared to him than, in that little chamber of remembrance and homage, to see her convey with such exquisite mildness that as from Acton Hague any injury was credible. The clock ticked in the stillness—Hague had probably given it to her—and while he let her hold his hand with a tenderness that was almost an assumption of responsibility for his old pain as well as his new, Stransom after a minute broke out: "Good God, how he must have used *you!*"

She dropped his hand at this, got up and, moving across the room, made straight a small picture to which, on examining it, he had given a slight push. Then turning round on him with her pale gaiety recovered, "I've forgiven him!" she declared.

"I know what you've done," said Stransom "I know what you've done for years." For a moment they looked at each other through it all with their long community of service in their eyes. This short passage made, to his sense, for the woman before him, an immense, an absolutely naked confession; which was presently, suddenly blushing red and changing her place again, what she appeared to learn he perceived in it. He got up and "How you must have loved him!" he cried.

"Women aren't like men. They can love even where they've suffered."

"Women are wonderful," said Stransom. "But I assure you I've forgiven him too."

"If I had known of anything so strange I wouldn't have brought you here."

"So that we might have gone on in our ignorance to the last?"

"What do you call the last?" she asked, smiling still.

At this he could smile back at her. "You'll see—when it comes."

She thought of that. "This is better perhaps; but as we were—it was good."

He put her the question. "Did it never happen that he spoke of me?"

Considering more intently she made no answer, and he then knew he should have been adequately answered by her asking how often he himself had spoken of their terrible friend. Suddenly a brighter light broke in her face and an excited idea sprang to her lips in the appeal: "You *have* forgiven him?"

"How, if I hadn't, could I linger here?"

She visibly winced at the deep but unintended irony of this; but even while she did so she panted quickly: “Then in the lights on your altar—?”

“There’s never a light for Acton Hague!”

She stared with a dreadful fall, “But if he’s one of your Dead?”

“He’s one of the world’s, if you like—he’s one of yours. But he’s not one of mine. Mine are only the Dead who died possessed of me. They’re mine in death because they were mine in life.”

“*He* was yours in life then, even if for a while he ceased to be. If you forgave him you went back to him. Those whom we’ve once loved—”

“Are those who can hurt us most,” Stransom broke in.

“Ah it’s not true—you’ve *not* forgiven him!” she wailed with a passion that startled him.

He looked at her as never yet. “What was it he did to you?”

“Everything!” Then abruptly she put out her hand in farewell. “Good-bye.”

He turned as cold as he had turned that night he read the man’s death. “You mean that we meet no more?”

“Not as we’ve met—not *there!*”

He stood aghast at this snap of their great bond, at the renouncement that rang out in the word she so expressively sounded. “But what’s changed—for you?”

She waited in all the sharpness of a trouble that for the first time since he had known her made her splendidly stern. “How can you understand now when you didn’t understand before?”

“I didn’t understand before only because I didn’t know. Now that I know, I see what I’ve been living with for years,” Stransom went on very gently.

She looked at him with a larger allowance, doing this gentleness justice. “How can I then, on this new knowledge of my own, ask you to continue to live with it?”

“I set up my altar, with its multiplied meanings,” Stransom began; but she quietly interrupted him.

“You set up your altar, and when I wanted one most I found it magnificently ready. I used it with the gratitude I’ve always shown you, for I knew it from of old to be dedicated to Death. I told you long ago that my Dead weren’t many. Yours were, but all you had done for them was none too much for *my* worship! You had placed a great light for Each—I gathered them together for One!”

“We had simply different intentions,” he returned. “That, as you say, I perfectly knew, and I don’t see why your intention shouldn’t still sustain you.”

“That’s because you’re generous—you can imagine and think. But the spell is broken.”

It seemed to poor Stransom, in spite of his resistance, that it really was, and the prospect stretched grey and void before him. All he could say, however, was: “I hope you’ll try before you give up.”

“If I had known you had ever known him I should have taken for granted he had his candle,” she presently answered. “What’s changed, as you say, is that on making the discovery I find

he never has had it. That makes *my* attitude”—she paused as thinking how to express it, then said simply—”all wrong.”

“Come once again,” he pleaded.

“Will you give him his candle?” she asked.

He waited, but only because it would sound ungracious; not because of a doubt of his feeling. “I can’t do that!” he declared at last.

“Then good-bye.” And she gave him her hand again.

He had got his dismissal; besides which, in the agitation of everything that had opened out to him, he felt the need to recover himself as he could only do in solitude. Yet he lingered—lingered to see if she had no compromise to express, no attenuation to propose. But he only met her great lamenting eyes, in which indeed he read that she was as sorry for him as for any one else. This made him say: “At least, in any case, I may see you here.”

“Oh yes, come if you like. But I don’t think it will do.”

He looked round the room once more, knowing how little he was sure it would do. He felt also stricken and more and more cold, and his chill was like an ague in which he had to make an effort not to shake. Then he made doleful reply: “I must try on my side—if you can’t try on yours.” She came out with him to the hall and into the doorway, and here he put her the question he held he could least answer from his own wit. “Why have you never let me come before?”

“Because my aunt would have seen you, and I should have had to tell her how I came to know you.”

“And what would have been the objection to that?”

“It would have entailed other explanations; there would at any rate have been that danger.”

“Surely she knew you went every day to church,” Stransom objected.

“She didn’t know what I went for.”

“Of me then she never even heard?”

“You’ll think I was deceitful. But I didn’t need to be!”

He was now on the lower door-step, and his hostess held the door half-closed behind him. Through what remained of the opening he saw her framed face. He made a supreme appeal. “What *did* he do to you?”

“It would have come out—*she* would have told you. That fear at my heart—that was my reason!” And she closed the door, shutting him out.

CHAPTER VIII.

He had ruthlessly abandoned her—that of course was what he had done. Stransom made it all out in solitude, at leisure, fitting the unmatched pieces gradually together and dealing one by one with a hundred obscure points. She had known Hague only after her present friend’s relations with him had wholly terminated; obviously indeed a good while after; and it was natural enough that of his previous life she should have ascertained only what he had judged good to communicate. There were passages it was quite conceivable that even in moments of the tenderest expansion he should have withheld. Of many facts in the career of a man so in the eye of the world there was of course a common knowledge; but this lady lived apart from public affairs, and the only time perfectly clear to her would have been the time following the

dawn of her own drama. A man in her place would have “looked up” the past—would even have consulted old newspapers. It remained remarkable indeed that in her long contact with the partner of her retrospect no accident had lighted a train; but there was no arguing about that; the accident had in fact come: it had simply been that security had prevailed. She had taken what Hague had given her, and her blankness in respect of his other connexions was only a touch in the picture of that plasticity Stransom had supreme reason to know so great a master could have been trusted to produce.

This picture was for a while all our friend saw: he caught his breath again and again as it came over him that the woman with whom he had had for years so fine a point of contact was a woman whom Acton Hague, of all men in the world, had more or less fashioned. Such as she sat there to-day she was ineffaceably stamped with him. Beneficent, blameless as Stransom held her, he couldn't rid himself of the sense that he had been, as who should say, swindled. She had imposed upon him hugely, though she had known it as little as he. All this later past came back to him as a time grotesquely misspent. Such at least were his first reflexions; after a while he found himself more divided and only, as the end of it, more troubled. He imagined, recalled, reconstituted, figured out for himself the truth she had refused to give him; the effect of which was to make her seem to him only more saturated with her fate. He felt her spirit, through the whole strangeness, finer than his own to the very degree in which she might have been, in which she certainly had been, more wronged. A woman, when wronged, was always more wronged than a man, and there were conditions when the least she could have got off with was more than the most he could have to bear. He was sure this rare creature wouldn't have got off with the least. He was awestruck at the thought of such a surrender—such a prostration. Moulded indeed she had been by powerful hands, to have converted her injury into an exaltation so sublime. The fellow had only had to die for everything that was ugly in him to be washed out in a torrent. It was vain to try to guess what had taken place, but nothing could be clearer than that she had ended by accusing herself. She absolved him at every point, she adored her very wounds. The passion by which he had profited had rushed back after its ebb, and now the tide of tenderness, arrested for ever at flood, was too deep even to fathom. Stransom sincerely considered that he had forgiven her; but how little he had achieved the miracle that she had achieved! His forgiveness was silence, but hers was mere unuttered sound. The light she had demanded for his altar would have broken his silence with a blare; whereas all the lights in the church were for her too great a hush.

She had been right about the difference—she had spoken the truth about the change: Stransom was soon to know himself as perversely but sharply jealous. *His* tide had ebbed, not flowed; if he had “forgiven” Acton Hague, that forgiveness was a motive with a broken spring. The very fact of her appeal for a material sign, a sign that should make her dead lover equal there with the others, presented the concession to her friend as too handsome for the case. He had never thought of himself as hard, but an exorbitant article might easily render him so. He moved round and round this one, but only in widening circles—the more he looked at it the less acceptable it seemed. At the same time he had no illusion about the effect of his refusal; he perfectly saw how it would make for a rupture. He left her alone a week, but when at last he again called this conviction was cruelly confirmed. In the interval he had kept away from the church, and he needed no fresh assurance from her to know she hadn't entered it. The change was complete enough: it had broken up her life. Indeed it had broken up his, for all the fires of his shrine seemed to him suddenly to have been quenched. A great indifference fell upon him, the weight of which was in itself a pain; and he never knew what his devotion had been for him till in that shock it ceased like a dropped watch. Neither did he know with how large a confidence he had counted on the final service

that had now failed: the mortal deception was that in this abandonment the whole future gave way.

These days of her absence proved to him of what she was capable; all the more that he never dreamed she was vindictive or even resentful. It was not in anger she had forsaken him; it was in simple submission to hard reality, to the stern logic of life. This came home to him when he sat with her again in the room in which her late aunt's conversation lingered like the tone of a cracked piano. She tried to make him forget how much they were estranged, but in the very presence of what they had given up it was impossible not to be sorry for her. He had taken from her so much more than she had taken from him. He argued with her again, told her she could now have the altar to herself; but she only shook her head with pleading sadness, begging him not to waste his breath on the impossible, the extinct. Couldn't he see that in relation to her private need the rites he had established were practically an elaborate exclusion? She regretted nothing that had happened; it had all been right so long as she didn't know, and it was only that now she knew too much and that from the moment their eyes were open they would simply have to conform. It had doubtless been happiness enough for them to go on together so long. She was gentle, grateful, resigned; but this was only the form of a deep immoveability. He saw he should never more cross the threshold of the second room, and he felt how much this alone would make a stranger of him and give a conscious stiffness to his visits. He would have hated to plunge again into that well of reminders, but he enjoyed quite as little the vacant alternative.

After he had been with her three or four times it struck him that to have come at last into her house had had the horrid effect of diminishing their intimacy. He had known her better, had liked her in greater freedom, when they merely walked together or kneeled together. Now they only pretended; before they had been nobly sincere. They began to try their walks again, but it proved a lame imitation, for these things, from the first, beginning or ending, had been connected with their visits to the church. They had either strolled away as they came out or gone in to rest on the return. Stransom, besides, now faltered; he couldn't walk as of old. The omission made everything false; it was a dire mutilation of their lives. Our friend was frank and monotonous, making no mystery of his remonstrance and no secret of his predicament. Her response, whatever it was, always came to the same thing—an implied invitation to him to judge, if he spoke of predicaments, of how much comfort she had in hers. For him indeed was no comfort even in complaint, since every allusion to what had befallen them but made the author of their trouble more present. Acton Hague was between them—that was the essence of the matter, and never so much between them as when they were face to face. Then Stransom, while still wanting to banish him, had the strangest sense of striving for an ease that would involve having accepted him. Deeply disconcerted by what he knew, he was still worse tormented by really not knowing. Perfectly aware that it would have been horribly vulgar to abuse his old friend or to tell his companion the story of their quarrel, it yet vexed him that her depth of reserve should give him no opening and should have the effect of a magnanimity greater even than his own.

He challenged himself, denounced himself, asked himself if he were in love with her that he should care so much what adventures she had had. He had never for a moment allowed he was in love with her; therefore nothing could have surprised him more than to discover he was jealous. What but jealousy could give a man that sore contentious wish for the detail of what would make him suffer? Well enough he knew indeed that he should never have it from the only person who to-day could give it to him. She let him press her with his sombre eyes, only smiling at him with an exquisite mercy and breathing equally little the word that would expose her secret and the word that would appear to deny his literal right to bitterness. She told nothing, she judged nothing; she accepted everything but the possibility of her return to

the old symbols. Stransom divined that for her too they had been vividly individual, had stood for particular hours or particular attributes—particular links in her chain. He made it clear to himself, as he believed, that his difficulty lay in the fact that the very nature of the plea for his faithless friend constituted a prohibition; that it happened to have come from *her* was precisely the vice that attached to it. To the voice of impersonal generosity he felt sure he would have listened; he would have deferred to an advocate who, speaking from abstract justice, knowing of his denial without having known Hague, should have had the imagination to say: “Ah, remember only the best of him; pity him; provide for him.” To provide for him on the very ground of having discovered another of his turpitudes was not to pity but to glorify him. The more Stransom thought the more he made out that whatever this relation of Hague’s it could only have been a deception more or less finely practised. Where had it come into the life that all men saw? Why had one never heard of it if it had had the frankness of honourable things? Stransom knew enough of his other ties, of his obligations and appearances, not to say enough of his general character, to be sure there had been some infamy. In one way or another this creature had been coldly sacrificed. That was why at the last as well as the first he must still leave him out and out.

CHAPTER IX.

And yet this was no solution, especially after he had talked again to his friend of all it had been his plan she should finally do for him. He had talked in the other days, and she had responded with a frankness qualified only by a courteous reluctance, a reluctance that touched him, to linger on the question of his death. She had then practically accepted the charge, suffered him to feel he could depend upon her to be the eventual guardian of his shrine; and it was in the name of what had so passed between them that he appealed to her not to forsake him in his age. She listened at present with shining coldness and all her habitual forbearance to insist on her terms; her deprecation was even still tenderer, for it expressed the compassion of her own sense that he was abandoned. Her terms, however, remained the same, and scarcely the less audible for not being uttered; though he was sure that secretly even more than he she felt bereft of the satisfaction his solemn trust was to have provided her. They both missed the rich future, but she missed it most, because after all it was to have been entirely hers; and it was her acceptance of the loss that gave him the full measure of her preference for the thought of Acton Hague over any other thought whatever. He had humour enough to laugh rather grimly when he said to himself: “Why the deuce does she like him so much more than she likes me?”—the reasons being really so conceivable. But even his faculty of analysis left the irritation standing, and this irritation proved perhaps the greatest misfortune that had ever overtaken him. There had been nothing yet that made him so much want to give up. He had of course by this time well reached the age of renouncement; but it had not hitherto been vivid to him that it was time to give up everything.

Practically, at the end of six months, he had renounced the friendship once so charming and comforting. His privation had two faces, and the face it had turned to him on the occasion of his last attempt to cultivate that friendship was the one he could look at least. This was the privation he inflicted; the other was the privation he bore. The conditions she never phrased he used to murmur to himself in solitude: “One more, one more—only just one.” Certainly he was going down; he often felt it when he caught himself, over his work, staring at vacancy and giving voice to that inanity. There was proof enough besides in his being so weak and so ill. His irritation took the form of melancholy, and his melancholy that of the conviction that his health had quite failed. His altar moreover had ceased to exist; his chapel, in his dreams, was a great dark cavern. All the lights had gone out—all his Dead had died again. He couldn’t exactly see at first how it had been in the power of his late companion to extinguish

them, since it was neither for her nor by her that they had been called into being. Then he understood that it was essentially in his own soul the revival had taken place, and that in the air of this soul they were now unable to breathe. The candles might mechanically burn, but each of them had lost its lustre. The church had become a void; it was his presence, her presence, their common presence, that had made the indispensable medium. If anything was wrong everything was—her silence spoiled the tune.

Then when three months were gone he felt so lonely that he went back; reflecting that as they had been his best society for years his Dead perhaps wouldn't let him forsake them without doing something more for him. They stood there, as he had left them, in their tall radiance, the bright cluster that had already made him, on occasions when he was willing to compare small things with great, liken them to a group of sea-lights on the edge of the ocean of life. It was a relief to him, after a while, as he sat there, to feel they had still a virtue. He was more and more easily tired, and he always drove now; the action of his heart was weak and gave him none of the reassurance conferred by the action of his fancy. None the less he returned yet again, returned several times, and finally, during six months, haunted the place with a renewal of frequency and a strain of impatience. In winter the church was unwarmed and exposure to cold forbidden him, but the glow of his shrine was an influence in which he could almost bask. He sat and wondered to what he had reduced his absent associate and what she now did with the hours of her absence. There were other churches, there were other altars, there were other candles; in one way or another her piety would still operate; he couldn't absolutely have deprived her of her rites. So he argued, but without contentment; for he well enough knew there was no other such rare semblance of the mountain of light she had once mentioned to him as the satisfaction of her need. As this semblance again gradually grew great to him and his pious practice more regular, he found a sharper and sharper pang in the imagination of her darkness; for never so much as in these weeks had his rites been real, never had his gathered company seemed so to respond and even to invite. He lost himself in the large lustre, which was more and more what he had from the first wished it to be—as dazzling as the vision of heaven in the mind of a child. He wandered in the fields of light; he passed, among the tall tapers, from tier to tier, from fire to fire, from name to name, from the white intensity of one clear emblem, of one saved soul, to another. It was in the quiet sense of having saved his souls that his deep strange instinct rejoiced. This was no dim theological rescue, no boon of a contingent world; they were saved better than faith or works could save them, saved for the warm world they had shrunk from dying to, for actuality, for continuity, for the certainty of human remembrance.

By this time he had survived all his friends; the last straight flame was three years old, there was no one to add to the list. Over and over he called his roll, and it appeared to him compact and complete. Where should he put in another, where, if there were no other objection, would it stand in its place in the rank? He reflected, with a want of sincerity of which he was quite conscious, that it would be difficult to determine that place. More and more, besides, face to face with his little legion, over endless histories, handling the empty shells and playing with the silence—more and more he could see that he had never introduced an alien. He had had his great companions, his indulgences—there were cases in which they had been immense; but what had his devotion after all been if it hadn't been at bottom a respect? He was, however, himself surprised at his stiffness; by the end of the winter the responsibility of it was what was uppermost in his thoughts. The refrain had grown old to them, that plea for just one more. There came a day when, for simple exhaustion, if symmetry should demand just one he was ready so far to meet symmetry. Symmetry was harmony, and the idea of harmony began to haunt him; he said to himself that harmony was of course everything. He took, in fancy, his composition to pieces,

redistributing it into other lines, making other juxtapositions and contrasts. He shifted this and that candle, he made the spaces different, he effaced the disfigurement of a possible gap. There were subtle and complex relations, a scheme of cross-reference, and moments in which he seemed to catch a glimpse of the void so sensible to the woman who wandered in exile or sat where he had seen her with the portrait of Acton Hague. Finally, in this way, he arrived at a conception of the total, the ideal, which left a clear opportunity for just another figure. "Just one more—to round it off; just one more, just one," continued to hum in his head. There was a strange confusion in the thought, for he felt the day to be near when he too should be one of the Others. What in this event would the Others matter to him, since they only mattered to the living? Even as one of the Dead what would his altar matter to him, since his particular dream of keeping it up had melted away? What had harmony to do with the case if his lights were all to be quenched? What he had hoped for was an instituted thing. He might perpetuate it on some other pretext, but his special meaning would have dropped. This meaning was to have lasted with the life of the one other person who understood it.

In March he had an illness during which he spent a fortnight in bed, and when he revived a little he was told of two things that had happened. One was that a lady whose name was not known to the servants (she left none) had been three times to ask about him; the other was that in his sleep and on an occasion when his mind evidently wandered he was heard to murmur again and again: "Just one more—just one." As soon as he found himself able to go out, and before the doctor in attendance had pronounced him so, he drove to see the lady who had come to ask about him. She was not at home; but this gave him the opportunity, before his strength should fall again, to take his way to the church. He entered it alone; he had declined, in a happy manner he possessed of being able to decline effectively, the company of his servant or of a nurse. He knew now perfectly what these good people thought; they had discovered his clandestine connexion, the magnet that had drawn him for so many years, and doubtless attached a significance of their own to the odd words they had repeated to him. The nameless lady was the clandestine connexion—a fact nothing could have made clearer than his indecent haste to rejoin her. He sank on his knees before his altar while his head fell over on his hands. His weakness, his life's weariness overtook him. It seemed to him he had come for the great surrender. At first he asked himself how he should get away; then, with the failing belief in the power, the very desire to move gradually left him. He had come, as he always came, to lose himself; the fields of light were still there to stray in; only this time, in straying, he would never come back. He had given himself to his Dead, and it was good: this time his Dead would keep him. He couldn't rise from his knees; he believed he should never rise again; all he could do was to lift his face and fix his eyes on his lights. They looked unusually, strangely splendid, but the one that always drew him most had an unprecedented lustre. It was the central voice of the choir, the glowing heart of the brightness, and on this occasion it seemed to expand, to spread great wings of flame. The whole altar flared—dazzling and blinding; but the source of the vast radiance burned clearer than the rest, gathering itself into form, and the form was human beauty and human charity, was the far-off face of Mary Antrim. She smiled at him from the glory of heaven—she brought the glory down with her to take him. He bowed his head in submission and at the same moment another wave rolled over him. Was it the quickening of joy to pain? In the midst of his joy at any rate he felt his buried face grow hot as with some communicated knowledge that had the force of a reproach. It suddenly made him contrast that very rapture with the bliss he had refused to another. This breath of the passion immortal was all that other had asked; the descent of Mary Antrim opened his spirit with a great compunctious throb for the descent of Acton Hague. It was as if Stransom had read what her eyes said to him.

After a moment he looked round in a despair that made him feel as if the source of life were ebbing. The church had been empty—he was alone; but he wanted to have something done, to make a last appeal. This idea gave him strength for an effort; he rose to his feet with a movement that made him turn, supporting himself by the back of a bench. Behind him was a prostrate figure, a figure he had seen before; a woman in deep mourning, bowed in grief or in prayer. He had seen her in other days—the first time of his entrance there, and he now slightly wavered, looking at her again till she seemed aware he had noticed her. She raised her head and met his eyes: the partner of his long worship had come back. She looked across at him an instant with a face wondering and scared; he saw he had made her afraid. Then quickly rising she came straight to him with both hands out.

“Then you *could* come? God sent you!” he murmured with a happy smile.

“You’re very ill—you shouldn’t be here,” she urged in anxious reply.

“God sent me too, I think. I was ill when I came, but the sight of you does wonders.” He held her hands, which steadied and quickened him. “I’ve something to tell you.”

“Don’t tell me!” she tenderly pleaded; “let me tell you. This afternoon, by a miracle, the sweetest of miracles, the sense of our difference left me. I was out—I was near, thinking, wandering alone, when, on the spot, something changed in my heart. It’s my confession—there it is. To come back, to come back on the instant—the idea gave me wings. It was as if I suddenly saw something—as if it all became possible. I could come for what you yourself came for: that was enough. So here I am. It’s not for my own—that’s over. But I’m here for *them*.” And breathless, infinitely relieved by her low precipitate explanation, she looked with eyes that reflected all its splendour at the magnificence of their altar.

“They’re here for you,” Stransom said, “they’re present to-night as they’ve never been. They speak for you—don’t you see?—in a passion of light; they sing out like a choir of angels. Don’t you hear what they say?—they offer the very thing you asked of me.”

“Don’t talk of it—don’t think of it; forget it!” She spoke in hushed supplication, and while the alarm deepened in her eyes she disengaged one of her hands and passed an arm round him to support him better, to help him to sink into a seat.

He let himself go, resting on her; he dropped upon the bench and she fell on her knees beside him, his own arm round her shoulder. So he remained an instant, staring up at his shrine. “They say there’s a gap in the array—they say it’s not full, complete. Just one more,” he went on, softly—“isn’t that what you wanted? Yes, one more, one more.”

“Ah no more—no more!” she wailed, as with a quick new horror of it, under her breath.

“Yes, one more,” he repeated, simply; “just one!” And with this his head dropped on her shoulder; she felt that in his weakness he had fainted. But alone with him in the dusky church a great dread was on her of what might still happen, for his face had the whiteness of death.

The Next Time

Mrs. Highmore's errand this morning was odd enough to deserve commemoration: she came to ask me to write a notice of her great forthcoming work. Her great works have come forth so frequently without my assistance that I was sufficiently entitled on this occasion to open my eyes; but what really made me stare was the ground on which her request reposed, and what leads me to record the incident is the train of memory lighted by that explanation. Poor Ray Limbert, while we talked, seemed to sit there between us: she reminded me that my acquaintance with him had begun, eighteen years ago, with her having come in precisely as she came in this morning to bespeak my charity for him. If she didn't know then how little my charity was worth she is at least enlightened about it to-day, and this is just the circumstance that makes the drollery of her visit. As I hold up the torch to the dusky years—by which I mean as I cipher up with a pen that stumbles and stops the figured column of my reminiscences—I see that Limbert's public hour, or at least my small apprehension of it, is rounded by those two occasions. It was *finis*, with a little moralising flourish, that Mrs. Highmore seemed to trace to-day at the bottom of the page. "One of the most voluminous writers of the time," she has often repeated this sign; but never, I daresay, in spite of her professional command of appropriate emotion, with an equal sense of that mystery and that sadness of things which to people of imagination generally hover over the close of human histories. This romance at any rate is bracketed by her early and her late appeal; and when its melancholy protrusions had caught the declining light again from my half-hour's talk with her I took a private vow to recover while that light still lingers something of the delicate flush, to pick out with a brief patience the perplexing lesson.

It was wonderful to observe how for herself Mrs. Highmore had already done so: she wouldn't have hesitated to announce to me what was the matter with Ralph Limbert, or at all events to give me a glimpse of the high admonition she had read in his career. There could have been no better proof of the vividness of this parable, which we were really in our pleasant sympathy quite at one about, than that Mrs. Highmore, of all hardened sinners, should have been converted. This indeed was not news to me: she impressed upon me that for the last ten years she had wanted to do something artistic, something as to which she was prepared not to care a rap whether or no it should sell. She brought home to me further that it had been mainly seeing what her brother-in-law did and how he did it that had wedded her to this perversity. As *he* didn't sell, dear soul, and as several persons, of whom I was one, thought highly of that, the fancy had taken her—taken her even quite early in her prolific course—of reaching, if only once, the same heroic eminence. She yearned to be, like Limbert, but of course only once, an exquisite failure. There was something a failure was, a failure in the market, that a success somehow wasn't. A success was as prosaic as a good dinner: there was nothing more to be said about it than that you had had it. Who but vulgar people, in such a case, made gloating remarks about the courses? It was often by such vulgar people that a success was attested. It made if you came to look at it nothing but money; that is it made so much that any other result showed small in comparison. A failure now could make—oh, with the aid of immense talent of course, for there were failures and failures—such a reputation! She did me the honour—she had often done it—to intimate that what she meant by reputation was seeing *me* toss a flower. If it took a failure to catch a failure I was by my own admission well qualified to place the laurel. It was because she had made so much money and Mr. Highmore had taken such care of it that she could treat herself to an hour of pure glory. She perfectly remembered that as often as I had heard her heave that sigh I had been prompt with my declaration that a book sold might easily be as glorious as a book

unsold. Of course she knew this, but she knew also that it was the age of trash triumphant and that she had never heard me speak of anything that had “done well” exactly as she had sometimes heard me speak of something that hadn’t—with just two or three words of respect which, when I used them, seemed to convey more than they commonly stood for, seemed to hush up the discussion a little, as if for the very beauty of the secret.

I may declare in regard to these allusions that, whatever I then thought of myself as a holder of the scales I had never scrupled to laugh out at the humour of Mrs. Highmore’s pursuit of quality at any price. It had never rescued her even for a day from the hard doom of popularity, and though I never gave her my word for it there was no reason at all why it should. The public *would* have her, as her husband used roguishly to remark; not indeed that, making her bargains, standing up to her publishers and even, in his higher flights, to her reviewers, he ever had a glimpse of her attempted conspiracy against her genius, or rather as I may say against mine. It was not that when she tried to be what she called subtle (for wasn’t Limbert subtle, and wasn’t I?) her fond consumers, bless them, didn’t suspect the trick nor show what they thought of it: they straightway rose on the contrary to the morsel she had hoped to hold too high, and, making but a big, cheerful bite of it, wagged their great collective tail artlessly for more. It was not given to her not to please, nor granted even to her best refinements to affright. I have always respected the mystery of those humiliations, but I was fully aware this morning that they were practically the reason why she had come to me. Therefore when she said with the flush of a bold joke in her kind, coarse face “What I feel is, you know, that *you* could settle me if you only would.” I knew quite well what she meant. She meant that of old it had always appeared to be the fine blade, as some one had hyperbolically called it, of my particular opinion that snapped the silken thread by which Limbert’s chance in the market was wont to hang. She meant that my favour was compromising, that my praise indeed was fatal. I had made myself a little specialty of seeing nothing in certain celebrities, of seeing overmuch in an occasional nobody, and of judging from a point of view that, say what I would for it (and I had a monstrous deal to say) remained perverse and obscure. Mine was in short the love that killed, for my subtlety, unlike Mrs. Highmore’s, produced no tremor of the public tail. She had not forgotten how, toward the end, when his case was worst, Limbert would absolutely come to me with a funny, shy pathos in his eyes and say: “My dear fellow, I think I’ve done it this time, if you’ll only keep quiet.” If my keeping quiet in those days was to help him to appear to have hit the usual taste, for the want of which he was starving, so now my breaking out was to help Mrs. Highmore to appear to have hit the unusual.

The moral of all this was that I had frightened the public too much for our late friend, but that as she was not starving this was exactly what her grosser reputation required. And then, she good-naturedly and delicately intimated, there would always be, if further reasons were wanting, the price of my clever little article. I think she gave that hint with a flattering impression—spoiled child of the booksellers as she is—that the price of my clever little articles is high. Whatever it is, at any rate, she had evidently reflected that poor Limbert’s anxiety for his own profit used to involve my sacrificing mine. Any inconvenience that my obliging her might entail would not in fine be pecuniary. Her appeal, her motive, her fantastic thirst for quality and her ingenious theory of my influence struck me all as excellent comedy, and when I consented contingently to oblige her she left me the sheets of her new novel. I could plead no inconvenience and have been looking them over; but I am frankly appalled at what she expects of me. What is she thinking of, poor dear, and what has put it into her head that “quality” has descended upon her? Why does she suppose that she has been “artistic”? She hasn’t been anything whatever, I surmise, that she has not inveterately been. What does she imagine she has left out? What does she conceive she has put in? She has neither left out

nor put in anything. I shall have to write her an embarrassed note. The book doesn't exist, and there's nothing in life to say about it. How can there be anything but the same old faithful rush for it?

I

This rush had already begun when, early in the seventies, in the interest of her prospective brother-in-law, she approached me on the singular ground of the unencouraged sentiment I had entertained for her sister. Pretty pink Maud had cast me out, but I appear to have passed in the flurried little circle for a magnanimous youth. Pretty pink Maud, so lovely then, before her troubles, that dusky Jane was gratefully conscious of all she made up for, Maud Stannace, very literary too, very languishing and extremely bullied by her mother, had yielded, invidiously as it might have struck me, to Ray Limbert's suit, which Mrs. Stannace was not the woman to stomach. Mrs. Stannace was seldom the woman to do anything: she had been shocked at the way her children, with the grubby taint of their father's blood (he had published pale Remains or flat Conversations of *his* father) breathed the alien air of authorship. If not the daughter, nor even the niece, she was, if I am not mistaken, the second cousin of a hundred earls and a great stickler for relationship, so that she had other views for her brilliant child, especially after her quiet one (such had been her original discreet forecast of the producer of eighty volumes) became the second wife of an ex-army-surgeon, already the father of four children. Mrs. Stannace had too manifestly dreamed it would be given to pretty pink Maud to detach some one of the hundred, who wouldn't be missed, from the cluster. It was because she cared only for cousins that I unlearned the way to her house, which she had once reminded me was one of the few paths of gentility I could hope to tread. Ralph Limbert, who belonged to nobody and had done nothing—nothing even at Cambridge—had only the uncanny spell he had cast upon her younger daughter to recommend him; but if her younger daughter had a spark of filial feeling she wouldn't commit the indecency of deserting for his sake a deeply dependent and intensely aggravated mother.

These things I learned from Jane Highmore, who, as if her books had been babies (they remained her only ones) had waited till after marriage to show what she could do and now bade fair to surround her satisfied spouse (he took for some mysterious reason, a part of the credit) with a little family, in sets of triplets, which properly handled would be the support of his declining years. The young couple, neither of whom had a penny, were now virtually engaged: the thing was subject to Ralph's putting his hand on some regular employment. People more enamoured couldn't be conceived, and Mrs. Highmore, honest woman, who had moreover a professional sense for a love-story, was eager to take them under her wing. What was wanted was a decent opening for Limbert, which it had occurred to her I might assist her to find, though indeed I had not yet found any such matter for myself. But it was well known that I was too particular, whereas poor Ralph, with the easy manners of genius, was ready to accept almost anything to which a salary, even a small one, was attached. If he could only for instance get a place on a newspaper the rest of his maintenance would come freely enough. It was true that his two novels, one of which she had brought to leave with me, had passed unperceived and that to her, Mrs. Highmore personally, they didn't irresistibly appeal; but she could all the same assure me that I should have only to spend ten minutes with him (and our encounter must speedily take place) to receive an impression of latent power.

Our encounter took place soon after I had read the volumes Mrs. Highmore had left with me, in which I recognised an intention of a sort that I had then pretty well given up the hope of meeting. I daresay that without knowing it I had been looking out rather hungrily for an altar of sacrifice: however that may be I submitted when I came across Ralph Limbert to one of the rarest emotions of my literary life, the sense of an activity in which I could critically rest.

The rest was deep and salutary, and it has not been disturbed to this hour. It has been a long, large surrender, the luxury of dropped discriminations. He couldn't trouble me, whatever he did, for I practically enjoyed him as much when he was worse as when he was better. It was a case, I suppose, of natural prearrangement, in which, I hasten to add, I keep excellent company. We are a numerous band, partakers of the same repose, who sit together in the shade of the tree, by the splash of the fountain, with the glare of the desert around us and no great vice that I know of but the habit perhaps of estimating people a little too much by what they think of a certain style. If it had been laid upon these few pages, none the less, to be the history of an enthusiasm, I should not have undertaken them: they are concerned with Ralph Limbert in relations to which I was a stranger or in which I participated only by sympathy. I used to talk about his work, but I seldom talk now: the brotherhood of the faith have become, like the Trappists, a silent order. If to the day of his death, after mortal disenchantments, the impression he first produced always evoked the word "ingenuous," those to whom his face was familiar can easily imagine what it must have been when it still had the light of youth. I had never seen a man of genius look so passive, a man of experience so off his guard. At the period I made his acquaintance this freshness was all un-brushed. His foot had begun to stumble, but he was full of big intentions and of sweet Maud Stannace. Black-haired and pale, deceptively languid, he had the eyes of a clever child and the voice of a bronze bell. He saw more even than I had done in the girl he was engaged to; as time went on I became conscious that we had both, properly enough, seen rather more than there was. Our odd situation, that of the three of us, became perfectly possible from the moment I observed that he had more patience with her than I should have had. I was happy at not having to supply this quantity, and she, on her side, found pleasure in being able to be impertinent to me without incurring the reproach of a bad wife.

Limbert's novels appeared to have brought him no money: they had only brought him, so far as I could then make out, tributes that took up his time. These indeed brought him from several quarters some other things, and on my part at the end of three months *The Blackport Beacon*. I don't to-day remember how I obtained for him the London correspondence of the great northern organ, unless it was through somebody's having obtained it for myself. I seem to recall that I got rid of it in Limbert's interest, persuaded the editor that he was much the better man. The better man was naturally the man who had pledged himself to support a charming wife. We were neither of us good, as the event proved, but he had a finer sort of badness. *The Blackport Beacon* had two London correspondents—one a supposed haunter of political circles, the other a votary of questions sketchily classified as literary. They were both expected to be lively, and what was held out to each was that it was honourably open to him to be livelier than the other. I recollect the political correspondent of that period and how the problem offered to Ray Limbert was to try to be livelier than Pat Moyle. He had not yet seemed to me so candid as when he undertook this exploit, which brought matters to a head with Mrs. Stannace, inasmuch as her opposition to the marriage now logically fell to the ground. It's all tears and laughter as I look back upon that admirable time, in which nothing was so romantic as our intense vision of the real. No fool's paradise ever rustled such a cradle-song. It was anything but Bohemia—it was the very temple of Mrs. Grundy. We knew we were too critical, and that made us sublimely indulgent; we believed we did our duty or wanted to, and that made us free to dream. But we dreamed over the multiplication-table; we were nothing if not practical. Oh, the long smokes and sudden ideas, the knowing hints and banished scruples! The great thing was for Limbert to bring out his next book, which was just what his delightful engagement with the *Beacon* would give him leisure and liberty to do. The kind of work, all human and elastic and suggestive, was capital experience: in picking up things for his bi-weekly letter he would pick up life as well, he would pick up literature. The new publications, the new pictures, the new people—there would be nothing too novel for us

and nobody too sacred. We introduced everything and everybody into Mrs. Stannace's drawing-room, of which I again became a familiar.

Mrs. Stannace, it was true, thought herself in strange company; she didn't particularly mind the new books, though some of them seemed queer enough, but to the new people she had decided objections. It was notorious however that poor Lady Robeck secretly wrote for one of the papers, and the thing had certainly, in its glance at the doings of the great world, a side that might be made attractive. But we were going to make every side attractive, and we had everything to say about the sort of thing a paper like the *Beacon* would want. To give it what it would want and to give it nothing else was not doubtless an inspiring, but it was a perfectly respectable task, especially for a man with an appealing bride and a contentious mother-in-law. I thought Lambert's first letters as charming as the type allowed, though I won't deny that in spite of my sense of the importance of concessions I was just a trifle disconcerted at the way he had caught the tone. The tone was of course to be caught, but need it have been caught so in the act? The creature was even cleverer, as Maud Stannace said, than she had ventured to hope. Verily it was a good thing to have a dose of the wisdom of the serpent. If it had to be journalism—well, it *was* journalism. If he had to be "chatty"—well, he *was* chatty. Now and then he made a hit that—it was stupid of me—brought the blood to my face. I hated him to be so personal; but still, if it would make his fortune—! It wouldn't of course directly, but the book would, practically and in the sense to which our pure ideas of fortune were confined; and these things were all for the book. The daily balm meanwhile was in what one knew of the book—there were exquisite things to know; in the quiet monthly cheques from Blackport and in the deeper rose of Maud's little preparations, which were as dainty, on their tiny scale, as if she had been a humming-bird building a nest. When at the end of three months her betrothed had fairly settled down to his correspondence—in which Mrs. Highmore was the only person, so far as we could discover, disappointed, even she moreover being in this particular tortuous and possibly jealous; when the situation had assumed such a comfortable shape it was quite time to prepare. I published at that moment my first volume, mere faded ink to-day, a little collection of literary impressions, odds and ends of criticism contributed to a journal less remunerative but also less chatty than the *Beacon*, small ironies and ecstasies, great phrases and mistakes; and the very week it came out poor Lambert devoted half of one of his letters to it, with the happy sense this time of gratifying both himself and me as well as the Blackport breakfast-tables. I remember his saying it wasn't literature, the stuff, superficial stuff, he had to write about me; but what did that matter if it came back, as we knew, to the making for literature in the roundabout way? I sold the thing, I remember, for ten pounds, and with the money I bought in Vigo Street a quaint piece of old silver for Maud Stannace, which I carried to her with my own hand as a wedding-gift. In her mother's small drawing-room, a faded bower of photography fenced in and bedimmed by folding screens out of which sallow persons of fashion with dashing signatures looked at you from retouched eyes and little windows of plush, I was left to wait long enough to feel in the air of the house a hushed vibration of disaster. When our young lady came in she was very pale and her eyes too had been retouched.

"Something horrid has happened," I immediately said; and having really all along but half believed in her mother's meagre permission I risked with an unguarded groan the introduction of Mrs. Stannace's name.

"Yes, she has made a dreadful scene; she insists on our putting it off again. We're very unhappy: poor Ray has been turned off." Her tears began to flow again.

I had such a good conscience that I stared. "Turned off what?"

“Why, his paper of course. The *Beacon* has given him what he calls the sack. They don’t like his letters: they’re not the style of thing they want.”

My blankness could only deepen. “Then what style of thing *do* they want?”

“Something more chatty.”

“More?” I cried, aghast.

“More gossipy, more personal. They want ‘journalism.’ They want tremendous trash.”

“Why, that’s just what his letters have *been!*” I broke out.

This was strong, and I caught myself up, but the girl offered me the pardon of a beautiful wan smile. “So Ray himself declares. He says he has stooped so low.”

“Very well—he must stoop lower. He *must* keep the place.”

“He can’t!” poor Maud wailed. “He says he has tried all he knows, has been abject, has gone on all fours, and that if they don’t like that—”

“He accepts his dismissal?” I interposed in dismay.

She gave a tragic shrug. “What other course is open to him? He wrote to them that such work as he has done is the very worst he can do for the money.”

“Therefore,” I inquired with a flash of hope, “they’ll offer him more for worse?”

“No indeed,” she answered, “they haven’t even offered him to go on at a reduction. He isn’t funny enough.”

I reflected a moment. “But surely such a thing as his notice of my book—!”

“It was your wretched book that was the last straw! He should have treated it superficially.”

“Well, if he didn’t—!” I began. Then I checked myself. “*Je vous porte malheur.*”

She didn’t deny this; she only went, on: “What on earth is he to do?”

“He’s to do better than the monkeys! He’s to write!”

“But what on earth are we to marry on?”

I considered once more. “You’re to marry on *The Major Key.*”

II

The Major Key was the new novel, and the great thing accordingly was to finish it; a consummation for which three months of the *Beacon* had in some degree prepared the way. The action of that journal was indeed a shock, but I didn’t know then the worst, didn’t know that in addition to being a shock it was also a symptom. It was the first hint of the difficulty to which poor Limbert was eventually to succumb. His state was the happier of a truth for his not immediately seeing all that it meant. Difficulty was the law of life, but one could thank heaven it was exceptionally present in that horrid quarter. There was the difficulty that inspired, the difficulty of *The Major Key* to wit, which it was after all base to sacrifice to the turning of somersaults for pennies. These convictions Ray Limbert beguiled his fresh wait by blandly entertaining: not indeed, I think, that the failure of his attempt to be chatty didn’t leave him slightly humiliated. If it was bad enough to have grinned through a horse-collar it was very bad indeed to have grinned in vain. Well, he would try no more grinning or at least no more horse-collars. The only success worth one’s powder was success in the line of one’s idiosyncrasy. Consistency was in itself distinction, and what was talent but the art of being completely whatever it was that one happened to be? One’s things were characteristic or they

were nothing. I look back rather fondly on our having exchanged in those days these admirable remarks and many others; on our having been very happy too, in spite of postponements and obscurities, in spite also of such occasional hauntings as could spring from our lurid glimpse of the fact that even twaddle cunningly calculated was far above people's heads. It was easy to wave away spectres by the reflection that all one had to do was not to write for people; it was certainly not for people that Limbert wrote while he hammered at *The Major Key*. The taint of literature was fatal only in a certain kind of air, which was precisely the kind against which we had now closed our window. Mrs. Stannace rose from her crumpled cushions as soon as she had obtained an adjournment, and Maud looked pale and proud, quite victorious and superior, at her having obtained nothing more. Maud behaved well, I thought, to her mother, and well indeed for a girl who had mainly been taught to be flowerlike to every one. What she gave Ray Limbert her fine, abundant needs made him then and ever pay for; but the gift was liberal, almost wonderful—an assertion I make even while remembering to how many clever women, early and late, his work has been dear. It was not only that the woman he was to marry was in love with him, but that (this was the strangeness) she had really seen almost better than any one what he could do. The greatest strangeness was that she didn't want him to do something different. This boundless belief was indeed the main way of her devotion; and as an act of faith it naturally asked for miracles. She was a rare wife for a poet if she was not perhaps the best who could have been picked out for a poor man.

Well, we were to have the miracles at all events and we were in a perfect state of mind to receive them. There were more of us every day, and we thought highly even of our friend's odd jobs and pot-boilers. The *Beacon* had had no successor, but he found some quiet comers and stray chances. Perpetually poking the fire and looking out of the window, he was certainly not a monster of facility, but he was, thanks perhaps to a certain method in that madness, a monster of certainty. It wasn't every one however who knew him for this: many editors printed him but once. He was getting a small reputation as a man it was well to have the first time; he created obscure apprehensions as to what might happen the second. He was good for making an impression, but no one seemed exactly to know what the impression was good for when made. The reason was simply that they had not seen yet *The Major Key* that fiery-hearted rose as to which we watched in private the formation of petal after petal and flame after flame. Nothing mattered but this, for it had already elicited a splendid bid, much talked about in Mrs. Highmore's drawing-room, where at this point my reminiscences grow particularly thick. *Her* roses bloomed all the year and her sociability increased with her row of prizes. We had an idea that we "met every one" there—so we naturally thought when we met each other. Between our hostess and Ray Limbert flourished the happiest relation, the only cloud on which was that her husband eyed him rather askance. When he was called clever this personage wanted to know what he had to "show;" and it was certain that he showed nothing that could compare with Jane Highmore. Mr. Highmore took his stand on accomplished work and, turning up his coat-tails, warmed his rear with a good conscience at the neat bookcase in which the generations of triplets were chronologically arranged. The harmony between his companions rested on the fact that, as I have already hinted, each would have liked so much to be the other. Limbert couldn't but have a feeling about a woman who in addition to being the best creature and her sister's backer would have made, could she have condescended, such a success with the *Beacon*. On the other hand Mrs. Highmore used freely to say: "Do you know, he'll do exactly the thing that *I* want to do? I shall never do it myself, but he'll do it instead. Yes, he'll do *my* thing, and I shall hate him for it—the wretch." Hating him was her pleasant humour, for the wretch was personally to her taste.

She prevailed on her own publisher to promise to take *The Major Key* and to engage to pay a considerable sum down, as the phrase is, on the presumption of its attracting attention. This

was good news for the evening's end at Mrs. Highmore's when there were only four or five left and cigarettes ran low; but there was better news to come, and I have never forgotten how, as it was I who had the good fortune to bring it, I kept it back on one of those occasions, for the sake of my effect, till only the right people remained. The right people were now more and more numerous, but this was a revelation addressed only to a choice residuum—a residuum including of course Limbert himself, with whom I haggled for another cigarette before I announced that as a consequence of an interview I had had with him that afternoon, and of a subtle argument I had brought to bear, Mrs. Highmore's pearl of publishers had agreed to put forth the new book as a serial. He was to "run" it in his magazine and he was to pay ever so much more for the privilege. I produced a fine gasp which presently found a more articulate relief, but poor Limbert's voice failed him once for all (he knew he was to walk away with me) and it was some one else who asked me in what my subtle argument had resided. I forget what florid description I then gave of it: to-day I have no reason not to confess that it had resided in the simple plea that the book was exquisite. I had said: "Come, my dear friend, be original; just risk it for that!" My dear friend seemed to rise to the chance, and I followed up my advantage, permitting him honestly no illusion as to the quality of the work. He clutched interrogatively at two or three attenuations, but I dashed them aside, leaving him face to face with the formidable truth. It was just a pure gem: was he the man not to flinch? His danger appeared to have acted upon him as the anaconda acts upon the rabbit; fascinated and paralysed, he had been engulfed in the long pink throat. When a week before, at my request, Limbert had let me possess for a day the complete manuscript, beautifully copied out by Maud Stannace, I had flushed with indignation at its having to be said of the author of such pages that he hadn't the common means to marry. I had taken the field in a great glow to repair this scandal, and it was therefore quite directly my fault if three months later, when *The Major Key* began to run, Mrs. Stannace was driven to the wall. She had made a condition of a fixed income; and at last a fixed income was achieved.

She had to recognise it, and after much prostration among the photographs she recognised it to the extent of accepting some of the convenience of it in the form of a project for a common household, to the expenses of which each party should proportionately contribute. Jane Highmore made a great point of her not being left alone, but Mrs. Stannace herself determined the proportion, which on Limbert's side at least and in spite of many other fluctuations was never altered. His income had been "fixed" with a vengeance: having painfully stooped to the comprehension of it Mrs. Stannace rested on this effort to the end and asked no further question on the subject. *The Major Key* in other words ran ever so long, and before it was half out Limbert and Maud had been married and the common household set up. These first months were probably the happiest in the family annals, with wedding-bells and budding laurels, the quiet, assured course of the book and the friendly, familiar note, round the corner, of Mrs. Highmore's big guns. They gave Ralph time to block in another picture as well as to let me know after a while that he had the happy prospect of becoming a father. We had at times some dispute as to whether *The Major Key* was making an impression, but our contention could only be futile so long as we were not agreed as to what an impression consisted of. Several persons wrote to the author and several others asked to be introduced to him: wasn't that an impression? One of the lively "weeklies," snapping at the deadly "monthlies," said the whole thing was "grossly inartistic"—wasn't that? It was somewhere else proclaimed "a wonderfully subtle character-study"—wasn't that too? The strongest effect doubtless was produced on the publisher when, in its lemon-coloured volumes, like a little dish of three custards, the book was at last served cold: he never got his money back and so far as I know has never got it back to this day. *The Major Key* was rather a great performance than a great success. It converted readers into friends and friends into lovers; it placed the author, as the phrase is—placed him all too definitely; but it shrank to

obscurity in the account of sales eventually rendered. It was in short an exquisite thing, but it was scarcely a thing to have published and certainly not a thing to have married on. I heard all about the matter, for my intervention had much exposed me. Mrs. Highmore said the second volume had given her ideas, and the ideas are probably to be found in some of her works, to the circulation of which they have even perhaps contributed. This was not absolutely yet the very thing she wanted to do, but it was on the way to it. So much, she informed me, she particularly perceived in the light of a critical study which I put forth in a little magazine; which the publisher in his advertisements quoted from profusely; and as to which there sprang up some absurd story that Limbert himself had written it. I remember that on my asking some one why such an idiotic thing had been said my interlocutor replied: "Oh, because, you know, it's just the way he *would* have written!" My spirit sank a little perhaps as I reflected that with such analogies in our manner there might prove to be some in our fate.

It was during the next four or five years that our eyes were open to what, unless something could be done, that fate, at least on Limbert's part, might be. The thing to be done was of course to write the book, the book that would make the difference, really justify the burden he had accepted and consummately express his power. For the works that followed upon *The Major Key* he had inevitably to accept conditions the reverse of brilliant, at a time too when the strain upon his resources had begun to show sharpness. With three babies in due course, an ailing wife and a complication still greater than these, it became highly important that a man should do only his best. Whatever Limbert did was his best; so at least each time I thought and so I unfailingly said somewhere, though it was not my saying it, heaven knows, that made the desired difference. Every one else indeed said it, and there was among multiplied worries always the comfort that his position was quite assured. The two books that followed *The Major Key* did more than anything else to assure it, and Jane Highmore was always crying out: "You stand alone, dear Ray; you stand absolutely alone!" Dear Ray used to tell me that he felt the truth of this in feebly attempted discussions with his bookseller. His sister-in-law gave him good advice into the bargain; she was a repository of knowing hints, of esoteric learning. These things were doubtless not the less valuable to him for bearing wholly on the question of how a reputation might be with a little gumption, as Mrs. Highmore said, "worked." Save when she occasionally bore testimony to her desire to do, as Limbert did, something some day for her own very self, I never heard her speak of the literary motive as if it were distinguishable from the pecuniary. She cocked up his hat, she pricked up his prudence for him, reminding him that as one seemed to take one's self so the silly world was ready to take one. It was a fatal mistake to be too candid even with those who were all right—not to look and to talk prosperous, not at least to pretend that one had beautiful sales. To listen to her you would have thought the profession of letters a wonderful game of bluff. Wherever one's idea began it ended somehow in inspired paragraphs in the newspapers. "I pretend, I assure you, that you are going off like wildfire—I can at least do that for you!" she often declared, prevented as she was from doing much else by Mr. Highmore's insurmountable objection to *their* taking Mrs. Stannace.

I couldn't help regarding the presence of this latter lady in Limbert's life as the major complication: whatever he attempted it appeared given to him to achieve as best he could in the mere margin of the space in which she swung her petticoats. I may err in the belief that she practically lived on him, for though it was not in him to follow adequately Mrs. Highmore's counsel there were exasperated confessions he never made, scanty domestic curtains he rattled on their rings. I may exaggerate in the retrospect his apparent anxieties, for these after all were the years when his talent was freshest and when as a writer he most laid down his line. It wasn't of Mrs. Stannace nor even as time went on of Mrs. Limbert that we mainly talked when I got at longer intervals a smokier hour in the little grey den from which

we could step out, as we used to say, to the lawn. The lawn was the back-garden, and Limbert's study was behind the dining-room, with folding doors not impervious to the clatter of the children's tea. We sometimes took refuge from it in the depths—a bush and a half deep—of the shrubbery, where was a bench that gave us a view while we gossiped of Mrs. Stannace's tiara-like headdress nodding at an upper window. Within doors and without Limbert's life was overhung by an awful region that figured in his conversation, comprehensively and with unpremeditated art, as Upstairs. It was Upstairs that the thunder gathered, that Mrs. Stannace kept her accounts and her state, that Mrs. Limbert had her babies and her headaches, that the bells for ever jangled at the maids, that everything imperative in short took place—everything that he had somehow, pen in hand, to meet and dispose of in the little room on the garden-level. I don't think he liked to go Upstairs, but no special burst of confidence was needed to make me feel that a terrible deal of service went. It was the habit of the ladies of the Stannace family to be extremely waited on, and I've never been in a house where three maids and a nursery-governess gave such an impression of a retinue. "Oh, they're so deucedly, so hereditarily fine!"—I remember how that dropped from him in some worried hour. Well, it was because Maud was so universally fine that we had both been in love with her. It was not an air moreover for the plaintive note: no private inconvenience could long outweigh for him the great happiness of these years—the happiness that sat with us when we talked and that made it always amusing to talk, the sense of his being on the heels of success, coming closer and closer, touching it at last, knowing that he should touch it again and hold it fast and hold it high. Of course when we said success we didn't mean exactly what Mrs. Highmore for instance meant. He used to quote at me as a definition something from a nameless page of my own, some stray dictum to the effect that the man of his craft had achieved it when of a beautiful subject his expression was complete. Well, wasn't Limbert's in all conscience complete?

III

It was bang upon this completeness all the same that the turn arrived, the turn I can't say of his fortune—for what was that?—but of his confidence, of his spirits and, what was more to the point, of his system. The whole occasion on which the first symptom flared out is before me as I write. I had met them both at dinner: they were diners who had reached the penultimate stage—the stage which in theory is a rigid selection and in practice a wan submission. It was late in the season and stronger spirits than theirs were broken; the night was close and the air of the banquet such as to restrict conversation to the refusal of dishes and consumption to the sniffing of a flower. It struck me all the more that Mrs. Limbert was flying her flag. As vivid as a page of her husband's prose, she had one of those flickers of freshness that are the miracle of her sex and one of those expensive dresses that are the miracle of ours. She had also a neat brougham in which she had offered to rescue an old lady from the possibilities of a queer cab-horse; so that when she had rolled away with her charge I proposed a walk home with her husband, whom I had overtaken on the doorstep. Before I had gone far with him he told me he had news for me—he had accepted, of all people and of all things, an "editorial position." It had come to pass that very day, from one hour to another, without time for appeals or ponderations: Mr. Bousefield, the proprietor of a "high-class monthly," making, as they said, a sudden change, had dropped on him heavily out of the blue. It was all right—there was a salary and an idea, and both of them, as such things went, rather high. We took our way slowly through the vacant streets, and in the explanations and revelations that as we lingered under lamp-posts I drew from him I found with an apprehension that I tried to gulp down a foretaste of the bitter end. He told me more than he had ever told me yet. He couldn't balance accounts—that was the trouble: his expenses were too rising a tide. It was absolutely necessary that he should at last make money, and now he

must work only for that. The need this last year had gathered the force of a crusher: it had rolled over him and laid him on his back. He had his scheme; this time he knew what he was about; on some good occasion, with leisure to talk it over, he would tell me the blessed whole. His editorship would help him, and for the rest he must help himself. If he couldn't they would have to do something fundamental—change their life altogether, give up London, move into the country, take a house at thirty pounds a year, send their children to the Board-school. I saw that he was excited, and he admitted that he was: he had waked out of a trance. He had been on the wrong tack; he had piled mistake on mistake. It was the vision of his remedy that now excited him: ineffably, grotesquely simple, it had yet come to him only within a day or two. No, he wouldn't tell me what it was; he would give me the night to guess, and if I shouldn't guess it would be because I was as big an ass as himself. However, a lone man might be an ass: he had room in his life for his ears. Ray had a burden that demanded a back: the back must therefore now be properly instituted. As to the editorship, it was simply heaven-sent, being not at all another case of *The Blackport Beacon* but a case of the very opposite. The proprietor, the great Mr. Bousefield, had approached him precisely because his name, which was to be on the cover, *didn't* represent the chatty. The whole thing was to be—oh, on fiddling little lines of course—a protest against the chatty. Bousefield wanted him to be himself; it was for himself Bousefield had picked him out. Wasn't it beautiful and brave of Bousefield? He wanted literature, he saw the great reaction coming, the way the cat was going to jump. "Where will you get literature?" I wofully asked; to which he replied with a laugh that what he had to get was not literature but only what Bousefield would take for it.

In that single phrase without more ado I discovered his famous remedy. What was before him for the future was not to do his work but to do what somebody else would take for it. I had the question out with him on the next opportunity, and of all the lively discussions into which we had been destined to drift it lingers in my mind as the liveliest. This was not, I hasten to add, because I disputed his conclusions: it was an effect of the very force with which, when I had fathomed his wretched premises, I took them to my soul. It was very well to talk with Jane Highmore about his standing alone: the eminent relief of this position had brought him to the verge of ruin. Several persons admired his books—nothing was less contestable; but they appeared to have a mortal objection to acquiring them by subscription or by purchase: they begged or borrowed or stole, they delegated one of the party perhaps to commit the volumes to memory and repeat them, like the bards of old, to listening multitudes. Some ingenious theory was required at any rate to account for the inexorable limits of his circulation. It wasn't a thing for five people to live on; therefore either the objects circulated must change their nature or the organisms to be nourished must. The former change was perhaps the easier to consider first. Limbert considered it with extraordinary ingenuity from that time on, and the ingenuity, greater even than any I had yet had occasion to admire in him, made the whole next stage of his career rich in curiosity and suspense.

"I have been butting my skull against a wall," he had said in those hours of confidence; "and, to be as sublime a blockhead, if you'll allow me the word, you, my dear fellow, have kept sounding the charge. We've sat prating here of 'success,' heaven help us, like chanting monks in a cloister, hugging the sweet delusion that it lies somewhere in the work itself, in the expression, as you said, of one's subject or the intensification, as somebody else somewhere says, of one's note. One has been going on in short as if the only thing to do were to accept the law of one's talent and thinking that if certain consequences didn't follow it was only because one wasn't logical enough. My disaster has served me right—I mean for using that ignoble word at all. It's a mere distributor's, a mere hawker's word. What *is* 'success' anyhow? When a book's right, it's right—shame to it surely if it isn't. When it sells it sells—

it brings money like potatoes or beer. If there's dishonour one way and inconvenience the other, it certainly is comfortable, but it as certainly isn't glorious to have escaped them. People of delicacy don't brag either about their probity or about their luck. Success be hanged!—I want to sell. It's a question of life and death. I must study the way. I've studied too much the other way—I know the other way now, every inch of it. I must cultivate the market—it's a science like another. I must go in for an infernal cunning. It will be very amusing, I foresee that; I shall lead a dashing life and drive a roaring trade. I haven't been obvious—I must *be* obvious. I haven't been popular—I must *be* popular. It's another art—or perhaps it isn't an art at all. It's something else; one must find out what it is. Is it something awfully queer?—you blush!—something barely decent? All the greater incentive to curiosity! Curiosity's an immense motive; we shall have tremendous sport. They all do it; it's only a question of how. Of course I've everything to unlearn; but what is life, as Jane Highmore says, but a lesson? I must get all I can, all she can give me, from Jane. She can't explain herself much; she's all intuition; her processes are obscure; it's the spirit that swoops down and catches her up. But I must study her reverently in her works. Yes, you've defied me before, but now my loins are girded: I declare I'll read one of them—I really will: I'll put it through if I perish!"

I won't pretend that he made all these remarks at once; but there wasn't one that he didn't make at one time or another, for suggestion and occasion were plentiful enough, his life being now given up altogether to his new necessity. It wasn't a question of his having or not having, as they say, my intellectual sympathy: the brute force of the pressure left no room for judgment; it made all emotion a mere recourse to the spyglass. I watched him as I should have watched a long race or a long chase, irresistibly siding with him but much occupied with the calculation of odds. I confess indeed that my heart, for the endless stretch that he covered so fast, was often in my throat. I saw him peg away over the sun-dappled plain, I saw him double and wind and gain and lose; and all the while I secretly entertained a conviction. I wanted him to feed his many mouths, but at the bottom of all things was my sense that if he should succeed in doing so in this particular way I should think less well of him. Now I had an absolute terror of that. Meanwhile so far as I could I backed him up, I helped him: all the more that I had warned him immensely at first, smiled with a compassion it was very good of him not to have found exasperating over the complacency of his assumption that a man could escape from himself. Ray Limbert at all events would certainly never escape; but one could make believe for him, make believe very hard—an undertaking in which at first Mr. Bousefield was visibly a blessing. Limbert was delightful on the business of this being at last my chance too—my chance, so miraculously vouchsafed, to appear with a certain luxuriance. He didn't care how often he printed me, for wasn't it exactly in my direction Mr. Bousefield held that the cat was going to jump? This was the least he could do for me. I might write on anything I liked—on anything at least but Mr. Limbert's second manner. He didn't wish attention strikingly called to his second manner; it was to operate insidiously; people were to be left to believe they had discovered it long ago. "Ralph Limbert? Why, when did we ever live without him?"—that's what he wanted them to say. Besides, they hated manners—let sleeping dogs lie. His understanding with Mr. Bousefield—on which he had had not at all to insist; it was the excellent man who insisted—was that he should run one of his beautiful stories in the magazine. As to the beauty of his story however Limbert was going to be less admirably straight than as to the beauty of everything else. That was another reason why I mustn't write about his new line: Mr. Bousefield was not to be too definitely warned that such a periodical was exposed to prostitution. By the time he should find it out for himself the public—*le gros public*—would have bitten, and then perhaps he would be conciliated and forgive. Everything else would be literary in short, and above all *I* would be; only Ralph Limbert wouldn't—he'd chuck up the whole thing sooner. He'd be vulgar, he'd be

rudimentary, he'd be atrocious: he'd be elaborately what he hadn't been before. I duly noticed that he had more trouble in making "everything else" literary than he had at first allowed for; but this was largely counteracted by the ease with which he was able to obtain that his mark should not be overshot. He had taken well to heart the old lesson of the *Beacon*; he remembered that he was after all there to keep his contributors down much rather than to keep them up. I thought at times that he kept them down a trifle too far, but he assured me that I needn't be nervous: he had his limit—his limit was inexorable. He would reserve pure vulgarity for his serial, over which he was sweating blood and water; elsewhere it should be qualified by the prime qualification, the mediocrity that attaches, that endears. Bousefield, he allowed, was proud, was difficult: nothing was really good enough for him but the middling good; but he himself was prepared for adverse comment, resolute for his noble course. Hadn't Limbert moreover in the event of a charge of laxity from headquarters the great strength of being able to point to my contributions? Therefore I must let myself go, I must abound in my peculiar sense, I must be a resource in case of accidents. Limbert's vision of accidents hovered mainly over the sudden awakening of Mr. Bousefield to the stuff that in the department of fiction his editor was palming off. He would then have to confess in all humility that this was not what the good old man wanted, but I should be all the more there as a salutary specimen. I would cross the scent with something showily impossible, splendidly unpopular—I must be sure to have something on hand. I always had plenty on hand—poor Limbert needn't have worried: the magazine was forearmed each month by my care with a retort to any possible accusation of trifling with Mr. Bousefield's standard. He had admitted to Limbert, after much consideration indeed, that he was prepared to be perfectly human; but he had added that he was not prepared for an abuse of this admission. The thing in the world I think I least felt myself was an abuse, even though (as I had never mentioned to my friendly editor) I too had my project for a bigger reverberation. I daresay I trusted mine more than I trusted Limbert's; at all events the golden mean in which in the special case he saw his salvation as an editor was something I should be most sure of if I were to exhibit it myself. I exhibited it month after month in the form of a monstrous levity, only praying heaven that my editor might now not tell me, as he had so often told me, that my result was awfully good. I knew what that would signify—it would signify, sketchily speaking, disaster. What he did tell me heartily was that it was just what his game required: his new line had brought with it an earnest assumption—earnest save when we privately laughed about it—of the locutions proper to real bold enterprise. If I tried to keep him in the dark even as he kept Mr. Bousefield there was nothing to show that I was not tolerably successful: each case therefore presented a promising analogy for the other. He never noticed my descent, and it was accordingly possible that Mr. Bousefield would never notice his.

But would nobody notice it at all?—that was a question that added a prospective zest to one's possession of a critical sense. So much depended upon it that I was rather relieved than otherwise not to know the answer too soon. I waited in fact a year—the year for which Limbert had cannily engaged on trial with Mr. Bousefield; the year as to which through the same sharpened shrewdness it had been conveyed in the agreement between them that Mr. Bousefield was not to intermeddle. It had been Limbert's general prayer that we would during this period let him quite alone. His terror of my direct rays was a droll, dreadful force that always operated: he explained it by the fact that I understood him too well, expressed too much of his intention, saved him too little from himself. The less he was saved the more he didn't sell: I literally interpreted, and that was simply fatal.

I held my breath accordingly; I did more—I closed my eyes, I guarded my treacherous ears. He induced several of us to do that (of such devotions we were capable) so that not even glancing at the thing from month to month, and having nothing but his shamed, anxious

silence to go by, I participated only vaguely in the little hum that surrounded his act of sacrifice. It was blown about the town that the public would be surprised; it was hinted, it was printed that he was making a desperate bid. His new work was spoken of as “more calculated for general acceptance.” These tidings produced in some quarters much reprobation, and nowhere more, I think, than on the part of certain persons who had never read a word of him, or assuredly had never spent a shilling on him, and who hung for hours over the other attractions of the newspaper that announced his abasement. So much asperity cheered me a little—seemed to signify that he might really be doing something. On the other hand I had a distinct alarm; some one sent me for some alien reason an American journal (containing frankly more than that source of affliction) in which was quoted a passage from our friend’s last instalment. The passage—I couldn’t for my life help reading it—was simply superb. Ah, he *would* have to move to the country if that was the worst he could do! It gave me a pang to see how little after all he had improved since the days of his competition with Pat Moyle. There was nothing in the passage quoted in the American paper that Pat would for a moment have owned. During the last weeks, as the opportunity of reading the complete thing drew near, one’s suspense was barely endurable, and I shall never forget the July evening on which I put it to rout. Coming home to dinner I found the two volumes on my table, and I sat up with them half the night, dazed, bewildered, rubbing my eyes, wondering at the monstrous joke. *Was* it a monstrous joke, his second manner—was *this* the new line, the desperate bid, the scheme for more general acceptance and the remedy for material failure? Had he made a fool of all his following, or had he most injuriously made a still bigger fool of himself? Obvious?—where the deuce was it obvious? Popular?—how on earth could it be popular? The thing was charming with all his charm and powerful with all his power: it was an unscrupulous, an unsparing, a shameless, merciless masterpiece. It was, no doubt, like the old letters to the *Beacon*, the worst he could do; but the perversity of the effort, even though heroic, had been frustrated by the purity of the gift. Under what illusion had he laboured, with what wavering, treacherous compass had he steered? His honour was inviolable, his measurements were all wrong. I was thrilled with the whole impression and with all that came crowding in its train. It was too grand a collapse—it was too hideous a triumph; I exalted almost with tears—I lamented with a strange delight. Indeed as the short night waned and, threshing about in my emotion, I fidgeted to my high-perched window for a glimpse of the summer dawn, I became at last aware that I was staring at it out of eyes that had compassionately and admiringly filled. The eastern sky, over the London housetops, had a wonderful tragic crimson. That was the colour of his magnificent mistake.

IV

If something less had depended on my impression I daresay I should have communicated it as soon as I had swallowed my breakfast; but the case was so embarrassing that I spent the first half of the day in reconsidering it, dipping into the book again, almost feverishly turning its leaves and trying to extract from them, for my friend’s benefit, some symptom of reassurance, some ground for felicitation. This rash challenge had consequences merely dreadful; the wretched volumes, imperturbable and impeccable, with their shyer secrets and their second line of defence, were like a beautiful woman more denuded or a great symphony on a new hearing. There was something quite sinister in the way they stood up to me. I couldn’t however be dumb—that was to give the wrong tinge to my disappointment; so that later in the afternoon, taking my courage in both hands, I approached with a vain tortuosity poor Limbert’s door. A smart victoria waited before it in which from the bottom of the street I saw that a lady who had apparently just issued from the house was settling herself. I recognised Jane Highmore and instantly paused till she should drive down to me. She presently met me half-way and as soon as she saw me stopped her carriage in agitation. This

was a relief—it postponed a moment the sight of that pale, fine face of our friend’s fronting me for the right verdict. I gathered from the flushed eagerness with which Mrs. Highmore asked me if I had heard the news that a verdict of some sort had already been rendered.

“What news?—about the book?”

“About that horrid magazine. They’re shockingly upset. He has lost his position—he has had a fearful flare-up with Mr. Bousefield.”

I stood there blank, but not unaware in my blankness of how history repeats itself. There came to me across the years Maud’s announcement of their ejection from the *Beacon*, and dimly, confusedly the same explanation was in the air. This time however I had been on my guard; I had had my suspicion. “He has made it too flippant?” I found breath after an instant to inquire.

Mrs. Highmore’s vacuity exceeded my own. “Too ‘flippant’? He has made it too oracular. Mr. Bousefield says he has killed it.” Then perceiving my stupefaction: “Don’t you know what has happened?” she pursued; “isn’t it because in his trouble, poor love, he has sent for you that you’ve come? You’ve heard nothing at all? Then you had better know before you see them. Get in here with me—I’ll take you a turn and tell you.” We were close to the Park, the Regent’s, and when with extreme alacrity I had placed myself beside her and the carriage had begun to enter it she went on: “It was what I feared, you know. It reeked with culture. He keyed it up too high.”

I felt myself sinking in the general collapse. “What are you talking about?”

“Why, about that beastly magazine. They’re all on the streets. I shall have to take mamma.”

I pulled myself together. “What on earth then did Bousefield want? He said he wanted intellectual power.”

“Yes, but Ray overdid it.”

“Why, Bousefield said it was a thing he *couldn’t* overdo.”

“Well, Ray managed: he took Mr. Bousefield too literally. It appears the thing has been doing dreadfully, but the proprietor couldn’t say anything, because he had covenanted to leave the editor quite free. He describes himself as having stood there in a fever and seen his ship go down. A day or two ago the year was up, so he could at last break out. Maud says he did break out quite fearfully; he came to the house and let poor Ray have it. Ray gave it to him back; he reminded him of his own idea of the way the cat was going to jump.”

I gasped with dismay. “Has Bousefield abandoned that idea? Isn’t the cat going to jump?”

Mrs. Highmore hesitated. “It appears that she doesn’t seem in a hurry. Ray at any rate has jumped too far ahead of her. He should have temporised a little, Mr. Bousefield says; but I’m beginning to think, you know,” said my companion, “that Ray *can’t* temporise.” Fresh from my emotions of the previous twenty-four hours I was scarcely in a position to disagree with her. “He published too much pure thought.”

“Pure thought?” I cried. “Why, it struck me so often—certainly in a due proportion of cases—as pure drivel!”

“Oh, you’re more keyed up than he! Mr. Bousefield says that of course he wanted things that were suggestive and clever, things that he could point to with pride. But he contends that Ray didn’t allow for human weakness. He gave everything in too stiff doses.”

Sensibly, I fear, to my neighbour I winced at her words; I felt a prick that made me meditate. Then I said: “Is that, by chance, the way he gave *me*?” Mrs. Highmore remained silent so

long that I had somehow the sense of a fresh pang; and after a minute, turning in my seat, I laid my hand on her arm, fixed my eyes upon her face and pursued pressingly: "Do you suppose it to be to my 'Occasional Remarks' that Mr. Bousefield refers?"

At last she met my look. "Can you bear to hear it?"

"I think I can bear anything now."

"Well then, it was really what I wanted to give you an inkling of. It's largely over you that they've quarrelled. Mr. Bousefield wants him to chuck you."

I grabbed her arm again. "And Limbert *won't*?"

"He seems to cling to you. Mr. Bousefield says no magazine can afford you."

I gave a laugh that agitated the very coachman. "Why, my dear lady, has he any idea of my price?"

"It isn't your price—he says you're dear at any price; you do so much to sink the ship. Your 'Remarks' are called 'Occasional,' but nothing could be more deadly regular: you're there month after month and you're never anywhere else. And you supply no public want."

"I supply the most delicious irony."

"So Ray appears to have declared. Mr. Bousefield says that's not in the least a public want. No one can make out what you're talking about and no one would care if he could. I'm only quoting *him*, mind."

"Quote, quote—if Limbert holds out. I think I must leave you now, please: I must rush back to express to him what I feel."

"I'll drive you to his door. That isn't all," said Mrs. Highmore. And on the way, when the carriage had turned, she communicated the rest. "Mr. Bousefield really arrived with an ultimatum: it had the form of something or other by Minnie Meadows."

"Minnie Meadows?" I was stupefied.

"The new lady-humourist every one is talking about. It's the first of a series of screaming sketches for which poor Ray was to find a place."

"Is *that* Mr. Bousefield's idea of literature?"

"No, but he says it's the public's, and you've got to take *some* account of the public. *Aux grands maux les grands remèdes*. They had a tremendous lot of ground to make up, and no one would make it up like Minnie. She would be the best concession they could make to human weakness; she would strike at least this note of showing that it was not going to be quite all—well, all *you*. Now Ray draws the line at Minnie; he won't stoop to Minnie; he declines to touch, to look at Minnie. When Mr. Bousefield—rather imperiously, I believe—made Minnie a *sine qua non* of his retention of his post he said something rather violent, told him to go to some unmentionable place and take Minnie with him. That of course put the fat on the fire. They had really a considerable scene."

"So had he with the *Beacon* man," I musingly replied. "Poor dear, he seems born for considerable scenes! It's on Minnie, then, that they've really split?" Mrs. Highmore exhaled her despair in a sound which I took for an assent, and when we had rolled a little further I rather in-consequently and to her visible surprise broke out of my reverie. "It will never do in the world—he *must* stoop to Minnie!"

"It's too late—and what I've told you still isn't all. Mr. Bousefield raises another objection."

“What other, pray?”

“Can’t you guess?”

I wondered. “No more of Ray’s fiction?”

“Not a line. That’s something else no magazine can stand. Now that his novel has run its course Mr. Bousefield is distinctly disappointed.”

I fairly bounded in my place. “Then it may do?”

Mrs. Highmore looked bewildered. “Why so, if he finds it too dull?”

“Dull? Ralph Limbert? He’s as fine as a needle!”

“It comes to the same thing—he won’t penetrate leather. Mr. Bousefield had counted on something that *would*, on something that would have a wider acceptance. Ray says he wants iron pegs.” I collapsed again; my flicker of elation dropped to a throb of quieter comfort; and after a moment’s silence I asked my neighbour if she had herself read the work our friend had just put forth. “No,” she replied, “I gave him my word at the beginning, on his urgent request, that I wouldn’t.”

“Not even as a book?”

“He begged me never to look at it at all. He said he was trying a low experiment. Of course I knew what he meant and I entreated him to let me just for curiosity take a peep. But he was firm, he declared he couldn’t bear the thought that a woman like me should see him in the depths.”

“He’s only, thank God, in the depths of distress,” I replied. “His experiment’s nothing worse than a failure.”

“Then Bousefield *is* right—his circulation won’t budge?”

“It won’t move one, as they say in Fleet Street. The book has extraordinary beauty.”

“Poor duck—after trying so hard!” Jane Highmore sighed with real tenderness.

“What *will* then become of them?”

I was silent an instant. “You must take your mother.”

She was silent too. “I must speak of it to Cecil!” she presently said. Cecil is Mr. Highmore, who then entertained, I knew, strong views on the inadjustability of circumstances in general to the idiosyncrasies of Mrs. Stannace. He held it supremely happy that in an important relation she should have met her match. Her match was Ray Limbert—not much of a writer but a practical man. “The dear things still think, you know,” my companion continued, “that the book will be the beginning of their fortune. Their illusion, if you’re right, will be rudely dispelled.”

“That’s what makes me dread to face them. I’ve just spent with his volumes an unforgettable night. His illusion has lasted because so many of us have been pledged till this moment to turn our faces the other way. We haven’t known the truth and have therefore had nothing to say. Now that we do know it indeed we have practically quite as little. I hang back from the threshold. How can I follow up with a burst of enthusiasm such a catastrophe as Mr. Bousefield’s visit?”

As I turned uneasily about my neighbour more comfortably snuggled. “Well, I’m glad then I haven’t read him and have nothing unpleasant to say!” We had come back to Limbert’s door, and I made the coachman stop short of it. “But he’ll try again, with that determination of his: he’ll build his hopes on the next time.”

“On what else has he built them from the very first? It’s never the present for him that bears the fruit; that’s always postponed and for somebody else: there has always to be another try. I admit that his idea of a ‘new line’ has made him try harder than ever. It makes no difference,” I brooded, still timorously lingering; “his achievement of his necessity, his hope of a market will continue to attach themselves to the future. But the next time will disappoint him as each last time has done—and then the next and the next and the next!”

I found myself seeing it all with a clearness almost inspired: it evidently cast a chill on Mrs. Highmore. “Then what on earth will become of him?” she plaintively asked.

“I don’t think I particularly care what may become of *him*,” I returned with a conscious, reckless increase of my exaltation; “I feel it almost enough to be concerned with what may become of one’s enjoyment of him. I don’t know in short what will become of his circulation; I am only quite at my ease as to what will become of his work. It will simply keep all its quality. He’ll try again for the common with what he’ll believe to be a still more infernal cunning, and again the common will fatally elude him, for his infernal cunning will have been only his genius in an ineffectual disguise.” We sat drawn up by the pavement, facing poor Limbert’s future as I saw it. It relieved me in a manner to know the worst, and I prophesied with an assurance which as I look back upon it strikes me as rather remarkable. “*Que voulez-vous?*” I went on; “you can’t make a sow’s ear of a silk purse! It’s grievous indeed if you like—there are people who can’t be vulgar for trying. *He* can’t—it wouldn’t come off, I promise you, even once. It takes more than trying—it comes by grace. It happens not to be given to Limbert to fall. He belongs to the heights—he breathes there, he lives there, and it’s accordingly to the heights I must ascend,” I said as I took leave of my conductress, “to carry him this wretched news from where *we* move!”

V

A few months were sufficient to show how right I had been about his circulation. It didn’t move one, as I had said; it stopped short in the same place, fell off in a sheer descent, like some precipice gaped up at by tourists. The public in other words drew the line for him as sharply as he had drawn it for Minnie Meadows. Minnie has skipped with a flouncing caper over his line, however; whereas the mark traced by a lustier cudgel has been a barrier insurmountable to Limbert. Those next times I had spoken of to Jane Highmore, I see them simplified by retrocession. Again and again he made his desperate bid—again and again he tried to. His rupture with Mr. Bousefield caused him, I fear, in professional circles to be thought impracticable, and I am perfectly aware, to speak candidly, that no sordid advantage ever accrued to him from such public patronage of my performances as he had occasionally been in a position to offer. I reflect for my comfort that any injury I may have done him by untimely application of a faculty of analysis which could point to no converts gained by honourable exercise was at least equalled by the injury he did himself. More than once, as I have hinted, I held my tongue at his request, but my frequent plea that such favours weren’t politic never found him, when in other connections there was an opportunity to give me a lift, anything but indifferent to the danger of the association. He let them have me in a word whenever he could; sometimes in periodicals in which he had credit, sometimes only at dinner. He talked about me when he couldn’t get me in, but it was always part of the bargain that I shouldn’t make him a topic. “How can I successfully serve you if you do?” he used to ask: he was more afraid than I thought he ought to have been of the charge of tit for tat. I didn’t care, for I never could distinguish tat from tit; but as I have intimated I dropped into silence really more than anything else because there was a certain fascinated observation of his course which was quite testimony enough and to which in this huddled conclusion of it he practically reduced me.

I see it all foreshortened, his wonderful remainder—see it from the end backward, with the direction widening toward me as if on a level with the eye. The migration to the country promised him at first great things—smaller expenses, larger leisure, conditions eminently conducive on each occasion to the possible triumph of the next time. Mrs. Stannace, who altogether disapproved of it, gave as one of her reasons that her son-in-law, living mainly in a village on the edge of a goose-green, would be deprived of that contact with the great world which was indispensable to the painter of manners. She had the showiest arguments for keeping him in touch, as she called it, with good society; wishing to know with some force where, from the moment he ceased to represent it from observation, the novelist could be said to be. In London fortunately a clever man was just a clever man; there were charming houses in which a person of Ray's undoubted ability, even though without the knack of making the best use of it, could always be sure of a quiet corner for watching decorously the social kaleidoscope. But the kaleidoscope of the goose-green, what in the world was that, and what such delusive thrift as drives about the land (with a fearful account for flies from the inn) to leave cards on the country magnates? This solicitude for Limbert's subject-matter was the specious colour with which, deeply determined not to affront mere tolerance in a cottage, Mrs. Stannace overlaid her indisposition to place herself under the heel of Cecil Highmore. She knew that he ruled Upstairs as well as down, and she clung to the fable of the association of interests in the north of London. The Highmores had a better address—they lived now in Stanhope Gardens; but Cecil was fearfully artful—he wouldn't hear of an association of interests nor treat with his mother-in-law save as a visitor. She didn't like false positions; but on the other hand she didn't like the sacrifice of everything she was accustomed to. Her universe at all events was a universe full of card-leavings and charming houses, and it was fortunate that she couldn't Upstairs catch the sound of the doom to which, in his little grey den, describing to me his diplomacy, Limbert consigned alike the country magnates and the opportunities of London. Despoiled of every guarantee she went to Stanhope Gardens like a mere maidservant, with restrictions on her very luggage, while during the year that followed this upheaval Limbert, strolling with me on the goose-green, to which I often ran down, played extravagantly over the theme that with what he was now going in for it was a positive comfort not to have the social kaleidoscope. With a cold-blooded trick in view what had life or manners or the best society or flies from the inn to say to the question? It was as good a place as another to play his new game. He had found a quieter corner than any corner of the great world, and a damp old house at sixpence a year, which, beside leaving him all his margin to educate his children, would allow of the supreme luxury of his frankly presenting himself as a poor man. This was a convenience that *ces dames*, as he called them, had never yet fully permitted him.

It rankled in me at first to see his reward so meagre, his conquest so mean; but the simplification effected had a charm that I finally felt; it was a forcing-house for the three or four other fine miscarriages to which his scheme was evidently condemned. I limited him to three or four, having had my sharp impression, in spite of the perpetual broad joke of the thing, that a spring had really snapped in him on the occasion of that deeply disconcerting sequel to the episode of his editorship. He never lost his sense of the grotesque want, in the difference made, of adequate relation to the effort that had been the intensest of his life. He had from that moment a charge of shot in him, and it slowly worked its way to a vital part. As he met his embarrassments each year with his punctual false remedy I wondered periodically where he found the energy to return to the attack. He did it every time with a rage more blanched, but it was clear to me that the tension must finally snap the cord. We got again and again the irrepressible work of art, but what did *he* get, poor man, who wanted something so different? There were likewise odder questions than this in the matter, phenomena more curious and mysteries more puzzling, which often for sympathy if not for illumination I

intimately discussed with Mrs. Limbert. She had her burdens, dear lady: after the removal from London and a considerable interval she twice again became a mother. Mrs. Stannace too, in a more restricted sense, exhibited afresh, in relation to the home she had abandoned, the same exemplary character. In her poverty of guarantees at Stanhope Gardens there had been least of all, it appeared, a proviso that she shouldn't resentfully revert again from Goneril to Regan. She came down to the goose-green like Lear himself, with fewer knights, or at least baronets, and the joint household was at last patched up. It fell to pieces and was put together on various occasions before Ray Limbert died. He was ridden to the end by the superstition that he had broken up Mrs. Stannace's original home on pretences that had proved hollow and that if he hadn't given Maud what she might have had he could at least give her back her mother. I was always sure that a sense of the compensations he owed was half the motive of the dogged pride with which he tried to wake up the libraries. I believed Mrs. Stannace still had money, though she pretended that, called upon at every turn to retrieve deficits, she had long since poured it into the general fund. This conviction haunted me; I suspected her of secret hoards, and I said to myself that she couldn't be so infamous as not some day on her deathbed to leave everything to her less opulent daughter. My compassion for the Limberts led me to hover perhaps indiscreetly round that closing scene, to dream of some happy time when such an accession of means would make up a little for their present penury.

This however was crude comfort, as in the first place I had nothing definite to go by and in the second I held it for more and more indicated that Ray wouldn't outlive her. I never ventured to sound him as to what in this particular he hoped or feared, for after the crisis marked by his leaving London I had new scruples about suffering him to be reminded of where he fell short. The poor man was in truth humiliated, and there were things as to which that kept us both silent. In proportion as he tried more fiercely for the market the old plaintiff arithmetic, fertile in jokes, dropped from our conversation. We joked immensely still about the process, but our treatment of the results became sparing and superficial. He talked as much as ever, with monstrous arts and borrowed hints, of the traps he kept setting, but we all agreed to take merely for granted that the animal was caught. This propriety had really dawned upon me the day that after Mr. Bousefield's visit Mrs. Highmore put me down at his door. Mr. Bousefield in that juncture had been served up to me anew, but after we had disposed of him we came to the book, which I was obliged to confess I had already rushed through. It was from this moment—the moment at which my terrible impression of it had blinked out at his anxious query—that the image of his scared face was to abide with me. I couldn't attenuate then—the cat was out of the bag; but later, each of the next times, I did, I acknowledge, attenuate. We all did religiously, so far as was possible; we cast ingenious ambiguities over the strong places, the beauties that betrayed him most, and found ourselves in the queer position of admirers banded to mislead a confiding artist. If we stifled our cheers however and dissimulated our joy our fond hypocrisy accomplished little, for Limbert's finger was on a pulse that told a plainer story. It was a satisfaction to have secured a greater freedom with his wife, who at last, much to her honour, entered into the conspiracy and whose sense of responsibility was flattered by the frequency of our united appeal to her for some answer to the marvellous riddle. We had all turned it over till we were tired of it, threshing out the question why the note he strained every chord to pitch for common ears should invariably insist on addressing itself to the angels. Being, as it were, ourselves the angels we had only a limited quarrel in each case with the event; but its inconsequent character, given the forces set in motion, was peculiarly baffling. It was like an interminable sum that wouldn't come straight; nobody had the time to handle so many figures. Limbert gathered, to make his pudding, dry bones and dead husks; how then was one to formulate the law that made the dish prove a feast? What was the cerebral treachery that defied his own

vigilance? There was some obscure interference of taste, some obsession of the exquisite. All one could say was that genius was a fatal disturber or that the unhappy man had no effectual *flair*. When he went abroad to gather garlic he came home with heliotrope.

I hasten to add that if Mrs. Limbert was not directly illuminating she was yet rich in anecdote and example, having found a refuge from mystification exactly where the rest of us had found it, in a more devoted embrace and the sense of a finer glory. Her disappointments and eventually her privations had been many, her discipline severe; but she had ended by accepting the long grind of life and was now quite willing to take her turn at the mill. She was essentially one of us—she always understood. Touching and admirable at the last, when through the unmistakable change in Limbert's health her troubles were thickest, was the spectacle of the particular pride that she wouldn't have exchanged for prosperity. She had said to me once—only once, in a gloomy hour in London days when things were not going at all—that one really had to think him a very great man because if one didn't one would be rather ashamed of him. She had distinctly felt it at first—and in a very tender place—that almost every one passed him on the road; but I believe that in these final years she would almost have been ashamed of him if he had suddenly gone into editions. It is certain indeed that her complacency was not subjected to that shock. She would have liked the money immensely, but she would have missed something she had taught herself to regard as rather rare. There is another remark I remember her making, a remark to the effect that of course if she could have chosen she would have liked him to be Shakespeare or Scott, but that failing this she was very glad he wasn't—well, she named the two gentlemen, but I won't. I daresay she sometimes laughed out to escape an alternative. She contributed passionately to the capture of the second manner, foraging for him further afield than he could conveniently go, gleaning in the barest stubble, picking up shreds to build the nest and in particular in the study of the great secret of how, as we always said, they all did it laying waste the circulating libraries. If Limbert had a weakness he rather broke down in his reading. It was fortunately not till after the appearance of *The Hidden Heart* that he broke down in everything else. He had had rheumatic fever in the spring, when the book was but half finished, and this ordeal in addition to interrupting his work had enfeebled his powers of resistance and greatly reduced his vitality. He recovered from the fever and was able to take up the book again, but the organ of life was pronounced ominously weak and it was enjoined upon him with some sharpness that he should lend himself to no worries. It might have struck me as on the cards that his worries would now be surmountable, for when he began to mend he expressed to me a conviction almost contagious that he had never yet made so adroit a bid as in the idea of *The Hidden Heart*. It is grimly droll to reflect that this superb little composition, the shortest of his novels but perhaps the loveliest, was planned from the first as an “adventure-story” on approved lines. It was the way they all did the adventure-story that he tried most dauntlessly to emulate. I wonder how many readers ever divined to which of their book-shelves *The Hidden Heart* was so exclusively addressed. High medical advice early in the summer had been quite viciously clear as to the inconvenience that might ensue to him should he neglect to spend the winter in Egypt. He was not a man to neglect anything; but Egypt seemed to us all then as unattainable as a second edition. He finished *The Hidden Heart* with the energy of apprehension and desire, for if the book should happen to do what “books of that class,” as the publisher said, sometimes did he might well have a fund to draw on. As soon as I read the deep and delicate thing I knew, as I had known in each case before, exactly how well it would do. Poor Limbert in this long business always figured to me an undiscourageable parent to whom only girls kept being born. A bouncing boy, a son and heir was devoutly prayed for and almanacks and old wives consulted; but the spell was inveterate, incurable, and *The Hidden Heart* proved, so to speak, but another female child. When the winter arrived accordingly Egypt was out of the question. Jane Highmore, to my knowledge, wanted to lend

him money, and there were even greater devotees who did their best to induce him to lean on them. There was so marked a “movement” among his friends that a very considerable sum would have been at his disposal; but his stiffness was invincible: it had its root, I think, in his sense, on his own side, of sacrifices already made. He had sacrificed honour and pride, and he had sacrificed them precisely to the question of money. He would evidently, should he be able to go on, have to continue to sacrifice them, but it must be all in the way to which he had now, as he considered, hardened himself. He had spent years in plotting for favour, and since on favour he must live it could only be as a bargain and a price.

He got through the early part of the season better than we feared, and I went down in great elation to spend Christmas on the goose-green.

He told me late on Christmas eve, after our simple domestic revels had sunk to rest and we sat together by the fire, that he had been visited the night before in wakeful hours by the finest fancy for a really good thing that he had ever felt descend in the darkness. “It’s just the vision of a situation that contains, upon my honour, everything,” he said, “and I wonder that I’ve never thought of it before.” He didn’t describe it further, contrary to his common practice, and I only knew later, by Mrs. Limbert, that he had begun *Derogation* and that he was completely full of his subject. It was a subject however that he was not to live to treat. The work went on for a couple of months in happy mystery, without revelations even to his wife. He had not invited her to help him to get up his case—she had not taken the field with him as on his previous campaigns. We only knew he was at it again but that less even than ever had been said about the impression to be made on the market. I saw him in February and thought him sufficiently at ease. The great thing was that he was immensely interested and was pleased with the omens. I got a strange, stirring sense that he had not consulted the usual ones and indeed that he had floated away into a grand indifference, into a reckless consciousness of art. The voice of the market had suddenly grown faint and far: he had come back at the last, as people so often do, to one of the moods, the sincerities of his prime. Was he really with a blurred sense of the urgent doing something now only for himself? We wondered and waited—we felt that he was a little confused. What had happened, I was afterwards satisfied, was that he had quite forgotten whether he generally sold or not. He had merely waked up one morning again in the country of the blue and had stayed there with a good conscience and a great idea. He stayed till death knocked at the gate, for the pen dropped from his hand only at the moment when from sudden failure of the heart his eyes, as he sank back in his chair, closed for ever. *Derogation* is a splendid fragment; it evidently would have been one of his high successes. I am not prepared to say it would have waked up the libraries.

Glasses

I

Yes indeed, I say to myself, pen in hand, I can keep hold of the thread and let it lead me back to the first impression. The little story is all there, I can touch it from point to point; for the thread, as I call it, is a row of coloured beads on a string. None of the beads are missing—at least I think they're not: that's exactly what I shall amuse myself with finding out.

I had been all summer working hard in town and then had gone down to Folkestone for a blow. Art was long, I felt, and my holiday short; my mother was settled at Folkestone, and I paid her a visit when I could. I remember how on this occasion, after weeks, in my stuffy studio, with my nose on my palette, I sniffed up the clean salt air and cooled my eyes with the purple sea. The place was full of lodgings, and the lodgings were at that season full of people, people who had nothing to do but to stare at one another on the great flat down. There were thousands of little chairs and almost as many little Jews; and there was music in an open rotunda, over which the little Jews wagged their big noses. We all strolled to and fro and took pennyworths of rest; the long, level cliff-top, edged in places with its iron rail, might have been the deck of a huge crowded ship. There were old folks in Bath chairs, and there was one dear chair, creeping to its last full stop, by the side of which I always walked. There was in fine weather the coast of France to look at, and there were the usual things to say about it; there was also in every state of the atmosphere our friend Mrs. Meldrum, a subject of remark not less inveterate. The widow of an officer in the Engineers, she had settled, like many members of the martial miscellany, well within sight of the hereditary enemy, who however had left her leisure to form in spite of the difference of their years a close alliance with my mother. She was the heartiest, the keenest, the ugliest of women, the least apologetic, the least morbid in her misfortune. She carried it high aloft, with loud sounds and free gestures, made it flutter in the breeze as if it had been the flag of her country. It consisted mainly of a big red face, indescribably out of drawing, from which she glared at you through gold-rimmed aids to vision, optic circles of such diameter and so frequently displaced that some one had vividly spoken of her as flattening her nose against the glass of her spectacles. She was extraordinarily near-sighted, and whatever they did to other objects they magnified immensely the kind eyes behind them. Blessed conveniences they were, in their hideous, honest strength—they showed the good lady everything in the world but her own queerness. This element was enhanced by wild braveries of dress, reckless charges of colour and stubborn resistances of cut, wonderous encounters in which the art of the toilet seemed to lay down its life. She had the tread of a grenadier and the voice of an angel.

In the course of a walk with her the day after my arrival I found myself grabbing her arm with sudden and undue familiarity. I had been struck by the beauty of a face that approached us and I was still more affected when I saw the face, at the sight of my companion, open like a window thrown wide. A smile fluttered out of it as brightly as a drapery dropped from a sill—a drapery shaken there in the sun by a young lady flanked with two young men, a wonderful young lady who, as we drew nearer, rushed up to Mrs. Meldrum with arms flourished for an embrace. My immediate impression of her had been that she was dressed in mourning, but during the few moments she stood talking with our friend I made more discoveries. The figure from the neck down was meagre, the stature insignificant, but the desire to please towered high, as well as the air of infallibly knowing how and of never, never missing it. This was a little person whom I would have made a high bid for a good chance to paint. The head, the features, the colour, the whole facial oval and radiance had a wonderful

purity; the deep grey eyes—the most agreeable, I thought, that I had ever seen—brushed with a kind of winglike grace every object they encountered. Their possessor was just back from Boulogne, where she had spent a week with dear Mrs. Floyd-Taylor: this accounted for the effusiveness of her reunion with dear Mrs. Meldrum. Her black garments were of the freshest and daintiest; she suggested a pink-and-white wreath at a showy funeral. She confounded us for three minutes with her presence; she was a beauty of the great conscious, public, responsible order. The young men, her companions, gazed at her and grinned: I could see there were very few moments of the day at which young men, these or others, would not be so occupied. The people who approached took leave of their manners; every one seemed to linger and gape. When she brought her face close to Mrs. Meldrum's—and she appeared to be always bringing it close to somebody's—it was a marvel that objects so dissimilar should express the same general identity, the unmistakable character of the English gentlewoman. Mrs. Meldrum sustained the comparison with her usual courage, but I wondered why she didn't introduce me: I should have had no objection to the bringing of such a face close to mine. However, when the young lady moved on with her escort she herself bequeathed me a sense that some such *rapprochement* might still occur. Was this by reason of the general frequency of encounters at Folkestone, or by reason of a subtle acknowledgment that she contrived to make of the rights, on the part of others, that such beauty as hers created? I was in a position to answer that question after Mrs. Meldrum had answered a few of mine.

II

Flora Saunt, the only daughter of an old soldier, had lost both her parents, her mother within a few months. Mrs. Meldrum had known them, disapproved of them, considerably avoided them: she had watched the girl, off and on, from her early childhood. Flora, just twenty, was extraordinarily alone in the world—so alone that she had no natural chaperon, no one to stay with but a mercenary stranger, Mrs. Hammond Synge, the sister-in-law of one of the young men I had just seen. She had lots of friends, but none of them nice: she kept picking up impossible people. The Floyd-Taylors, with whom she had been at Boulogne, were simply horrid. The Hammond Synges were perhaps not so vulgar, but they had no conscience in their dealings with her.

“She knows what I think of them,” said Mrs. Meldrum, “and indeed she knows what I think of most things.”

“She shares that privilege with most of your friends!” I replied laughing.

“No doubt; but possibly to some of my friends it makes a little difference. That girl doesn't care a button. She knows best of all what I think of Flora Saunt.”

“And what may your opinion be?”

“Why, that she's not worth talking about—an idiot too abysmal.”

“Doesn't she care for that?”

“Just enough, as you saw, to hug me till I cry out. She's too pleased with herself for anything else to matter.”

“Surely, my dear friend,” I rejoined, “she has a good deal to be pleased with!”

“So every one tells her, and so you would have told her if I had given you a chance. However, that doesn't signify either, for her vanity is beyond all making or mending. She believes in herself, and she's welcome, after all, poor dear, having only herself to look to. I've seldom met a young woman more completely at liberty to be silly. She has a clear course—she'll make a showy finish.”

“Well,” I replied, “as she probably will reduce many persons to the same degraded state, her partaking of it won’t stand out so much.”

“If you mean that the world’s full of twaddlers I quite agree with you!” cried Mrs. Meldrum, trumpeting her laugh half across the Channel.

I had after this to consider a little what she would call my mother’s son, but I didn’t let it prevent me from insisting on her making me acquainted with Flora Saunt; indeed I took the bull by the horns, urging that she had drawn the portrait of a nature which common charity now demanded that she should put into relation with a character really fine. Such a frail creature was just an object of pity. This contention on my part had at first of course been jocular; but strange to say it was quite the ground I found myself taking with regard to our young lady after I had begun to know her. I couldn’t have said what I felt about her except that she was undefended; from the first of my sitting with her there after dinner, under the stars—that was a week at Folkestone of balmy nights and muffled tides and crowded chairs—I became aware both that protection was wholly absent from her life and that she was wholly indifferent to its absence.

The odd thing was that she was not appealing: she was abjectly, divinely conceited, absurdly, fantastically happy. Her beauty was as yet all the world to her, a world she had plenty to do to live in. Mrs. Meldrum told me more about her, and there was nothing that, as the centre of a group of giggling, nudging spectators, she was not ready to tell about herself. She held her little court in the crowd, upon the grass, playing her light over Jews and Gentiles, completely at ease in all promiscuities. It was an effect of these things that from the very first, with every one listening, I could mention that my main business with her would be just to have a go at her head and to arrange in that view for an early sitting. It would have been as impossible, I think, to be impertinent to her as it would have been to throw a stone at a plate-glass window; so any talk that went forward on the basis of her loveliness was the most natural thing in the world and immediately became the most general and sociable. It was when I saw all this that I judged how, though it was the last thing she asked for, what one would ever most have at her service was a curious compassion. That sentiment was coloured by the vision of the dire exposure of a being whom vanity had put so off her guard. Hers was the only vanity I have ever known that made its possessor superlatively soft. Mrs. Meldrum’s further information contributed moreover to these indulgences—her account of the girl’s neglected childhood and queer continental relegations, with straying, squabbling, Monte-Carlo-haunting parents; the more invidious picture, above all, of her pecuniary arrangement, still in force, with the Hammond Synges, who really, though they never took her out—practically she went out alone—had their hands half the time in her pocket. She had to pay for everything, down to her share of the wine-bills and the horses’ fodder, down to Bertie Hammond Synges’ fare in the “Underground” when he went to the City for her. She had been left with just money enough to turn her head; and it hadn’t even been put in trust, nothing prudent or proper had been done with it. She could spend her capital, and at the rate she was going, expensive, extravagant and with a swarm of parasites to help, it certainly wouldn’t last very long.

“Couldn’t *you* perhaps take her, independent, unencumbered as you are?” I asked of Mrs. Meldrum. “You’re probably, with one exception, the sanest person she knows, and you at least wouldn’t scandalously fleece her.”

“How do you know what I wouldn’t do?” my humorous friend demanded. “Of course I’ve thought how I can help her—it has kept me awake at night. But I can’t help her at all; she’ll take nothing from me. You know what she does—she hugs me and runs away. She has an instinct about me, she feels that I’ve one about her. And then she dislikes me for another reason that I’m not quite clear about, but that I’m well aware of and that I shall find out some

day. So far as her settling with me goes it would be impossible moreover here: she wants naturally enough a much wider field. She must live in London—her game is there. So she takes the line of adoring me, of saying she can never forget that I was devoted to her mother—which I wouldn't for the world have been—and of giving me a wide berth. I think she positively dislikes to look at me. It's all right; there's no obligation; though people in general can't take their eyes off me."

"I see that at this moment," I replied. "But what does it matter where or how, for the present, she lives? She'll marry infallibly, marry early, and everything then will change."

"Whom will she marry?" my companion gloomily asked.

"Any one she likes. She's so abnormally pretty she can do anything. She'll fascinate some nabob or some prince."

"She'll fascinate him first and bore him afterwards. Moreover she's not so pretty as you make her out; she has a scrappy little figure."

"No doubt; but one doesn't in the least notice it."

"Not now," said Mrs. Meldrum, "but one will when she's older."

"When she's older she'll be a princess, so it won't matter."

"She has other drawbacks," my companion went on. "Those wonderful eyes are good for nothing but to roll about like sugar-balls—which they greatly resemble—in a child's mouth. She can't use them."

"Use them? Why, she does nothing else."

"To make fools of young men, but not to read or write, not to do any sort of work. She never opens a book, and her maid writes her notes. You'll say that those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. Of course I know that if I didn't wear my goggles I shouldn't be good for much."

"Do you mean that Miss Saunt ought to sport such things?" I exclaimed with more horror than I meant to show.

"I don't prescribe for her; I don't know that they're what she requires."

"What's the matter with her eyes?" I asked after a moment.

"I don't exactly know; but I heard from her mother years ago that even as a child they had had for a while to put her into spectacles and that, though she hated them and had been in a fury of disgust, she would always have to be extremely careful. I'm sure I hope she is!"

I echoed the hope, but I remember well the impression this made upon me—my immediate pang of resentment, a disgust almost equal to Flora's own. I felt as if a great rare sapphire had split in my hand.

III

This conversation occurred the night before I went back to town. I settled on the morrow to take a late train, so that I had still my morning to spend at Folkestone, where during the greater part of it I was out with my mother. Every one in the place was as usual out with some one else, and even had I been free to go and take leave of her I should have been sure that Flora Saunt would not be at home. Just where she was I presently discovered: she was at the far end of the cliff, the point at which it overhangs the pretty view of Sandgate and Hythe. Her back however was turned to this attraction; it rested with the aid of her elbows, thrust slightly behind her so that her scanty little shoulders were raised toward her ears, on the high

rail that inclosed the down. Two gentlemen stood before her whose faces we couldn't see but who even as observed from the rear were visibly absorbed in the charming figure-piece submitted to them. I was freshly struck with the fact that this meagre and defective little person, with the cock of her hat and the flutter of her crape, with her eternal idleness, her eternal happiness, her absence of moods and mysteries and the pretty presentation of her feet, which especially now in the supported slope of her posture occupied with their imperceptibility so much of the foreground—I was reminded anew, I say, how our young lady dazzled by some art that the enumeration of her merits didn't explain and that the mention of her lapses didn't affect. Where she was amiss nothing counted, and where she was right everything did. I say she was wanting in mystery, but that after all was her secret. This happened to be my first chance of introducing her to my mother, who had not much left in life but the quiet look from under the hood of her chair at the things which, when she should have quitted those she loved, she could still trust to make the world good for them. I wondered an instant how much she might be moved to trust Flora Saunt, and then while the chair stood still and she waited I went over and asked the girl to come and speak to her. In this way I saw that if one of Flora's attendants was the inevitable young Hammond Synge, master of ceremonies of her regular court, always offering the use of a telescope and accepting that of a cigar, the other was a personage I had not yet encountered, a small pale youth in showy knickerbockers, whose eyebrows and nose and the glued points of whose little moustache were extraordinarily uplifted and sustained. I remember taking him at first for a foreigner and for something of a pretender: I scarcely know why, unless because of the motive I felt in the stare he fixed on me when I asked Miss Saunt to come away. He struck me a little as a young man practising the social art of "impertinence"; but it didn't matter, for Flora came away with alacrity, bringing all her prettiness and pleasure and gliding over the grass in that rustle of delicate mourning which made the endless variety of her garments, as a painter could take heed, strike one always as the same obscure elegance. She seated herself on the floor of my mother's chair, a little too much on her right instep as I afterwards gathered, caressing her stiff hand, smiling up into her cold face, commending and approving her without a reserve and without a doubt. She told her immediately, as if it were something for her to hold on by, that she was soon to sit to me for a "likeness," and these words gave me a chance to inquire if it would be the fate of the picture, should I finish it, to be presented to the young man in the knickerbockers. Her lips, at this, parted in a stare; her eyes darkened to the purple of one of the shadow-patches on the sea. She showed for the passing instant the face of some splendid tragic mask, and I remembered for the inconsequence of it what Mrs. Meldrum had said about her sight. I had derived from this lady a worrying impulse to catechise her, but that didn't seem exactly kind; so I substituted another question, inquired who the pretty young man in knickerbockers might happen to be.

"Oh, a gentleman I met at Boulogne. He has come over to see me." After a moment she added: "He's Lord Iffield."

I had never heard of Lord Iffield, but her mention of his having been at Boulogne helped me to give him a niche. Mrs. Meldrum had incidentally thrown a certain light on the manners of Mrs. Floyd-Taylor, Flora's recent hostess in that charming town, a lady who, it appeared, had a special vocation for helping rich young men to find a use for their leisure. She had always one or other in hand and she had apparently on this occasion pointed her lesson at the rare creature on the opposite coast. I had a vague idea that Boulogne was not a resort of the aristocracy; at the same time there might very well have been a strong attraction there even for one of the darlings of fortune. I could perfectly understand in any case that such a darling should be drawn to Folkestone by Flora Saunt. But it was not in truth of these things I was

thinking; what was uppermost in my mind was a matter which, though it had no sort of keeping, insisted just then on coming out.

“Is it true, Miss Saunt,” I suddenly demanded, “that you’re so unfortunate as to have had some warning about your beautiful eyes?”

I was startled by the effect of my words; the girl threw back her head, changing colour from brow to chin. “True? Who in the world says so?” I repented of my question in a flash; the way she met it made it seem cruel, and I saw that my mother looked at me in some surprise. I took care, in answer to Flora’s challenge, not to incriminate Mrs. Meldrum. I answered that the rumour had reached me only in the vaguest form and that if I had been moved to put it to the test my very real interest in her must be held responsible. Her blush died away, but a pair of still prettier tears glistened in its track. “If you ever hear such a thing said again you can say it’s a horrid lie!” I had brought on a commotion deeper than any I was prepared for; but it was explained in some degree by the next words she uttered: “I’m happy to say there’s nothing the matter with any part of my body; not the least little thing!” She spoke with her habitual complacency, with triumphant assurance; she smiled again, and I could see that she was already sorry she had shown herself too disconcerted. She turned it off with a laugh. “I’ve good eyes, good teeth, a good digestion and a good temper. I’m sound of wind and limb!” Nothing could have been more characteristic than her blush and her tears, nothing less acceptable to her than to be thought not perfect in every particular. She couldn’t submit to the imputation of a flaw. I expressed my delight in what she told me, assuring her I should always do battle for her; and as if to rejoin her companions she got up from her place on my mother’s toes. The young men presented their backs to us; they were leaning on the rail of the cliff. Our incident had produced a certain awkwardness, and while I was thinking of what next to say she exclaimed irrelevantly: “Don’t you know? He’ll be Lord Considine.” At that moment the youth marked for this high destiny turned round, and she went on, to my mother: “I’ll introduce him to you—he’s awfully nice.” She beckoned and invited him with her parasol; the movement struck me as taking everything for granted. I had heard of Lord Considine and if I had not been able to place Lord Iffield it was because I didn’t know the name of his eldest son. The young man took no notice of Miss Saunt’s appeal; he only stared a moment and then on her repeating it quietly turned his back. She was an odd creature: she didn’t blush at this; she only said to my mother apologetically, but with the frankest, sweetest amusement: “You don’t mind, do you? He’s a monster of shyness!” It was as if she were sorry for every one—for Lord Iffield, the victim of a complaint so painful, and for my mother, the object of a trifling incivility. “I’m sure I don’t want him!” said my mother; but Flora added some remark about the rebuke she would give him for slighting us. She would clearly never explain anything by any failure of her own power. There rolled over me while she took leave of us and floated back to her friends a wave of tenderness superstitious and silly. I seemed somehow to see her go forth to her fate; and yet what should fill out this orb of a high destiny if not such beauty and such joy? I had a dim idea that Lord Considine was a great proprietor, and though there mingled with it a faint impression that I shouldn’t like his son the result of the two images was a whimsical prayer that the girl mightn’t miss her possible fortune.

IV

One day in the course of the following June there was ushered into my studio a gentleman whom I had not yet seen but with whom I had been very briefly in correspondence. A letter from him had expressed to me some days before his regret on learning that my “splendid portrait” of Titras Flora Louisa Saunt, whose full name figured by her own wish in the catalogue of the exhibition of the Academy, had found a purchaser before the close of the

private view. He took the liberty of inquiring whether I might have at his service some other memorial of the same lovely head, some preliminary sketch, some study for the picture. I had replied that I had indeed painted Miss Saunt more than once and that if he were interested in my work I should be happy to show him what I had done. Mr. Geoffrey Dawling, the person thus introduced to me, stumbled into my room with awkward movements and equivocal sounds—a long, lean, confused, confusing young man, with a bad complexion and large, protrusive teeth. He bore in its most indelible pressure the postmark, as it were, of Oxford, and as soon as he opened his mouth I perceived, in addition to a remarkable revelation of gums, that the text of the queer communication matched the registered envelope. He was full of refinements and angles, of dreary and distinguished knowledge. Of his unconscious drollery his dress freely partook; it seemed, from the gold ring into which his red necktie was passed to the square toe-caps of his boots, to conform with a high sense of modernness to the fashion before the last. There were moments when his overdone urbanity, all suggestive stammers and interrogative quavers, made him scarcely intelligible; but I felt him to be a gentleman and I liked the honesty of his errand and the expression of his good green eyes.

As a worshipper at the shrine of beauty however he needed explaining, especially when I found he had no acquaintance with my brilliant model; had on the mere evidence of my picture taken, as he said, a tremendous fancy to her face. I ought doubtless to have been humiliated by the simplicity of his judgment of it, a judgment for which the rendering was lost in the subject, quite leaving out the element of art. He was like the innocent reader for whom the story is “really true” and the author a negligible quantity. He had come to me only because he wanted to purchase, and I remember being so amused at his attitude, which I had never seen equally marked in a person of education, that I asked him why, for the sort of enjoyment he desired, it wouldn’t be more to the point to deal directly with the lady. He stared and blushed at this: it was plain the idea frightened him. He was an extraordinary case—personally so modest that I could see it had never occurred to him. He had fallen in love with a painted sign and seemed content just to dream of what it stood for. He was the young prince in the legend or the comedy who loses his heart to the miniature of the outland princess. Until I knew him better this puzzled me much—the link was so missing between his sensibility and his type. He was of course bewildered by my sketches, which implied in the beholder some sense of intention and quality; but for one of them, a comparative failure, he ended by conceiving a preference so arbitrary and so lively that, taking no second look at the others, he expressed the wish to possess it and fell into the extremity of confusion over the question of the price. I simplified that problem, and he went off without having asked me a direct question about Miss Saunt, yet with his acquisition under his arm. His delicacy was such that he evidently considered his rights to be limited; he had acquired none at all in regard to the original of the picture. There were others—for I was curious about him—that I wanted him to feel I conceded: I should have been glad of his carrying away a sense of ground acquired for coming back. To insure this I had probably only to invite him, and I perfectly recall the impulse that made me forbear. It operated suddenly from within while he hung about the door and in spite of the diffident appeal that blinked in his gentle grin. If he was smitten with Flora’s ghost what mightn’t be the direct force of the luminary that could cast such a shadow? This source of radiance, flooding my poor place, might very well happen to be present the next time he should turn up. The idea was sharp within me that there were complications it was no mission of mine to bring about. If they were to occur they might occur by a logic of their own.

Let me say at once that they did occur and that I perhaps after all had something to do with it. If Mr. Dawling had departed without a fresh appointment he was to reappear six months later under protection no less adequate than that of our young lady herself. I had seen her

repeatedly for months: she had grown to regard my studio as the tabernacle of her face. This prodigy was frankly there the sole object of interest; in other places there were occasionally other objects. The freedom of her manners continued to be stupefying; there was nothing so extraordinary save the absence in connection with it of any catastrophe. She was kept innocent by her egotism, but she was helped also, though she had now put off her mourning, by the attitude of the lone orphan who had to be a law unto herself. It was as a lone orphan that she came and went, as a lone orphan that she was the centre of a crush. The neglect of the Hammond Synges gave relief to this character, and she paid them handsomely to be, as every one said, shocking. Lord Iffield had gone to India to shoot tigers, but he returned in time for the private view: it was he who had snapped up, as Flora called it, the gem of the exhibition.

My hope for the girl's future had slipped ignominiously off his back, but after his purchase of the portrait I tried to cultivate a new faith. The girl's own faith was wonderful. It couldn't however be contagious: too great was the limit of her sense of what painters call values. Her colours were laid on like blankets on a cold night. How indeed could a person speak the truth who was always posturing and bragging? She was after all vulgar enough, and by the time I had mastered her profile and could almost with my eyes shut do it in a single line I was decidedly tired of her perfection. There grew to be something silly in its eternal smoothness. One moved with her moreover among phenomena mismated and unrelated; nothing in her talk ever matched with anything out of it. Lord Iffield was dying of love for her, but his family was leading him a life. His mother, horrid woman, had told some one that she would rather he should be swallowed by a tiger than marry a girl not absolutely one of themselves. He had given his young friend unmistakable signs, but he was lying low, gaining time: it was in his father's power to be, both in personal and in pecuniary ways, excessively nasty to him. His father wouldn't last for ever—quite the contrary; and he knew how thoroughly, in spite of her youth, her beauty and the swarm of her admirers, some of them positively threatening in their passion, he could trust her to hold out. There were richer, cleverer men, there were greater personages too, but she liked her "little viscount" just as he was, and liked to think that, bullied and persecuted, he had her there so luxuriously to rest upon. She came back to me with tale upon tale, and it all might be or mightn't. I never met my pretty model in the world—she moved, it appeared, in exalted circles—and could only admire, in her wealth of illustration, the grandeur of her life and the freedom of her hand.

I had on the first opportunity spoken to her of Geoffrey Dawling, and she had listened to my story so far as she had the art of such patience, asking me indeed more questions about him than I could answer; then she had capped my anecdote with others much more striking, revelations of effects produced in the most extraordinary quarters: on people who had followed her into railway-carriages; guards and porters even who had literally stuck there; others who had spoken to her in shops and hung about her house-door; cabmen, upon her honour, in London, who, to gaze their fill at her, had found excuses to thrust their petrification through the very glasses of four-wheelers. She lost herself in these reminiscences, the moral of which was that poor Mr. Dawling was only one of a million. When therefore the next autumn she flourished into my studio with her odd companion at her heels her first care was to make clear to me that if he was now in servitude it wasn't because she had run after him. Dawling hilariously explained that when one wished very much to get anything one usually ended by doing so—a proposition which led me wholly to dissent and our young lady to asseverate that she hadn't in the least wished to get Mr. Dawling. She mightn't have wished to get him, but she wished to show him, and I seemed to read that if she could treat him as a trophy her affairs were rather at the ebb. True there always hung from her belt a promiscuous fringe of scalps. Much at any rate would have come and gone since our separation in July.

She had spent four months abroad, where, on Swiss and Italian lakes, in German cities, in Paris, many accidents might have happened.

V

I had been again with my mother, but except Mrs. Meldrum and the gleam of France had not found at Folkestone my old resources and pastimes. Mrs. Meldrum, much edified by my report of the performances, as she called them, in my studio, had told me that to her knowledge Flora would soon be on the straw: she had cut from her capital such fine fat slices that there was almost nothing more left to swallow. Perched on her breezy cliff the good lady dazzled me as usual by her universal light: she knew so much more about everything and everybody than I could ever squeeze out of my colour-tubes. She knew that Flora was acting on system and absolutely declined to be interfered with: her precious reasoning was that her money would last as long as she should need it, that a magnificent marriage would crown her charms before she should be really pinched. She had a sum put by for a liberal outfit; meanwhile the proper use of the rest was to decorate her for the approaches to the altar, keep her afloat in the society in which she would most naturally meet her match. Lord Iffield had been seen with her at Lucerne, at Cadenabbia; but it was Mrs. Meldrum's conviction that nothing was to be expected of him but the most futile flirtation. The girl had a certain hold of him, but with a great deal of swagger he hadn't the spirit of a sheep: he was in fear of his father and would never commit himself in Lord Considine's lifetime. The most Flora might achieve would be that he wouldn't marry some one else. Geoffrey Dawling, to Mrs. Meldrum's knowledge (I had told her of the young man's visit) had attached himself on the way back from Italy to the Hammond Synge group. My informant was in a position to be definite about this dangler; she knew about his people: she had heard of him before. Hadn't he been, at Oxford, a friend of one of her nephews? Hadn't he spent the Christmas holidays precisely three years before at her brother-in-law's in Yorkshire, taking that occasion to get himself refused with derision by wilful Betty, the second daughter of the house? Her sister, who liked the floundering youth, had written to her to complain of Betty, and that the young man should now turn up as an appendage of Flora's was one of those oft-cited proofs that the world is small and that there are not enough people to go round. His father had been something or other in the Treasury; his grandfather, on the mother's side, had been something or other in the Church. He had come into the paternal estate, two or three thousand a year in Hampshire; but he had let the place advantageously and was generous to four ugly sisters who lived at Bournemouth and adored him. The family was hideous all round, but the salt of the earth. He was supposed to be unspeakably clever; he was fond of London, fond of books, of intellectual society and of the idea of a political career. That such a man should be at the same time fond of Flora Saunt attested, as the phrase in the first volume of Gibbon has it, the variety of his inclinations. I was soon to learn that he was fonder of her than of all the other things together. Betty, one of five and with views above her station, was at any rate felt at home to have dished herself by her perversity. Of course no one had looked at her since and no one would ever look at her again. It would be eminently desirable that Flora should learn the lesson of Betty's fate.

I was not struck, I confess, with all this in my mind, by any symptoms on our young lady's part of that sort of meditation. The only moral she saw in anything was that of her incomparable countenance, which Mr. Dawling, smitten even like the railway porters and the cabmen by the doom-dealing gods, had followed from London to Venice and from Venice back to London again. I afterwards learned that her version of this episode was profusely inexact: his personal acquaintance with her had been determined by an accident remarkable enough, I admit, in connection with what had gone before—a coincidence at all events superficially striking. At Munich, returning from a tour in the Tyrol with two of his sisters, he

had found himself at the *table d'hôte* of his inn opposite to the full presentment of that face of which the mere clumsy copy had made him dream and desire. He had been tossed by it to a height so vertiginous as to involve a retreat from the table; but the next day he had dropped with a resounding thud at the very feet of his apparition. On the following, with an equal incoherence, a sacrifice even of his bewildered sisters, whom he left behind, he made an heroic effort to escape by flight from a fate of which he already felt the cold breath. That fate, in London, very little later, drove him straight before it—drove him one Sunday afternoon, in the rain, to the door of the Hammond Synges. He marched in other words close up to the cannon that was to blow him to pieces. But three weeks, when he reappeared to me, had elapsed since then, yet (to vary my metaphor) the burden he was to carry for the rest of his days was firmly lashed to his back. I don't mean by this that Flora had been persuaded to contract her scope; I mean that he had been treated to the unconditional snub which, as the event was to show, couldn't have been bettered as a means of securing him. She hadn't calculated, but she had said "Never!" and that word had made a bed big enough for his long-legged patience. He became from this moment to my mind the interesting figure in the piece.

Now that he had acted without my aid I was free to show him this, and having on his own side something to show me he repeatedly knocked at my door. What he brought with him on these occasions was a simplicity so huge that, as I turn my ear to the past, I seem even now to hear it bumping up and down my stairs. That was really what I saw of him in the light of his behaviour. He had fallen in love as he might have broken his leg, and the fracture was of a sort that would make him permanently lame. It was the whole man who limped and lurched, with nothing of him left in the same position as before. The tremendous cleverness, the literary society, the political ambition, the Bournemouth sisters all seemed to flop with his every movement a little nearer to the floor. I hadn't had an Oxford training and I had never encountered the great man at whose feet poor Dawling had most submissively sat and who had addressed him his most destructive sniffs; but I remember asking myself if such privileges had been an indispensable preparation to the career on which my friend appeared now to have embarked. I remember too making up my mind about the cleverness, which had its uses and I suppose in impenetrable shades even its critics, but from which the friction of mere personal intercourse was not the sort of process to extract a revealing spark. He accepted without a question both his fever and his chill, and the only thing he showed any subtlety about was this convenience of my friendship. He doubtless told me his simple story, but the matter comes back to me in a kind of sense of *my* being rather the mouthpiece, of my having had to thresh it out for him. He took it from me without a groan, and I gave it to him, as we used to say, pretty hot; he took it again and again, spending his odd half-hours with me as if for the very purpose of learning how idiotically he was in love. He told me I made him see things: to begin with, hadn't I first made him see Flora Saunt? I wanted him to give her up and luminously informed him why; on which he never protested nor contradicted, never was even so alembicated as to declare just for the sake of the drama that he wouldn't. He simply and undramatically didn't, and when at the end of three months I asked him what was the use of talking with such a fellow his nearest approach to a justification was to say that what made him want to help her was just the deficiencies I dwelt on. I could only reply without pointing the moral: "Oh, if you're as sorry for her as that!" I too was nearly as sorry for her as that, but it only led me to be sorrier still for other victims of this compassion. With Dawling as with me the compassion was at first in excess of any visible motive; so that when eventually the motive was supplied each could to a certain extent compliment the other on the fineness of his foresight.

After he had begun to haunt my studio Miss Saunt quite gave it up, and I finally learned that she accused me of conspiring with him to put pressure on her to marry him. She didn't know

I would take it that way; else she wouldn't have brought him to see me. It was in her view a part of the conspiracy; that to show him a kindness I asked him at last to sit to me. I daresay moreover she was disgusted to hear that I had ended by attempting almost as many sketches of his beauty as I had attempted of hers. What was the value of tributes to beauty by a hand that luxuriated in ugliness? My relation to poor Dawling's want of modelling was simple enough. I was really digging in that sandy desert for the buried treasure of his soul.

VI

It befell at this period, just before Christmas, that on my having gone under pressure of the season into a great shop to buy a toy or two, my eye, fleeing from superfluity, lighted at a distance on the bright concretion of Flora Saunt, an exhibitability that held its own even against the most plausible pinkness of the most developed dolls. A huge quarter of the place, the biggest bazaar "on earth," was peopled with these and other effigies and fantasies, as well as with purchasers and vendors, haggard alike in the blaze of the gas with hesitations. I was just about to appeal to Flora to avert that stage of my errand when I saw that she was accompanied by a gentleman whose identity, 'though more than a year had elapsed, came back to me from the Folkestone cliff.' It had been associated in that scene with showy knickerbockers; at present it overflowed more splendidly into a fur-trimmed overcoat. Lord Iffield's presence made me waver an instant before crossing over; and during that instant Flora, blank and undistinguishing, as if she too were after all weary of alternatives, looked straight across at me. I was on the point of raising my hat to her when I observed that her face gave no sign. I was exactly in the line of her vision, but she either didn't see me or didn't recognise me, or else had a reason to pretend she didn't. Was her reason that I had displeased her and that she wished to punish me? I had always thought it one of her merits that she wasn't vindictive. She at any rate simply looked away; and at this moment one of the shop-girls, who had apparently gone off in search of it, bustled up to her with a small mechanical toy. It so happened that I followed closely what then took place, afterwards recognising that I had been led to do so, led even through the crowd to press nearer for the purpose, by an impression of which in the act I was not fully conscious.

Flora, with the toy in her hand, looked round at her companion; then seeing his attention had been solicited in another quarter she moved away with the shop-girl, who had evidently offered to conduct her into the presence of more objects of the same sort. When she reached the indicated spot I was in a position still to observe her. She had asked some question about the working of the toy, and the girl, taking it herself, began to explain the little secret. Flora bent her head over it, but she clearly didn't understand. I saw her, in a manner that quickened my curiosity, give a glance back at the place from which she had come. Lord Iffield was talking with another young person: she satisfied herself of this by the aid of a question addressed to her own attendant. She then drew closer to the table near which she stood and, turning her back to me, bent her head lower over the collection of toys and more particularly over the small object the girl had attempted to explain. She took it back and, after a moment, with her face well averted, made an odd motion of her arms and a significant little duck of her head. These slight signs, singular as it may appear, produced in my bosom an agitation so great that I failed to notice Lord Iffield's whereabouts. He had rejoined her; he was close upon her before I knew it or before she knew it herself. I felt at that instant the strangest of all impulses: if it could have operated more rapidly it would have caused me to dash between them in some such manner as to give Flora a warning. In fact as it was I think I could have done this in time had I not been checked by a curiosity stronger still than my impulse. There were three seconds during which I saw the young man and yet let him come on. Didn't I make the quick calculation that if he didn't catch what Flora was doing I too might perhaps not catch it? She at any rate herself took the alarm. On perceiving her companion's nearness

she made, still averted, another duck of her head and a shuffle of her hands so precipitate that a little tin steamboat she had been holding escaped from them and rattled down to the floor with a sharpness that I hear at this hour. Lord Iffield had already seized her arm; with a violent jerk he brought her round toward him. Then it was that there met my eyes a quite distressing sight: this exquisite creature, blushing, glaring, exposed, with a pair of big black-rimmed eyeglasses, defacing her by their position, crookedly astride of her beautiful nose. She made a grab at them with her free hand while I turned confusedly away.

VII

I don't remember how soon it was I spoke to Geoffrey Dawling; his sittings were irregular, but it was certainly the very next time he gave me one.

"Has any rumour ever reached you of Miss Saunt's having anything the matter with her eyes?" He stared with a candour that was a sufficient answer to my question, backing it up with a shocked and mystified "Never!" Then I asked him if he had observed in her any symptom, however disguised, of embarrassed sight: on which, after a moment's thought, he exclaimed "Disguised?" as if my use of that word had vaguely awakened a train. "She's not a bit myopic," he said; "she doesn't blink or contract her lids." I fully recognised this and I mentioned that she altogether denied the impeachment; owing it to him moreover to explain the ground of my inquiry, I gave him a sketch of the incident that had taken place before me at the shop. He knew all about Lord Iffield: that nobleman had figured freely in our conversation as his preferred, his injurious rival. Poor Daw-ling's contention was that if there had been a definite engagement between his lordship and the young lady, the sort of thing that was announced in *The Morning Post*, renunciation and retirement would be comparatively easy to him; but that having waited in vain for any such assurance he was entitled to act as if the door were not really closed or were at any rate not cruelly locked. He was naturally much struck with my anecdote and still more with my interpretation of it.

"There *is* something, there *is* something—possibly something very grave, certainly something that requires she should make use of artificial aids. She won't admit it publicly, because with her idolatry of her beauty, the feeling she is all made up of, she sees in such aids nothing but the humiliation and the disfigurement. She has used them in secret, but that is evidently not enough, for the affection she suffers from, apparently some definite ailment, has lately grown much worse. She looked straight at me in the shop, which was violently lighted, without seeing it was I. At the same distance, at Folkestone, where as you know I first met her, where I heard this mystery hinted at and where she indignantly denied the thing, she appeared easily enough to recognise people. At present she couldn't really make out anything the shop-girl showed her. She has successfully concealed from the man I saw her with that she resorts in private to a pince-nez and that she does so not only under the strictest orders from an oculist, but because literally the poor thing can't accomplish without such help half the business of life. Iffield however has suspected something, and his suspicions, whether expressed or kept to himself, have put him on the watch. I happened to have a glimpse of the movement at which he pounced on her and caught her in the act."

I had thought it all out; my idea explained many things, and Dawling turned pale as he listened to me.

"Was he rough with her?" he anxiously asked.

"How can I tell what passed between them? I fled from the place."

My companion stared at me a moment. "Do you mean to say her eyesight's going?"

"Heaven forbid! In that case how could she take life as she does?"

“How *does* she take life? That’s the question!” He sat there bewilderedly brooding; the tears had come into his eyes; they reminded me of those I had seen in Flora’s the day I risked my inquiry. The question he had asked was one that to my own satisfaction I was ready to answer, but I hesitated to let him hear as yet all that my reflections had suggested. I was indeed privately astonished at their ingenuity. For the present I only rejoined that it struck me she was playing a particular game; at which he went on as if he hadn’t heard me, suddenly haunted with a fear, lost in the dark possibility I had opened up: “Do you mean there’s a danger of anything very bad?” “My dear fellow, you must ask her oculist.” “Who in the world *is* her oculist?” “I haven’t a conception. But we mustn’t get too excited. My impression would be that she has only to observe a few ordinary rules, to exercise a little common sense.”

Dawling jumped at this. “I see—to stick to the pince-nez.”

“To follow to the letter her oculist’s prescription, whatever it is and at whatever cost to her prettiness. It’s not a thing to be trifled with.”

“Upon my honour it *shan’t* be trifled with!” he roundly declared; and he adjusted himself to his position again as if we had quite settled the business. After a considerable interval, while I botched away, he suddenly said: “Did they make a great difference?”

“A great difference?”

“Those things she had put on.”

“Oh, the glasses—in her beauty? She looked queer of course, but it was partly because one was unaccustomed. There are women who look charming in nippers. What, at any rate, if she does look queer? She must be mad not to accept that alternative.”

“She *is* mad,” said Geoffrey Dawling.

“Mad to refuse you, I grant. Besides,” I went on, “the pince-nez, which was a large and peculiar one, was all awry: she had half pulled it off, but it continued to stick, and she was crimson, she was angry.”

“It must have been horrible!” my companion murmured.

“It *was* horrible. But it’s still more horrible to defy all warnings; it’s still more horrible to be landed in—” Without saying in what I disgustedly shrugged my shoulders.

After a glance at me Dawling jerked round. “Then you do believe that she may be?”

I hesitated. “The thing would be to make *her* believe it. She only needs a good scare.”

“But if that fellow is shocked at the precautions she does take?”

“Oh, who knows?” I rejoined with small sincerity. “I don’t suppose Iffield is absolutely a brute.”

“I would take her with leather blinders, like a shying mare!” cried Geoffrey Dawling.

I had an impression that Iffield wouldn’t, but I didn’t communicate it, for I wanted to pacify my friend, whom I had discomposed too much for the purposes of my sitting. I recollect that I did some good work that morning, but it also comes back to me that before we separated he had practically revealed to me that my anecdote, connecting itself in his mind with a series of observations at the time unconscious and unregistered, had covered with light the subject of our colloquy. He had had a formless perception of some secret that drove Miss Saunt to subterfuges, and the more he thought of it the more he guessed this secret to be the practice of making believe she saw when she didn’t and of cleverly keeping people from finding out how

little she saw. When one patched things together it was astonishing what ground they covered. Just as he was going away he asked me from what source, at Folkestone, the horrid tale had proceeded. When I had given him, as I saw no reason not to do, the name of Mrs. Meldrum, he exclaimed: "Oh, I know all about her; she's a friend of some friends of mine!" At this I remembered wilful Betty and said to myself that I knew some one who would probably prove more wilful still.

VIII

A few days later I again heard Dawling on my stairs, and even before he passed my threshold I knew he had something to tell me.

"I've been down to Folkestone—it was necessary I should see her!" I forget whether he had come straight from the station; he was at any rate out of breath with his news, which it took me however a minute to interpret.

"You mean that you've been with Mrs. Meldrum?"

"Yes; to ask her what she knows and how she comes to know it. It worked upon me awfully—I mean what you told me." He made a visible effort to seem quieter than he was, and it showed me sufficiently that he had not been reassured. I laid, to comfort him and smiling at a venture, a friendly hand on his arm, and he dropped into my eyes, fixing them an instant, a strange, distended look which might have expressed the cold clearness of all that was to come. "I *know*—now!" he said with an emphasis he rarely used.

"What then did Mrs. Meldrum tell you?"

"Only one thing that signified, for she has no real knowledge. But that one thing was everything."

"What is it then?"

"Why, that she can't bear the sight of her." His pronouns required some arranging, but after I had successfully dealt with them I replied that I knew perfectly Miss Saunt had a trick of turning her back on the good lady of Folkestone. But what did that prove? "Have you never guessed? I guessed as soon as she spoke!" Dawling towered over me in dismal triumph. It was the first time in our acquaintance that, intellectually speaking, this had occurred; but even so remarkable an incident still left me sufficiently at sea to cause him to continue: "Why, the effect of those spectacles!"

I seemed to catch the tail of his idea. "Mrs. Meldrum's?"

"They're so awfully ugly and they increase so the dear woman's ugliness." This remark began to flash a light, and when he quickly added "She sees herself, she sees her own fate!" my response was so immediate that I had almost taken the words out of his mouth. While I tried to fix this sudden image of Flora's face glazed in and cross-barred even as Mrs. Meldrum's was glazed and barred, he went on to assert that only the horror of that image, looming out at herself, could be the reason of her avoiding such a monitress. The fact he had encountered made everything hideously vivid and more vivid than anything else that just such another pair of goggles was what would have been prescribed to Flora.

"I see—I see," I presently rejoined. "What would become of Lord Iffield if she were suddenly to come out in them? What indeed would become of every one, what would become of *everything*?" This was an inquiry that Dawling was evidently unprepared to meet, and I completed it by saying at last: "My dear fellow, for that matter, what would become of *you*?"

Once more he turned on me his good green eyes. "Oh, I shouldn't mind!"

The tone of his words somehow made his ugly face beautiful, and I felt that there dated from this moment in my heart a confirmed affection for him. None the less, at the same time, perversely and rudely, I became aware of a certain drollery in our discussion of such alternatives. It made me laugh out and say to him while I laughed: "You'd take her even with those things of Mrs. Meldrum's?"

He remained mournfully grave; I could see that he was surprised at my rude mirth. But he summoned back a vision of the lady at Folkestone and conscientiously replied: "Even with those things of Mrs. Meldrum's." I begged him not to think my laughter in bad taste: it was only a practical recognition of the fact that we had built a monstrous castle in the air. Didn't he see on what flimsy ground the structure rested? The evidence was preposterously small. He believed the worst, but we were utterly ignorant.

"I shall find out the truth," he promptly replied.

"How can you? If you question her you'll simply drive her to perjure herself. Wherein after all does it concern you to know the truth? It's the girl's own affair."

"Then why did you tell me your story?"

I was a trifle embarrassed. "To warn you off," I returned smiling. He took no more notice of these words than presently to remark that Lord Iffield had no serious intentions. "Very possibly," I said. "But you mustn't speak as if Lord Iffield and you were her only alternatives."

Dawling thought a moment. "Wouldn't the people she has consulted give some information? She must have been to people. How else can she have been condemned?"

"Condemned to what? Condemned to perpetual nippers? Of course she has consulted some of the big specialists, but she has done it, you may be sure, in the most clandestine manner; and even if it were supposable that they would tell you anything—which I altogether doubt—you would have great difficulty in finding out which men they are. Therefore leave it alone; never show her what you suspect."

I even, before he quitted me, asked him to promise me this. "All right, I promise," he said gloomily enough. He was a lover who could tacitly grant the proposition that there was no limit to the deceit his loved one was ready to practise: it made so remarkably little difference. I could see that from this moment he would be filled with a passionate pity ever so little qualified by a sense of the girl's fatuity and folly. She was always accessible to him—that I knew; for if she had told him he was an idiot to dream she could dream of him, she would have resented the imputation of having failed to make it clear that she would always be glad to regard him as a friend. What were most of her friends—what were all of them—but repudiated idiots? I was perfectly aware that in her conversations and confidences I myself for instance had a niche in the gallery. As regards poor Dawling I knew how often he still called on the Hammond Synges. It was not there but under the wing of the Floyd-Taylors that her intimacy with Lord Iffield most flourished. At all events when a week after the visit I have just summarised Flora's name was one morning brought up to me I jumped at the conclusion that Dawling had been with her and even I fear briefly entertained the thought that he had broken his word.

IX

She left me, after she had been introduced, in no suspense about her present motive; she was on the contrary in a visible fever to enlighten me; but I promptly learned that for the alarm with which she pitiably panted our young man was not accountable. She had but one thought in the world, and that thought was for Lord Iffield. I had the strangest, saddest scene with her,

and if it did me no other good it at least made me at last completely understand why insidiously, from the first, she had struck me as a creature of tragedy. In showing me the whole of her folly it lifted the curtain of her misery. I don't know how much she meant to tell me when she came—I think she had had plans of elaborate misrepresentation; at any rate she found it at the end of ten minutes the simplest way to break down and sob, to be wretched and true. When she had once begun to let herself go the movement took her off her feet: the relief of it was like the cessation of a cramp. She shared in a word her long secret; she shifted her sharp pain. She brought, I confess, tears to my own eyes, tears of helpless tenderness for her helpless poverty. Her visit however was not quite so memorable in itself as in some of its consequences, the most immediate of which was that I went that afternoon to see Geoffrey Dawling, who had in those days rooms in Welbeck Street, where I presented myself at an hour late enough to warrant the supposition that he might have come in. He had not come in, but he was expected, and I was invited to enter and wait for him: a lady, I was informed, was already in his sitting-room. I hesitated, a little at a loss: it had wildly coursed through my brain that the lady was perhaps Flora Saunt. But when I asked if she were young and remarkably pretty I received so significant a “No, sir!” that I risked an advance and after a minute in this manner found myself, to my astonishment, face to face with Mrs. Meldrum. “Oh, you dear thing,” she exclaimed, “I'm delighted to see you: you spare me another compromising *démarche*! But for this I should have called on you also. Know the worst at once: if you see me here it's at least deliberate—it's planned, plotted, shameless. I came up on purpose to see him; upon my word, I'm in love with him. Why, if you valued my peace of mind, did you let him, the other day at Folkestone, dawn upon my delighted eyes? I took there in half an hour the most extraordinary fancy to him. With a perfect sense of everything that can be urged against him, I find him none the less the very pearl of men. However, I haven't come up to declare my passion—I've come to bring him news that will interest him much more. Above all I've come to urge upon him to be careful.”

“About Flora Saunt?”

“About what he says and does: he must be as still as a mouse! She's at last really engaged.”

“But it's a tremendous secret?” I was moved to merriment.

“Precisely: she telegraphed me this noon, and spent another shilling to tell me that not a creature in the world is yet to know it.”

“She had better have spent it to tell you that she had just passed an hour with the creature you see before you.”

“She has just passed an hour with every one in the place!” Mrs. Meldrum cried. “They've vital reasons, she wired, for it's not coming out for a month. Then it will be formally announced, but meanwhile her happiness is delirious. I daresay Mr. Dawling already knows, and he may, as it's nearly seven o'clock, have jumped off London Bridge; but an effect of the talk I had with him the other day was to make me, on receipt of my telegram, feel it to be my duty to warn him in person against taking action, as it were, on the horrid certitude which I could see he carried away with him. I had added somehow to that certitude. He told me what you had told him you had seen in your shop.”

Mrs. Meldrum, I perceived, had come to Welbeck Street on an errand identical with my own—a circumstance indicating her rare sagacity, inasmuch as her ground for undertaking it was a very different thing from what Flora's wonderful visit had made of mine. I remarked to her that what I had seen in the shop was sufficiently striking, but that I had seen a great deal more that morning in my studio. “In short,” I said, “I've seen everything.”

She was mystified. “Everything?”

“The poor creature is under the darkest of clouds. Oh, she came to triumph, but she remained to talk something approaching to sense! She put herself completely in my hands—she does me the honour to intimate that of all her friends I’m the most disinterested. After she had announced to me that Lord Iffield was bound hands and feet and that for the present I was absolutely the only person in the secret, she arrived at her real business. She had had a suspicion of me ever since the day, at Folkestone, I asked her for the truth about her eyes. The truth is what you and I both guessed. She has no end of a danger hanging over her.”

“But from what cause? I, who by God’s mercy have kept mine, know everything that can be known about eyes,” said Mrs. Meldrum.

“She might have kept hers if she had profited by God’s mercy, if she had done in time, done years ago, what was imperatively ordered her; if she hadn’t in fine been cursed with the loveliness that was to make her behaviour a thing of fable. She may keep them still if she’ll sacrifice—and after all so little—that purely superficial charm. She must do as you’ve done; she must wear, dear lady, what you wear!”

What my companion wore glittered for the moment like a melon-frame in August. “Heaven forgive her—now I understand!” She turned pale.

But I wasn’t afraid of the effect on her good nature of her thus seeing, through her great goggles, why it had always been that Flora held her at such a distance. “I can’t tell you,” I said, “from what special affection, what state of the eye, her danger proceeds: that’s the one thing she succeeded this morning in keeping from me. She knows it herself perfectly; she has had the best advice in Europe. ‘It’s a thing that’s awful, simply awful’—that was the only account she would give me. Year before last, while she was at Boulogne, she went for three days with Mrs. Floyd-Taylor to Paris. She there surreptitiously consulted the greatest man—even Mrs. Floyd-Taylor doesn’t know. Last autumn, in Germany, she did the same. ‘First put on certain special spectacles with a straight bar in the middle: then we’ll talk’—that’s practically what they say. What *she* says is that she’ll put on anything in nature when she’s married, but that she must get married first. She has always meant to do everything as soon as she’s married. Then and then only she’ll be safe. How will any one ever look at her if she makes herself a fright? How could she ever have got engaged if she had made herself a fright from the first? It’s no use to insist that with her beauty she can never *be* a fright. She said to me this morning, poor girl, the most characteristic, the most harrowing things. ‘My face is all I have—and *such* a face! I knew from the first I could do anything with it. But I needed it all—I need it still, every exquisite inch of it. It isn’t as if I had a figure or anything else. Oh, if God had only given me a figure too, I don’t say! Yes, with a figure, a really good one, like Fanny Floyd-Taylor’s, who’s hideous, I’d have risked plain glasses. *Que voulez-vous?* No one is perfect.’ She says she still has money left, but I don’t believe a word of it. She has been speculating on her impunity, on the idea that her danger would hold off: she has literally been running a race with it. Her theory has been, as you from the first so clearly saw, that she’d get in ahead. She swears to me that though the ‘bar’ is too cruel she wears when she’s alone what she has been ordered to wear. But when the deuce is she alone? It’s herself of course that she has swindled worst: she has put herself off, so insanely that even her vanity but half accounts for it, with little inadequate concessions, little false measures and preposterous evasions and childish hopes. Her great terror is now that Iffield, who already has suspicions, who has found out her pince-nez but whom she has beguiled with some unblushing hocus-pocus, may discover the dreadful facts; and the essence of what she wanted this morning was in that interest to square me, to get me to deny indignantly and authoritatively (for isn’t she my ‘favourite sitter’?) that she has anything whatever the matter with any part of her. She sobbed, she ‘went on,’ she entreated; after we got talking her

extraordinary nerve left her and she showed me what she has been through—showed me also all her terror of the harm I could do her. ‘Wait till I’m married! wait till I’m married!’ She took hold of me, she almost sank on her knees. It seems to me highly immoral, one’s participation in her fraud; but there’s no doubt that she *must* be married: I don’t know what I don’t see behind it! Therefore,” I wound up, “Dawling must keep his hands off.”

Mrs. Meldrum had held her breath; she exhaled a long moan. “Well, that’s exactly what I came here to tell him.”

“Then here he is.” Our unconscious host had just opened the door. Immensely startled at finding us he turned a frightened look from one to the other, as if to guess what disaster we were there to announce or avert.

Mrs. Meldrum, on the spot, was all gaiety. “I’ve come to return your sweet visit. Ah,” she laughed, “I mean to keep up the acquaintance!”

“Do—do,” he murmured mechanically and absently, continuing to look at us. Then abruptly he broke out: “He’s going to marry her.”

I was surprised. “You already know?”

He had had in his hand an evening newspaper; he tossed it down on the table. “It’s in that.”

“Published—already?” I was still more surprised.

“Oh, Flora can’t keep a secret!” Mrs. Meldrum humorously declared. She went up to poor Dawling and laid a motherly hand upon him. “It’s all right—it’s just as it ought to be: don’t think about her ever any more.” Then as he met this adjuration with a dismal stare in which the thought of her was as abnormally vivid as the colour of the pupil, the excellent woman put up her funny face and tenderly kissed him on the cheek.

X

I have spoken of these reminiscences as of a row of coloured beads, and I confess that as I continue to straighten out my chaplet I am rather proud of the comparison. The beads are all there, as I said—they slip along the string in their small, smooth roundness. Geoffrey Dawling accepted like a gentleman the event his evening paper had proclaimed; in view of which I snatched a moment to murmur him a hint to offer Mrs. Meldrum his hand. He returned me a heavy head-shake, and I judged that marriage would henceforth strike him very much as the traffic of the street may strike some poor incurable at the window of an hospital. Circumstances arising at this time promptly led to my making an absence from England, and circumstances already existing offered him a solid basis for similar action. He had after all the usual resource of a Briton—he could take to his boats.

He started on a journey round the globe, and I was left with nothing but my inference as to what might have happened. Later observation however only confirmed my belief that if at any time during the couple of months that followed Flora Saunt’s brilliant engagement he had made up, as they say, to the good lady of Folkestone, that good lady would not have pushed him over the cliff. Strange as she was to behold I knew of cases in which she had been obliged to administer that shove. I went to New York to paint a couple of portraits; but I found, once on the spot, that I had counted without Chicago, where I was invited to blot out this harsh discrimination by the production of no less than ten. I spent a year in America and should probably have spent a second had I not been summoned back to England by alarming news from my mother. Her strength had failed, and as soon as I reached London I hurried down to Folkestone, arriving just at the moment to offer a welcome to some slight symptom of a rally. She had been much worse, but she was now a little better; and though I found

nothing but satisfaction in having come to her I saw after a few hours that my London studio, where arrears of work had already met me, would be my place to await whatever might next occur. Before returning to town however I had every reason to sally forth in search of Mrs. Meldrum, from whom, in so many months, I had not had a line, and my view of whom, with the adjacent objects, as I had left them, had been intercepted by a luxuriant foreground.

Before I had gained her house I met her, as I supposed, coming toward me across the down, greeting me from afar with the familiar twinkle of her great vitreous badge; and as it was late in the autumn and the esplanade was a blank I was free to acknowledge this signal by cutting a caper on the grass. My enthusiasm dropped indeed the next moment, for it had taken me but a few seconds to perceive that the person thus assaulted had by no means the figure of my military friend. I felt a shock much greater than any I should have thought possible as on this person's drawing near I identified her as poor little Flora Saunt. At what moment Flora had recognised me belonged to an order of mysteries over which, it quickly came home to me, one would never linger again: I could intensely reflect that once we were face to face it chiefly mattered that I should succeed in looking still more intensely unastonished. All I saw at first was the big gold bar crossing each of her lenses, over which something convex and grotesque, like the eyes of a large insect, something that now represented her whole personality, seemed, as out of the orifice of a prison, to strain forward and press. The face had shrunk away: it looked smaller, appeared even to look plain; it was at all events, so far as the effect on a spectator was concerned, wholly sacrificed to this huge apparatus of sight. There was no smile in it, and she made no motion to take my offered hand.

"I had no idea you were down here!" I exclaimed; and I wondered whether she didn't know me at all or knew me only by my voice.

"You thought I was Mrs. Meldrum," she very quietly remarked.

It was the quietness itself that made me feel the necessity of an answer almost violently gay. "Oh yes," I laughed, "you have a tremendous deal in common with Mrs. Meldrum! I've just returned to England after a long absence and I'm on my way to see her. Won't you come with me?" It struck me that her old reason for keeping clear of our friend was well disposed of now.

"I've just left her; I'm staying with her." She stood solemnly fixing me with her goggles. "Would you like to paint me *now*?" she asked. She seemed to speak, with intense gravity, from behind a mask or a cage.

There was nothing to do but to treat the question with the same exuberance. "It would be a fascinating little artistic problem!" That something was wrong it was not difficult to perceive; but a good deal more than met the eye might be presumed to be wrong if Flora was under Mrs. Meldrum's roof. I had not for a year had much time to think of her, but my imagination had had sufficient warrant for lodging her in more gilded halls. One of the last things I had heard before leaving England was that in commemoration of the new relationship she had gone to stay with Lady Considine. This had made me take everything else for granted, and the noisy American world had deafened my ears to possible contradictions. Her spectacles were at present a direct contradiction; they seemed a negation not only of new relationships but of every old one as well. I remember nevertheless that when after a moment she walked beside me on the grass I found myself nervously hoping she wouldn't as yet at any rate tell me anything very dreadful; so that to stave off this danger I harried her with questions about Mrs. Meldrum and, without waiting for replies, became profuse on the subject of my own doings. My companion was completely silent, and I felt both as if she were watching my nervousness with a sort of sinister irony and as if I were talking to some different, strange

person. Flora plain and obscure and soundless was no Flora at all. At Mrs. Meldrum's door she turned off with the observation that as there was certainly a great deal I should have to say to our friend she had better not go in with me. I looked at her again—I had been keeping my eyes away from her—but only to meet her magnified stare. I greatly desired in truth to see Mrs. Meldrum alone, but there was something so pitiful in the girl's predicament that I hesitated to fall in with this idea of dropping her. Yet one couldn't express a compassion without seeming to take too much wretchedness for granted. I reflected that I must really figure to her as a fool, which was an entertainment I had never expected to give her. It rolled over me there for the first time—it has come back to me since—that there is, strangely, in very deep misfortune a dignity finer even than in the most inveterate habit of being all right. I couldn't have to her the manner of treating it as a mere detail that I was face to face with a part of what, at our last meeting, we had had such a scene about; but while I was trying to think of some manner that I *could* have she said quite colourlessly, yet somehow as if she might never see me again: "Goodbye. I'm going to take my walk."

"All alone?"

She looked round the great bleak cliff-top. "With whom should I go? Besides, I like to be alone—for the present."

This gave me the glimmer of a vision that she regarded her disfigurement as temporary, and the confidence came to me that she would never, for her happiness, cease to be a creature of illusions. It enabled me to exclaim, smiling brightly and feeling indeed idiotic: "Oh, I shall see you again! But I hope you'll have a very pleasant walk."

"All my walks are very pleasant, thank you—they do me such a lot of good." She was as quiet as a mouse, and her words seemed to me stupendous in their wisdom. "I take several a day," she continued. She might have been an ancient woman responding with humility at the church door to the patronage of the parson. "The more I take the better I feel. I'm ordered by the doctors to keep all the while in the air and go in for plenty of exercise. It keeps up my general health, you know, and if that goes on improving as it has lately done everything will soon be all right. All that was the matter with me before—and always; it was too reckless!—was that I neglected my general health. It acts directly on the state of the particular organ. So I'm going three miles."

I grinned at her from the doorstep while Mrs. Meldrum's maid stood there to admit me. "Oh, I'm so glad," I said, looking at her as she paced away with the pretty flutter she had kept and remembering the day when, while she rejoined Lord Iffield, I had indulged in the same observation. Her air of assurance was on this occasion not less than it had been on that; but I recalled that she had then struck me as marching off to her doom. Was she really now marching away from it?

XI

As soon as I saw Mrs. Meldrum I broke out to her. "Is there anything in it? *Is* her general health—?"

Mrs. Meldrum interrupted me with her great amused glare. "You've already seen her and she has told you her wondrous tale? What's 'in it' is what has been in everything she has ever done—the most comical, tragical belief in herself. She thinks she's doing a 'cure.'"

"And what does her husband think?"

"Her husband? What husband?"

"Hasn't she then married Lord Iffield?"

“*Vous-en-êtes là?*” cried my hostess. “He behaved like a regular beast.”

“How should I know? You never wrote to me.”

Mrs. Meldrum hesitated, covering me with what poor Flora called the particular organ. “No, I didn’t write to you; and I abstained on purpose. If I didn’t I thought you mightn’t, over there, hear what had happened. If you should hear I was afraid you would stir up Mr. Dawling.”

“Stir him up?”

“Urge him to fly to the rescue; write out to him that there was another chance for him.”

“I wouldn’t have done it,” I said.

“Well,” Mrs. Meldrum replied, “it was not my business to give you an opportunity.”

“In short you were afraid of it.”

Again she hesitated and though it may have been only my fancy I thought she considerably reddened. At all events she laughed out. Then “I was afraid of it!” she very honestly answered.

“But doesn’t he know? Has he given no sign?”

“Every sign in life—he came straight back to her. He did everything to get her to listen to him; but she hasn’t the smallest idea of it.”

“Has he seen her as she is now?” I presently and just a trifle awkwardly inquired.

“Indeed he has, and borne it like a hero. He told me all about it.”

“How much you’ve all been through!” I ventured to ejaculate. “Then what has become of him?”

“He’s at home in Hampshire. He has got back his old place and I believe by this time his old sisters. It’s not half a bad little place.”

“Yet its attractions say nothing to Flora?”

“Oh, Flora’s by no means on her back!” my interlocutress laughed.

“She’s not on her back because she’s on yours. Have you got her for the rest of your life?”

Once more my hostess genially glared at me. “Did she tell you how much the Hammond Synges have kindly left her to live on? Not quite eighty pounds a year.”

“That’s a good deal, but it won’t pay the oculist. What was it that at last induced her to submit to him?”

“Her general collapse after that brute of an Iffield’s rupture. She cried her eyes out—she passed through a horror of black darkness. Then came a gleam of light, and the light appears to have broadened. She went into goggles as repentant Magdalens go into the Catholic Church.”

“Yet you don’t think she’ll be saved?”

“*She* thinks she will—that’s all I can tell you. There’s no doubt that when once she brought herself to accept her real remedy, as she calls it, she began to enjoy a relief that she had never known. That feeling, very new and in spite of what she pays for it most refreshing, has given her something to hold on by, begotten in her foolish little mind a belief that, as she says, she’s on the mend and that in the course of time, if she leads a tremendously healthy life, she’ll be able to take off her muzzle and become as dangerous again as ever. It keeps her going.”

“And what keeps *you*? You’re good until the parties begin again.”

“Oh, she doesn’t object to me now!” smiled Mrs. Meldrum. “I’m going to take her abroad; we shall be a pretty pair.” I was struck with this energy and after a moment I inquired the reason of it. “It’s to divert her mind,” my friend replied, reddening again, I thought, a little. “We shall go next week: I’ve only waited, to start, to see how your mother would be.” I expressed to her hereupon my sense of her extraordinary merit and also that of the inconceivability of Flora’s fancying herself still in a situation not to jump at the chance of marrying a man like Dawling. “She says he’s too ugly; she says he’s too dreary; she says in fact he’s ‘nobody,’” Mrs. Meldrum pursued. “She says above all that he’s not ‘her own sort.’ She doesn’t deny that he’s good, but she insists on the fact that he’s grotesque. He’s quite the last person she would ever dream of.” I was almost disposed on hearing this to protest that if the girl had so little proper feeling her noble suitor had perhaps served her right; but after a while my curiosity as to just how her noble suitor *had* served her got the better of that emotion, and I asked a question or two which led my companion again to apply to him the invidious epithet I have already quoted. What had happened was simply that Flora had at the eleventh hour broken down in the attempt to put him off with an uncandid account of her infirmity and that his lordship’s interest in her had not been proof against the discovery of the way she had practised on him. Her dissimulation, he was obliged to perceive, had been infernally deep. The future in short assumed a new complexion for him when looked at through the grim glasses of a bride who, as he had said to some one, couldn’t really, when you came to find out, see her hand before her face. He had conducted himself like any other jockeyed customer—he had returned the animal as unsound. He had backed out in his own way, giving the business, by some sharp shuffle, such a turn as to make the rupture ostensibly Flora’s, but he had none the less remorselessly and basely backed out. He had cared for her lovely face, cared for it in the amused and haunted way it had been her poor little delusive gift to make men care; and her lovely face, damn it, with the monstrous gear she had begun to rig upon it, was just what had let him in. He had in the judgment of his family done everything that could be expected of him; he had made—Mrs. Meldrum had herself seen the letter—a “handsome” offer of pecuniary compensation. Oh, if Flora, with her incredible buoyancy, was in a manner on her feet again now, it was not that she had not for weeks and weeks been prone in the dust. Strange were the humiliations, the prostrations it was given to some natures to survive. That Flora had survived was perhaps after all a sort of sign that she was reserved for some final mercy. “But she has been in the abysses at any rate,” said Mrs. Meldrum, “and I really don’t think I can tell you what pulled her through.”

“I think I can tell *you*,” I said. “What in the world but Mrs. Meldrum?”

At the end of an hour Flora had not come in, and I was obliged to announce that I should have but time to reach the station, where, in charge of my mother’s servant, I was to find my luggage. Mrs. Meldrum put before me the question of waiting till a later train, so as not to lose our young lady; but I confess I gave this alternative a consideration less profound than I pretended. Somehow I didn’t care if I did lose our young lady. Now that I knew the worst that had befallen her it struck me still less as possible to meet her on the ground of condolence; and with the melancholy aspect she wore to me what other ground was left? I lost her, but I caught my train. In truth she was so changed that one hated to see it; and now that she was in charitable hands one didn’t feel compelled to make great efforts. I had studied her face for a particular beauty; I had lived with that beauty and reproduced it; but I knew what belonged to my trade well enough to be sure it was gone for ever.

XII

I was soon called back to Folkestone; but Mrs. Meldrum and her young friend had already left England, finding to that end every convenience on the spot and not having had to come up to town. My thoughts however were so painfully engaged there that I should in any case have had little attention for them: the event occurred that was to bring my series of visits to a close. When this high tide had ebbed I returned to America and to my interrupted work, which had opened out on such a scale that, with a deep plunge into a great chance, I was three good years in rising again to the surface. There are nymphs and naiads moreover in the American depths: they may have had something to do with the duration of my dive. I mention them to account for a grave misdemeanour—the fact that after the first year I rudely neglected Mrs. Meldrum. She had written to me from Florence after my mother's death and had mentioned in a postscript that in our young lady's calculations the lowest numbers were now Italian counts. This was a good omen, and if in subsequent letters there was no news of a sequel I was content to accept small things and to believe that grave tidings, should there be any, would come to me in due course. The gravity of what might happen to a featherweight became indeed with time and distance less appreciable, and I was not without an impression that Mrs. Meldrum, whose sense of proportion was not the least of her merits, had no idea of boring the world with the ups and downs of her pensioner. The poor girl grew dusky and dim, a small fitful memory, a regret tempered by the comfortable consciousness of how kind Mrs. Meldrum would always be to her. I was professionally more preoccupied than I had ever been, and I had swarms of pretty faces in my eyes and a chorus of high voices in my ears. Geoffrey Dawling had on his return to England written me two or three letters: his last information had been that he was going into the figures of rural illiteracy. I was delighted to receive it and had no doubt that if he should go into figures they would, as they are said to be able to prove anything, prove at least that my advice was sound and that he had wasted time enough. This quickened on my part another hope, a hope suggested by some roundabout rumour—I forget how it reached me—that he was engaged to a girl down in Hampshire. He turned out not to be, but I felt sure that if only he went into figures deep enough he would become, among the girls down in Hampshire or elsewhere, one of those numerous prizes of battle whose defences are practically not on the scale of their provocations. I nursed in short the thought that it was probably open to him to become one of the types as to which, as the years go on, frivolous and superficial spectators lose themselves in the wonder that they ever succeeded in winning even the least winsome mates. He never alluded to Flora Saunt; and there was in his silence about her, quite as in Mrs. Meldrum's, an element of instinctive tact, a brief implication that if you didn't happen to have been in love with her she was not an inevitable topic.

Within a week after my return to London I went to the opera, of which I had always been much of a devotee. I arrived too late for the first act of "Lohengrin," but the second was just beginning, and I gave myself up to it with no more than a glance at the house. When it was over I treated myself, with my glass, from my place in the stalls, to a general survey of the boxes, making doubtless on their contents the reflections, pointed by comparison, that are most familiar to the wanderer restored to London. There was a certain proportion of pretty women, but I suddenly became aware that one of these was far prettier than the others. This lady, alone in one of the smaller receptacles of the grand tier and already the aim of fifty tentative glances, which she sustained with admirable serenity—this single exquisite figure, placed in the quarter furthest removed from my stall, was a person, I immediately felt, to cause one's curiosity to linger. Dressed in white, with diamonds in her hair and pearls on her neck, she had a pale radiance of beauty which even at that distance made her a distinguished presence and, with the air that easily attaches to lonely loveliness in public places, an agreeable mystery. A mystery however she remained to me only for a minute after I had levelled my glass at her: I feel to this moment the startled thrill, the shock almost of joy with

which I suddenly encountered in her vague brightness a rich revival of Flora Saunt. I say a revival because, to put it crudely, I had on that last occasion left poor Flora for dead. At present perfectly alive again, she was altered only, as it were, by resurrection. A little older, a little quieter, a little finer and a good deal fairer, she was simply transfigured by recovery. Sustained by the reflection that even recovery wouldn't enable her to distinguish me in the crowd, I was free to look at her well. Then it was it came home to me that my vision of her in her great goggles had been cruelly final. As her beauty was all there was of her, that machinery had extinguished her, and so far as I had thought of her in the interval I had thought of her as buried in the tomb her stern specialist had built. With the sense that she had escaped from it came a lively wish to return to her; and if I didn't straightway leave my place and rush round the theatre and up to her box it was because I was fixed to the spot some moments longer by the simple inability to cease looking at her.

She had been from the first of my seeing her practically motionless, leaning back in her chair with a kind of thoughtful grace and with her eyes vaguely directed, as it seemed to me, to one of the boxes on my side of the house and consequently over my head and out of my sight. The only movement she made for some time was to finger with an ungloved hand and as if with the habit of fondness the row of pearls on her neck, which my glass showed me to be large and splendid. Her diamonds and pearls, in her solitude, mystified me, making me, as she had had no such brave jewels in the days of the Hammond Synges, wonder what undreamt-of improvement had taken place in her fortunes. The ghost of a question hovered there a moment: could anything so prodigious have happened as that on her tested and proved amendment Lord Iffield had taken her back? This could not have occurred without my hearing of it; and moreover if she had become a person of such fashion where was the little court one would naturally see at her elbow? Her isolation was puzzling, though it could easily suggest that she was but momentarily alone. If she had come with Mrs. Meldrum that lady would have taken advantage of the interval to pay a visit to some other box—doubtless the box at which Flora had just been looking. Mrs. Meldrum didn't account for the jewels, but the refreshment of Flora's beauty accounted for anything. She presently moved her eyes over the house, and I felt them brush me again like the wings of a dove. I don't know what quick pleasure flickered into the hope that she would at last see me. She did see me: she suddenly bent forward to take up the little double-barrelled ivory glass that rested on the edge of the box and, to all appearance, fix me with it. I smiled from my place straight up at the searching lenses, and after an instant she dropped them and smiled as straight back at me. Oh, her smile: it was her old smile, her young smile, her peculiar smile made perfect! I instantly left my stall and hurried off for a nearer view of it; quite flushed, I remember, as I went, with the annoyance of having happened to think of the idiotic way I had tried to paint her. Poor Iffield with his sample of that error, and still poorer Dawling in particular with his! I hadn't touched her, I was professionally humiliated, and as the attendant in the lobby opened her box for me I felt that the very first thing I should have to say to her would be that she must absolutely sit to me again.

XIII

She gave me the smile once more as over her shoulder, from her chair, she turned her face to me. "Here you are again!" she exclaimed with her disglowed hand put up a little backward for me to take. I dropped into a chair just behind her and, having taken it and noted that one of the curtains of the box would make the demonstration sufficiently private, bent my lips over it and impressed them on its finger-tips. It was given me however, to my astonishment, to feel next that all the privacy in the world couldn't have sufficed to mitigate the start with which she greeted this free application of my moustache: the blood had jumped to her face, she quickly recovered her hand and jerked at me, twisting herself round, a vacant, challenging

stare. During the next few instants several extraordinary things happened, the first of which was that now I was close to them the eyes of loveliness I had come up to look into didn't show at all the conscious light I had just been pleased to see them flash across the house: they showed on the contrary, to my confusion, a strange, sweet blankness, an expression I failed to give a meaning to until, without delay, I felt on my arm, directed to it as if instantly to efface the effect of her start, the grasp of the hand she had impulsively snatched from me. It was the irrepressible question in this grasp that stopped on my lips all sound of salutation. She had mistaken my entrance for that of another person, a pair of lips without a moustache. She was feeling me to see who I was! With the perception of this and of her not seeing me I sat gaping at her and at the wild word that didn't come, the right word to express or to disguise my stupefaction. What was the right word to commemorate one's sudden discovery, at the very moment too at which one had been most encouraged to count on better things, that one's dear old friend had gone blind? Before the answer to this question dropped upon me—and the moving moments, though few, seemed many—I heard, with the sound of voices, the click of the attendant's key on the other side of the door. Poor Flora heard also, and with the hearing, still with her hand on my arm, she brightened again as I had a minute since seen her brighten across the house: she had the sense of the return of the person she had taken me for—the person with the right pair of lips, as to whom I was for that matter much more in the dark than she. I gasped, but my word had come: if she had lost her sight it was in this very loss that she had found again her beauty. I managed to speak while we were still alone, before her companion had appeared. “You're lovelier at this day than you have ever been in your life!” At the sound of my voice and that of the opening of the door her excitement broke into audible joy. She sprang up, recognising me, always holding me, and gleefully cried to a gentleman who was arrested in the doorway by the sight of me: “He has come back, he has come back, and you should have heard what he says of me!” The gentleman was Geoffrey Dawling, and I thought it best to let him hear on the spot. “How beautiful she is, my dear man—but how extraordinarily beautiful! More beautiful at this hour than ever, ever before!”

It gave them almost equal pleasure and made Dawling blush up to his eyes; while this in turn produced, in spite of deepened astonishment, a blessed snap of the strain that I had been under for some moments. I wanted to embrace them both, and while the opening bars of another scene rose from the orchestra I almost did embrace Dawling, whose first emotion on beholding me had visibly and ever so oddly been a consciousness of guilt. I had caught him somehow in the act, though that was as yet all I knew; but by the time we had sunk noiselessly into our chairs again (for the music was supreme, Wagner passed first) my demonstration ought pretty well to have given him the limit of the criticism he had to fear. I myself indeed, while the opera blazed, was only too afraid he might divine in our silent closeness the very moral of my optimism, which was simply the comfort I had gathered from seeing that if our companion's beauty lived again her vanity partook of its life. I had hit on the right note—that was what eased me off: it drew all pain for the next half-hour from the sense of the deep darkness in which the stricken woman sat there. If the music, in that darkness, happily soared and swelled for her, it beat its wings in unison with those of a gratified passion. A great deal came and went between us without profaning the occasion, so that I could feel at the end of twenty minutes as if I knew almost everything he might in kindness have to tell me; knew even why Flora, while I stared at her from the stalls, had misled me by the use of ivory and crystal and by appearing to recognise me and smile. She leaned back in her chair in luxurious ease: I had from the first become aware that the way she fingered her pearls was a sharp image of the wedded state. Nothing of old had seemed wanting to her assurance; but I hadn't then dreamed of the art with which she would wear that assurance as a married woman. She had taken him when everything had failed; he had taken her when she herself had done so. His embarrassed eyes confessed it all, confessed the

deep peace he found in it. They only didn't tell me why he had not written to me, nor clear up as yet a minor obscurity. Flora after a while again lifted the glass from the ledge of the box and elegantly swept the house with it. Then, by the mere instinct of her grace, a motion but half conscious, she inclined her head into the void with the sketch of a salute, producing, I could see, a perfect imitation of a response to some homage. Dawling and I looked at each other again: the tears came into his eyes. She was playing at perfection still, and her misfortune only simplified the process.

I recognised that this was as near as I should ever come, certainly as I should come that night, to pressing on her misfortune. Neither of us would name it more than we were doing then, and Flora would never name it at all. Little by little I perceived that what had occurred was, strange as it might appear, the best thing for her happiness. The question was now only of her beauty and her being seen and marvelled at: with Dawling to do for her everything in life her activity was limited to that. Such an activity was all within her scope: it asked nothing of her that she couldn't splendidly give. As from time to time in our delicate communion she turned her face to me with the parody of a look I lost none of the signs of its strange new glory. The expression of the eyes was a bit of pastel put in by a master's thumb; the whole head, stamped with a sort of showy suffering, had gained a fineness from what she had passed through. Yes, Flora was settled for life—nothing could hurt her further. I foresaw the particular praise she would mostly incur—she would be incomparably “interesting.” She would charm with her pathos more even than she had charmed with her pleasure. For herself above all she was fixed for ever, rescued from all change and ransomed from all doubt. Her old certainties, her old vanities were justified and sanctified, and in the darkness that had closed upon her one object remained clear. That object, as unfading as a mosaic mask, was fortunately the loveliest she could possibly look upon. The greatest blessing of all was of course that Dawling thought so. Her future was ruled with the straightest line, and so for that matter was his. There were two facts to which before I left my friends I gave time to sink into my spirit. One of them was that he had changed by some process as effective as Flora's change; had been simplified somehow into service as she had been simplified into success. He was such a picture of inspired intervention as I had never yet encountered: he would exist henceforth for the sole purpose of rendering unnecessary, or rather impossible, any reference even on her own part to his wife's infirmity. Oh yes, how little desire he would ever give *me* to refer to it! He principally after a while made me feel—and this was my second lesson—that, good-natured as he was, my being there to see it all oppressed him; so that by the time the act ended I recognised that I too had filled out my hour. Dawling remembered things; I think he caught in my very face the irony of old judgments: they made him thresh about in his chair. I said to Flora as I took leave of her that I would come to see her; but I may mention that I never went. I'll go to-morrow if I hear she wants me; but what in the world can she ever want? As I quitted them I laid my hand on Dawling's arm and drew him for a moment into the lobby.

“Why did you never write to me of your marriage?”

He smiled uncomfortably, showing his long yellow teeth and something more. “I don't know—the whole thing gave me such a tremendous lot to do.”

This was the first dishonest speech I had heard him make: he really hadn't written to me because he had an idea I would think him a still bigger fool than before. I didn't insist, but I tried there, in the lobby, so far as a pressure of his hand could serve me, to give him a notion of what I thought him. “I can't at any rate make out,” I said, “why I didn't hear from Mrs. Meldrum.”

“She didn't write to you?”

“Never a word. What has become of her?”

“I think she’s at Folkestone,” Dawling returned; “but I’m sorry to say that practically she has ceased to see us.”

“You haven’t quarrelled with her?”

“How *could* we? Think of all we owe her. At the time of our marriage, and for months before, she did everything for us: I don’t know how we should have managed without her. But since then she has never been near us and has given us rather markedly little encouragement to try and keep up our relations with her.”

I was struck with this though of course I admit I am struck with all sorts of things. “Well,” I said after a moment, “even if I could imagine a reason for that attitude it wouldn’t explain why she shouldn’t have taken account of *my* natural interest.”

“Just so.” Dawling’s face was a windowless wall. He could contribute nothing to the mystery, and, quitting him, I carried it away. It was not till I went down to see Mrs. Meldrum that it was really dispelled. She didn’t want to hear of them or to talk of them, not a bit, and it was just in the same spirit that she hadn’t wanted to write of them. She had done everything in the world for them, but now, thank heaven, the hard business was over. After I had taken this in, which I was quick to do, we quite avoided the subject. She simply couldn’t bear it.

The Figure In The Carpet

I

I had done a few things and earned a few pence—I had perhaps even had time to begin to think I was finer than was perceived by the patronising; but when I take the little measure of my course (a fidgety habit, for it's none of the longest yet) I count my real start from the evening George Corvick, breathless and worried, came in to ask me a service. He had done more things than I, and earned more pence, though there were chances for cleverness I thought he sometimes missed. I could only however that evening declare to him that he never missed one for kindness. There was almost rapture in hearing it proposed to me to prepare for *The Middle*, the organ of our lucubrations, so called from the position in the week of its day of appearance, an article for which he had made himself responsible and of which, tied up with a stout string, he laid on my table the subject. I pounced upon my opportunity—that is on the first volume of it—and paid scant attention to my friend's explanation of his appeal. What explanation could be more to the point than my obvious fitness for the task? I had written on Hugh Vereker, but never a word in *The Middle*, where my dealings were mainly with the ladies and the minor poets. This was his new novel, an advance copy, and whatever much or little it should do for his reputation I was clear on the spot as to what it should do for mine. Moreover, if I always read him as soon as I could get hold of him, I had a particular reason for wishing to read him now: I had accepted an invitation to Bridges for the following Sunday, and it had been mentioned in Lady Jane's note that Mr. Vereker was to be there. I was young enough to have an emotion about meeting a man of his renown, and innocent enough to believe the occasion would demand the display of an acquaintance with his "last."

Corvick, who had promised a review of it, had not even had time to read it; he had gone to pieces in consequence of news requiring—as on precipitate reflection he judged—that he should catch the night-mail to Paris. He had had a telegram from Gwendolen Erme in answer to his letter offering to fly to her aid. I knew already about Gwendolen Erme; I had never seen her, but I had my ideas, which were mainly to the effect that Corvick would marry her if her mother would only die. That lady seemed now in a fair way to oblige him; after some dreadful mistake about some climate or some waters, she had suddenly collapsed on the return from abroad. Her daughter, unsupported and alarmed, desiring to make a rush for home but hesitating at the risk, had accepted our friend's assistance, and it was my secret belief that at the sight of him Mrs. Erme would pull round. His own belief was scarcely to be called secret; it discernibly at any rate differed from mine. He had showed me Gwendolen's photograph with the remark that she wasn't pretty but was awfully interesting; she had published at the age of nineteen a novel in three volumes, "Deep Down," about which, in *The Middle*, he had been really splendid. He appreciated my present eagerness and undertook that the periodical in question should do no less; then at the last, with his hand on the door, he said to me: "Of course you'll be all right, you know." Seeing I was a trifle vague he added: "I mean you won't be silly."

"Silly—about Vereker! Why, what do I ever find him but awfully clever?"

"Well, what's that but silly? What on earth does 'awfully clever' mean? For God's sake try to get *at* him. Don't let him suffer by our arrangement. Speak of him, you know, if you can, as should have spoken of him."

I wondered an instant. "You mean as far and away the biggest of the lot—that sort of thing?"

Corvick almost groaned. "Oh, you know, I don't put them back to back that way; it's the infancy of art! But he gives me a pleasure so rare; the sense of"—he mused a little—"something or other."

I wondered again. "The sense, pray, of what?"

"My dear man, that's just what I want *you* to say!"

Even before Corvick had banged the door I had begun, book in hand, to prepare myself to say it. I sat up with Vereker half the night; Corvick couldn't have done more than that. He was awfully clever—I stuck to that, but he wasn't a bit the biggest of the lot. I didn't allude to the lot, however; I flattered myself that I emerged on this occasion from the infancy of art. "It's all right," they declared vividly at the office; and when the number appeared I felt there was a basis on which I could meet the great man; It gave me confidence for a day or two, and then that confidence dropped. I had fancied him reading it with relish, but if Corvick was not satisfied how could Vereker himself be? I reflected indeed that the heat of the admirer was sometimes grosser even than the appetite of the scribe. Corvick at all events wrote me from Paris a little ill-humouredly. Mrs. Erme was pulling round, and I hadn't at all said what Vereker gave him the sense of.

II

The effect of my visit to Bridges was to turn me out for more profundity. Hugh Vereker, as I saw him there, was of a contact so void of angles that I blushed for the poverty of imagination involved in my small precautions. If he was in spirits it was not because he had read my review; in fact on the Sunday morning I felt sure he hadn't read it, though *The Middle* had been out three days and bloomed, I assured myself, in the stiff garden of periodicals which gave one of the ormolu tables the air of a stand at a station. The impression he made on me personally was such that I wished him to read it, and I corrected to this end with a surreptitious hand what might be wanting in the careless conspicuity of the sheet. I am afraid I even watched the result of my manœuvre, but up to luncheon I watched in vain.

When afterwards, in the course of our gregarious walk, I found myself for half an hour, not perhaps without another manoeuvre, at the great man's side, the result of his affability was a still livelier desire that he should not remain in ignorance of the peculiar justice I had done him. It was not that he seemed to thirst for justice; on the contrary I had not yet caught in his talk the faintest grunt of a grudge—a note for which my young experience had already given me an ear. Of late he had had more recognition, and it was pleasant, as we used to say in *The Middle*, to see that it drew him out. He wasn't of course popular, but I judged one of the sources of his good humour to be precisely that his success was independent of that. He had none the less become in a manner the fashion; the critics at least had put on a spurt and caught up with him. We had found out at last how clever he was, and he had had to make the best of the loss of his mystery. I was strongly tempted, as I walked beside him, to let him know how much of that unveiling was my act; and there was a moment when I probably should have done so had not one of the ladies of our party, snatching a place at his other elbow, just then appealed to him in a spirit comparatively selfish. It was very discouraging: I almost felt the liberty had been taken with myself.

I had had on my tongue's end, for my own part, a phrase or two about the right word at the right time; but later on I was glad not to have spoken, for when on our return we clustered at tea I perceived Lady Jane, who had not been out with us, brandishing *The Middle* with her longest arm. She had taken it up at her leisure; she was delighted with what she had found, and I saw that, as a mistake in a man may often be a felicity in a woman, she would practically do for me what I hadn't been able to do for myself. "Some sweet little truths that

needed to be spoken,” I heard her declare, thrusting the paper at rather a bewildered couple by the fireplace. She grabbed it away from them again on the reappearance of Hugh Vereker, who after our walk had been upstairs to change something. “I know you don’t in general look at this kind of thing, but it’s an occasion really for doing so. You *haven’t* seen it? Then you must. The man has actually got *at* you, at what *I* always feel, you know.” Lady Jane threw into her eyes a look evidently intended to give an idea of what she always felt; but she added that she couldn’t have expressed it. The man in the paper expressed it in a striking manner. “Just see there, and there, where I’ve dashed it, how he brings it out.” She had literally marked for him the brightest patches of my prose, and if I was a little amused Vereker himself may well have been. He showed how much he was when before us all Lady Jane wanted to read something aloud. I liked at any rate the way he defeated her purpose by jerking the paper affectionately out of her clutch. He would take it upstairs with him, would look at it on going to dress. He did this half an hour later—I saw it in his hand when he repaired to his room. That was the moment at which, thinking to give her pleasure, I mentioned to Lady Jane that I was the author of the review. I did give her pleasure, I judged, but perhaps not quite so much as I had expected. If the author was “only me” the thing didn’t seem quite so remarkable. Hadn’t I had the effect rather of diminishing the lustre of the article than of adding to my own? Her ladyship was subject to the most extraordinary drops. It didn’t matter; the only effect I cared about was the one it would have on Vereker up there by his bedroom fire.

At dinner I watched for the signs of this impression, tried to fancy there was some happier light in his eyes; but to my disappointment Lady Jane gave me no chance to make sure. I had hoped she would call triumphantly down the table, publicly demand if she hadn’t been right. The party was large—there were people from outside as well, but I had never seen a table long enough to deprive Lady Jane of a triumph. I was just reflecting in truth that this interminable board would deprive *me* of one, when the guest next me, dear woman—she was Miss Poyle, the vicar’s sister, a robust, unmodulated person—had the happy inspiration and the unusual courage to address herself across it to Vereker, who was opposite, but not directly, so that when he replied they were both leaning forward. She inquired, artless body, what he thought of Lady Jane’s “panegyric,” which she had read—not connecting it however with her right-hand neighbour; and while I strained my ear for his reply I heard him, to my stupefaction, call back gaily, with his mouth full of bread: “Oh, it’s all right—it’s the usual twaddle!”

I had caught Vereker’s glance as he spoke, but Miss Poyle’s surprise was a fortunate cover for my own. “You mean he doesn’t do you justice?” said the excellent woman.

Vereker laughed out, and I was happy to be able to do the same. “It’s a charming article,” he tossed us.

Miss Poyle thrust her chin half across the cloth.

“Oh you’re so deep!” she drove home.

“As deep as the ocean! All I pretend is, the author doesn’t see—”

A dish was at this point passed over his shoulder, and we had to wait while he helped himself.

“Doesn’t see what?” my neighbour continued.

“Doesn’t see anything.”

“Dear me—how very stupid!”

“Not a bit,” Vereker laughed again. “Nobody does.”

The lady on his further side appealed to him, and Miss Poyle sank back to me. "Nobody sees anything!" she cheerfully announced; to which I replied that I had often thought so too, but had somehow taken the thought for a proof on my own part of a tremendous eye. I didn't tell her the article was mine; and I observed that Lady Jane, occupied at the end of the table, had not caught Vereker's words.

I rather avoided him after dinner, for I confess he struck me as cruelly conceited, and the revelation was a pain. "The usual twaddle"—my acute little study! That one's admiration should have had a reserve or two could gall him to that point? I had thought him placid, and he was placid enough; such a surface was the hard, polished glass that encased the bauble of his vanity. I was really ruffled, the only comfort was that if nobody saw anything George Corvick was quite as much out of it as I. This comfort however was not sufficient, after the ladies had dispersed, to carry me in the proper manner—I mean in a spotted jacket and humming an air—into the smoking-room. I took my way in some dejection to bed; but in the passage I encountered Mr. Vereker, who had been up once more to change, coming out of his room. *He* was humming an air and had on a spotted jacket, and as soon as he saw me his gaiety gave a start.

"My dear young man," he exclaimed, "I'm so glad to lay hands on you! I'm afraid I most unwittingly wounded you by those words of mine at dinner to Miss Poyle. I learned but half an hour ago from Lady Jane that you wrote the little notice in *The Middle*."

I protested that no bones were broken; but he moved with me to my own door, his hand on my shoulder, kindly feeling for a fracture; and on hearing that I had come up to bed he asked leave to cross my threshold and just tell me in three words what his qualification of my remarks had represented. It was plain he really feared I was hurt, and the sense of his solicitude suddenly made all the difference to me. My cheap review fluttered off into space, and the best things I had said in it became flat enough beside the brilliancy of his being there. I can see him there still, on my rug, in the firelight and his spotted jacket, his fine, clear face all bright with the desire to be tender to my youth. I don't know what he had at first meant to say, but I think the sight of my relief touched him, excited him, brought up words to his lips from far within. It was so these words presently conveyed to me something that, as I afterwards knew, he had never uttered to any one. I have always done justice to the generous impulse that made him speak; it was simply compunction for a snub unconsciously administered to a man of letters in a position inferior to his own, a man of letters moreover in the very act of praising him. To make the thing right he talked to me exactly as an equal and on the ground of what we both loved best. The hour, the place, the unexpectedness deepened the impression: he couldn't have done anything more exquisitely successful.

III.

"I don't quite know how to explain it to you," he said, "but it was the very fact that your notice of my book had a spice of intelligence, it was just your exceptional sharpness that produced the feeling—a very old story with me, I beg you to believe—under the momentary influence of which I used in speaking to that good lady the words you so naturally resent. I don't read the things in the newspapers unless they're thrust upon me as that one was—it's always one's best friend that does it! But I used to read them sometimes—ten years ago. I daresay they were in general rather stupider then; at any rate it always seemed to me that they missed my little point with a perfection exactly as admirable when they patted me on the back as when they kicked me in the shins. Whenever since I've happened to have a glimpse of them they were still blazing away—still missing it, I mean, deliciously. *You* miss it, my dear fellow, with inimitable assurance; the fact of your being awfully clever and your article's

being awfully nice doesn't make a hair's breadth of difference. It's quite with you rising young men," Vereker laughed, "that I feel most what a failure I am!"

I listened with intense interest; it grew intenser as he talked. "*You* a failure—heavens! What then may your 'little point' happen to be?"

"Have I got to *tell* you, after all these years and labours?" There was something in the friendly reproach of this—jocosely exaggerated—that made me, as an ardent young seeker for truth, blush to the roots of my hair. I'm as much in the dark as ever, though I've grown used in a sense to my obtuseness; at that moment, however, Vereker's happy accent made me appear to myself, and probably to him, a rare donkey. I was on the point of exclaiming, "Ah, yes, don't tell me: for my honour, for that of the craft, don't!" when he went on in a manner that showed he had read my thought and had his own idea of the probability of our some day redeeming ourselves. "By my little point I mean—what shall I call it?—the particular thing I've written my books most *for*. Isn't there for every writer a particular thing of that sort, the thing that most makes him apply himself, the thing without the effort to achieve which he wouldn't write at all, the very passion of his passion, the part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely? Well, it's *that*!"

I considered a moment. I was fascinated—easily, you'll say; but I wasn't going after all to be put off my guard. "Your description's certainly beautiful, but it doesn't make what you describe very distinct."

"I promise you it would be distinct if it should dawn on you at all." I saw that the charm of our topic overflowed for my companion into an emotion as lively as my own. "At any rate," he went on, "I can speak for myself: there's an idea in my work without which I wouldn't have given a straw for the whole job. It's the finest, fullest intention of the lot, and the application of it has been, I think, a triumph of patience, of ingenuity. I ought to leave that to somebody else to say; but that nobody does say it is precisely what we're talking about. It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it. So it's naturally the thing for the critic to look for. It strikes me," my visitor added, smiling, "even as the thing for the critic to find."

This seemed a responsibility indeed. "You call it a little trick?"

"That's only my little modesty. It's really an exquisite scheme."

"And you hold that you've carried the scheme out?"

"The way I've carried it out is the thing in life I think a bit well of myself for."

I was silent a moment. "Don't you think you ought—just a trifle—to assist the critic?"

"Assist him? What else have I done with every stroke of my pen? I've shouted my intention in his great blank face!" At this, laughing out again, Vereker laid his hand on my shoulder to show that the allusion was not to my personal appearance.

"But you talk about the initiated. There must therefore, you see, be initiation."

"What else in heaven's name is criticism supposed to be?" I'm afraid I coloured at this too; but I took refuge in repeating that his account of his silver lining was poor in something or other that a plain man knows things by. "That's only because you've never had a glimpse of it," he replied. "If you had had one the element in question would soon have become practically all you'd see. To me it's exactly as palpable as the marble of this chimney. Besides, the critic just *isn't* a plain man: if he were, pray, what would he be doing in his

neighbour's garden? You're anything but a plain man yourself, and the very *raison d'être* of you all is that you're little demons of subtlety. If my great affair's a secret, that's only because it's a secret in spite of itself—the amazing event has made it one. I not only never took the smallest precaution to do so, but never dreamed of any such accident. If I had I shouldn't in advance have had the heart to go on. As it was I only became aware little by little, and meanwhile I had done my work."

"And now you quite like it?" I risked.

"My work?"

"Your secret. It's the same thing."

"Your guessing that," Vereker replied, "is a proof that you're as clever as I say!" I was encouraged by this to remark that he would clearly be pained to part with it, and he confessed that it was indeed with him now the great amusement of life. "I live almost to see if it will ever be detected." He looked at me for a jesting challenge; something at the back of his eyes seemed to peep out. "But I needn't worry—it won't!"

"You fire me as I've never been fired," I returned; "you make me determined to do or die." Then I asked: "Is it a kind of esoteric message?"

His countenance fell at this—he put out his hand as if to bid me good-night. "Ah, my dear fellow, it can't be described in cheap journalese!"

I knew of course he would be awfully fastidious, but our talk had made me feel how much his nerves were exposed. I was unsatisfied—I kept hold of his hand. "I won't make use of the expression then," I said, "in the article in which I shall eventually announce my discovery, though I daresay I shall have hard work to do without it. But meanwhile, just to hasten that difficult birth, can't you give a fellow a clue?" I felt much more at my ease.

"My whole lucid effort gives him a clue—every page and line and letter. The thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma."

I scratched my head. "Is it something in the style or something in the thought? An element of form or an element of feeling?"

He indulgently shook my hand again, and I felt my questions to be crude and my distinctions pitiful. "Good-night, my dear boy—don't bother about it. After all, you do like a fellow."

"And a little intelligence might spoil it?" I still detained him.

He hesitated. "Well, you've got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling? What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life."

"I see—it's some idea about life, some sort of philosophy. Unless it be," I added with the eagerness of a thought perhaps still happier, "some kind of game you're up to with your style, something you're after in the language. Perhaps it's a preference for the letter P!" I ventured profanely to break out. "Papa, potatoes, prunes—that sort of thing?" He was suitably indulgent: he only said I hadn't got the right letter. But his amusement was over; I could see he was bored. There was nevertheless something else I had absolutely to learn. "Should you be able, pen in hand, to state it clearly yourself—to name it, phrase it, formulate it?"

"Oh," he almost passionately sighed, "if I were only, pen in hand, one of *you* chaps!"

"That would be a great chance for you of course. But why should you despise us chaps for not doing what you can't do yourself?"

“Can’t do?” He opened his eyes. “Haven’t I done it in twenty volumes? I do it in my way,” he continued. “You don’t do it in yours.”

“Ours is so devilish difficult,” I weakly observed.

“So is mine. We each choose our own. There’s no compulsion. You won’t come down and smoke?”

“No. I want to think this thing out.”

“You’ll tell me then in the morning that you’ve laid me bare?”

“I’ll see what I can do; I’ll sleep on it. But just one word more,” I added. We had left the room—I walked again with him a few steps along the passage. “This extraordinary ‘general intention,’ as you call it—for that’s the most vivid description I can induce you to make of it—is then generally a sort of buried treasure?”

His face lighted. “Yes, call it that, though it’s perhaps not for me to do so.”

“Nonsense!” I laughed. “You know you’re hugely proud of it.”

“Well, I didn’t propose to tell you so; but it *is* the joy of my soul!”

“You mean it’s a beauty so rare, so great?”

He hesitated a moment. “The loveliest thing in the world!” We had stopped, and on these words he left me; but at the end of the corridor, while I looked after him rather yearningly, he turned and caught sight of my puzzled face. It made him earnestly, indeed I thought quite anxiously, shake his head and wave his finger. “Give it up—give it up!”

This wasn’t a challenge—it was fatherly advice. If I had had one of his books at hand I would have repeated my recent act of faith—I would have spent half the night with him. At three o’clock in the morning, not sleeping, remembering moreover how indispensable he was to Lady Jane, I stole down to the library with a candle. There wasn’t, so far as I could discover, a line of his writing in the house.

IV

Returning to town I feverishly collected them all; I picked out each in its order and held it up to the light. This gave me a maddening month, in the course of which several things took place. One of these, the last, I may as well immediately mention, was that I acted on Vereker’s advice: I renounced my ridiculous attempt. I could really make nothing of the business; it proved a dead loss. After all, before, as he had himself observed, I liked him; and what now occurred was simply that my new intelligence and vain preoccupation damaged my liking. I not only failed to find his general intention—I found myself missing the subordinate intentions I had formerly found. His books didn’t even remain the charming things they had been for me; the exasperation of my search put me out of conceit of them. Instead of being a pleasure the more they became a resource the less; for from the moment I was unable to follow up the author’s hint I of course felt it a point of honour not to make use professionally of my knowledge of them. I *had* no knowledge—nobody had any. It was humiliating, but I could bear it—they only annoyed me now. At last they even bored me, and I accounted for my confusion—perversely, I confess—by the idea that Vereker had made a fool of me. The buried treasure was a bad joke, the general intention a monstrous *pose*.

The great incident of the time however was that I told George Corvick all about the matter and that my information had an immense effect upon him. He had at last come back, but so, unfortunately, had Mrs. Erme, and there was as yet, I could see, no question of his nuptials. He was immensely stirred up by the anecdote I had brought from Bridges; it fell in so

completely with the sense he had had from the first that there was more in Vereker than met the eye. When I remarked that the eye seemed what the printed page had been expressly invented to meet he immediately accused me of being spiteful because I had been foiled. Our commerce had always that pleasant latitude. The thing Vereker had mentioned to me was exactly the thing he, Corvick, had wanted me to speak of in my review. On my suggesting at last that with the assistance I had now given him he would doubtless be prepared to speak of it himself he admitted freely that before doing this there was more he must understand. What he would have said, had he reviewed the new book, was that there was evidently in the writer's inmost art something to *be* understood. I hadn't so much as hinted at that: no wonder the writer hadn't been flattered! I asked Corvick what he really considered he meant by his own supersubtlety, and, unmistakably kindled, he replied: "It isn't for the vulgar—it isn't for the vulgar!" He had hold of the tail of something; he would pull hard, pull it right out. He pumped me dry on Vereker's strange confidence and, pronouncing me the luckiest of mortals, mentioned half a dozen questions he wished to goodness I had had the gumption to put. Yet on the other hand he didn't want to be told too much—it would spoil the fun of seeing what would come. The failure of my fun was at the moment of our meeting not complete, but I saw it ahead, and Corvick saw that I saw it. I, on my side, saw likewise that one of the first things he would do would be to rush off with my story to Gwendolen.

On the very day after my talk with him I was surprised by the receipt of a note from Hugh Vereker, to whom our encounter at Bridges had been recalled, as he mentioned, by his falling, in a magazine, on some article to which my signature was appended. "I read it with great pleasure," he wrote, "and remembered under its influence our lively conversation by your bedroom fire. The consequence of this has been that I begin to measure the temerity of my having saddled you with a knowledge that you may find something of a burden. Now that the fit's over I can't imagine how I came to be moved so much beyond my wont. I had never before related, no matter in what expansion, the history of my little secret, and I shall never speak of the business again. I was accidentally so much more explicit with you than it had ever entered into my game to be, that I find this game—I mean the pleasure of playing it—suffers considerably. In short, if you can understand it, I've spoiled a part of my fun. I really don't want to give anybody what I believe you clever young men call the tip. That's of course a selfish solicitude, and I name it to you for what it may be worth to you. If you're disposed to humour me, don't repeat my revelation. Think me demented—it's your right; but don't tell anybody why."

The sequel to this communication was that as early on the morrow as I dared I drove straight to Mr. Vereker's door. He occupied in those years one of the honest old houses in Kensington-square. He received me immediately, and as soon as I came in I saw I had not lost my power to minister to his mirth. He laughed out at the sight of my face, which doubtless expressed my perturbation. I had been indiscreet—my compunction was great. "I *have* told somebody," I panted, "and I'm sure that, person will by this time have told somebody else! It's a woman, into the bargain."

"The person you've told?"

"No, the other person. I'm quite sure he must have told her."

"For all the good it will do her—or do *me*! A woman will never find out."

"No, but she'll talk all over the place: she'll do just what you don't want."

Vereker thought a moment, but he was not so disconcerted as I had feared: he felt that if the harm was done it only served him right. "It doesn't matter—don't worry."

"I'll do my best, I promise you, that your talk with me shall go no further."

“Very good; do what you can.”

“In the meantime,” I pursued, “George Corvick’s possession of the tip may, on his part, really lead to something.”

“That will be a brave day.”

I told him about Corvick’s cleverness, his admiration, the intensity of his interest in my anecdote; and without making too much of the divergence of our respective estimates mentioned that my friend was already of opinion that he saw much further into a certain affair than most people. He was quite as fired as I had been at Bridges. He was moreover in love with the young lady: perhaps the two together would puzzle something out.

Vereker seemed struck with this. “Do you mean they’re to be married?”

“I daresay that’s what it will come to.”

“That may help them,” he conceded, “but we must give them time!”

I spoke of my own renewed assault and confessed my difficulties; whereupon he repeated his former advice: “Give it up, give it up!” He evidently didn’t think me intellectually equipped for the adventure. I stayed half an hour, and he was most good-natured, but I couldn’t help pronouncing him a man of shifting moods. He had been free with me in a mood, he had repented in a mood, and now in a mood he had turned indifferent. This general levity helped me to believe that, so far as the subject of the tip went, there wasn’t much in it. I contrived however to make him answer a few more questions about it, though he did so with visible impatience. For himself, beyond doubt, the thing we were all so blank about was vividly there. It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet. He highly approved of this image when I used it, and he used another himself. “It’s the very string,” he said, “that my pearls are strung on!” The reason of his note to me had been that he really didn’t want to give us a grain of succour—our destiny was a thing too perfect in its way to touch. He had formed the habit of depending upon it, and if the spell was to break it must break by some force of its own. He comes back to me from that last occasion—for I was never to speak to him again—as a man with some safe secret for enjoyment. I wondered as I walked away where he had got *his* tip.

V

When I spoke to George Corvick of the caution I had received he made me feel that any doubt of his delicacy would be almost an insult. He had instantly told Gwendolen, but Gwendolen’s ardent response was in itself a pledge of discretion. The question would now absorb them, and they would enjoy their fun too much to wish to share it with the crowd. They appeared to have caught instinctively Vereker’s peculiar notion of fun. Their intellectual pride, however, was not such as to make them indifferent to any further light I might throw on the affair they had in hand. They were indeed of the “artistic temperament,” and I was freshly struck with my colleague’s power to excite himself over a question of art. He called it letters, he called it life—it was all one thing. In what he said I now seemed to understand that he spoke equally for Gwendolen, to whom, as soon as Mrs. Erme was sufficiently better to allow her a little leisure, he made a point of introducing me. I remember our calling together one Sunday in August at a huddled house in Chelsea, and my renewed envy of Corvick’s possession of a friend who had some light to mingle with his own. He could say things to her that I could never say to him. She had indeed no sense of humour and, with her pretty way of holding her head on one side, was one of those persons whom you want, as the phrase is, to shake, but who have learnt Hungarian by themselves. She conversed perhaps in Hungarian with Corvick; she had remarkably little English for his friend. Corvick

afterwards told me that I had chilled her by my apparent indisposition to oblige her with the detail of what Vereker had said to me. I admitted that I felt I had given thought enough to this exposure: hadn't I even made up my mind that it was hollow, wouldn't stand the test? The importance they attached to it was irritating—it rather envenomed my dissent.

That statement looks unamiable, and what probably happened was that I felt humiliated at seeing other persons derive a daily joy from an experiment which had brought me only chagrin. I was out in the cold while, by the evening fire, under the lamp, they followed the chase for which I myself had sounded the horn. They did as I had done, only more deliberately and sociably—they went over their author from the beginning. There was no hurry, Corvick said—the future was before them and the fascination could only grow; they would take him page by page, as they would take one of the classics, inhale him in slow draughts and let him sink deep in. I doubt whether they would have got so wound up if they had not been in love: poor Vereker's secret gave them endless occasion to put their young heads together. None the less it represented the kind of problem for which Corvick had a special aptitude, drew out the particular pointed patience of which, had he lived, he would have given more striking and, it is to be hoped, more fruitful examples. He at least was, in Vereker's words, a little demon of subtlety. We had begun by disputing, but I soon saw that without my stirring a finger his infatuation would have its bad hours. He would bound off on false scents as I had done—he would clap his hands over new lights and see them blown out by the wind of the turned page. He was like nothing, I told him, but the maniacs who embrace some bedlamitical theory of the cryptic character of Shakespeare. To this he replied that if we had had Shakespeare's own word for his being cryptic he would immediately have accepted it. The case there was altogether different—we had nothing but the word of Mr. Snooks. I rejoined that I was stupefied to see him attach such importance even to the word of Mr. Vereker. He inquired thereupon whether I treated Mr. Vereker's word as a lie. I wasn't perhaps prepared, in my unhappy rebound, to go as far as that, but I insisted that till the contrary was proved I should view it as too fond an imagination. I didn't, I confess, say—I didn't at that time quite know—all I felt. Deep down, as Miss Erme would have said, I was uneasy, I was expectant. At the core of my personal confusion—for my curiosity lived in its ashes—was the sharpness of a sense that Corvick would at last probably come out somewhere. He made, in defence of his credulity, a great point of the fact that from of old, in his study of this genius, he had caught whiffs and hints of he didn't know what, faint wandering notes of a hidden music. That was just the rarity, that was the charm: it fitted so perfectly into what I reported.

If I returned on several occasions to the little house in Chelsea I daresay it was as much for news of Vereker as for news of Miss Erme's mamma. The hours spent there by Corvick were present to my fancy as those of a chessplayer bent with a silent scowl, all the lamplit winter, over his board and his moves. As my imagination filled it out the picture held me fast. On the other side of the table was a ghostlier form, the faint figure of an antagonist good-humouredly but a little wearily secure—an antagonist who leaned back in his chair with his hands in his pockets and a smile on his fine clear face. Close to Corvick, behind him, was a girl who had begun to strike me as pale and wasted and even, on more familiar view, as rather handsome, and who rested on his shoulder and hung upon his moves. He would take up a chessman and hold it poised a while over one of the little squares, and then he would put it back in its place with a long sigh of disappointment. The young lady, at this, would slightly but uneasily shift her position and look across, very hard, very long, very strangely, at their dim participant. I had asked them at an early stage of the business if it mightn't contribute to their success to have some closer communication with him. The special circumstances would surely be held to have given me a right to introduce them. Corvick immediately replied that he had no wish

to approach the altar before he had prepared the sacrifice. He quite agreed with our friend both as to the sport and as to the honour—he would bring down the animal with his own rifle. When I asked him if Miss Erme were as keen a shot he said after an hesitation: “No; I’m ashamed to say she wants to set a trap. She’d give anything to see him; she says she requires another tip. She’s really quite morbid about it. But she must play fair—she *shan’t* see him!” he emphatically added. I had a suspicion that they had even quarrelled a little on the subject—a suspicion not corrected by the way he more than once exclaimed to me: “She’s quite incredibly literary, you know—quite fantastically!” I remember his saying of her that she felt in italics and thought in capitals. “Oh, when I’ve run him to earth,” he also said, “then, you know, I shall knock at his door. Rather—I beg you to believe. I’ll have it from his own lips: ‘Right you are, my boy; you’ve done it this time!’ He shall crown me victor—with the critical laurel.”

Meanwhile he really avoided the chances London life might have given him of meeting the distinguished novelist; a danger however that disappeared with Vereker’s leaving England for an indefinite absence, as the newspapers announced—going to the south for motives connected with the health of his wife, which had long kept her in retirement. A year—more than a year—had elapsed since the incident at Bridges, but I had not encountered him again. I think at bottom I was rather ashamed—I hated to remind him that though I had irremediably missed his point a reputation for acuteness was rapidly overtaking me. This scruple led me a dance; kept me out of Lady Jane’s house, made me even decline, when in spite of my bad manners she was a second time so good as to make me a sign, an invitation to her beautiful seat. I once saw her with Vereker at a concert and was sure I was seen by them, but I slipped out without being caught. I felt, as on that occasion I splashed along in the rain, that I couldn’t have done anything else; and yet I remember saying to myself that it was hard, was even cruel. Not only had I lost the books, but I had lost the man himself: they and their author had been alike spoiled for me. I knew too which was the loss I most regretted. I had liked the man still better than I had liked the books.

VI

Six months after Vereker had left England George Corvick, who made his living by his pen, contracted for a piece of work which imposed on him an absence of some length and a journey of some difficulty, and his undertaking of which was much of a surprise to me. His brother-in-law had become editor of a great provincial paper, and the great provincial paper, in a fine flight of fancy, had conceived the idea of sending a “special commissioner” to India. Special commissioners had begun, in the “metropolitan press,” to be the fashion, and the journal in question felt that it had passed too long for a mere country cousin. Corvick had no hand, I knew, for the big brush of the correspondent, but that was his brother-in-law’s affair, and the fact that a particular task was not in his line was apt to be with himself exactly a reason for accepting it. He was prepared to out-Herod the metropolitan press; he took solemn precautions against priggishness, he exquisitely outraged taste. Nobody ever knew it—the taste was all his own. In addition to his expenses he was to be conveniently paid, and I found myself able to help him, for the usual fat book, to a plausible arrangement with the usual fat publisher. I naturally inferred that his obvious desire to make a little money was not unconnected with the prospect of a union with Gwendolen Erme. I was aware that her mother’s opposition was largely addressed to his want of means and of lucrative abilities, but it so happened that, on my saying the last time I saw him something that bore on the question of his separation from our young lady, he exclaimed with an emphasis that startled me: “Ah, I’m not a bit engaged to her, you know!”

“Not overtly,” I answered, “because her mother doesn’t like you. But I’ve always taken for granted a private understanding.”

“Well, there *was* one. But there isn’t now.” That was all he said, except something about Mrs. Erme’s having got on her feet again in the most extraordinary way—a remark from which I gathered he wished me to think he meant that private understandings were of little use when the doctor didn’t share them. What I took the liberty of really thinking was that the girl might in some way have estranged him. Well, if he had taken the turn of jealousy for instance it could scarcely be jealousy of me. In that case (besides the absurdity of it) he wouldn’t have gone away to leave us together. For some time before his departure we had indulged in no allusion to the buried treasure, and from his silence, of which mine was the consequence, I had drawn a sharp conclusion. His courage had dropped, his ardour had gone the way of mine—this inference at least he left me to enjoy. More than that he couldn’t do; he couldn’t face the triumph with which I might have greeted an explicit admission. He needn’t have been afraid, poor dear, for I had by this time lost all need to triumph. In fact I considered that I showed magnanimity in not reproaching him with his collapse, for the sense of his having thrown up the game made me feel more than ever how much I at last depended on him. If Corvick had broken down I should never know; no one would be of any use if *he* wasn’t. It wasn’t a bit true that I had ceased to care for knowledge; little by little my curiosity had not only begun to ache again, but had become the familiar torment of my consciousness. There are doubtless people to whom torments of such an order appear hardly more natural than the contortions of disease; but I don’t know after all why I should in this connection so much as mention them. For the few persons, at any rate, abnormal or not, with whom my anecdote is concerned, literature was a game of skill, and skill meant courage, and courage meant honour, and honour meant passion, meant life. The stake on the table was of a different substance, and our roulette was the revolving mind, but we sat round the green board as intently as the grim gamblers at Monte Carlo. Gwendolen Erme, for that matter, with her white face and her fixed eyes, was of the very type of the lean ladies one had met in the temples of chance. I recognised in Corvick’s absence that she made this analogy vivid. It was extravagant, I admit, the way she lived for the art of the pen. Her passion visibly preyed upon her, and in her presence I felt almost tepid. I got hold of “Deep Down” again: it was a desert in which she had lost herself, but in which too she had dug a wonderful hole in the sand—a cavity out of which Corvick had still more remarkably pulled her.

Early in March I had a telegram from her, in consequence of which I repaired immediately to Chelsea, where the first thing she said to me was: “He has got it, he has got it!”

She was moved, as I could see, to such depths that she must mean the great thing. “Vereker’s idea?”

“His general intention. George has cabled from Bombay.”

She had the missive open there; it was emphatic, but it was brief. “Eureka. Immense.” That was all—he had saved the money of the signature. I shared her emotion, but I was disappointed. “He doesn’t say what it is.”

“How could he—in a telegram? He’ll write it.”

“But how does he know?”

“Know it’s the real thing? Oh, I’m sure when you see it you do know. *Vera incessu patuit dea!*”

“It’s you, Miss Erme, who are a dear for bringing me such news!”—I went all lengths in my high spirits. “But fancy finding our goddess in the temple of Vishnu! How strange of George

to have been able to go into the thing again in the midst of such different and such powerful solicitations!”

“He hasn’t gone into it, I know; it’s the thing itself, let severely alone for six months, that has simply sprung out at him like a tigress out of the jungle. He didn’t take a book with him—on purpose; indeed he wouldn’t have needed to—he knows every page, as I do, by heart. They all worked in him together, and some day somewhere, when he wasn’t thinking, they fell, in all their superb intricacy, into the one right combination. The figure in the carpet came out. That’s the way he knew it would come and the real reason—you didn’t in the least understand, but I suppose I may tell you now—why he went and why I consented to his going. We knew the change would do it, the difference of thought, of scene, would give the needed touch, the magic shake. We had perfectly, we had admirably calculated. The elements were all in his mind, and in the *secousse* of a new and intense experience they just struck light.” She positively struck light herself—she was literally, facially luminous. I stammered something about unconscious cerebration, and she continued: “He’ll come right home—this will bring him.”

“To see Vereker, you mean?”

“To see Vereker—and to see *me*. Think what he’ll have to tell me!”

I hesitated. “About India?”

“About fiddlesticks! About Vereker—about the figure in the carpet.”

“But, as you say, we shall surely have that in a letter.”

She thought like one inspired, and I remembered how Corvick had told me long before that her face was interesting. “Perhaps it won’t go in a letter if it’s ‘immense.’”

“Perhaps not if it’s immense bosh. If he has got something that won’t go in a letter he hasn’t got *the* thing. Vereker’s own statement to me was exactly that the ‘figure’ *would* go in a letter.”

“Well, I cabled to George an hour ago—two words,” said Gwendolen.

“Is it indiscreet of me to inquire what they were?”

She hung fire, but at last she brought them out. “‘Angel, write.’”

“Good!” I exclaimed. “I’ll make it sure—I’ll send him the same.”

VII

My words however were not absolutely the same—I put something instead of “angel”; and in the sequel my epithet seemed the more apt, for when eventually we heard from Corvick it was merely, it was thoroughly to be tantalised. He was magnificent in his triumph, he described his discovery as stupendous; but his ecstasy only obscured it—there were to be no particulars till he should have submitted his conception to the supreme authority. He had thrown up his commission, he had thrown up his book, he had thrown up everything but the instant need to hurry to Rapallo, on the Genoese shore, where Vereker was making a stay. I wrote him a letter which was to await him at Aden—I besought him to relieve my suspense. That he found my letter was indicated by a telegram which, reaching me after weary days and without my having received an answer to my laconic dispatch at Bombay, was evidently intended as a reply to both communications. Those few words were in familiar French, the French of the day, which Corvick often made use of to show he wasn’t a prig. It had for some persons the opposite effect, but his message may fairly be paraphrased. “Have patience; I want to see, as it breaks on you, the face you’ll make!” “*Tellement envie de voir ta tête!*”—

that was what I had to sit down with. I can certainly not be said to have sat down, for I seem to remember myself at this time as rushing constantly between the little house in Chelsea and my own. Our impatience, Gwendolen's and mine, was equal, but I kept hoping her light would be greater. We all spent during this episode, for people of our means, a great deal of money in telegrams, and I counted on the receipt of news from Rapallo immediately after the junction of the discoverer with the discovered. The interval seemed an age, but late one day I heard a hansom rattle up to my door with a crash engendered by a hint of liberality. I lived with my heart in my mouth and I bounded to the window—a movement which gave me a view of a young lady erect on the footboard of the vehicle and eagerly looking up at my house. At sight of me she flourished a paper with a movement that brought me straight down, the movement with which, in melodramas, handkerchiefs and reprieves are flourished at the foot of the scaffold.

“Just seen Vereker—not a note wrong. Pressed me to bosom—keeps me a month.” So much I read on her paper while the cabby dropped a grin from his perch. In my excitement I paid him profusely and in hers she suffered it; then as he drove away we started to walk about and talk. We had talked, heaven knows, enough before, but this was a wondrous lift. We pictured the whole scene at Rapallo, where he would have written, mentioning my name, for permission to call; that is *I* pictured it, having more material than my companion, whom I felt hang on my lips as we stopped on purpose before shop-windows we didn't look into. About one thing we were clear: if he was staying on for fuller communication we should at least have a letter from him that would help us through the dregs of delay. We understood his staying on, and yet each of us saw, I think, that the other hated it. The letter we were clear about arrived; it was for Gwendolen, and I called upon her in time to save her the trouble of bringing it to me. She didn't read it out, as was natural enough; but she repeated to me what it chiefly embodied. This consisted of the remarkable statement that he would tell her when they were married exactly what she wanted to know.

“Only when we're married—not before,” she explained. “It's tantamount to saying—isn't it?—that I must marry him straight off!” She smiled at me while I flushed with disappointment, a vision of fresh delay that made me at first unconscious of my surprise. It seemed more than a hint that on me as well he would impose some tiresome condition. Suddenly, while she reported several more things from his letter, I remembered what he had told me before going away. He found Mr. Vereker deliriously interesting and his own possession of the secret a kind of intoxication. The buried treasure was all gold and gems. Now that it was there it seemed to grow and grow before him; it was in all time, in all tongues, one of the most wonderful flowers of art. Nothing, above all, when once one was face to face with it, had been more consummately done. When once it came out it came out, was there with a splendour that made you ashamed; and there had not been, save in the bottomless vulgarity of the age, with every one tasteless and tainted, every sense stopped, the smallest reason why it should have been overlooked. It was immense, but it was simple—it was simple, but it was immense, and the final knowledge of it was an experience quite apart. He intimated that the charm of such an experience, the desire to drain it, in its freshness, to the last drop, was what kept him there close to the source. Gwendolen, frankly radiant as she tossed me these fragments, showed the elation of a prospect more assured than my own. That brought me back to the question of her marriage, prompted me to ask her if what she meant by what she had just surprised me with was that she was under an engagement.

“Of course I am!” she answered. “Didn't you know it?” She appeared astonished; but I was still more so, for Corvick had told me the exact contrary. I didn't mention this, however; I only reminded her that I had not been to that degree in her confidence, or even in Corvick's, and that moreover I was not in ignorance of her mother's interdict. At bottom I was troubled

by the disparity of the two assertions; but after a moment I felt that Corvick's was the one I least doubted. This simply reduced me to asking myself if the girl had on the spot improvised an engagement—vamped up an old one or dashed off a new—in order to arrive at the satisfaction she desired. I reflected that she had resources of which I was destitute; but she made her case slightly more intelligible by rejoining presently: “What the state of things has been is that we felt of course bound to do nothing in mamma's lifetime.”

“But now you think you'll just dispense with your mother's consent?”

“Ah, it may not come to that!” I wondered what it might come to, and she went on: “Poor dear, she may swallow the dose. In fact, you know,” she added with a laugh, “she really *must!*”—a proposition of which, on behalf of every one concerned, I fully acknowledged the force.

VIII

Nothing more annoying had ever happened to me than to become aware before Corvick's arrival in England that I should not be there to put him through. I found myself abruptly called to Germany by the alarming illness of my younger brother, who, against my advice, had gone to Munich to study, at the feet indeed of a great master, the art of portraiture in oils. The near relative who made him an allowance had threatened to withdraw it if he should, under specious pretexts, turn for superior truth to Paris—Paris being somehow, for a Cheltenham aunt, the school of evil, the abyss. I deplored this prejudice at the time, and the deep injury of it was now visible—first in the fact that it had not saved the poor boy, who was clever, frail and foolish, from congestion of the lungs, and second in the greater remoteness from London to which the event condemned me. I am afraid that what was uppermost in my mind during several anxious weeks was the sense that if we had only been in Paris I might have run over to see Corvick. This was actually out of the question from every point of view: my brother, whose recovery gave us both plenty to do, was ill for three months, during which I never left him and at the end of which we had to face the absolute prohibition of a return to England. The consideration of climate imposed itself, and he was in no state to meet it alone. I took him to Meran and there spent the summer with him, trying to show him by example how to get back to work and nursing a rage of another sort that I tried not to show him.

The whole business proved the first of a series of phenomena so strangely combined that, taken together (which was how I had to take them) they form as good an illustration as I can recall of the manner in which, for the good of his soul doubtless, fate sometimes deals with a man's avidity. These incidents certainly had larger bearings than the comparatively meagre consequence we are here concerned with—though I feel that consequence also to be a thing to speak of with some respect. It's mainly in such a light, I confess, at any rate, that at this hour the ugly fruit of my exile is present to me. Even at first indeed the spirit in which my avidity, as I have called it, made me regard this term owed no element of ease to the fact that before coming back from Rapallo George Corvick addressed me in a way I didn't like. His letter had none of the sedative action that I must to-day profess myself sure he had wished to give it, and the march of occurrences was not so ordered as to make up for what it lacked. He had begun on the spot, for one of the quarterlies, a great last word on Vereker's writings, and this exhaustive study, the only one that would have counted, have existed, was to turn on the new light, to utter—oh, so quietly!—the unimagined truth. It was in other words to trace the figure in the carpet through every convolution, to reproduce it in every tint. The result, said Corvick, was to be the greatest literary portrait ever painted, and what he asked of me was just to be so good as not to trouble him with questions till he should hang up his masterpiece before me. He did me the honour to declare that, putting aside the great sitter himself, all aloft in his indifference, I was individually the connoisseur he was most working for. I was

therefore to be a good boy and not try to peep under the curtain before the show-was ready: I should enjoy it all the more if I sat very still.

I did my best to sit very still, but I couldn't help giving a jump on seeing in *The Times* after I had been a week or two in Munich and before, as I knew, Corvick had reached London, the announcement of the sudden death of poor Mrs. Erme. I instantly wrote to Gwendolen for particulars, and she replied that her mother had succumbed to long-threatened failure of the heart. She didn't say, but I took the liberty of reading into her words, that from the point of view of her marriage and also of her eagerness, which was quite a match for mine, this was a solution more prompt than could have been expected and more radical than waiting for the old lady to swallow the dose. I candidly admit indeed that at the time—for I heard from her repeatedly—I read some singular things into Gwendolen's words and some still more extraordinary ones into her silences. Pen in hand, this way, I live the time over, and it brings back the oddest sense of my having been for months and in spite of myself a kind of coerced spectator. All my life had taken refuge in my eyes, which the procession of events appeared to have committed itself to keep astare. There were days when I thought of writing to Hugh Vereker and simply throwing myself on his charity. But I felt more deeply that I hadn't fallen quite so low, besides which, quite properly, he would send me about my business. Mrs. Erme's death brought Corvick straight home, and within the month he was united "very quietly"—as quietly I suppose as he meant in his article to bring out his *trouvaille*—to the young lady he had loved and quitted. I use this last term, I may parenthetically say, because I subsequently grew sure that at the time he went to India, at the time of his great news from Bombay, there was no engagement whatever. There was none at the moment she affirmed the opposite. On the other hand he certainly became engaged the day he returned. The happy pair went down to Torquay for their honeymoon, and there, in a reckless hour, it occurred to poor Corvick to take his young bride a drive. He had no command of that business: this had been brought home to me of old in a little tour we had once made together in a dogcart. In a dogcart he perched his companion for a rattle over Devonshire hills, on one of the likeliest of which he brought his horse, who, it was true, had bolted, down with such violence that the occupants of the cart were hurled forward and that he fell horribly on his head. He was killed on the spot; Gwendolen escaped unhurt.

I pass rapidly over the question of this unmitigated tragedy, of what the loss of my best friend meant for me, and I complete my little history of my patience and my pain by the frank statement of my having, in a postscript to my very first letter to her after the receipt of the hideous news, asked Mrs. Corvick whether her husband had not at least finished the great article on Vereker. Her answer was as prompt as my inquiry: the article, which had been barely begun, was a mere heartbreaking scrap. She explained that Corvick had just settled down to it when he was interrupted by her mother's death; then, on his return, he had been kept from work by the engrossments into which that calamity plunged them. The opening pages were all that existed; they were striking, they were promising, but they didn't unveil the idol. That great intellectual feat was obviously to have formed his climax. She said nothing more, nothing to enlighten me as to the state of her own knowledge—the knowledge for the acquisition of which I had conceived her doing prodigious things. This was above all what I wanted to know: had *she* seen the idol unveiled? Had there been a private ceremony for a palpitating audience of one? For what else but that ceremony had the previous ceremony been enacted? I didn't like as yet to press her, though when I thought of what had passed between us on the subject in Corvick's absence her reticence surprised me. It was therefore not till much later, from Meran, that I risked another appeal, risked it in some trepidation, for she continued to tell me nothing. "Did you hear in those few days of your blighted bliss," I

wrote, "what we desired so to hear?" I said "we" as a little hint; and she showed me she could take a little hint. "I heard everything," she replied, "and I mean to keep it to myself!"

IX

It was impossible not to be moved with the strongest sympathy for her, and on my return to England I showed her every kindness in my power. Her mother's death had made her means sufficient, and she had gone to live in a more convenient quarter. But her loss had been great and her visitation cruel; it never would have occurred to me moreover to suppose she could come to regard the enjoyment of a technical tip, of a piece of literary experience, as a counterpoise to her grief. Strange to say, none the less, I couldn't help fancying after I had seen her a few times that I caught a glimpse of some such oddity. I hasten to add that there had been other things I couldn't help fancying; and as I never felt I was really clear about these, so, as to the point I here touch on, I give her memory the benefit of every doubt. Stricken and solitary, highly accomplished and now, in her deep mourning, her maturer grace, and her uncomplaining sorrow incontestably handsome, she presented herself as leading a life of singular dignity and beauty. I had at first found a way to believe that I should soon get the better of the reserve formulated the week after the catastrophe in her reply to an appeal as to which I was not unconscious that it might strike her as mistimed. Certainly that reserve was something of a shock to me—certainly it puzzled me the more I thought of it, though I tried to explain it, with moments of success, by the supposition of exalted sentiments, of superstitious scruples, of a refinement of loyalty. Certainly it added at the same time hugely to the price of Vereker's secret, precious as that mystery already appeared. I may as well confess abjectly that Mrs. Corvick's unexpected attitude was the final tap on the nail that was to fix, as they say, my luckless idea, convert it into the obsession of which I am for ever conscious. But this only helped me the more to be artful, to be adroit, to allow time to elapse before renewing my suit. There were plenty of speculations for the interval, and one of them was deeply absorbing. Corvick had kept his information from his young friend till after the removal of the last barriers to their intimacy; then he had let the cat out of the bag. Was it Gwendolen's idea, taking a hint from him, to liberate this animal only on the basis of the renewal of such a relation? Was the figure in the carpet traceable or describable only for husbands and wives—for lovers supremely united? It came back to me in a mystifying manner that in Kensington-square, when I told him that Corvick would have told the girl he loved, some word had dropped from Vereker that gave colour to this possibility. There might be little in it, but there was enough to make me wonder if I should have to marry Mrs. Corvick to get what I wanted. Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge? Ah! that way madness lay—so I said to myself at least in bewildered hours. I could see meanwhile the torch she refused to pass on flame away in her chamber of memory—pour through her eyes a light that made a glow in her lonely house. At the end of six months I was fully sure of what this warm presence made up to her for. We had talked again and again of the man who had brought us together, of his talent, his character, his personal charm, his certain career, his dreadful doom, and even of his clear purpose in that great study which was to have been a supreme literary portrait, a kind of critical Vandyke or Velasquez. She had conveyed to me in abundance that she was tongue-tied by her perversity, by her piety, that she would never break the silence it had not been given to the "right person," as she said, to break. The hour however finally arrived. One evening when I had been sitting with her longer than usual I laid my hand firmly on her arm.

"Now, at last, what *is* it?"

She had been expecting me; she was ready. She gave a long, slow, soundless headshake, merciful only in being inarticulate. This mercy didn't prevent its hurling at me the largest,

finest, coldest “Never!” I had yet, in the course of a life that had known denials, had to take full in the face. I took it and was aware that with the hard blow the tears had come into my eyes. So for a while we sat and looked at each other; after which I slowly rose. I was wondering if some day she would accept me; but this was not what I brought out. I said as I smoothed down my hat: “I know what to think then; it’s nothing!”

A remote, disdainful pity for me shone out of her dim smile; then she exclaimed in a voice that I hear at this moment: “It’s my *life!*” As I stood at the door she added: “You’ve insulted him!”

“Do you mean Vereker?”

“I mean—the Dead!”

I recognised when I reached the street the justice of her charge. Yes, it was her life—I recognised that too; but her life none the less made room with the lapse of time for another interest. A year and a half after Corvick’s death she published in a single volume her second novel, “Overmastered,” which I pounced on in the hope of finding in it some tell-tale echo or some peeping face. All I found was a much better book than her younger performance, showing I thought the better company she had kept. As a tissue tolerably intricate it was a carpet with a figure of its own; but the figure was not the figure I was looking for. On sending a review of it to *The Middle* I was surprised to learn from the office that a notice was already in type. When the paper came out I had no hesitation in attributing this article, which I thought rather vulgarly overdone, to Drayton Deane, who in the old days had been something of a friend of Corvick’s, yet had only within a few weeks made the acquaintance of his widow. I had had an early copy of the book, but Deane had evidently had an earlier. He lacked all the same the light hand with which Corvick had gilded the gingerbread—he laid on the tinsel in splotches.

X

Six months later appeared “The Right of Way,” the last chance, though we didn’t know it, that we were to have to redeem ourselves. Written wholly during Vereker’s absence, the book had been heralded, in a hundred paragraphs, by the usual ineptitudes. I carried it, as early a copy as any, I this time flattered myself, straightway to Mrs. Corvick. This was the only use I had for it; I left the inevitable tribute of *The Middle* to some more ingenious mind and some less irritated temper. “But I already have it,” Gwendolen said. “Drayton Deane was so good as to bring it to me yesterday, and I’ve just finished it.”

“Yesterday? How did he get it so soon?”

“He gets everything soon. He’s to review it in *The Middle*.”

“He—Drayton Deane—review Vereker?” I couldn’t believe my ears.

“Why not? One fine ignorance is as good as another.”

I winced, but I presently said: “You ought to review him yourself!”

“I don’t ‘review,’” she laughed. “I’m reviewed!”

Just then the door was thrown open. “Ah yes, here’s your reviewer!” Drayton Deane was there with his long legs and his tall forehead: he had come to see what she thought of “The Right of Way,” and to bring news which was singularly relevant. The evening papers were just out with a telegram on the author of that work, who, in Rome, had been ill for some days with an attack of malarial fever. It had at first not been thought grave, but had taken in

consequence of complications a turn that might give rise to anxiety. Anxiety had indeed at the latest hour begun to be felt.

I was struck in the presence of these tidings with the fundamental detachment that Mrs. Corvick's public regret quite failed to conceal: it gave me the measure of her consummate independence. That independence rested on her knowledge, the knowledge which nothing now could destroy and which nothing could make different. The figure in the carpet might take on another twist or two, but the sentence had virtually been written. The writer might go down to his grave: she was the person in the world to whom—as if she had been his favoured heir—his continued existence was least of a need. This reminded me how I had observed at a particular moment—after Corvick's death—the drop of her desire to see him face to face. She had got what she wanted without that. I had been sure that if she hadn't got it she wouldn't have been restrained from the endeavour to sound him personally by those superior reflections, more conceivable on a man's part than on a woman's, which in my case had served as a deterrent. It wasn't however, I hasten to add, that my case, in spite of this invidious comparison, wasn't ambiguous enough. At the thought that Vereker was perhaps at that moment dying there rolled over me a wave of anguish—a poignant sense of how inconsistently I still depended on him. A delicacy that it was my one compensation to suffer to rule me had left the Alps and the Apennines between us, but the vision of the waning opportunity made me feel as if I might in my despair at last have gone to him. Of course I would really have done nothing of the sort. I remained five minutes, while my companions talked of the new book, and when Drayton Deane appealed to me for my opinion of it I replied, getting up, that I detested Hugh Vereker—simply couldn't read him. I went away with the moral certainty that as the door closed behind me Deane would remark that I was awfully superficial. His hostess wouldn't contradict him.

I continue to trace with a briefer touch our intensely odd concatenation. Three weeks after this came Vereker's death, and before the year was out the death of his wife. That poor lady I had never seen, but I had had a futile theory that, should she survive him long enough to be decorously accessible, I might approach her with the feeble flicker of my petition. Did she know and if she knew would she speak? It was much to be presumed that for more reasons than one she would have nothing to say; but when she passed out of all reach I felt that renouncement was indeed my appointed lot. I was shut up in my obsession for ever—my gaolers had gone off with the key. I find myself quite as vague as a captive in a dungeon about the time that further elapsed before Mrs. Corvick became the wife of Drayton Deane. I had foreseen, through my bars, this end of the business, though there was no indecent haste and our friendship had rather fallen off. They were both so “awfully intellectual” that it struck people as a suitable match, but I knew better than any one the wealth of understanding the bride would contribute to the partnership. Never, for a marriage in literary circles—so the newspapers described the alliance—had a bride been so handsomely dowered. I began with due promptness to look for the fruit of their union—that fruit, I mean, of which the premonitory symptoms would be peculiarly visible in the husband. Taking for granted the splendour of the lady's nuptial gift, I expected to see him make a show commensurate with his increase of means. I knew what his means had been—his article on “The Right of Way” had distinctly given one the figure. As he was now exactly in the position in which still more exactly I was not I watched from month to month, in the likely periodicals, for the heavy message poor Corvick had been unable to deliver and the responsibility of which would have fallen on his successor. The widow and wife would have broken by the rekindled hearth the silence that only a widow and wife might break, and Deane would be as aflame with the knowledge as Corvick in his own hour, as Gwendolen in hers had been. Well, he was aflame doubtless, but the fire was apparently not to become a public blaze. I scanned the periodicals

in vain: Drayton Deane filled them with exuberant pages, but he withheld the page I most feverishly sought. He wrote on a thousand subjects, but never on the subject of Vereker. His special line was to tell truths that other people either “fucked,” as he said, or overlooked, but he never told the only truth that seemed to me in these days to signify. I met the couple in those literary circles referred to in the papers: I have sufficiently intimated that it was only in such circles we were all constructed to revolve. Gwendolen was more than ever committed to them by the publication of her third novel, and I myself definitely classed by holding the opinion that this work was inferior to its immediate predecessor. Was it worse because she had been keeping worse company? If her secret was, as she had told me, her life—a fact discernible in her increasing bloom, an air of conscious privilege that, cleverly corrected by pretty charities, gave distinction to her appearance—it had yet not a direct influence on her work. That only made—everything only made—one yearn the more for it, rounded it off with a mystery finer and subtler.

XI

It was therefore from her husband I could never remove my eyes: I hovered about him in a manner that might have made him uneasy. I went even so far as to engage him in conversation. *Didn't* he know, hadn't he come into it as a matter of course?—that question hummed in my brain. Of course he knew; otherwise he wouldn't return my stare so queerly. His wife had told him what I wanted, and he was amiably amused at my impotence. He didn't laugh—he was not a laugher: his system was to present to my irritation, so that I should crudely expose myself, a conversational blank as vast as his big bare brow. It always happened that I turned away with a settled conviction from these unpeopled expanses, which seemed to complete each other geographically and to symbolise together Drayton Deane's want of voice, want of form. He simply hadn't the art to use what he knew; he literally was incompetent to take up the duty where Corvick had left it. I went still further—it was the only glimpse of happiness I had. I made up my mind that the duty didn't appeal to him. He wasn't interested, he didn't care. Yes, it quite comforted me to believe him too stupid to have joy of the thing I lacked. He was as stupid after as before, and that deepened for me the golden glory in which the mystery was wrapped. I had of course however to recollect that his wife might have imposed her conditions and exactions. I had above all to recollect that with Vereker's death the major incentive dropped. He was still there to be honoured by what might be done—he was no longer there to give it his sanction. Who, alas, but he had the authority?

Two children were born to the pair, but the second cost the mother her life. After this calamity I seemed to see another ghost of a chance. I jumped at it in thought, but I waited a certain time for manners, and at last my opportunity arrived in a remunerative way. His wife had been dead a year when I met Drayton Deane in the smoking-room of a small club of which we both were members, but where for months—perhaps because I rarely entered it—I had not seen him. The room was empty and the occasion propitious. I deliberately offered him, to have done with the matter for ever, that advantage for which I felt he had long been looking.

“As an older acquaintance of your late wife's than even you were,” I began, “you must let me say to you something I have on my mind. I shall be glad to make any terms with you that you see fit to name for the information she had from George Corvick—the information, you know, that he, poor fellow, in one of the happiest hours of his life, had straight from Hugh Vereker.”

He looked at me like a dim phrenological bust. “The information——?”

“Vereker’s secret, my dear man—the general intention of his books: the string the pearls were strung on, the buried treasure, the figure in the carpet.”

He began to flush—the numbers on his bumps to come out. “Vereker’s books had a general intention?”

I stared in my turn. “You don’t mean to say you don’t know it?” I thought for a moment he was playing with me. “Mrs. Deane knew it; she had it, as I say, straight from Corvick, who had, after infinite search and to Vereker’s own delight, found the very mouth of the cave. Where *is* the mouth? He told after their marriage—and told alone—the person who, when the circumstances were reproduced, must have told you. Have I been wrong in taking for granted that she admitted you, as one of the highest privileges of the relation in which you stood to her, to the knowledge of which she was after Corvick’s death the sole depositary? All *I* know is that that knowledge is infinitely precious, and what I want you to understand is that if you will in your turn admit *me* to it you will do me a kindness for which I shall be everlastingly grateful.”

He had turned at last very red; I daresay he had begun by thinking I had lost my wits. Little by little he followed me; on my own side I stared with a livelier surprise. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

He wasn’t acting—it was the absurd truth. “She *didn’t* tell you——”

“Nothing about Hugh Vereker.”

I was stupefied; the room went round. It had been too good even for that! “Upon your honour?”

“Upon my honour. What the devil’s the matter with you?” he demanded.

“I’m astounded—I’m disappointed. I wanted to get it out of you.”

“It isn’t *in* me!” he awkwardly laughed. “And even if it were——”

“If it were you’d let me have it—oh yes, in common humanity. But I believe you. I see—I see!” I went on, conscious, with the full turn of the wheel, of my great delusion, my false view of the poor man’s attitude. What I saw, though I couldn’t say it, was that his wife hadn’t thought him worth enlightening. This struck me as strange for a woman who had thought him worth marrying. At last I explained it by the reflection that she couldn’t possibly have married him for his understanding. She had married him for something else. He was to some extent enlightened now, but he was even more astonished, more disconcerted: he took a moment to compare my story with his quickened memories. The result of his meditation was his presently saying with a good deal of rather feeble form:

“This is the first I hear of what you allude to. I think you must be mistaken as to Mrs. Drayton Deane’s having had any unmentioned, and still less any unmentionable, knowledge about Hugh Vereker. She would certainly have wished it—if it bore on his literary character—to be used.”

“It *was* used. She used it herself. She told me with her own lips that she ‘lived’ on it.”

I had no sooner spoken than I repented of my words; he grew so pale that I felt as if I had struck him. “Ah, ‘lived’—!” he murmured, turning short away from me.

My compunction was real; I laid my hand on his shoulder. “I beg you to forgive me—I’ve made a mistake. You *don’t* know what I thought you knew. You could, if I had been right, have rendered me a service; and I had my reasons for assuming that you would be in a position to meet me.”

“Your reasons?” he asked. “What were your reasons?”

I looked at him well; I hesitated; I considered. “Come and sit down with me here, and I’ll tell you.” I drew him to a sofa, I lighted another cigarette and, beginning with the anecdote of Vereker’s one descent from the clouds, I gave him an account of the extraordinary chain of accidents that had in spite of it kept me till that hour in the dark. I told him in a word just what I’ve written out here. He listened with deepening attention, and I became aware, to my surprise, by his ejaculations, by his questions, that he would have been after all not unworthy to have been trusted by his wife. So abrupt an experience of her want of trust had an agitating effect on him, but I saw that immediate shock throb away little by little and then gather again into waves of wonder and curiosity—waves that promised, I could perfectly judge, to break in the end with the fury of my own highest tides. I may say that to-day as victims of unappeased desire there isn’t a pin to choose between us. The poor man’s state is almost my consolation; there are indeed moments when I feel it to be almost my revenge.

The Way It Came

I find, as you prophesied, much that's interesting, but little that helps the delicate question—the possibility of publication. Her diaries are less systematic than I hoped; she only had a blessed habit of noting and narrating. She summarised, she saved; she appears seldom indeed to have let a good story pass without catching it on the wing. I allude of course not so much to things she heard as to things she saw and felt. She writes sometimes of herself, sometimes of others, sometimes of the combination. It's under this last rubric that she's usually most vivid. But it's not, you will understand, when she's most vivid that she's always most publish-able. To tell the truth she's fearfully indiscreet, or has at least all the material for making me so. Take as an instance the fragment I send you, after dividing it for your convenience into several small chapters. It is the contents of a thin blank-book which I have had copied out and which has the merit of being nearly enough a rounded thing, an intelligible whole. These pages evidently date from years ago. I've read with the liveliest wonder the statement they so circumstantially make and done my best to swallow the prodigy they leave to be inferred. These things would be striking, wouldn't they? to any reader; but can you imagine for a moment my placing such a document before the world, even though, as if she herself had desired the world should have the benefit of it, she has given her friends neither name nor initials? Have you any sort of clue to their identity? I leave her the floor.

I

I know perfectly of course that I brought it upon myself; but that doesn't make it any better. I was the first to speak of her to him—he had never even heard her mentioned. Even if I had happened not to speak some one else would have made up for it: I tried afterwards to find comfort in that reflection. But the comfort of reflections is thin: the only comfort that counts in life is not to have been a fool. That's a beatitude I shall doubtless never enjoy. "Why, you ought to meet her and talk it over," is what I immediately said. "Birds of a feather flock together." I told him who she was and that they were birds of a feather because if he had had in youth a strange adventure she had had about the same time just such another. It was well known to her friends—an incident she was constantly called on to describe. She was charming, clever, pretty, unhappy; but it was none the less the thing to which she had originally owed her reputation.

Being at the age of eighteen somewhere abroad with an aunt she had had a vision of one of her parents at the moment of death. The parent was in England, hundreds of miles away and so far as she knew neither dying nor dead. It was by day, in the museum of some great foreign town. She had passed alone, in advance of her companions, into a small room containing some famous work of art and occupied at that moment by two other persons. One of these was an old custodian; the second, before observing him, she took for a stranger, a tourist. She was merely conscious that he was bareheaded and seated on a bench. The instant her eyes rested on him however she beheld to her amazement her father, who, as if he had long waited for her, looked at her in singular distress, with an impatience that was akin to reproach. She rushed to him with a bewildered cry, "Papa, what *is* it?" but this was followed by an exhibition of still livelier feeling when on her movement he simply vanished, leaving the custodian and her relations, who were at her heels, to gather round her in dismay. These persons, the official, the aunt, the cousins were therefore in a manner witnesses of the fact—the fact at least of the impression made on her; and there was the further testimony of a doctor who was attending one of the party and to whom it was immediately afterwards communicated. He gave her a remedy for hysterics but said to the aunt privately: "Wait and

see if something doesn't happen at home." Something *had* happened—the poor father, suddenly and violently seized, had died that morning. The aunt, the mother's sister, received before the day was out a telegram announcing the event and requesting her to prepare her niece for it. Her niece was already prepared, and the girl's sense of this visitation remained of course indelible. We had all as her friends had it conveyed to us and had conveyed it creepily to each other. Twelve years had elapsed and as a woman who had made an unhappy marriage and lived apart from her husband she had become interesting from other sources; but since the name she now bore was a name frequently borne, and since moreover her judicial separation, as things were going, could hardly count as a distinction, it was usual to qualify her as "the one, you know, who saw her father's ghost."

As for him, dear man, he had seen his mother's. I had never heard of that till this occasion on which our closer, our pleasanter acquaintance led him, through some turn of the subject of our talk, to mention it and to inspire me in so doing with the impulse to let him know that he had a rival in the field—a person with whom he could compare notes. Later on his story became for him, perhaps because of my unduly repeating it, likewise a convenient wordly label; but it had not a year before been the ground on which he was introduced to me. He had other merits, just as she, poor thing! had others. I can honestly say that I was quite aware of them from the first—I discovered them sooner than he discovered mine. I remember how it struck me even at the time that his sense of mine was quickened by my having been able to match, though not indeed straight from my own experience, his curious anecdote. It dated, this anecdote, as hers did, from some dozen years before—a year in which, at Oxford, he had for some reason of his own been staying on into the "Long." He had been in the August afternoon on the river. Coming back into his room while it was still distinct daylight he found his mother standing there as if her eyes had been fixed on the door. He had had a letter from her that morning out of Wales, where she was staying with her father. At the sight of him she smiled with extraordinary radiance and extended her arms to him, and then as he sprang forward and joyfully opened his own she vanished from the place. He wrote to her that night, telling her what had happened; the letter had been carefully preserved. The next morning he heard of her death. He was through this chance of our talk extremely struck with the little prodigy I was able to produce for him. He had never encountered another case. Certainly they ought to meet, my friend and he; certainly they would have something in common. I would arrange this, wouldn't I?—if *she* didn't mind; for himself he didn't mind in the least. I had promised to speak to her of the matter as soon as possible, and within the week I was able to do so. She "minded" as little as he; she was perfectly willing to see him. And yet no meeting was to occur—as meetings are commonly understood.

II

That's just half my tale—the extraordinary way it was hindered. This was the fault of a series of accidents; but the accidents continued for years and became, for me and for others, a subject of hilarity with either party. They were droll enough at first; then they grew rather a bore. The odd thing was that both parties were amenable: it wasn't a case of their being indifferent, much less of their being indisposed. It was one of the caprices of chance, aided I suppose by some opposition of their interests and habits. His were centred in his office, his eternal inspectorship, which left him small leisure, constantly calling him away and making him break engagements. He liked society, but he found it everywhere and took it at a run. I never knew at a given moment where he was, and there were times when for months together I never saw him. She was on her side practically suburban: she lived at Richmond and never went "out." She was a woman of distinction, but not of fashion, and felt, as people said, her situation. Decidedly proud and rather whimsical she lived her life as she had planned it. There were things one could do with her, but one couldn't make her come to one's parties.

One went indeed a little more than seemed quite convenient to hers, which consisted of her cousin, a cup of tea and the view. The tea was good; but the view was familiar, though perhaps not, like the cousin—a disagreeable old maid who had been of the group at the museum and with whom she now lived—offensively so. This connection with an inferior relative, which had partly an economical motive—she proclaimed her companion a marvellous manager—was one of the little perversities we had to forgive her. Another was her estimate of the proprieties created by her rupture with her husband. That was extreme—many persons called it even morbid. She made no advances; she cultivated scruples; she suspected, or I should perhaps rather say she remembered slights: she was one of the few women I have known whom that particular predicament had rendered modest rather than bold. Dear thing! she had some delicacy. Especially marked were the limits she had set to possible attentions from men: it was always her thought that her husband was waiting to pounce on her. She discouraged if she didn't forbid the visits of male persons not senile: she said she could never be too careful.

When I first mentioned to her that I had a friend whom fate had distinguished in the same weird way as herself I put her quite at liberty to say “Oh, bring him out to see me!” I should probably have been able to bring him, and a situation perfectly innocent or at any rate comparatively simple would have been created. But she uttered no such word; she only said: “I must meet him certainly; yes, I shall look out for him!” That caused the first delay, and meanwhile various things happened. One of them was that as time went on she made, charming as she was, more and more friends, and that it regularly befell that these friends were sufficiently also friends of his to bring him up in conversation. It was odd that without belonging, as it were, to the same world or, according to the horrid term, the same set, my baffled pair should have happened in so many cases to fall in with the same people and make them join in the funny chorus. She had friends who didn't know each other but who inevitably and punctually recommended *him*. She had also the sort of originality, the intrinsic interest that led her to be kept by each of us as a kind of private resource, cultivated jealously, more or less in secret, as a person whom one didn't meet in society, whom it was not for every one—whom it was not for the vulgar—to approach, and with whom therefore acquaintance was particularly difficult and particularly precious. We saw her separately, with appointments and conditions, and found it made on the whole for harmony not to tell each other. Somebody had always had a note from her still later than somebody else. There was some silly woman who for a long time, among the unprivileged, owed to three simple visits to Richmond a reputation for being intimate with “lots of awfully clever out-of-the-way people.”

Every one has had friends it has seemed a happy thought to bring together, and every one remembers that his happiest thoughts have not been his greatest successes; but I doubt if there was ever a case in which the failure was in such direct proportion to the quantity of influence set in motion. It is really perhaps here the quantity of influence that was most remarkable. My lady and gentleman each declared to me and others that it was like the subject of a roaring farce. The reason first given had with time dropped-out of sight and fifty better ones flourished on top of it. They were so awfully alike: they had the same ideas and tricks and tastes, the same prejudices and superstitions and heresies; they said the same things and sometimes did them; they liked and disliked the same persons and places, the same books, authors and styles; any one could see a certain identity even in their looks and their features. It established much of a propriety that they were in common parlance equally “nice” and almost equally handsome. But the great sameness, for wonder and chatter, was their rare perversity in regard to being photographed. They were the only persons ever heard of who had never been “taken” and who had a passionate objection to it. They just *wouldn't* be, for

anything any one could say. I had loudly complained of this; him in particular I had so vainly desired to be able to show on my drawing-room chimney-piece in a Bond Street frame. It was at any rate the very liveliest of all the reasons why they ought to know each other—all the lively reasons reduced to naught by the strange law that had made them bang so many doors in each other's face, made them the buckets in the well, the two ends of the see-saw, the two parties in the state, so that when one was up the other was down, when one was out the other was in; neither by any possibility entering a house till the other had left it, or leaving it, all unawares, till the other was at hand. They only arrived when they had been given up, which was precisely also when they departed. They were in a word alternate and incompatible; they missed each other with an inveteracy that could be explained only by its being preconcerted. It was however so far from preconcerted that it had ended—literally after several years—by disappointing and annoying them. I don't think their curiosity was lively till it had been proved utterly vain. A great deal was of course done to help them, but it merely laid wires for them to trip. To give examples I should have to have taken notes; but I happen to remember that neither had ever been able to dine on the right occasion. The right occasion for each was the occasion that would be wrong for the other. On the wrong one they were most punctual, and there were never any but wrong ones. The very elements conspired and the constitution of man reinforced them. A cold, a headache, a bereavement, a storm, a fog, an earthquake, a cataclysm infallibly intervened. The whole business was beyond a joke.

Yet as a joke it had still to be taken, though one couldn't help feeling that the joke had made the situation serious, had produced on the part of each a consciousness, an awkwardness, a positive dread of the last accident of all, the only one with any freshness left, the accident that would bring them face to face. The final effect of its predecessors had been to kindle this instinct. They were quite ashamed—perhaps even a little of each other. So much preparation, so much frustration: what indeed could be good enough for it all to lead up to? A mere meeting would be mere flatness. Did I see them at the end of years, they often asked, just stupidly confronted? If they were bored by the joke they might be worse bored by something else. They made exactly the same reflections, and each in some manner was sure to hear of the other's.

I really think it was this peculiar diffidence that finally controlled the situation. I mean that if they had failed for the first year or two because they couldn't help it they kept up the habit because they had—what shall I call it?—grown nervous. It really took some lurking volition to account for anything so absurd.

III

When to crown our long acquaintance I accepted his renewed offer of marriage it was humorously said, I know, that I had made the gift of his photograph a condition. This was so far true that I had refused to give him mine without it. At any rate I had him at last, in his high distinction, on the chimney-piece, where the day she called to congratulate me she came nearer than she had ever done to seeing him. He had set her in being taken an example which I invited her to follow; he had sacrificed his perversity—wouldn't she sacrifice hers? She too must give me something on my engagement—wouldn't she give me the companion-piece? She laughed and shook her head; she had headshakes whose impulse seemed to come from as far away as the breeze that stirs a flower. The companion-piece to the portrait of my future husband was the portrait of his future wife. She had taken her stand—she could depart from it as little as she could explain it. It was a prejudice, an *entêtement*, a vow—she would live and die unphotographed. Now too she was alone in that state: this was what she liked; it made her so much more original. She rejoiced in the fall of her late associate and looked a long time at his picture, about which she made no memorable remark, though she even turned it over to

see the back. About our engagement she was charming—full of cordiality and sympathy. “You’ve known him even longer than I’ve *not*?” she said, “and that seems a very long time.” She understood how we had jogged together over hill and dale and how inevitable it was that we should now rest together. I’m definite about all this because what followed is so strange that it’s a kind of relief to me to mark the point up to which our relations were as natural as ever. It was I myself who in a sudden madness altered and destroyed them. I see now that she gave me no pretext and that I only found one in the way she looked at the fine face in the Bond Street frame. How then would I have had her look at it? What I had wanted from the first was to make her care for him. Well, that was what I still wanted—up to the moment of her having promised me that he would on this occasion really aid me to break the silly spell that had kept them asunder. I had arranged with him to do his part if she would as triumphantly do hers. I was on a different footing now—I was on a footing to answer for him. I would positively engage that at five on the following Saturday he would be on that spot. He was out of town on pressing business; but pledged to keep his promise to the letter he would return on purpose and in abundant time. “Are you perfectly sure?” I remember she asked, looking grave and considering: I thought she had turned a little pale. She was tired, she was indisposed: it was a pity he was to see her after all at so poor a moment. If he only *could* have seen her five years before! However, I replied that this time I was sure and that success therefore depended simply on herself. At five o’clock on the Saturday she would find him in a particular chair I pointed out, the one in which he usually sat and in which—though this I didn’t mention—he had been sitting when, the week before, he put the question of our future to me in the way that had brought me round. She looked at it in silence, just as she had looked at the photograph, while I repeated for the twentieth time that it was too preposterous it shouldn’t somehow be feasible to introduce to one’s dearest friend one’s second self. “*Am I your dearest friend?*” she asked with a smile that for a moment brought back her beauty. I replied by pressing her to my bosom; after which she said: “Well, I’ll come. I’m extraordinarily afraid, but you may count on me.”

When she had left me I began to wonder what she was afraid of, for she had spoken as if she fully meant it. The next day, late in the afternoon, I had three lines from her: she had found on getting home the announcement of her husband’s death. She had not seen him for seven years, but she wished me to know it in this way before I should hear of it in another. It made however in her life, strange and sad to say, so little difference that she would scrupulously keep her appointment. I rejoiced for her—I supposed it would make at least the difference of her having more money; but even in this diversion, far from forgetting that she had said she was afraid, I seemed to catch sight of a reason for her being so. Her fear as the evening went on became contagious, and the contagion took in my breast the form of a sudden panic. It wasn’t jealousy—it was the dread of jealousy. I called myself a fool for not having been quiet till we were man and wife. After that I should somehow feel secure. It was only a question of waiting another month—a trifle surely for people who had waited so long. It had been plain enough she was nervous, and now that she was free she naturally wouldn’t be less so. What was her nervousness therefore but a presentiment? She had been hitherto the victim of interference, but it was quite possible she would henceforth be the source of it. The victim in that case would be my simple self. What had the interference been but the finger of providence pointing out a danger? The danger was of course for poor *me*. It had been kept at bay by a series of accidents unexampled in their frequency; but the reign of accident was now visibly at an end. I had an intimate conviction that both parties would keep the tryst. It was more and more impressed upon me that they were approaching, converging. We had talked about breaking the spell; well, it would be effectually broken—unless indeed it should merely take another form and overdo their encounters as it had overdone their escapes.

This was something I couldn't sit still for thinking of; it kept me awake—at midnight I was full of unrest. At last I felt there was only one way of laying the ghost. If the reign of accident was over I must just take up the succession. I sat down and wrote a hurried note which would meet him on his return and which as the servants had gone to bed I sallied forth bareheaded into the empty, gusty street to drop into the nearest pillar-box. It was to tell him that I shouldn't be able to be at home in the afternoon as I had hoped and that he must postpone his visit till dinner-time. This was an implication that he would find me alone.

IV

When accordingly at five she presented herself I naturally felt false and base. My act had been a momentary madness, but I had at least to be consistent. She remained an hour; he of course never came; and I could only persist in my perfidy. I had thought it best to let her come; singular as this now seems to me I thought it diminished my guilt. Yet as she sat there so visibly white and weary, stricken with a sense of everything her husband's death had opened up, I felt an almost intolerable pang of pity and remorse. If I didn't tell her on the spot what I had done it was because I was too ashamed. I feigned astonishment—I feigned it to the end; I protested that if ever I had had confidence I had had it that day. I blush as I tell my story—I take it as my penance. There was nothing indignant I didn't say about him; I invented suppositions, attenuations; I admitted in stupefaction, as the hands of the clock travelled, that their luck hadn't turned. She smiled at this vision of their "luck," but she looked anxious—she looked unusual: the only thing that kept me up was the fact that, oddly enough, she wore mourning—no great depths of crape, but simple and scrupulous black. She had in her bonnet three small black feathers. She carried a little muff of astrachan. This put me by the aid of some acute reflection a little in the right. She had written to me that the sudden event made no difference for her, but apparently it made as much difference as that. If she was inclined to the usual forms why didn't she observe that of not going the first day or two out to tea? There was some one she wanted so much to see that she couldn't wait till her husband was buried. Such a betrayal of eagerness made me hard and cruel enough to practise my odious deceit, though at the same time, as the hour waxed and waned, I suspected in her something deeper still than disappointment and somewhat less successfully concealed. I mean a strange underlying relief, the soft, low emission of the breath that comes when a danger is past. What happened as she spent her barren hour with me was that at last she gave him up. She let him go for ever. She made the most graceful joke of it that I've ever seen made of anything; but it was for all that a great date in her life. She spoke with her mild gaiety of all the other vain times, the long game of hide-and-seek, the unprecedented queerness of such a relation. For it was, or had been, a relation, wasn't it, hadn't it? That was just the absurd part of it. When she got up to go I said to her that it was more a relation than ever, but that I hadn't the face after what had occurred to propose to her for the present another opportunity. It was plain that the only valid opportunity would be my accomplished marriage. Of course she would be at my wedding? It was even to be hoped that *he* would.

"If *I* am, he won't be!" she declared with a laugh. I admitted there might be something in that. The thing was therefore to get us safely married first. "That won't help us. Nothing will help us!" she said as she kissed me farewell. "I shall never, never see him!" It was with those words she left me.

I could bear her disappointment as I've called it; but when a couple of hours later I received him at dinner I found that I couldn't bear his. The way my manoeuvre might have affected him had not been particularly present to me; but the result of it was the first word of reproach that had ever yet dropped from him. I say "reproach" because that expression is scarcely too strong for the terms in which he conveyed to me his surprise that under the extraordinary

circumstances I should not have found some means not to deprive him of such an occasion. I might really have managed either not to be obliged to go out or to let their meeting take place all the same. They would probably have got on in my drawing-room without me. At this I quite broke down—I confessed my iniquity and the miserable reason of it. I had not put her off and I had not gone out; she had been there and after waiting for him an hour had departed in the belief that he had been absent by his own fault.

“She must think me a precious brute!” he exclaimed. “Did she say of me—what she had a right to say?”

“I assure you she said nothing that showed the least feeling. She looked at your photograph, she even turned round the back of it, on which your address happens to be inscribed. Yet it provoked her to no demonstration. She doesn’t care so much as all that.”

“Then why are you afraid of her?”

“It was not of her I was afraid. It was of you.”

“Did you think I would fall in love with her? You never alluded to such a possibility before,” he went on as I remained silent. “Admirable person as you pronounced her, that wasn’t the light in which you showed her to me.”

“Do you mean that if it *had* been you would have managed by this time to catch a glimpse of her? I didn’t fear things then,” I added. “I hadn’t the same reason.”

He kissed me at this, and when I remembered that she had done so an hour or two before I felt for an instant as if he were taking from my lips the very pressure of hers. In spite of kisses the incident had shed a certain chill, and I suffered horribly from the sense that he had seen me guilty of a fraud. He had seen it only through my frank avowal, but I was as unhappy as if I had a stain to efface. I couldn’t get over the manner of his looking at me when I spoke of her apparent indifference to his not having come.

For the first time since I had known him he seemed to have expressed a doubt of my word. Before we parted I told him that I would undeceive her, start the first thing in the morning for Richmond and there let her know that he had been blameless. At this he kissed me again. I would expiate my sin, I said; I would humble myself in the dust; I would confess and ask to be forgiven. At this he kissed me once more.

V

In the train the next day this struck me as a good deal for him to have consented to; but my purpose was firm enough to carry me on. I mounted the long hill to where the view begins, and then I knocked at her door. I was a trifle mystified by the fact that her blinds were still drawn, reflecting that if in the stress of my compunction I had come early I had certainly yet allowed people time to get up.

“At home, mum? She has left home for ever.”

I was extraordinarily startled by this announcement of the elderly parlour-maid. “She has gone away?”

“She’s dead, mum, please.” Then as I gasped at the horrible word: “She died last night.”

The loud cry that escaped me sounded even in my own ears like some harsh violation of the hour. I felt for the moment as if I had killed her; I turned faint and saw through a vagueness the woman hold out her arms to me. Of what next happened I have no recollection, nor of anything but my friend’s poor stupid cousin, in a darkened room, after an interval that I suppose very brief, sobbing at me in a smothered accusatory way. I can’t say how long it took

me to understand, to believe and then to press back with an immense effort that pang of responsibility which, superstitiously, insanely had been at first almost all I was conscious of. The doctor, after the fact, had been superlatively wise and clear: he was satisfied of a long-latent weakness of the heart, determined probably years before by the agitations and terrors to which her marriage had introduced her. She had had in those days cruel scenes with her husband, she had been in fear of her life. All emotion, everything in the nature of anxiety and suspense had been after that to be strongly deprecated, as in her marked cultivation of a quiet life she was evidently well aware; but who could say that any one, especially a “real lady,” could be successfully protected from every little rub? She had had one a day or two before in the news of her husband’s death; for there were shocks of all kinds, not only those of grief and surprise. For that matter she had never dreamed of so near a release; it had looked uncommonly as if he would live as long as herself. Then in the evening, in town, she had manifestly had another: something must have happened there which it would be indispensable to clear up. She had come back very late—it was past eleven o’clock, and on being met in the hall by her cousin, who was extremely anxious, had said that she was tired and must rest a moment before mounting the stairs. They had passed together into the dining-room, her companion proposing a glass of wine and bustling to the sideboard to pour it out. This took but a moment, and when my informant turned round our poor friend had not had time to seat herself. Suddenly, with a little moan that was barely audible, she dropped upon the sofa. She was dead. What unknown “little rub” had dealt her the blow? What shock, in the name of wonder, *had* she had in town? I mentioned immediately the only one I could imagine—her having failed to meet at my house, to which by invitation for the purpose she had come at five o’clock, the gentleman I was to be married to, who had been accidentally kept away and with whom she had no acquaintance whatever. This obviously counted for little; but something else might easily have occurred; nothing in the London streets was more possible than an accident, especially an accident in those desperate cabs. What had she done, where had she gone on leaving my house? I had taken for granted she had gone straight home. We both presently remembered that in her excursions to town she sometimes, for convenience, for refreshment, spent an hour or two at the “Gentlewomen,” the quiet little ladies’ club, and I promised that it should be my first care to make at that establishment thorough inquiry. Then we entered the dim and dreadful chamber where she lay locked up in death and where, asking after a little to be left alone with her, I remained for half an hour. Death had made her, had kept her beautiful; but I felt above all, as I kneeled at her bed, that it had made her, had kept her silent. It had turned the key on something I was concerned to know.

On my return from Richmond and after another duty had been performed I drove to his chambers. It was the first time, but I had often wanted to see them. On the staircase, which, as the house contained twenty sets of rooms, was unrestrictedly public, I met his servant, who went back with me and ushered me in. At the sound of my entrance he appeared in the doorway of a further room, and the instant we were alone I produced my news: “She’s dead!” “Dead?”

He was tremendously struck, and I observed that he had no need to ask whom, in this abruptness, I meant.

“She died last evening—just after leaving me.”

He stared with the strangest expression, his eyes searching mine as if they were looking for a trap. “Last evening—after leaving you?” He repeated my words in stupefaction. Then he brought out so that it was in stupefaction I heard: “Impossible! I saw her.”

“You ‘saw’ her?”

“On that spot—where you stand.”

This brought back to me after an instant, as if to help me to take it in, the memory of the strange warning of his youth. “In the hour of death—I understand: as you so beautifully saw your mother.”

“Ah! *not* as I saw my mother—not that way, not that way!” He was deeply moved by my news—far more moved, I perceived, than he would have been the day before: it gave me a vivid sense that, as I had then said to myself, there was indeed a relation between them and that he had actually been face to face with her. Such an idea, by its reassertion of his extraordinary privilege, would have suddenly presented him as painfully abnormal had he not so vehemently insisted on the difference. “I saw her living—I saw her to speak to her—I saw her as I see you now!”

It is remarkable that for a moment, though only for a moment, I found relief in the more personal, as it were, but also the more natural of the two phenomena. The next, as I embraced this image of her having come to him on leaving me and of just what it accounted for in the disposal of her time, I demanded with a shade of harshness of which I was aware—“What on earth did she come for?” He had now had a minute to think—to recover himself and judge of effects, so that if it was still with excited eyes he spoke he showed a conscious redness and made an inconsequent attempt to smile away the gravity of his words.

“She came just to see me. She came—after what had passed at your house—so that we *should*, after all, at last meet. The impulse seemed to me exquisite, and that was the way I took it.”

I looked round the room where she had been—where she had been and I never had been.

“And was the way you took it the way she expressed it?”

“She only expressed it by being here and by letting me look at her. That was enough!” he exclaimed with a singular laugh.

I wondered more and more. “You mean she didn’t speak to you?”

“She said nothing. She only looked at me as I looked at her.”

“And *you* didn’t speak either?”

He gave me again his painful smile. “I thought of *you*. The situation was every way delicate. I used the finest tact. But she saw she had pleased me.” He even repeated his dissonant laugh.

“She evidently pleased you!” Then I thought a moment. “How long did she stay?”

“How can I say? It seemed twenty minutes, but it was probably a good deal less.”

“Twenty minutes of silence!” I began to have my definite view and now in fact quite to clutch at it. “Do you know you’re telling me a story positively monstrous?”

He had been standing with his back to the fire; at this, with a pleading look, he came to me. “I beseech you, dearest, to take it kindly.”

I could take it kindly, and I signified as much; but I couldn’t somehow, as he rather awkwardly opened his arms, let him draw me to him. So there fell between us for an appreciable time the discomfort of a great silence.

VI

He broke it presently by saying: “There’s absolutely no doubt of her death?”

“Unfortunately none. I’ve just risen from my knees by the bed where they’ve laid her out.”

He fixed his eyes hard on the floor; then he raised them to mine. “How does she look?”

“She looks—at peace.”

He turned away again, while I watched him; but after a moment he began: “At what hour, then——?”

“It must have been near midnight. She dropped as she reached her house—from an affection of the heart which she knew herself and her physician knew her to have, but of which, patiently, bravely she had never spoken to me.”

He listened intently and for a minute he was unable to speak. At last he broke out with an accent of which the almost boyish confidence, the really sublime simplicity rings in my ears as I write: “Wasn’t she *wonderful!*” Even at the time I was able to do it justice enough to remark in reply that I had always told him so; but the next minute, as if after speaking he had caught a glimpse of what he might have made me feel, he went on quickly: “You see that if she didn’t get home till midnight——”

I instantly took him up. “There was plenty of time for you to have seen her? How so,” I inquired, “when you didn’t leave my house till late? I don’t remember the very moment—I was preoccupied. But you know that though you said you had lots to do you sat for some time after dinner. She, on her side, was all the evening at the ‘Gentlewomen.’ I’ve just come from there—I’ve ascertained. She had tea there; she remained a long, long time.”

“What was she doing all the long, long time?” I saw that he was eager to challenge at every step my account of the matter; and the more he showed this the more I found myself disposed to insist on that account, to prefer, with apparent perversity, an explanation which only deepened the marvel and the mystery, but which, of the two prodigies it had to choose from, my reviving jealousy found easiest to accept. He stood there pleading with a candour that now seems to me beautiful for the privilege of having in spite of supreme defeat known the living woman; while I, with a passion I wonder at to-day, though it still smoulders in a manner in its ashes, could only reply that, through a strange gift shared by her with his mother and on her own side likewise hereditary, the miracle of his youth had been renewed for him, the miracle of hers for her. She had been to him—yes, and by an impulse as charming as he liked; but oh! she had not been in the body. It was a simple question of evidence. I had had, I assured him, a definite statement of what she had done—most of the time—at the little club. The place was almost empty, but the servants had noticed her. She had sat motionless in a deep chair by the drawing-room fire; she had leaned back her head, she had closed her eyes, she had seemed softly to sleep.

“I see. But till what o’clock?”

“There,” I was obliged to answer, “the servants fail me a little. The portress in particular is unfortunately a fool, though even she too is supposed to be a Gentlewoman. She was evidently at that period of the evening, without a substitute and, against regulations, absent for some little time from the cage in which it’s her business to watch the comings and goings. She’s muddled, she palpably prevaricates; so I can’t positively, from her observation, give you an hour. But it was remarked toward half-past ten that our poor friend was no longer in the club.”

“She came straight here; and from here she went straight to the train.”

“She couldn’t have run it so close,” I declared. “That was a thing she particularly never did.”

“There was no need of running it close, my dear—she had plenty of time. Your memory is at fault about my having left you late: I left you, as it happens, unusually early. I’m sorry my stay with you seemed long; for I was back here by ten.”

“To put yourself into your slippers,” I rejoined, “and fall asleep in your chair. You slept till morning—you saw her in a dream!” He looked at me in silence and with sombre eyes—eyes that showed me he had some irritation to repress. Presently I went on: “You had a visit, at an extraordinary hour, from a lady—*soit*: nothing in the world is more probable. But there are ladies and ladies. How in the name of goodness, if she was unannounced and dumb and you had into the bargain never seen the least portrait of her—how could you identify the person we’re talking of?”

“Haven’t I to absolute satiety heard her described? I’ll describe her for you in every particular.”

“Don’t!” I exclaimed with a promptness that made him laugh once more. I coloured at this, but I continued: “Did your servant introduce her?”

“He wasn’t here—he’s always away when he’s wanted. One of the features of this big house is that from the street-door the different floors are accessible practically without challenge. My servant makes love to a young person employed in the rooms above these, and he had a long bout of it last evening. When he’s out on that job he leaves my outer door, on the staircase, so much ajar as to enable him to slip back without a sound. The door then only requires a push. She pushed it—that simply took a little courage.”

“A little? It took tons! And it took all sorts of impossible calculations.”

“Well, she had them—she made them. Mind you, I don’t deny for a moment,” he added, “that it was very, very wonderful!”

Something in his tone prevented me for a while from trusting myself to speak. At last I said: “How did she come to know where you live?”

“By remembering the address on the little label the shop-people happily left sticking to the frame I had had made for my photograph.”

“And how was she dressed?”

“In mourning, my own dear. No great depths of crape, but simple and scrupulous black. She had in her bonnet three small black feathers. She carried a little muff of astrachan. She has near the left eye,” he continued, “a tiny vertical scar—”

I stopped him short. “The mark of a caress from her husband.” Then I added: “How close you must have been to her!” He made no answer to this, and I thought he blushed, observing which I broke straight off. “Well, goodbye.”

“You won’t stay a little?” He came to me again tenderly, and this time I suffered him. “Her visit had its beauty,” he murmured as he held me, “but yours has a greater one.”

I let him kiss me, but I remembered, as I had remembered the day before, that the last kiss she had given, as I supposed, in this world had been for the lips he touched.

“I’m life, you see,” I answered. “What you saw last night was death.”

“It was life—it was life!”

He spoke with a kind of soft stubbornness, and I disengaged myself. We stood looking at each other hard.

“You describe the scene—so far as you describe it at all—in terms that are incomprehensible. She was in the room before you knew it?”

“I looked up from my letter-writing—at that table under the lamp, I had been wholly absorbed in it—and she stood before me.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I sprang up with an ejaculation, and she, with a smile, laid her finger, ever so warningly, yet with a sort of delicate dignity, to her lips. I knew it meant silence, but the strange thing was that it seemed immediately to explain and to justify her. We, at any rate, stood for a time that, as I’ve told you, I can’t calculate, face to face. It was just as you and I stand now.”

“Simply staring?”

He impatiently protested. “Ah! *we’re* not staring!”

“Yes, but *we’re* talking.”

“Well, *we* were—after a fashion.” He lost himself in the memory of it. “It was as friendly as this.” I had it on my tongue’s end to ask if that were saying much for it, but I remarked instead that what they had evidently done was to gaze in mutual admiration. Then I inquired whether his recognition of her had been immediate. “Not quite,” he replied, “for, of course, I didn’t expect her; but it came to me long before she went who she was—who she could only be.”

I thought a little. “And how did she at last go?”

“Just as she arrived. The door was open behind her, and she passed out.”

“Was she rapid—slow?”

“Rather quick. But looking behind her,” he added, with a smile. “I let her go, for I perfectly understood that I was to take it as she wished.”

I was conscious of exhaling a long, vague sigh. “Well, you must take it now as *I* wish—you must let *me* go.”

At this he drew near me again, detaining and persuading me, declaring with all due gallantry that I was a very different matter. I would have given anything to have been able to ask him if he had touched her, but the words refused to form themselves: I knew well enough how horrid and vulgar they would sound. I said something else—I forget exactly what; it was feebly tortuous, and intended to make him tell me without my putting the question. But he didn’t tell me; he only repeated, as if from a glimpse of the propriety of soothing and consoling me, the sense of his declaration of some minutes before—the assurance that she was indeed exquisite, as I had always insisted, but that I was his “real” friend and his very own for ever. This led me to reassert, in the spirit of my previous rejoinder, that I had at least the merit of being alive; which in turn drew from him again the flash of contradiction I dreaded. “Oh, *she* was alive! she was, she was!”

“She was dead! she was dead!” I asseverated with an energy, a determination that it should be so, which comes back to me now almost as grotesque. But the sound of the word, as it rang out, filled me suddenly with horror, and all the natural emotion the meaning of it might have evoked in other conditions gathered and broke in a flood. It rolled over me that here was a great affection quenched, and how much I had loved and trusted her. I had a vision at the same time of the lonely beauty of her end. “She’s gone—she’s lost to us for ever!” I burst into sobs.

“That’s exactly what I feel,” he exclaimed, speaking with extreme kindness and pressing me to him for comfort. “She’s gone; she’s lost to us for ever: so what does it matter now?” He bent over me, and when his face had touched mine I scarcely knew if it were wet with my tears or with his own.

VII

It was my theory, my conviction, it became, as I may say, my attitude, that they had still never “met;” and it was just on this ground that I said to myself it would be generous to ask him to stand with me beside her grave. He did so, very modestly and tenderly, and I assumed, though he himself clearly cared nothing for the danger, that the solemnity of the occasion, largely made up of persons who had known them both and had a sense of the long joke, would sufficiently deprive his presence of all light association. On the question of what had happened the evening of her death little more passed between us; I had been overtaken by a horror of the element of evidence. It seemed gross and prying on either hypothesis. He, on his side, had none to produce, none at least but a statement of his house-porter—on his own admission a most casual and intermittent personage—that between the hours of ten o’clock and midnight no less than three ladies in deep black had flitted in and out of the place. This proved far too much; we had neither of us any use for three. He knew that I considered I had accounted for every fragment of her time, and we dropped the matter as settled; we abstained from further discussion. What I knew however was that he abstained to please me rather than because he yielded to my reasons. He didn’t yield—he was only indulgent; he clung to his interpretation because he liked it better. He liked it better, I held, because it had more to say to his vanity. That, in a similar position, would not have been its effect on me, though I had doubtless quite as much; but these are things of individual humour, as to which no person can judge for another. I should have supposed it more gratifying to be the subject of one of those inexplicable occurrences that are chronicled in thrilling books and disputed about at learned meetings; I could conceive, on the part of a being just engulfed in the infinite and still vibrating with human emotion, of nothing more fine and pure, more high and august than such an impulse of reparation, of admonition or even of curiosity. *That* was beautiful, if one would, and I should in his place have thought more of myself for being so distinguished. It was public that he had already, that he had long been distinguished, and what was this in itself but almost a proof? Each of the strange visitations contributed to establish the other. He had a different feeling; but he had also, I hasten to add, an unmistakable desire not to make a stand or, as they say, a fuss about it. I might believe what I liked—the more so that the whole thing was in a manner a mystery of my producing. It was an event of my history, a puzzle of my consciousness, not of his; therefore he would take about it any tone that struck me as convenient. We had both at all events other business on hand; we were pressed with preparations for our marriage.

Mine were assuredly urgent, but I found as the days went on that to believe what I “liked” was to believe what I was more and more intimately convinced of. I found also that I didn’t like it so much as that came to, or that the pleasure at all events was far from being the cause of my conviction. My obsession, as I may really call it and as I began to perceive, refused to be elbowed away, as I had hoped, by my sense of paramount duties. If I had a great deal to do I had still more to think about, and the moment came when my occupations were gravely menaced by my thoughts. I see it all now, I feel it, I live it over. It’s terribly void of joy, it’s full indeed to overflowing of bitterness; and yet I must do myself justice—I couldn’t possibly be other than I was. The same strange impressions, had I to meet them again, would produce the same deep anguish, the same sharp doubts, the same still sharper certainties. Oh, it’s all easier to remember than to write, but even if I could retrace the business hour by hour, could find terms for the inexpressible, the ugliness and the pain would quickly stay my hand. Let

me then note very simply and briefly that a week before our wedding-day, three weeks after her death, I became fully aware that I had something very serious to look in the face, and that if I was to make this effort I must make it on the spot and before another hour should elapse. My unextinguished jealousy—*that* was the Medusa-mask. It hadn't died with her death, it had vividly survived, and it was fed by suspicions unspeakable. They *would* be unspeakable to-day, that is, if I hadn't felt the sharp need of uttering them at the time.

This need took possession of me—to save me, as it appeared, from my fate. When once it had done so I saw—in the urgency of the case, the diminishing hours and shrinking interval—only one issue, that of absolute promptness and frankness. I could at least not do him the wrong of delaying another day, I could at least treat my difficulty as too fine for a subterfuge. Therefore very quietly, but none the less abruptly and hideously, I put it before him on a certain evening that we must reconsider our situation and recognise that it had completely altered.

He stared bravely. "How has it altered?"

"Another person has come between us."

He hesitated a moment. "I won't pretend not to know whom you mean." He smiled in pity for my aberration, but he meant to be kind. "A woman dead and buried!"

"She's buried, but she's not dead. She's dead for the world—she's dead for me. But she's not dead for *you*."

"You hark back to the different construction we put on her appearance that evening?"

"No," I answered, "I hark back to nothing. I've no need of it. I've more than enough with what's before me."

"And pray, darling, what is that?"

"You're completely changed."

"By that absurdity?" he laughed.

"Not so much by that one as by other absurdities that have followed it."

"And what may they have been?"

We had faced each other fairly, with eyes that didn't flinch; but his had a dim, strange light, and my certitude triumphed in his perceptible paleness. "Do you really pretend," I asked, "not to know what they are?"

"My dear child," he replied, "you describe them too sketchily!"

I considered a moment. "One may well be embarrassed to finish the picture! But from that point of view—and from the beginning—what was ever more embarrassing than your idiosyncrasy?"

He was extremely vague. "My idiosyncrasy?"

"Your notorious, your peculiar power."

He gave a great shrug of impatience, a groan of overdone disdain. "Oh, my peculiar power!"

"Your accessibility to forms of life," I coldly went on, "your command of impressions, appearances, contacts closed—for our gain or our loss—to the rest of us. That was originally a part of the deep interest with which you inspired me—one of the reasons I was amused, I was indeed positively proud to know you. It was a magnificent distinction; it's a magnificent distinction still. But of course I had no prevision then of the way it would operate now; and

even had that been the case I should have had none of the extraordinary way in which its action would affect me.”

“To what in the name of goodness,” he pleadingly inquired, “are you fantastically alluding?” Then as I remained silent, gathering a tone for my charge, “How in the world *does* it operate?” he went on; “and how in the world are you affected?”

“She missed you for five years,” I said, “but she never misses you now. You’re making it up!”

“Making it up?” He had begun to turn from white to red.

“You see her—you see her: you see her every night!” He gave a loud sound of derision, but it was not a genuine one. “She comes to you as she came that evening,” I declared; “having tried it she found she liked it!” I was able, with God’s help, to speak without blind passion or vulgar violence; but those were the exact words—and far from “sketchy” they then appeared to me—that I uttered. He had turned away in his laughter, clapping his hands at my folly, but in an instant he faced me again, with a change of expression that struck me. “Do you dare to deny,” I asked, “that you habitually see her?”

He had taken the line of indulgence, of meeting me halfway and kindly humouring me. At all events, to my astonishment, he suddenly said: “Well, my dear, what if I do?”

“It’s your natural right; it belongs to your constitution and to your wonderful, if not perhaps quite enviable fortune. But you will easily understand that it separates us. I unconditionally release you.”

“Release me?”

“You must choose between me and her.”

He looked at me hard. “I see.” Then he walked away a little, as if grasping what I had said and thinking how he had best treat it. At last he turned upon me afresh. “How on earth do you know such an awfully private thing?”

“You mean because you’ve tried so hard to hide it? It *is* awfully private, and you may believe I shall never betray you. You’ve done your best, you’ve acted your part, you’ve behaved, poor dear! loyally and admirably. Therefore I’ve watched you in silence, playing my part too; I’ve noted every drop in your voice, every absence in your eyes, every effort in your indifferent hand: I’ve waited till I was utterly sure and miserably unhappy. How *can* you hide it when you’re abjectly in love with her, when you’re sick almost to death with the joy of what she gives you?” I checked his quick protest with a quicker gesture. “You love her as you’ve *never* loved, and, passion for passion, she gives it straight back! She rules you, she holds you, she has you all! A woman, in such a case as mine, divines and feels and sees; she’s not an idiot who has to be credibly informed. You come to me mechanically, compunctiously, with the dregs of your tenderness and the remnant of your life. I can renounce you, but I can’t share you; the best of you is hers; I know what it is and I freely give you up to her for ever!”

He made a gallant fight, but it couldn’t be patched up; he repeated his denial, he retracted his admission, he ridiculed my charge, of which I freely granted him moreover the indefensible extravagance. I didn’t pretend for a moment that we were talking of common things; I didn’t pretend for a moment that he and she were common people. Pray, if they *had* been, how should I ever have cared for them? They had enjoyed a rare extension of being and they had caught me up in their flight; only I couldn’t breathe in such an air and I promptly asked to be set down. Everything in the facts was monstrous, and most of all my lucid perception of

them; the only thing allied to nature and truth was my having to act on that perception. I felt after I had spoken in this sense that my assurance was complete; nothing had been wanting to it but the sight of my effect on him. He disguised indeed the effect in a cloud of chaff, a diversion that gained him time and covered his retreat. He challenged my sincerity, my sanity, almost my humanity, and that of course widened our breach and confirmed our rupture. He did everything in short but convince me either that I was wrong or that he was unhappy; we separated, and I left him to his inconceivable communion.

He never married, any more than I've done. When six years later, in solitude and silence, I heard of his death I hailed it as a direct contribution to my theory. It was sudden, it was never properly accounted for, it was surrounded by circumstances in which—for oh, I took them to pieces!—I distinctly read an intention, the mark of his own hidden hand. It was the result of a long necessity, of an unquenchable desire. To say exactly what I mean, it was a response to an irresistible call.

Covering End

I

At the foot of the staircase he waited and listened, thinking he had heard her call to him from the gallery, high aloft but out of view, to which he had allowed her independent access and whence indeed, on her first going up, the sound of her appreciation had reached him in rapid movements, evident rushes and dashes, and in droll, charming cries that echoed through the place. He had afterwards, expectant and restless, been, for another look, to the house-door, and then had fidgeted back into the hall, where her voice again caught him. It was many a day since such a voice had sounded in those empty chambers, and never perhaps, in all the years, for poor Chivers, had any voice at all launched a note so friendly and so free.

“Oh, no, mum, there ain’t no one whatever come yet. It’s quite all right, mum,—you can please yourself!” If he left her to range, all his pensive little economy seemed to say, wasn’t it just his poor pickings? He quitted the stairs, but stopped again, with his hand to his ear, as he heard her once more appeal to him. “Lots of lovely——? Lovely *what*, mum? Little ups and downs?” he quavered aloft. “Oh, as you say, mum: as many as in a poor man’s life!” She was clearly disposed, as she roamed in delight from point to point, to continue to talk, and, with his better ear and his scooped hand, he continued to listen hard. ““Dear little crooked steps’? Yes, mum; please mind ‘em, mum: they be cruel in the dark corners!” She appeared to take another of her light scampers, the sign of a fresh discovery and a fresh response; at which he felt his heart warm with the success of a trust of her that might after all have been rash. Once more her voice reached him and once more he gossiped back. “Coming up too? Not if you’ll kindly indulge me, mum—I must be where I can watch the bell. It takes watching as well as hearing!”—he dropped, as he resumed his round, to a murmur of great patience. This was taken up the next moment by the husky plaint of the signal itself, which seemed to confess equally to short wind and creaking joints. It moved, however, distinguishably, and its motion made him start much more as if he had been guilty of sleeping at his post than as if he had waited half the day. “Mercy, if I *didn’t* watch——!” He shuffled across the wide stone-paved hall and, losing himself beneath the great arch of the short passage to the entrance-front, hastened to admit his new visitor. He gives us thereby the use of his momentary absence for a look at the place he has left.

This is the central hall, high and square, brown and grey, flagged beneath and timbered above, of an old English country-house; an apartment in which a single survey is a perception of long and lucky continuities. It would have been difficult to find elsewhere anything at once so old and so actual, anything that had plainly come so far, far down without, at any moment of the endless journey, losing its way. To stand there and look round was to wonder a good deal—yet without arriving at an answer—whether it had been most neglected or most cherished; there was such resignation in its long survival and yet such bravery in its high polish. If it had never been spoiled, this was partly, no doubt, because it had been, for a century, given up; but what it had been given up to was, after all, homely and familiar use. It had in it at the present moment indeed much of the chill of fallen fortunes; but there was no concession in its humility and no hypocrisy in its welcome. It was magnificent and shabby, and the eyes of the dozen dark old portraits seemed, in their eternal attention, to count the cracks in the pavement, the rents in the seats of the chairs, and the missing tones in the Flemish tapestry. Above the tapestry, which, in its turn, was above the high oak wainscot, most of these stiff images—on the side on which it principally reigned—were placed; and they held up their heads to assure all comers that a tone or two was all that *was* missing, and

that they had never waked up in winter dawns to any glimmer of bereavement, in the long night, of any relic or any feature. Such as it was, the company was all there; every inch of old oak, every yard of old arras, every object of ornament or of use to which these surfaces formed so rare a background. If the watchers on the walls had ever found a gap in their own rank, the ancient roof, of a certainty, would have been shaken by their collective gasp. As a matter of fact it was rich and firm—it had almost the dignity of the vault of a church. On this Saturday afternoon in August, a hot, still day, such of the casements as freely worked in the discoloured glass of the windows stood open in one quarter to a terrace that overlooked a park and in another to a wonderful old empty court that communicated with a wonderful old empty garden. The staircase, wide and straight, mounted, full in sight, to a landing that was half-way up; and on the right, as you faced this staircase, a door opened out of the brown panelling into a glimpse of a little morning-room, where, in a slanted, gilded light, there was brownness too, mixed with notes of old yellow. On the left, toward court and garden, another door stood open to the warm air. Still as you faced the staircase you had at your right, between that monument and the morning-room, the arch through which Chivers had disappeared.

His reappearance interrupts and yet in a manner, after all, quickens our intense impression; Chivers on the spot, and in this severe but spacious setting, was so perfect an image of immemorial domesticity. It would have been impossible perhaps, however, either to tell his age or to name his use: he was of the age of all the history that lurked in all the corners and of any use whatever you might be so good as still to find for him. Considerably shrunken and completely silvered, he had perpetual agreement in the droop of his kind white head and perpetual inquiry in the jerk of the idle old hands now almost covered by the sleeves of the black dress-coat which, twenty years before, must have been by a century or two the newest thing in the house and into which his years appeared to have declined very much as a shrunken family moves into a part of its habitation. This attire was completed by a white necktie that, in honour of the day, he himself had this morning done up. The humility he betrayed and the oddity he concealed were alike brought out by his juxtaposition with the gentleman he had admitted.

To admit Mr. Prodmore was anywhere and at any time, as you would immediately have recognised, an immense admission. He was a personage of great presence and weight, with a large smooth face in which a small sharp meaning was planted like a single pin in the tight red toilet-cushion of a guest-chamber. He wore a blue frock-coat and a stiff white waistcoat and a high white hat that he kept on his head with a kind of protesting cock, while in his buttonhole nestled a bold prize plant on which he occasionally lowered a proprietary eye that seemed to remind it of its being born to a public career. Mr. Prodmore's appearance had evidently been thought out, but it might have struck you that the old portraits took it in with a sterner stare, with a fixedness indeed in which a visitor more sensitive would have read a consciousness of his remaining, in their presence, so jauntily, so vulgarly covered. He had never a glance for them, and it would have been easy after a minute to see that this was an old story between them. Their manner, as it were, sensibly increased the coolness. This coolness became a high rigour as Mr. Prodmore encountered, from the very threshold, a disappointment.

“No one here?” he indignantly demanded.

“I'm sorry to say no one has come, sir,” Chivers replied; “but I've had a telegram from Captain Yule.”

Mr. Prodmore's apprehension flared out. “Not to say he ain't coming?”

“He was to take the 2.20 from Paddington; he certainly *should* be here!” The old man spoke as if his non-arrival were the most unaccountable thing in the world, especially for a poor person ever respectful of the mystery of causes.

“He should have been here this hour or more. And so should my fly-away daughter!”

Chivers surrounded this description of Miss Prodmore with the deep discretion of silence, and then, after a moment, evidently reflected that silence, in a world bestrewn with traps to irreverence, might be as rash as speech. “Were they coming—a—together, sir?”

He had scarcely mended the matter, for his visitor gave an inconsequent stare. “Together?—for what do you take Miss Prodmore?” This young lady’s parent glared about him again as if to alight on something else that was out of place; but the good intentions expressed in the attitude of every object might presently have been presumed to soothe his irritation. It had at any rate the effect of bridging, for poor Chivers, some of his gaps. “It *is* in a sense true that their ‘coming together,’ as you call it, is exactly what I’ve made my plans for today: my calculation was that we should all punctually converge on this spot. Attended by her trusty maid, Miss Prodmore, who happens to be on a week’s visit to her grandmother at Bellborough, was to take the 1.40 from that place. I was to drive over—ten miles—from the most convenient of my seats. Captain Yule”—the speaker wound up his statement as with the mention of the last touch in a masterpiece of his own sketching—“was finally to shake off for a few hours the peculiar occupations that engage him.”

The old man listened with his head askance to favour his good ear, but his visible attention all on a sad spot in one of the half-dozen worn rugs. “They *must* be peculiar, sir, when a gentleman comes into a property like this and goes three months without so much as a nat’ral curiosity——! I don’t speak of anything but what *is* nat’ral, sir; but there have *been* people here——”

“There have repeatedly been people here!” Mr. Prodmore complacently interrupted.

“As you say, sir—to be shown over. With the master himself never shown!” Chivers dismally commented.

“He *shall* be, so that nobody can miss him!” Mr. Prodmore, for his own reassurance as well, hastened to retort.

His companion risked a tiny explanation. “It will be a mercy indeed to look on him; but I meant that he has not been taken round.”

“That’s what I meant too. *I’ll* take him—round and round: it’s exactly what I’ve come for!” Mr. Prodmore rang out; and his eyes made the lower circuit again, looking as pleased as such a pair of eyes could look with nobody as yet quite good enough either to terrify or to tickle. “He can’t fail to be affected, though he *has* been up to his neck in such a different class of thing.”

Chivers clearly wondered awhile what class of thing it could be. Then he expressed a timid hope. “In nothing, I dare say, but what’s right, sir——?”

“In everything,” Mr. Prodmore distinctly informed him, “that’s wrong! But here he is!” that gentleman added with elation as the doorbell again sounded. Chivers, under the double agitation of the appeal and the disclosure, proceeded to the front as fast as circumstances allowed; while Mr. Prodmore, left alone, would have been observed—had not his solitude been so bleak—to recover a degree of cheerfulness. Cheerfulness in solitude at Covering End was certainly not irresistible, but particular feelings and reasons had pitched, for their campaign, the starched, if now somewhat ruffled, tent of his large white waistcoat. If they

had issued audibly from that pavilion, they would have represented to us his consciousness of the reinforcement he might bring up for attack should Captain Yule really resist the house. The sound he next heard from the front caused him none the less, for that matter, to articulate a certain drop. "Only Cora?—Well," he added in a tone somewhat at variance with his "only," "he shan't, at any rate, resist *her!*" This announcement would have quickened a spectator's interest in the young lady whom Chivers now introduced and followed, a young lady who straightway found herself the subject of traditionary discipline. "I've waited. What do you mean?"

Cora Prodmore, who had a great deal of colour in her cheeks and a great deal more—a bold variety of kinds—in the extremely high pitch of her new, smart clothes, meant, on the whole, it was easy to see, very little, and met this challenge with still less show of support either from the sources I have mentioned or from any others. A dull, fresh, honest, overdressed damsel of two-and-twenty, she was too much out of breath, too much flurried and frightened, to do more than stammer: "Waited, papa? Oh, I'm sorry!"

Her regret appeared to strike her father still more as an impertinence than as a vanity. "Would you then, if I had not had patience for you, have wished not to find me? Why the dickens are you so late?"

Agitated, embarrassed, the girl was at a loss. "I'll tell you, papa!" But she followed up her pledge with an air of vacuity and then, dropping into the nearest seat, simply closed her eyes to her danger. If she desired relief, she had caught at the one way to get it. "I feel rather faint. Could I have some tea?"

Mr. Prodmore considered both the idea and his daughter's substantial form. "Well, as I shall expect you to put forth *all* your powers—yes!" He turned to Chivers. "Some tea."

The old man's eyes had attached themselves to Miss Prodmore's symptoms with more solicitude than those of her parent. "I did think it might be required!" Then as he gained the door of the morning-room: "I'll lay it out here."

The young lady, on his withdrawal, recovered herself sufficiently to rise again. "It was my train, papa—so very awfully behind. I walked up, you know, also, from the station—there's such a lovely footpath across the park."

"You've been roaming the country then alone?" Mr. Prodmore inquired.

The girl protested with instant eagerness against any such picture. "Oh, dear no, not *alone!*" She spoke, absurdly, as if she had had a train of attendants; but it was an instant before she could complete the assurance. "There were ever so many people about."

"Nothing is more possible than that there should be *too* many!" said her father, speaking as for his personal convenience, but presenting that as enough. "But where, among them all," he demanded, "is your trusty maid?"

Cora's reply made up in promptitude what it lacked in felicity. "I didn't bring her." She looked at the old portraits as if to appeal to them to help her to remember why. Apparently indeed they gave a sign, for she presently went on: "She was so extremely unwell."

Mr. Prodmore met this with reprobation. "Wasn't she to understand from the first that we don't permit——"

"Anything of that sort?"—the girl recalled it at least as a familiar law. "Oh, yes, papa—I *thought* she did."

“But she doesn’t?”—Mr. Prodmore pressed the point. Poor Cora, at a loss again, appeared to wonder if the point had better be a failure of brain or of propriety, but her companion continued to press. “What on earth’s the matter with her?”

She again communed with their silent witnesses. “I really don’t quite know, but I think that at Granny’s she eats too much.”

“I’ll soon put an end to *that!*” Mr. Prodmore returned with decision. “You expect then to pursue your adventures quite into the night—to return to Bellborough as you came?”

The girl had by this time begun a little to find her feet. “Exactly as I came, papa dear,—under the protection of a new friend I’ve just made, a lady whom I met in the train and who is also going back by the 6.19. She was, like myself, on her way to this place, and I expected to find her here.”

Mr. Prodmore chilled on the spot any such expectations. “What does she want at this place?”

Cora was clearly stronger for her new friend than for herself. “She wants to see it.”

Mr. Prodmore reflected on this complication. “Today?” It was practically presumptuous. “Today won’t do.”

“So I suggested,” the girl declared. “But do you know what she said?”

“How should I know,” he coldly demanded, “what a nobody says?”

But on this, as if with the returning taste of a new strength, his daughter could categorically meet him. “She’s not a nobody. She’s an American.”

Mr. Prodmore, for a moment, was struck: he embraced the place, instinctively, in a flash of calculation. “An American?”

“Yes, and she’s wild——”

He knew all about that. “Americans mostly *are!*”

“I mean,” said Cora, “to see this place. ‘Wild’ was what she herself called it—and I think she also said she was ‘mad.’”

“She gave”—Mr. Prodmore reviewed the affair—“a fine account of herself! But she won’t do.”

The effect of her new acquaintance on his companion had been such that she could, after an instant, react against this sentence. “Well, when I told her that this particular day perhaps wouldn’t, she said it would just *have* to.”

“Have to do?” Mr. Prodmore showed again, through a chink, his speculative eye. “For *what*, then, with such grand airs?”

“Why, I suppose, for what Americans want.”

He measured the quantity. “They want everything.”

“Then I wonder,” said Cora, “that she hasn’t arrived.”

“When she does arrive,” he answered, “I’ll tackle her; and I shall thank you, in future, not to take up, in trains, with indelicate women of whom you know nothing.”

“Oh, I did know something,” his daughter pleaded; “for I saw her yesterday at Bellborough.”

Mr. Prodmore contested even this freedom. “And what was she doing at Bellborough?”

“Staying at the Blue Dragon, to see the old abbey. She says she just loves old abbeys. It seems to be the same feeling,” the girl went on, “that brought her over, today, to see this old house.”

“She ‘just loves’ old houses? Then why the deuce didn’t she accompany you properly, since she is so pushing, to the door?”

“Because she went off in a fly,” Cora explained, “to see, first, the old hospital. She just loves old hospitals. She asked me if this isn’t a show-house. I told her”—the girl was anxious to disclaim responsibility—“that I hadn’t the least idea.”

“It *is!*” Mr. Prodmore cried almost with ferocity. “I wonder, on such a speech, what she thought of *you!*”

Miss Prodmore meditated with distinct humbleness. “I know. She told me.”

He had looked her up and down. “That you’re really a hopeless frump?”

Cora, oddly enough, seemed almost to court this description. “That I’m not, as she rather funnily called it, a show-girl.”

“Think of your having to be reminded—by the very strangers you pick up,” Mr. Prodmore groaned, “of what my daughter should pre-eminently be! Your friend, all the same,” he bethought himself, “is evidently loud.”

“Well, when she comes,” the girl again so far agreed as to reply, “you’ll certainly hear her. But don’t judge her, papa, till you do. She’s tremendously clever,” she risked—“there seems to be nothing she doesn’t know.”

“And there seems to be nothing you do! You’re *not* tremendously clever,” Mr. Prodmore pursued; “so you’ll permit me to demand of you a slight effort of intelligence.” Then, as for the benefit of the listening walls themselves, he struck the high note. “I’m expecting Captain Yule.”

Cora’s consciousness blinked. “The owner of this property?”

Her father’s tone showed his reserves. “That’s what it depends on you to make him!”

“On me?” the girl gasped.

“He came into it three months ago by the death of his great-uncle, who had lived to ninety-three, but who, having quarrelled mortally with his father, had always refused to receive either sire or son.”

Our young lady bent her eyes on this page of family history, then raised them but dimly lighted. “But now, at least, doesn’t he live here?”

“So little,” her companion replied, “that he comes here today for the very first time. I’ve some business to discuss with him that can best be discussed on this spot; and it’s a vital part of that business that you too should take pains to make him welcome.”

Miss Prodmore failed to ignite. “In his own house?”

“That it’s *not* his own house is just the point I seek to make! The way I look at it is that it’s *my* house! The way I look at it even, my dear”—in his demonstration of his ways of looking Mr. Prodmore literally expanded—“is that it’s *our* house. The whole thing is mortgaged, as it stands, for every penny of its value; and I’m in the pleasant position—do you follow me?” he trumpeted.

Cora jumped. “Of holding the mortgages?”

He caught her with a smile of approval and indeed of surprise. "You keep up with me better than I hoped. I hold every scrap of paper, and it's a precious collection."

She smothered, perceptibly, a vague female sigh, glancing over the place more attentively than she had yet done. "Do you mean that you can come down on him?"

"I don't need to 'come,' my dear—I *am* 'down.' *This* is down!"—and the iron point of Mr. Prodmore's stick fairly struck, as he rapped it, a spark from the cold pavement. "I came many weeks ago—commercially speaking—and haven't since budged from the place."

The girl moved a little about the hall, then turned with a spasm of courage. "Are you going to be very hard?"

If she read the eyes with which he met her she found in them, in spite of a certain accompanying show of pleasantry, her answer. "Hard with *you*?"

"No—that doesn't matter. Hard with the Captain."

Mr. Prodmore thought an instant. "'Hard' is a stupid, shuffling term. What do you mean by it?"

"Well, I don't understand business," Cora said; "but I think I understand *you*, papa, enough to gather that you've got, as usual, a striking advantage."

"As usual, I *have* scored; but my advantage won't be striking perhaps till I have sent the blow home. What I appeal to you, as a father, at present to do"—he continued broadly to demonstrate—"is to nerve my arm. I look to you to see me through."

"Through what, then?"

"Through this most important transaction. Through the speculation of which you've been the barely dissimulated subject. I've brought you here to receive an impression, and I've brought you, even more, to make one."

The girl turned honestly flat. "But on whom?"

"On me, to begin with—by not being a fool. And then, Miss, on *him*."

Erect, but as if paralysed, she had the air of facing the worst. "On Captain Yule?"

"By bringing him to the point."

"But, father," she asked in evident anguish—"to *what* point?"

"The point where a gentleman *has* to."

Miss Prodmore faltered. "Go down on his knees?"

Her father considered. "No—they don't do that now."

"What *do* they do?"

Mr. Prodmore carried his eyes with a certain sustained majesty to a remote point. "He will know himself."

"Oh, no, indeed, he won't," the girl cried; "they don't *ever*!"

"Then the sooner they learn—whoever teaches 'em!—the better: the better I mean in particular," Mr. Prodmore added with an intention discernibly vicious, "for the master of this house. I'll guarantee that he shall understand that," he concluded, "for I shall do my part."

She looked at him as if his part were really to be hated. "But how on earth, sir, can I ever do mine? To begin with, you know, I've never even seen him."

Mr. Prodmore took out his watch; then, having consulted it, put it back with a gesture that seemed to dispose at the same time and in the same manner of the objection. "You'll see him *now*—from one moment to the other. He's remarkably handsome, remarkably young, remarkably ambitious, and remarkably clever. He has one of the best and oldest names in this part of the country—a name that, far and wide here, one could do so much with that I'm simply indignant to see him do so little. I propose, my dear, to do with it all he hasn't, and I further propose, to that end, first to get hold of it. It's you, Miss Prodmore, who shall take it out of the fire."

"The fire?"—he had terrible figures.

"Out of the mud, if you prefer. You must pick it up, do you see? My plan is, in short," Mr. Prodmore pursued, "that when we've brushed it off and rubbed it down a bit, blown away the dust and touched up the rust, my daughter shall gracefully bear it."

She could only oppose, now, a stiff, thick transparency that yielded a view of the course in her own veins, after all, however, mingled with a feebler fluid, of the passionate blood of the Prodmores. "And pray is it also Captain Yule's plan?"

Her father's face warned her off the ground of irony, but he replied without violence. "His plans have not yet quite matured. But nothing is more natural," he added with an ominous smile, "than that they shall do so on the sunny south wall of Miss Prodmore's best manner."

Miss Prodmore's spirit was visibly rising, and a note that might have meant warning for warning sounded in the laugh produced by this sally. "You speak of them, papa, as if they were sour little plums! You exaggerate, I think, the warmth of Miss Prodmore's nature. It has always been thought remarkably cold."

"Then you'll be so good, my dear, as to confound—it mightn't be amiss even a little to scandalise—that opinion. I've spent twenty years in giving you what your poor mother used to call advantages, and they've cost me hundreds and hundreds of pounds. It's now time that, both as a parent and as a man of business, I should get my money back. I couldn't help your temper," Mr. Prodmore conceded, "nor your taste, nor even your unfortunate resemblance to the estimable, but far from ornamental, woman who brought you forth; but I paid out a small fortune that you should have, damn you, don't you know? a good manner. You never show it to me, certainly; but do you mean to tell me that, at this time of day—for other persons—you *haven't* got one?"

This pulled our young lady perceptibly up; there was a directness in the argument that was like the ache of old pinches. "If you mean by 'other persons' persons who are particularly civil—well, Captain Yule may not see his way to be one of them. He may not *think*—don't you see?—that I've a good manner."

"Do your duty, Miss, and never mind what he thinks!" Her father's conception of her duty momentarily sharpened. "Don't look at him like a sick turkey, and he'll be sure to think right."

The colour that sprang into Cora's face at this rude comparison was such, unfortunately, as perhaps a little to justify it. Yet she retained, in spite of her emotion, some remnant of presence of mind. "I remember your saying once, some time ago, that that was just what he would be sure *not* to do: I mean when he began to go in for his dreadful ideas——"

Mr. Prodmore took her boldly up. "About the 'radical programme,' the 'social revolution,' the spoliation of everyone, and the destruction of everything? Why, you stupid thing, I've worked round to a complete agreement with him. The taking from those who have by those who haven't——"

“Well?” said the girl, with some impatience, as he sought the right way of expressing his notion.

“What is it but to receive, from consenting hands, the principal treasure of the rich? If I’m rich, my daughter is my largest property, and I freely make her over. I shall, in other words, forgive my young friend his low opinions if he renounces them for *you*.”

Cora, at this, started as with a glimpse of delight. “He won’t renounce them! He *shan’t*!”

Her father appeared still to enjoy the ingenious way he had put it, so that he had good humour to spare. “If you suggest that you’re in political sympathy with him, you mean then that you’ll take him as he *is*?”

“I won’t take him at all!” she protested with her head very high; but she had no sooner uttered the words than the sound of the approach of wheels caused her dignity to drop. “A fly?—it must be *he*!” She turned right and left, for a retreat or an escape, but her father had already caught her by the wrist. “Surely,” she pitifully panted, “you don’t want me to bounce on him *thus*?”

Mr. Prodmore, as he held her, estimated the effect. “Your frock won’t do—with what it cost me?”

“It’s not my frock, papa,—it’s his thinking I’ve come here for him to see me!”

He let her go and, as she moved away, had another look for the social value of the view of her stout back. It appeared to determine him, for, with a touch of mercy, he passed his word. “He doesn’t think it, and he *shan’t* know it.”

The girl had made for the door of the morning-room, before reaching which she flirted breathlessly round. “But he knows you want me to hook him!”

Mr. Prodmore was already in the parliamentary attitude the occasion had suggested to him for the reception of his visitor. “The way to ‘hook’ him will be not to be hopelessly vulgar. He doesn’t know that you know anything.” The house-bell clinked, and he waved his companion away. “Await us there with tea, and mind you toe the mark!”

Chivers, at this moment, summoned by the bell, reappeared in the morning-room doorway, and Cora’s dismay brushed him as he sidled past her and off into the passage to the front. Then, from the threshold of her refuge, she launched a last appeal. “Don’t *kill* me, father: give me time!” With which she dashed into the room, closing the door with a bang.

II

Mr. Prodmore, in Chivers’s absence, remained staring as if at a sudden image of something rather fine. His child had left with him the sense of a quick irradiation, and he failed to see why, at the worst, such lightnings as she was thus able to dart shouldn’t strike somewhere. If he had spoken to her of her best manner perhaps *that* was her best manner. He heard steps and voices, however, and immediately invited to his aid his own, which was simply magnificent. Chivers, returning, announced solemnly “Captain Yule!” and ushered in a tall young man in a darkish tweed suit and a red necktie, attached in a sailor’s knot, who, as he entered, removed a soft brown hat. Mr. Prodmore, at this, immediately saluted him by uncovering. “Delighted at last to see you here!”

It was the young man who first, in his comparative simplicity, put out a hand. “If I’ve not come before, Mr. Prodmore, it was—very frankly speaking—from the dread of seeing *you*!” His speech contradicted, to some extent, his gesture, but Clement Yule’s was an aspect in which contradictions were rather remarkably at home. Erect and slender, but as strong as he

was straight, he was set up, as the phrase is, like a soldier, and yet finished, in certain details—matters of expression and suggestion only indeed—like a man in whom sensibility had been recklessly cultivated. He was hard and fine, just as he was sharp and gentle, just as he was frank and shy, just as he was serious and young, just as he looked, though you could never have imitated it, distinctly “kept up” and yet considerably reduced. His features were thoroughly regular, but his complete shaving might have been designed to show that they were, after all, not absurd. The face Mr. Prodmore offered him fairly glowed, on this new showing, with instant pride of possession, and there was that in Captain Yule’s whole air which justified such a sentiment without consciously rewarding it.

“Ah, surely,” said the elder man, “my presence is not without a motive!”

“It’s just the motive,” Captain Yule returned, “that makes me wince at it! Certainly I’ve no illusions,” he added, “about the ground of our meeting. Your thorough knowledge of what you’re about has placed me at your mercy—you hold me in the hollow of your hand.”

It was vivid in every inch that Mr. Prodmore’s was a nature to expand in the warmth, or even in the chill, of any tribute to his financial subtlety. “Well, I won’t, on my side, deny that when, in general, I go in deep I don’t go in for nothing. I make it pay double!” he smiled.

“You make it pay so well—’double’ surely doesn’t do you justice!—that, if I’ve understood you, you can do quite as you like with this preposterous place. Haven’t you brought me down exactly that I may *see* you do it?”

“I’ve certainly brought you down that you may open your eyes!” This, apparently, however, was not what Mr. Prodmore himself had arrived to do with his own. These fine points of expression literally contracted with intensity. “Of course, you know, you can always clear the property. You can pay off the mortgages.”

Captain Yule, by this time, had, as he had not done at first, looked up and down, round about and well over the scene, taking in, though at a mere glance, it might have seemed, more particularly, the row, high up, of strenuous ancestors. But Mr. Prodmore’s last words rang none the less on his ear, and he met them with mild amusement. “Pay off——? What can I pay off with?”

“You can always raise money.”

“What can I raise it on?”

Mr. Prodmore looked massively gay. “On your great political future.”

“Oh, I’ve not taken—for the short run at least—the lucrative line,” the young man said, “and I know what you think of *that*.”

Mr. Prodmore’s blandness confessed, by its instant increase, to this impeachment. There was always the glory of intimacy in Yule’s knowing what he thought. “I hold that you keep, in public, very dangerous company; but I also hold that you’re extravagant mainly because you’ve nothing at stake. A man has the right opinions,” he developed with pleasant confidence, “as soon as he has something to lose by having the wrong. Haven’t I already hinted to you how to set your political house in order? You drop into the lower regions because you keep the best rooms empty. You’re a firebrand, in other words my dear Captain, simply because you’re a bachelor. That’s one of the early complaints we all pass through, but it’s soon over, and the treatment for it quite simple. I have your remedy.”

The young man’s eyes, wandering again about the house, might have been those of an auditor of the fiddling before the rise of the curtain. “A remedy worse than the disease?”

“There’s nothing worse, that I’ve ever heard of,” Mr. Prodmore sharply replied, “than your particular fix. Least of all a heap of gold——”

“A heap of gold?” His visitor idly settled, as if the curtain were going up.

Mr. Prodmore raised it bravely. “In the lap of a fine fresh lass! Give pledges to fortune, as somebody says—*then* we’ll talk. You want money—that’s what you want. Well, marry it!”

Clement Yule, for a little, never stirred, save that his eyes yet again strayed vaguely. At last they stopped with a smile. “Of course I could do that in a moment!”

“It’s even just my own danger from you,” his companion returned. “I perfectly recognise that any woman would now jump——”

“I don’t like jumping women,” Captain Yule threw in; “but that perhaps is a detail. It’s more to the point that I’ve yet to see the woman whom, by an advance of my own——”

“You’d care to keep in the really attractive position——?”

“Which can never, of course, be anything”—Yule took his friend up again——“but that of waiting quietly.”

“Never, never anything!” Mr. Prodmore, most assentingly, banished all other thought. “But I haven’t asked you, you know, to make an advance.”

“You’ve only asked me to receive one?”

Mr. Prodmore waited a little. “Well, I’ve asked you—I asked you a month ago—to think it all over.”

“I *have* thought it all over,” Clement Yule said; “and the strange sequel seems to be that my eyes have got accustomed to my darkness. I seem to make out, in the gloom of my meditations, that, at the worst, I can let the whole thing slide.”

“The property?”—Mr. Prodmore jerked back as if it were about to start.

“Isn’t it the property,” his visitor inquired, “that positively throws me up? If I can afford neither to live on it nor to disencumber it, I can at least let it save its own bacon and pay its own debts. I can say to you simply: ‘Take it, my dear sir, and the devil take *you!*’”

Mr. Prodmore gave a quick, strained smile. “You wouldn’t be so shockingly rude!”

“Why not—if I’m a firebrand and a keeper of low company and a general nuisance? Sacrifice for sacrifice, that might very well be the least!”

This was put with such emphasis that Mr. Prodmore was for a moment arrested. He could stop very short, however, and yet talk as still going. “How do you know, if you haven’t compared them? It’s just to make the comparison—in all the proper circumstances—that you’re here at this hour.” He took, with a large, though vague, exhibitory gesture, a few turns about. “Now that you stretch yourself—for an hour’s relaxation and rocked, as it were, by my friendly hand—in the ancient cradle of your race, can you seriously entertain the idea of parting with such a venerable family relic?”

It was evident that, as he decorously embraced the scene, the young man, in spite of this dissuasive tone, was entertaining ideas. It might have appeared at the moment to a spectator in whom fancy was at all alert that the place, becoming in a manner conscious of the question, felt itself on its honour, and that its honour could make no compromise. It met Clement Yule with no grimace of invitation, with no attenuation of its rich old sadness. It was as if the two hard spirits, the grim *genius loci* and the quick modern conscience, stood an instant confronted. “The cradle of my race bears, for me, Mr. Prodmore, a striking

resemblance to its tomb." The sigh that dropped from him, however, was not quite void of tenderness. It might, for that matter, have been a long, sad creak, portending collapse, of some immemorial support of the Yules. "Heavens, how melancholy——!"

Mr. Prodmore, somewhat ambiguously, took up the sound. "Melancholy?"—he just balanced. That well might be, even a little *should* be—yet agreement might depreciate.

"Musty, mouldy;" then with a poke of his stick at a gap in the stuff with which an old chair was covered, "mangy!" Captain Yule responded. "Is this the character throughout?"

Mr. Prodmore fixed a minute the tell-tale tatter. "You must judge for yourself—you must go over the house." He hesitated again; then his indecision vanished—the right line was clear. "It does look a bit run down, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll do it up for you—neatly: I'll throw *that* in!"

His young friend turned on him an eye that, though markedly enlivened by his offer, was somehow only the more inscrutable. "Will you put in the electric light?"

Mr. Prodmore's own twinkle—at this touch of a spring he had not expected to work—was, on the other hand, temporarily veiled. "Well, if you'll meet me half-way! We're dealing here"—he backed up his gravity—"with fancy-values. Don't you feel," he appealed, "as you take it all in, a kind of a something-or-other down your back?"

Clement Yule gazed awhile at one of the pompous quarterings in the faded old glass that, in tones as of late autumn, crowned with armorial figures the top of the great hall-window; then with abruptness he turned away. "Perhaps I *don't* take it all in; but what I do feel is—since you mention it—a sort of stiffening of the spine! The whole thing is too queer—too cold—too cruel."

"Cruel?"—Mr. Prodmore's demur was virtuous.

"Like the face of some stuck-up distant relation who won't speak first. I see in the stare of the old dragon, I taste in his very breath, all the helpless mortality he has tucked away!"

"Lord, sir—you *have* fancies!" Mr. Prodmore was almost scandalised.

But the young man's fancies only multiplied as he moved, not at all critical, but altogether nervous, from object to object. "I don't know what's the matter—but there *is* more here than meets the eye." He tried as for his amusement or his relief to figure it out. "I miss the old presences. I feel the old absences. I hear the old voices. I see the old ghosts."

This last was a profession that offered some common ground. "The old ghosts, Captain Yule," his companion promptly replied, "are worth so much a dozen, and with no reduction, I must remind you—with the price indeed rather raised—for the quantity taken!" Feeling then apparently that he had cleared the air a little by this sally, Mr. Prodmore proceeded to pat his interlocutor on a back that he by no means wished to cause to be put to the wall. "Look about you, at any rate, a little more." He crossed with his toes well out the line that divides encouragement from patronage. "Do make yourself at home."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Prodmore. May I light a cigarette?" his visitor asked.

"In your own house, Captain?"

"That's just the question: it seems so much less my own house than before I had come into it!" The Captain offered Mr. Prodmore a cigarette which that gentleman, also taking a light from him, accepted; then he lit his own and began to smoke. "As I understand you," he went on, "you *lump* your two conditions? I mean I must accept both or neither?"

Mr. Prodmore threw back his shoulders with a high recognition of the long stride represented by this question. "You *will* accept both, for, by doing so, you'll clear the property at a stroke. The way I put it is—see?—that if you'll stand for Gossage, you'll get returned for Gossage."

"And if I get returned for Gossage, I shall marry your daughter. Accordingly," the young man pursued, "if I marry your daughter——"

"I'll burn up, before your eyes," said this young lady's proprietor, "every scratch of your pen. It will be a bonfire of signatures. There won't be a penny to pay—there'll only be a position to take. You'll take it with peculiar grace."

"Peculiar, Mr. Prodmore—very!"

The young man had assented more than he desired, but he was not deterred by it from completing the picture. "You'll settle down here in comfort and honour."

Clement Yule took several steps; the effect of his host was the reverse of soothing; yet the latter watched his irritation as if it were the working of a charm. "Are you very sure of the 'honour' if I turn my political coat?"

"You'll only be turning it back again to the way it was always worn. Gossage will receive you with open arms and press you to a heaving Tory bosom. That bosom"—Mr. Prodmore followed himself up—"has never heaved but to sound Conservative principles. The cradle, as I've called it,—or at least the rich, warm coverlet,—of your race, Gossage was the political property, so to speak, of generations of your family. Stand therefore in the good old interest and you'll stand like a lion."

"I'm afraid you mean," Captain Yule laughed, "that I must first roar like one."

"Oh, *I'll* do the roaring!"—and Mr. Prodmore shook his mane. "Leave that to me."

"Then why the deuce don't you stand yourself?"

Mr. Prodmore knew so familiarly why! "Because I'm not a remarkably handsome young man with the grand old home and the right old name. Because I'm a different sort of matter altogether. But if I haven't these advantages," he went on, "you'll do justice to my natural desire that my daughter at least shall have them."

Clement Yule watched himself smoke a minute. "Doing justice to natural desires is just what, of late, I've tried to make a study of. But I confess I don't quite grasp the deep attraction you appear to discover in so large a surrender of your interests."

"My surrenders are my own affair," Mr. Prodmore rang out, "and as for my interests, as I never, on principle, give anything for nothing, I dare say I may be trusted to know them when I see them. You come high—I don't for a moment deny it; but when I look at you, in this pleasant, intimate way, my dear boy—if you'll allow me so to describe things—I recognise one of those cases, unmistakable when really met, in which one must put down one's money. There's not an article in the whole shop, if you don't mind the comparison, that strikes me as better value. I intend you shall be, Captain," Mr. Prodmore wound up in a frank, bold burst, "the true comfort of my life!"

The young man was as hushed for a little as if an organ-tone were still in the air. "May I inquire," he at last returned, "if Miss Prodmore's ideas of comfort are as well defined—and in her case, I may add, as touchingly modest—as her father's? Is she a responsible party of this ingenious arrangement?"

Mr. Prodmore rendered homage—his appreciation was marked—to the elevated character of his young friend's scruple. "Miss Prodmore, Captain Yule, may be perhaps best described as

a large smooth sheet of blank, though gilt-edged, paper. No image of any tie but the true and perfect filial has yet, I can answer for it, formed itself on the considerable expanse. But for that image to be projected——”

“I’ve only, in person, to appear?” Yule asked with an embarrassment that he tried to laugh off.

“And, naturally, in person,” Mr. Prodmore intelligently assented, “do yourself, as well as the young lady, justice. Do you remember what you said when I first, in London, laid the matter before you?”

Clement Yule did remember, but his amusement increased. “I think I said it struck me I should first take a look at—what do you call it?—the *corpus delicti*.”

“You should first see for yourself what you had really come into? I was not only eager for that,” said Mr. Prodmore, “but I’m willing to go further: I’m quite ready to hear you say that you think you should also first see the young lady.”

Captain Yule continued to laugh. “There is something in that then, since you mention it!”

“I think you’ll find that there’s everything.” Mr. Prodmore again looked at his watch. “Which will you take first?”

“First?”

“The young lady or the house?”

His companion, at this, unmistakably started. “Do you mean your daughter’s *here*?”

Mr. Prodmore glowed with consciousness. “In the morning-room.”

“Waiting for me?”

The tone showed a consternation that Mr. Prodmore’s was alert to soothe. “Ah, as long, you know, as you like!”

Yule’s alarm, however, was not assuaged; it appeared to grow as he stared, much discomposed, yet sharply thinking, at the door to which his friend had pointed. “Oh, longer than *this*, please!” Then as he turned away: “Do you mean she knows——?”

“That she’s here on view?” Mr. Prodmore hung fire a moment, but was equal to the occasion. “She knows nothing whatever. She’s as unconscious as the rose on its stem!”

His companion was visibly relieved. “That’s right—let her remain so! I’ll first take the house,” said Clement Yule.

“Shall I go round *with* you?” Mr. Prodmore asked.

The young man’s reflection was brief. “Thank you. I’d rather, on the whole, go round alone.”

The old servant who had admitted the gentlemen came back at this crisis from the morning-room, looking from under a bent brow and with much limpid earnestness from one of them to the other. The one he first addressed had evidently, though quite unaware of it, inspired him with a sympathy from which he now took a hint. “There’s tea on, sir!” he persuasively jerked as he passed the younger man.

The elder answered. “Then I’ll join my daughter.” He gained the morning-room door, whence he repeated with an appropriate gesture—that of offering proudly, with light, firm fingers, a flower of his own celebrated raising—his happy formula of Miss Prodmore’s state. “The rose on its stem!” Scattering petals, diffusing fragrance, he thus passed out.

Chivers, meanwhile, had rather pointlessly settled once more in its place some small object that had not strayed; to whom Clement Yule, absently watching him, abruptly broke out. "I say, my friend, what colour is the rose?"

The old man looked up with a dimness that presently glimmered. "The rose, sir?" He turned to the open door and the shining day. "Rather a brilliant——"

"A brilliant——?" Yule was interested.

"Kind of old-fashioned red." Chivers smiled with the pride of being thus able to testify, but the next instant his smile went out. "It's the only one left—on the old west wall."

His visitor's mirth, at this, quickly enough revived. "My dear fellow, I'm not alluding to the sole ornament of the garden, but to the young lady at present in the morning-room. Do you happen to have noticed if she's pretty?"

Chivers stood queerly rueful. "Laws, sir—it's a matter I mostly notice; but isn't it, at the same time, sir, a matter—like—of taste?"

"Pre-eminently. That's just why I appeal with such confidence to yours."

The old man acknowledged with a flush of real embarrassment a responsibility he had so little invited. "Well, sir,—mine was always a sort of fancy for something more merry-like."

"She isn't merry-like then, poor Miss Prodmore?" Captain Yule's attention, however, dropped before the answer came, and he turned off the subject with an "Ah, if you come to that, neither am I! But it doesn't signify," he went on. "What are *you*?" he more sociably demanded.

Chivers clearly had to think a bit. "Well, sir, I'm not quite *that*. Whatever has there been to make me, sir?" he asked in dim extenuation.

"How in the world do *I* know? I mean to whom do you belong?"

Chivers seemed to scan impartially the whole field. "If you could just only *tell* me, sir! I quite seem to waste away—for someone to take an order of."

Clement Yule, by this time, had become aware he was amusing. "Who pays your wages?"

"No one at all, sir," said the old man very simply.

His friend, fumbling an instant in a waistcoat pocket, produced something that his hand, in obedience to a little peremptory gesture and by a trick of which he had unlearned, through scant custom, the neatness, though the propriety was instinctive, placed itself in a shy practical relation to. "Then there's a sovereign. And I haven't many!" the young man, turning away resignedly, threw after it.

Chivers, for an instant, intensely studied him. "Ah, then, shouldn't it stay in the family?"

Clement Yule wheeled round, first struck, then, at the sight of the figure made by his companion in this offer, visibly touched. "I think it does, old boy."

Chivers kept his eyes on him now. "I've served your house, sir."

"How long?"

"All my life."

So, for a time, they faced each other, and something in Chivers made Yule at last speak.

"Then I won't give *you* up!"

"Indeed, sir, I hope you won't give up anything."

The Captain took up his hat. "It remains to be seen." He looked over the place again; his eyes wandered to the open door. "Is that the garden?"

"It *was*!"—and the old man's sigh was like the creak of the wheel of time. "Shall I show you how it used to be?"

"It's just as it *is*, alas, that I happen to require it!" Captain Yule reached the door and stood looking beyond. "Don't come," he then said; "I want to think." With which he walked out.

Chivers, left alone, appeared to wonder at it, and his wonder, like that of most old people, lay near his lips. "What does he want, poor dear, to think about?" This speculation, however, was immediately checked by a high, clear voice that preceded the appearance on the stairs, before she had reached the middlemost landing, of the wonderful figure of a lady, a lady who, with the almost trumpeted cheer of her peremptory but friendly call—"Housekeeper, Butler, old Family Servant!"—fairly waked the sleeping echoes. Chivers gazed up at her in quick remembrance, half dismayed, half dazzled, of a duty neglected. She appeared now; she shone at him out of the upper dusk; reaching the middle, she had begun to descend, with beautiful laughter and rustling garments; and though she was alone she gave him the sense of coming in a crowd and with music. "Oh, I should have told him of *her*!"

III

She was indeed an apparition, a presence requiring announcement and explanation just in the degree in which it seemed to show itself in a relation quite of its own to all social preliminaries. It evidently either assumed them to be already over or wished to forestall them altogether; what was clear at any rate was that it allowed them scant existence. She was young, tall, radiant, lovely, and dressed in a manner determined at once, obviously, by the fact and by the humour of her journey—it might have proclaimed her so a pilgrim or so set her up as a priestess. Most journeys, for this lady, at all events, were clearly a brush of Paris. "Did you think I had got snapped down in an old box like that poor girl—what's her name? the one who was poking round too—in the celebrated poem? You dear, delightful man, why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you, mum——?"

"Well, that you're so perfectly—perfect! You're ever so much better than anyone has ever said. Why, in the name of common sense, has nobody ever said *anything*? You're everything in the world you ought to be, and not the shade of a shade of anything you oughtn't!"

It was a higher character to be turned out with than poor Chivers had ever dreamed. "Well, mum, I try!" he gaped.

"Oh, no, you don't—that's just your charm! *I* try," cried his friend, "but you do nothing: here you simply *are*—you can't help it!"

He stood overwhelmed. "Me, mum?"

She took him in at the eyes—she could take everything at once. "Yes, you too, you positive old picture! I've seen the old masters—but you're the old master!"

"The master—I?" He fairly fell back.

"The good and faithful servant'—Rembrandt van Rhyn: with three stars. *That's* what you are!" Nothing would have been more droll to a spectator than her manner of meeting his humbleness, or more charming indeed than the practical sweetness of her want of imagination of it. "The house is a vision of beauty, and you're simply worthy of the house. I can't say more for you!"

“I find it a bit of a strain, mum,” Chivers candidly replied, “to keep up—fairly to call it—with what you *do* say.”

“That’s just what everyone finds it!”—she broke into the happiest laugh. “Yet I haven’t come here to suffer in silence, you know—to suffer, I mean, from envy and despair.” She was in constant movement, from side to side, observing, comparing, returning, taking notes while she gossiped and gossiping, too, for remembrance. The intention of remembrance even had in it, however, some prevision of failure or some alloy of irritation. “You’re so fatally right and so deadly complete, all the same, that I can really scarcely bear it: with every fascinating feature that I had already heard of and thought I was prepared for, and ever so many others that, strange to say, I hadn’t and wasn’t, and that you just spring right *at* me like a series of things going off. What do you call it,” she asked—“a royal salute, a hundred guns?”

Her enthusiasm had a bewildering form, but it had by this time warmed the air, and the old man rubbed his hands as over a fire to which the bellows had been applied. “I saw as soon as you arrived, mum, that you were looking for more things than ever *I* heard tell of!”

“Oh, I had got you by heart,” she returned, “from books and drawings and photos; I had you in my pocket when I came: so, you see, as soon as you were so good as to give me my head and let me loose, I knew my way about. It’s all here, every inch of it,” she competently continued, “and now at last I can do what I want!”

A light of consternation, at this, just glimmered in Chivers’s face. “And pray, mum, what might that be?”

“Why, take you right back with me—to Missoura Top.”

This answer seemed to fix his bewilderment, but he was there for the general convenience.

“Do I understand you, mum, that you require to take *me*?”

Her particular convenience, on the spot, embraced him, so new and delightful a sense had he suddenly read into her words. “Do you mean to say you’d come—as the old Family Servant? Then *do*, you nice real thing: it’s just what I’m dying for—an old Family Servant! You’re somebody’s else, yes—but everything, over here, is somebody’s else, and I want, too, a first-rate second-hand one, all ready made, as you are, but not too much done up. You’re the best I’ve seen yet, and I wish I could have you packed—put up in paper and bran—as I shall have my old pot there.” She whisked about, remembering, recovering, eager: “Don’t let me *forget* my precious pot!” Excited, with quick transitions, she quite sociably appealed to her companion, who shuffled sympathetically to where, out of harm, the object had been placed on a table. “Don’t you just love old crockery? That’s awfully sweet old Chelsea.”

He took up the piece with tenderness, though, in his general agitation, not perhaps with all the caution with which, for daily service, he handled ancient frailties. He at any rate turned on this fresh subject an interested, puzzled eye. “Where is it I’ve known this very bit—though not to say, as *you* do, by name?” Suddenly it came to him. “In the pew-opener’s front parlour!”

“No,” his interlocutress cried, “in the pew-opener’s best bedroom: on the old chest of drawers, you know—with those ducks of brass handles. I’ve got the handles too—I mean the whole thing; and the brass fender and fire-irons, and the chair her grandmother died in. Not in the fly,” she added—“it was such a bore that they have to be sent.”

Chivers, with the pot still in his hands, fairly rocked in the high wind of so much confidence and such great transactions. He had nothing for these, however, but approval. “You did right to take this out, mum, when the fly went to the stables. Them flymen do be cruel rash with

anything that's delicate." Of the delicacy of the vessel it now rested with him to deposit safely again he was by this time so appreciatively aware that in returning with it to its safe niche he stumbled into some obscure trap literally laid for him by his nervousness. It was the matter of a few seconds, of a false movement, a knock of the elbow, a gasp, a shriek, a complete little crash. There was the pot on the pavement, in several pieces, and the clumsy cup-bearer blue with fear. "Mercy *on* us, mum,—I've brought shame on my old grey hairs!"

The little shriek of his companion had smothered itself in the utterance, and the next minute, with the ruin between them, they were contrastedly face to face. The charming woman, who had already found more voices in the air than anyone had found before, could, in the happy play of this power, find a poetry in her accident. "Oh, but the way you *take* it!" she laughed—"you're too quaint to live!" She looked at him as if he alone had suffered—as if his suffering indeed positively added to his charm. "The way you said that now—it's just the very 'type'! That's all I want of you now—to *be* the very type. It's what you are, you poor dear thing—for you *can't* help it; and it's what everything and everyone else is, over here; so that you had just better all make up your minds to it and not try to shirk it. There was a type in the train with me—the 'awfully nice girl' of all the English novels, the 'simple maiden in her flower' of—who is it?—your great poet. *She* couldn't help it either—in fact I wouldn't have *let* her!" With this, while Chivers picked up his fragments, his lady had a happy recall. His face, as he stood there with the shapeless elements of his humiliation fairly rattling again in his hands, was a reflection of her extraordinary manner of enlarging the subject, or rather, more beneficently perhaps, the space that contained it. "By the way, the girl was coming right here. Has she come?"

Chivers crept solemnly away, as if to bury his dead, which he consigned, with dumb rites, to a situation of honourable publicity; then, as he came back, he replied without elation: "Miss Prodmore is here, mum. She's having her tea."

This, for his friend, was a confirmatory touch to be fitted with eagerness into the picture. "Yes, that's exactly it—they're always having their tea!"

"With Mr. Prodmore—in the morning-room," the old man supplemented. "Captain Yule's in the garden."

"Captain Yule?"

"The new master. He's also just arrived."

The wonderful lady gave an immediate "Oh!" to the effect of which her silence for another moment seemed to add. "She didn't tell me about *him*."

"Well, mum," said Chivers, "it do be a strange thing to tell. He had never—like, mum—so much as seen the place."

"Before today—his very own?" This too, for the visitor, was an impression among impressions, and, like most of her others, it ended after an instant as a laugh. "Well, I hope he likes it!"

"I haven't seen many, mum," Chivers boldly declared, "that like it as much as *you*."

She made with her handsome head a motion that appeared to signify still deeper things than he had caught. Her beautiful wondering eyes played high and low, like the flight of an imprisoned swallow, then, as she sank upon a seat, dropped at last as if the creature were bruised with its limits. "I should like it still better if it were *my* very own!"

"Well, mum," Chivers sighed, "if it wasn't against my duty I could wish indeed it were! But the Captain, mum," he conscientiously added, "is the lawful heir."

It was a wonder what she found in whatever he said; he touched with every word the spring of her friendly joy. "That's another of your lovely old things—I adore your lawful heirs!" She appeared to have, about everything that came up, a general lucid vision that almost glorified the particular case. "He has come to take possession?"

Chivers accepted, for the credit of the house, this sustaining suggestion. "He's a-taking of it now."

This evoked, for his companion, an instantaneous show. "What does he do and how does he do it? Can't I *see*?" She was all impatience, but she dropped to disappointment as her guide looked blank. "There's no grand fuss——?"

"I scarce think him, mum," Chivers with propriety hastened to respond, "the gentleman to make any about anything."

She had to resign herself, but she smiled as she thought. "Well, perhaps I like them better when they don't!" She had clearly a great range of taste, and it all came out in the wistfulness with which, before the notice apparently served on her, she prepared to make way. "I also"—she lingered and sighed—"have taken possession!"

Poor Chivers really rose to her. "It was you, mum," he smiled, "took it first!"

She sadly shook her head. "Ah, but for a poor little hour! *He's* for life."

The old man gave up, after a little, with equal depression, the pretence of dealing with such realities. "For mine, mum, I do at least hope."

She made again the circuit of the great place, picking up without interest the jacket she had on her previous entrance laid down. "I shall think of you, you know, here together." She vaguely looked about her as for anything else to take; then abruptly, with her eyes again on Chivers: "Do you suppose he'll be kind to you?"

His hand, in his trousers-pocket, seemed to turn the matter over. "He has already been, mum."

"Then be sure to be so to *him*!" she replied with some emphasis. The house-bell sounded as she spoke, giving her quickly another thought. "Is that his bell?"

Chivers was hardly less struck. "I must see whose!"—and hurrying, on this, to the front, he presently again vanished.

His companion, left alone, stood a minute with an air in which happy possession was oddly and charmingly mingled with desperate surrender; so much as to have left you in doubt if the next of her lively motions were curiosity or disgust. Impressed, in her divided state, with a small framed plaque of enamel, she impulsively detached it from the wall and examined it with hungry tenderness. Her hovering thought was so vivid that you might almost have traced it in sound. "Why, bless me if it isn't Limoges! I wish awfully I were a *bad* woman: then, I do devoutly hope, I'd just quietly take it!" It testified to the force of this temptation that on hearing a sound behind her she started like a guilty thing; recovering herself, however, and—just, of course, not to appear at fault—keeping the object familiarly in her hand as she jumped to a recognition of the gentleman who, coming in from the garden, had stopped in the open doorway. She gathered indeed from his being there a positive advantage, the full confidence of which was already in her charming tone. "Oh, Captain Yule, I'm delighted to meet you! It's such a comfort to ask you if I *may*!"

His surprise kept him an instant dumb, but the effort not too closely to betray it appeared in his persuasive inflection. "If you 'may,' madam——?"

“Why, just *be* here, don’t you know? and poke round!” She presented such a course as almost vulgarly natural. “Don’t tell me I can’t now, because I already *have*: I’ve been upstairs and downstairs and in my lady’s chamber—I won’t answer for it even perhaps that I’ve not been in my lord’s! I got round your lovely servant—if you don’t look out I’ll grab him. If you don’t look out, you know, I’ll grab everything.” She gave fair notice and went on with amazing serenity; she gathered positive gaiety from his frank stupefaction. “That’s what I came over for—just to lay your country waste. Your house is a wild old dream; and besides”—she dropped, oddly and quaintly, into real responsible judgment—“you’ve got some quite good things. Oh, yes, you *have*—several: don’t coyly pretend you haven’t!” Her familiarity took these flying leaps, and she alighted, as her victim must have phrased it to himself, without turning a hair. “Don’t you *know* you have? Just look at that!” She thrust her enamel before him, but he took it and held it so blankly, with an attention so absorbed in the mere woman, that at the sight of his manner her zeal for his interest and her pity for his detachment again flashed out. “Don’t you know *anything*? Why, it’s Limoges!”

Clement Yule simply broke into a laugh—though his laugh indeed was comprehensive. “It seems absurd, but I’m not in the least acquainted with my house. I’ve never happened to see it.”

She seized his arm. “Then do let me show it to you!”

“I shall be delighted.” His laughter had redoubled in a way that spoke of his previous tension; yet his tone, as he saw Chivers return breathless from the front, showed that he had responded sincerely enough to desire a clear field. “Who in the world’s there?”

The old man was full of it. “A party!”

“A party?”

Chivers confessed to the worst. “Over from Gossage—to see the house.”

The worst, however, clearly, was quite good enough for their companion, who embraced the incident with sudden enthusiasm. “Oh, let *me* show it!” But before either of the men could reply she had, addressing herself to Chivers, one of those droll drops that betrayed the quickness of her wit and the freedom of her fancy. “Dear me, I forgot—*you* get the tips! But, you dear old creature,” she went on, “I’ll get them, too, and I’ll simply make them over to you.” She again pressed Yule—pressed him into this service. “Perhaps they’ll be bigger—for me!”

He continued to be highly amused. “I should think they’d be enormous—for you! But I *should* like,” he added with more concentration—“I should like extremely, you know, to go over with you alone.”

She was held a moment. “Just you and me?”

“Just you and me—as you kindly proposed.”

She stood reminded; but, throwing it off, she had her first in consequence. “That must be for after——!”

“Ah, but not too late.” He looked at his watch. “I go back tonight.”

“Laws, sir!” Chivers irrepressibly groaned.

“You want to keep him?” the stranger asked. Captain Yule turned away at the question, but her look went after him, and she found herself, somehow, instantly answered. “Then I’ll help you,” she said to Chivers; “and the oftener we go over the better.”

Something further, on this, quite immaterial, but quite adequate, passed, while the young man's back was turned, between the two others; in consequence of which Chivers again appealed to his master. "Shall I show them straight in, sir?"

His master, still detached, replied without looking at him. "By all means—if there's money in it!" This was jocose, but there would have been, for an observer, an increase of hope in the old man's departing step. The lady had exerted an influence.

She continued, for that matter, with a start of genial remembrance, to exert one in his absence. "Oh, and I promised to show it to Miss Prodmore!" Her conscience, with a kind smile for the young person she named, put the question to Clement Yule. "Won't you call her?"

The coldness of his quick response made it practically none. "'Call' her? Dear lady, I don't *know* her!"

"You must, then—she's wonderful." The face with which he met this drew from the dear lady a sharper look; but, for the aid of her good-nature, Cora Prodmore, at the moment she spoke, presented herself in the doorway of the morning-room. "See? She's charming!" The girl, with a glare of recognition, dashed across the open as if under heavy fire; but heavy fire, alas—the extremity of exposure—was promptly embodied in her friend's public embrace. "Miss Prodmore," said this terrible friend, "let me present Captain Yule." Never had so great a gulf been bridged in so free a span. "Captain Yule, Miss Prodmore. Miss Prodmore, Captain Yule."

There was stiffness, the cold mask of terror, in such notice as either party took of this demonstration, the convenience of which was not enhanced for the divided pair by the perception that Mr. Prodmore had now followed his daughter. Cora threw herself confusedly into it indeed, as with a vain rebound into the open. "Papa, let me 'present' you to Mrs. Gracedew. Mrs. Gracedew, Mr. Prodmore. Mr. Prodmore, Mrs. Gracedew."

Mrs. Gracedew, with a free salute and a distinct repetition, took in Mr. Prodmore as she had taken everything else. "Mr. Prodmore"—oh, she pronounced him, spared him nothing of himself. "So happy to meet your daughter's father. Your daughter's so perfect a specimen."

Mr. Prodmore, for the first moment, had simply looked large and at sea; then, like a practical man and without more question, had quickly seized the long perch held out to him in this statement. "So perfect a specimen, yes!"—he seemed to pass it on to his young friend.

Mrs. Gracedew, if she observed his emphasis, drew from it no deterrence; she only continued to cover Cora with a gaze that kept her well in the middle. "So fresh, so quaint, so droll!"

It was apparently a result of what had passed in the morning-room that Mr. Prodmore had grasped afresh the need for effective action, which he clearly felt he did something to meet in clutching precipitately the helping hand popped so suddenly out of space, yet so beautifully gloved and so pressingly and gracefully brandished. "So fresh, so quaint, so droll!"—he again gave Captain Yule the advantage of the stranger's impression.

To what further appreciation this might have prompted the lady herself was not, however, just then manifest; for the return of Chivers had been almost simultaneous with the advance of the Prodmores, and it had taken place with forms that made it something of a circumstance. There was positive pomp in the way he preceded several persons of both sexes, not tourists at large, but simple sightseers of the half-holiday order, plain provincial folk already, on the spot, rather awestruck. The old man, with suppressed pulls and prayers, had drawn them up in a broken line, and the habit of more peopled years, the dull drone of the dead lesson, sounded out in his prompt beginning. The party stood close, in this manner, on one side of the

apartment, while the master of the house and his little circle were grouped on the other. But as Chivers, guiding his squad, reached the centre of the space, Mrs. Gracedew, markedly moved, quite unreservedly engaged, came slowly forward to meet him. "This, ladies and gentlemen," he mechanically quavered, "is perhaps the most important feature—the grand old feudal, baronial 'all. Being, from all accounts, the most ancient portion of the edifice, it was erected in the very earliest ages." He paused a moment, to mark his effect, then gave a little cough which had become, obviously, in these great reaches of time, an essential part of the trick. "Some do say," he dispassionately remarked, "in the course of the fifteenth century."

Mrs. Gracedew, who had visibly thrown herself into the working of the charm, following him with vivid sympathy and hanging on his lips, took the liberty, at this, of quite affectionately pouncing on him. "*I say in the fourteenth, my dear—you're robbing us of a hundred years!*"

Her victim yielded without a struggle. "I do seem, in them dark old centuries, sometimes to trip a little." Yet the interruption of his ancient order distinctly discomposed him, all the more that his audience, gaping with a sense of the importance of the fine point, moved in its mass a little nearer. Thus put upon his honour, he endeavoured to address the group with a dignity undiminished. "The Gothic roof is much admired, but the west gallery is a modern addition."

His discriminations had the note of culture, but his candour, all too promptly, struck Mrs. Gracedew as excessive. "What in the name of Methuselah do you call 'modern'? It was here at the visit of James the First, in 1611, and is supposed to have served, in the charming detail of its ornament, as a model for several that were constructed in his reign. The great fireplace," she handsomely conceded, "*is Jacobean.*"

She had taken him up with such wondrous benignant authority—as if, for her life, if they *were* to have it, she couldn't help taking care that they had it out; she had interposed with an assurance that so converted her—as by the wave of a great wand, the motion of one of her own free arms—from mere passive alien to domesticated dragon, that poor Chivers could only assent with grateful obeisances. She so plunged into the old book that he had quite lost his place. The two gentlemen and the young lady, moreover, were held there by the magic of her manner. His own, as he turned again to his cluster of sightseers, took refuge in its last refinement. "The tapestry on the left Italian—the elegant wood-work Flemish."

Mrs. Gracedew was upon him again. "Excuse me if I just deprecate a misconception. The elegant wood-work Italian—the tapestry on the left Flemish." Suddenly she put it to him before them all, pleading as familiarly and gaily as she had done when alone with him, and looking now at the others, all round, gentry and poor folk alike, for sympathy and support. She had an idea that made her dance. "Do you really mind if *I* just do it? Oh, I know how: I can do quite beautifully the housekeeper last week at Castle Gaunt." She fraternised with the company as if it were a game they must play with her, though this first stage sufficiently hushed them. "How do you do? Ain't it thrilling?" Then with a laugh as free as if, for a disguise, she had thrown her handkerchief over her head or made an apron of her tucked-up skirt, she passed to the grand manner. "Keep well together, please—we're not doing puss-in-the-corner. I've my duty to all parties—I can't be partial to one!"

The contingent from Gossage had, after all, like most contingents, its spokesman—a very erect little personage in a very new suit and a very green necktie, with a very long face and upstanding hair. It was on an evident sense of having been practically selected for encouragement that he, in turn, made choice of a question which drew all eyes. "How many parties, now, can you manage?"

Mrs. Gracedew was superbly definite. "Two. The party up and the party down." Chivers gasped at the way she dealt with this liberty, and his impression was conspicuously deepened as she pointed to one of the escutcheons in the high hall-window. "Observe in the centre compartment the family arms." She did take his breath away, for before he knew it she had crossed with the lightest but surest of gestures to the black old portrait, on the opposite wall, of a long-limbed gentleman in white trunk-hose. "And observe the family legs!" Her method was wholly her own, irregular and broad; she flew, familiarly, from the pavement to the roof and then dropped from the roof to the pavement as if the whole air of the place were an element in which she floated. "Observe the suit of armour worn at Tewkesbury—observe the tattered banner carried at Blenheim." They bobbed their heads wherever she pointed, but it would have come home to any spectator that they saw her alone. This was the case quite as much with the opposite trio—the case especially with Clement Yule, who indeed made no pretence of keeping up with her signs. It was the signs themselves he looked at—not at the subjects indicated. But he never took his eyes from her, and it was as if, at last, she had been peculiarly affected by a glimpse of his attention. All her own, for a moment, frankly went back to him and was immediately determined by it. "Observe, above all, that you're in one of the most interesting old houses, of its type, in England; for which the ages have been tender and the generations wise: letting it change so slowly that there's always more left than taken—living their lives in it, but letting it shape their lives!"

Though this pretty speech had been unmistakeably addressed to the younger of the temporary occupants of Covering End, it was the elder who, on the spot, took it up. "A most striking and appropriate tribute to a real historical monument!" Mr. Prodmore had a natural ease that could deal handsomely with compliments, and he manifestly, moreover, like a clever man, saw even more in such an explosion of them than fully met the ear. "You do, madam, bring the whole thing out!"

The visitor who had already with such impunity ventured had, on this, a loud renewal of boldness, but for the benefit of a near neighbour. "Doesn't she indeed, Jane, bring it out?"

Mrs. Gracedew, with a friendly laugh, caught the words in their passage. "But who in the world wants to keep it *in*? It isn't a secret—it isn't a strange cat or a political party!" The housekeeper, as she talked, had already dropped from her; her sense of the place was too fresh for control, though instead of half an hour it might have taken six months to become so fond. She soared again, at random, to the noble spring of the roof. "Just look at those lovely lines!" They all looked, all but Clement Yule, and several of the larger company, subdued, overwhelmed, nudged each other with strange sounds. Wherever she turned Mrs. Gracedew appeared to find a pretext for breaking out. "Just look at the tone of that glass, and the gilding of that leather, and the cutting of that oak, and the dear old flags of the very floor." It came back, came back easily, her impulse to appeal to the lawful heir, and she seemed, with her smile of universal intelligence, just to demand the charity of another moment for it. "To look, in this place, is to love!"

A voice from the party she had in hand took it up with an artless guffaw that resounded more than had doubtless been meant and that, at any rate, was evidently the accompaniment of some private pinch applied to one of the ladies. "I *say*—to love!"

It was one of the ladies who very properly replied. "It depends on who you look at!"

Mr. Prodmore, in the geniality of the hour, made his profit of the simple joke. "Do you hear *that*, Captain? You must look at the right person!"

Mrs. Gracedew certainly had not been looking at the wrong one. "I don't think Captain Yule cares. He doesn't do justice——!"

Though her face was still gay, she had faltered, which seemed to strike the young man even more than if she had gone on. "To what, madam?"

Well, on the chance she let him have it. "To the value of your house."

He took it beautifully. "I like to hear *you* express it!"

"I *can't* express it!" She once more looked all round, and so much more gravely than she had yet done that she might have appeared in trouble. She tried but, with a sigh, broke down. "It's too inexpressible!"

This was a view of the case to which Mr. Prodmore, for his own reasons, was not prepared to assent. Expression and formulation were what he naturally most desired, and he had just encountered a fountain of these things that he couldn't prematurely suffer to fail him. "Do what you can for it, madam. It would bring it quite home."

Thus excited, she gave with sudden sombre clearness another try. "Well—the value's a fancy value!"

Mr. Prodmore, receiving it as more than he could have hoped, turned triumphant to his young friend. "Exactly what I told you!"

Mrs. Gracedew explained indeed as if Mr. Prodmore's triumph was not perhaps exactly what she had argued for. Still, the truth was too great. "When a thing's unique, it's unique!"

That was every bit Mr. Prodmore required. "It's unique!"

This met, moreover, the perception of the gentleman in the green necktie. "It's unique!" They all, in fact, demonstratively—almost vociferously now—caught the point.

Mrs. Gracedew, finding herself so sustained, and still with her eyes on the lawful heirs, put it yet more strongly. "It's worth anything you like."

What was this but precisely what Mr. Prodmore had always striven to prove? "Anything you like!" he richly reverberated.

The pleasant discussion and the general interest seemed to bring them all together. "Twenty thousand now?" one of the gentlemen from Gossage archly inquired—a very young gentleman with an almost coaxing voice, who blushed immensely as soon as he had spoken.

He blushed still more at the way Mrs. Gracedew faced him. "I wouldn't *look* at twenty thousand!"

Mr. Prodmore, on the other hand, was proportionately uplifted. "She wouldn't look at twenty thousand!" he announced with intensity to the Captain.

The visitor who had been the first to speak gave a shrewder guess. "Thirty, then, as it stands?"

Mrs. Gracedew looked more and more responsible; she communed afresh with the place; but she too evidently had her conscience. "It would be giving it away!"

Mr. Prodmore, at this, could scarcely contain himself. "It would be giving it away!"

The second speaker had meanwhile conceived the design of showing that, though still crimson, he was not ashamed. "You'd hold out for forty——?"

Mrs. Gracedew required a minute to answer—a very marked minute during which the whole place, pale old portraits and lurking old echoes and all, might have made you feel how much depended on her; to the degree that the consciousness in her face became finally a reason for

her not turning it to Gossage. “Fifty thousand, Captain Yule, is what I think I should propose.”

If the place had seemed to listen it might have been the place that, in admiring accents from the gentleman with the green tie, took up the prodigious figure. “Fifty thousand pound!”

It was echoed in a high note from the lady he had previously addressed. “Fifty thousand!”

Yet it was Mr. Prodmore who caught it up loudest and appeared to make it go furthest. “Fifty thousand—fifty thousand!” Mrs. Gracedew had put him in such spirits that he found on the spot, indicating to her his young friend, both the proper humour and the proper rigour for any question of what anyone might “propose.” “He’ll never part with the dear old home!”

Mrs. Gracedew could match at least the confidence. “Then I’ll go over it again while I have the chance.” Her own humour enjoined that she should drop into the housekeeper, in the perfect tone of which character she addressed herself once more to the party. “We now pass to the grand staircase.” She gathered her band with a brave gesture, but before she had fairly impelled them to the ascent she heard herself rather sharply challenged by Captain Yule, who, during the previous scene, had uttered no sound, yet had remained as attentive as he was impenetrable. “Please let them pass without you!”

She was taken by surprise. “And stay here with *you*?”

“If you’ll be so good. I want to speak to you.” Turning then to Chivers and frowning on the party, he delivered himself for the first time as a person in a position. “For God’s sake, remove them!”

The old man, at this blast of impatience, instantly fluttered forward. “We now pass to the grand staircase.”

They all passed, Chivers covering their scattered ascent as a shepherd scales a hillside with his flock; but it became evident during the manœuvre that Cora Prodmore was quite out of tune. She had been standing beyond and rather behind Captain Yule; but she now moved quickly round and reached her new friend’s right. “Mrs. Gracedew, may *I* speak to you?”

Her father, before the reply could come, had taken up the place. “*After* Captain Yule, my dear.” He was in a state of positively polished lucidity. “You must make the most—don’t you see?—of the opportunity of the others!”

He waved her to the staircase as one who knew what he was about, but, while the young man, turning his back, moved consciously and nervously away, the girl renewed her effort to provoke Mrs. Gracedew to detain her. It happened, to her sorrow, that this lady appeared for the moment, to the detriment of any free attention, to be absorbed in Captain Yule’s manner; so that Cora could scarce disengage her without some air of invidious reference to it. Recognising as much, she could only for two seconds, but with great yearning, parry her own antagonist. “She’ll *help* me, I think, papa!”

“That’s exactly what strikes me, love!” he cheerfully replied. “But *I’ll* help you too!” He gave her, toward the stairs, a push proportioned both to his authority and to her weight; and while she reluctantly climbed in the wake of the visitors, he laid on Mrs. Gracedew’s arm, with a portentous glance at Captain Yule, a hand of commanding significance. “Just pile it on!”

Her attention came back—she seemed to see. “He doesn’t like it?”

“Not half enough. Bring him round.”

Her eyes rested again on their companion, who had fidgeted further away and who now, with his hands in his pockets and unaware of this private passage, stood again in the open doorway and gazed into the grey court. Something in the sight determined her. "I'll bring him round."

But at this moment Cora, pausing half-way up, sent down another entreaty. "Mrs. Gracedew, will you see *me*?"

The charming woman looked at her watch. "In ten minutes," she smiled back.

Mr. Prodmore, bland and assured, looked at his own. "You could put him through in five—but I'll allow you twenty. There!" he decisively cried to his daughter, whom he quickly rejoined and hustled on her course. Mrs. Gracedew kissed after her a hand of vague comfort.

IV

The silence that reigned between the pair might have been registered as embarrassing had it lasted a trifle longer. Yule had continued to turn his back, but he faced about, though he was distinctly grave, in time to avert an awkwardness. "How do you come to know so much about my house?"

She was as distinctly not grave. "How do *you* come to know so little?"

"It's not my fault," he said very gently. "A particular combination of misfortunes has forbidden me, till this hour, to come within a mile of it."

These words evidently struck her as so exactly the right ones to proceed from the lawful heir that such a felicity of misery could only quicken her interest. He was plainly as good in his way as the old butler—the particular combination of misfortunes corresponded to the lifelong service. Her interest, none the less, in its turn, could only quicken her pity, and all her emotions, we have already seen, found prompt enough expression. What could any expression do indeed now but mark the romantic reality? "Why, you poor thing!"—she came toward him on the weary road. "Now that you've got here I hope at least you'll stay." Their intercourse must pitch itself—so far as she was concerned—in some key that would make up for things. "Do make yourself comfortable. Don't mind me."

Yule looked a shade less serious. "That's exactly what I wanted to say to *you*!"

She was struck with the way it came in. "Well, if you *had* been haughty, I shouldn't have been quite crushed, should I?"

The young man's gravity, at this, completely yielded. "I'm never haughty—oh, no!"

She seemed even more amused. "Fortunately then, as *I'm* never crushed. I don't think," she added, "that I'm really as crushable as you."

The smile with which he received this failed to conceal completely that it was something of a home thrust. "Aren't we really *all* crushable—by the right thing?"

She considered a little. "Don't you mean rather by the wrong?"

He had got, clearly, a trifle more accustomed to her being extraordinary. "Are you sure we always know them apart?"

She weighed the responsibility. "I always do. Don't you?"

"Not quite every time!"

"Oh," she replied, "I don't think, thank goodness, we have positively 'every time' to distinguish."

"Yet we must always act," he objected.

She turned this over; then with her wonderful living look, "I'm glad to hear it," she exclaimed, "because, I fear, I always *do*! You'll certainly think," she added with more gravity, "that I've taken a line today!"

"Do you mean that of mistress of the house? Yes—you do seem in possession!"

"*You* don't!" she honestly answered; after which, as to attenuate a little the rigour of the charge: "You don't comfortably look it, I mean. You don't look"—she was very serious—"as I want you to."

It was when she was most serious that she was funniest. "How do you 'want' me to look?"

She endeavoured, while he watched her, to make up her mind, but seemed only, after an instant, to recognise a difficulty. "When you look at *me*, you're all right!" she sighed. It was an obstacle to her lesson, and she cast her eyes about. "Look at that chimneypiece."

"Well——?" he inquired as his eyes came back from it.

"You mean to say it isn't lovely?"

He returned to it without passion—gave a vivid sign of mere disability. "I'm sure I don't know. I don't mean to say anything. I'm a rank outsider."

It had an instant effect on her—she almost pounced upon him. "Then you must let me put you up!"

"Up to what?"

"Up to everything!"—his levity added to her earnestness. "You were smoking when you came in," she said as she glanced about. "Where's your cigarette?"

The young man appreciatively produced another. "I thought perhaps I mightn't—here."

"You may everywhere."

He bent his head to the information. "Everywhere."

She laughed at his docility, yet could only wish to presume upon it. "It's a rule of the house!"

He took in the place with greater pleasure. "What delightful rules!"

"How could such a house have any others?"—she was already launched again in her brave relation to it. "I *may* go up just once more—mayn't I—to the long gallery?"

How could he tell? "The long gallery?"

With an added glow she remembered. "I forgot you've never seen it. Why, it's the leading thing about you!" She was full, on the spot, of the pride of showing it. "Come right up!"

Clement Yule, half seated on a table from which his long left leg nervously swung, only looked at her and smiled and smoked. "There's a party up."

She remembered afresh. "So *we* must be the party down? Well, you must give me a chance. That long gallery's the principal thing I came over for."

She was strangest of all when she explained. "Where in heaven's name did you come over from?"

"Missoura Top, where I'm building—just in this style. I came for plans and ideas," Mrs. Gracedew serenely pursued. "I felt I must look right *at* you."

"But what did you know about us?"

She kept it a moment as if it were too good to give him all at once. "Everything!"

He seemed indeed almost afraid to touch it. "At 'Missoura Top'?"

"Why not? It's a growing place—forty thousand the last census." She hesitated; then as if her warrant should be slightly more personal: "My husband left it to me."

The young man presently changed his posture. "You're a widow?"

Nothing was wanting to the simplicity of her quiet assent. "A very lone woman." Her face, for a moment, had the vision of a long distance. "My loneliness is great enough to want something big to hold it—and my taste good enough to want something beautiful. You see, I had your picture."

Yule's innocence made a movement. "Mine?"

Her smile reassured him; she nodded toward the main entrance. "A water colour I chanced on in Boston."

"In Boston?"

She stared. "Haven't you heard of Boston either?"

"Yes—but what has Boston heard of *me*?"

"It wasn't 'you,' unfortunately—it was your divine south front. The drawing struck me so that I got you up—in the books."

He appeared, however, rather comically, but half to make it out, or to gather at any rate that there was even more of it than he feared. "Are we in the books?"

"Did you never discover it?" Before his blankness, the dim apprehension in his fine amused and troubled face of how much there was of it, her frank, gay concern for him sprang again to the front. "Where in heaven's name, Captain Yule, have *you* come over from?"

He looked at her very kindly, but as if scarce expecting her to follow. "The East End of London."

She had followed perfectly, he saw the next instant, but she had by no means equally accepted. "What were you doing there?"

He could only put it, though a little over-consciously, very simply. "Working, you see. When I left the army—it was much too slow, unless one was personally a whirlwind of war—I began to make out that, for a fighting man——"

"There's always," she took him up, "somebody or other to go for?"

He considered her, while he smoked, with more confidence; as if she might after all understand. "The enemy, yes—everywhere in force. I went for *him*: misery and ignorance and vice—injustice and privilege and wrong. Such as you see me——"

"You're a rabid reformer?"—she understood beautifully. "I wish we had you at Missoura Top!"

He literally, for a moment, in the light of her beauty and familiarity, appeared to measure his possible use there; then, looking round him again, announced with a sigh that, predicament for predicament, his own would do. "I fear my work is nearer home. I hope," he continued, "since you're so good as to seem to care, to perform a part of that work in the next House of Commons. My electors have wanted me——"

"And you've wanted *them*," she lucidly put in, "and that has been why you couldn't come down."

“Yes, for all this last time. And before that, from my childhood up, there was another reason.” He took a few steps away and brought it out as rather a shabby one. “A family feud.”

She proved to be quite delighted with it. “Oh, I’m so glad—I *hoped* I’d strike a ‘feud’! That rounds it off, and spices it up, and, for the heartbreak with which I take leave of you, just neatly completes the fracture!” Her reference to her going seemed suddenly, on this, to bring her back to a sense of proportion and propriety, and she glanced about once more for some wrap or reticule. This, in turn, however, was another recall. “Must I really wait—to go up?”

He had watched her movement, had changed colour, had shifted his place, had tossed away, plainly unwitting, a cigarette but half smoked; and now he stood in her path to the staircase as if, still unsatisfied, he abruptly sought a way to turn the tables. “Only till you tell me this: if you absolutely meant, awhile ago, that this old thing is so precious.”

She met his doubt with amazement and his density with compassion. “Do you literally need I should *say* it? Can you stand here and not feel it?” If he had the misfortune of bandaged eyes, she could at least rejoice in her own vision, which grew intenser with her having to speak for it. She spoke as with a new rush of her impression. “It’s a place to love——” Yet to say the whole thing was not easy.

“To love——?” he impatiently insisted.

“Well, as you’d love a person!” If that was saying the whole thing, saying the whole thing could only be to go. A sound from the “party up” came down at that moment, and she took it so clearly as a call that, for a sign of separation, she passed straight to the stairs.

“Good-bye!”

The young man let her reach the foot, but then, though the greatest width of the hall now divided them, spoke, anxiously and nervously, as if the point she had just made brought them still more together. “I think I ‘feel’ it, you know; but it’s simply you—your presence, as I may say, and the remarkable way you put it—that make me. I’m afraid that in your absence——” He struck a match to smoke again.

It gave her time apparently to make out something to pause for. “In my absence?”

He lit his cigarette. “I may come back——”

“Come back?” she took him almost sharply up. “I should like to see you *not!*”

He smoked a moment. “I mean to my old idea——”

She had quite turned round on him now. “Your old idea——?”

He faced her over the width still between them. “Well—that one *could* give it up.”

Her stare, at this, fairly filled the space. “Give up Covering? How in the world—or why?”

“Because I can’t afford to keep it.”

It brought her straight back, but only half-way: she pulled up short as at a flash. “Can’t you let it?”

Again he smoked before answering. “Let it to *you?*”

She gave a laugh, and her laugh brought her nearer. “I’d take it in a minute!”

Clement Yule remained grave. “I shouldn’t have the face to charge you a rent that would make it worth one’s while, and I think even you, dear lady”—his voice just trembled as he risked that address—“wouldn’t have the face to offer me one.” He paused, but something in his aspect and manner checked in her now any impulse to read his meaning too soon. “My

lovely inheritance is Dead Sea fruit. It's mortgaged for all it's worth and I haven't the means to pay the interest. If by a miracle I could scrape the money together, it would leave me without a penny to live on." He puffed his cigarette profusely. "So if I find the old home at last—I lose it by the same luck!"

Mrs. Gracedew had hung upon his words, and she seemed still to wait, in visible horror, for something that would improve on them. But when she had to take them for his last, "I never heard of anything so awful!" she broke out. "Do you mean to say you can't arrange—?"

"Oh, yes," he promptly replied, "an arrangement—if that be the name to give it—has been definitely proposed to me."

"What's the matter, then?"—she had dropped into relief. "For heaven's sake, you poor thing, definitely accept it!"

He laughed, though with little joy, at her sweet simplifications. "I've made up my mind in the last quarter of an hour that I can't. It's such a peculiar case."

Mrs. Gracedew frankly wondered; her bias was clearly sceptical. "*How* peculiar——?"

He found the measure difficult to give. "Well—more peculiar than most cases."

Still she was not satisfied. "More peculiar than mine?"

"Than yours?"—Clement Yule knew nothing about that.

Something, at this, in his tone, his face—it might have been his "British" density—seemed to pull her up. "I forgot—you don't know mine. No matter. What *is* yours?"

He took a few steps in thought. "Well, the fact that I'm asked to change."

"To change what?"

He wondered how he could put it; then at last, on his own side, simplified. "My attitude."

"Is that all?"—she was relieved again. "Well, you're not a statue."

"No, I'm not a statue; but on the other hand, don't you see? I'm not a windmill." There was good-humour, none the less, in his rigour. "The mortgages I speak of have all found their way, like gregarious silly sheep, into the hands of one person—a devouring wolf, a very rich, a very sharp man of money. He holds me in this manner at his mercy. He consents to make things comfortable for me, but he requires that, in return, I shall do something for him that—don't you know?—rather sticks in my crop."

It appeared on this light showing to stick for a moment even in Mrs. Gracedew's. "Do you mean something wrong?"

He had not a moment's hesitation. "Exceedingly so!"

She turned it over as if pricing a Greek Aldus. "Anything immoral?"

"Yes—I may literally call it immoral."

She courted, however, frankly enough, the strict truth. "Too bad to tell?"

He indulged in another pensive fidget, then left her to judge. "He wants me to give up——" Yet again he faltered.

"To give up what?" What could it be, she appeared to ask, that was barely nameable?

He quite blushed to her indeed as he came to the point. "My fundamental views."

She was disappointed—she had waited for more. “Nothing but *them*?”

He met her with astonishment. “Surely they’re quite enough, when one has unfortunately”—he rather ruefully smiled—“so very many!”

She laughed aloud; this was frankly so odd a plea. “Well, *I’ve* a neat collection too, but I’d ‘swap,’ as they say in the West, the whole set——!” She looked about the hall for something of equivalent price; after which she pointed, as it caught her eye, to the great cave of the fireplace. “I’d take *that* set!”

The young man scarcely followed. “The fire-irons?”

“For the whole fundamental lot!” She gazed with real yearning at the antique group.

“*They’re* three hundred years old. Do you mean to tell me your wretched ‘views’——?”

“Have anything like that age? No, thank God,” Clement Yule laughed, “my views—wretched as you please!—are quite in their prime! They’re a hungry little family that has got to be fed. They keep me awake at night.”

“Then you must make up your sleep!” Her impatience grew with her interest. “Listen to *me*!”

“That would scarce be the way!” he returned. But he added more sincerely: “You must surely see a fellow can’t chuck his politics.”

“‘Chuck’ them——?”

“Well—sacrifice them.”

“I’d sacrifice mine,” she cried, “for that old fire-back with your arms!” He glanced at the object in question, but with such a want of intelligence that she visibly resented it. “See how it has stood!”

“See how *I’ve* stood!” he answered with spirit. “I’ve glowed with a hotter fire than anything in any chimney, and the warmth and light I diffuse have attracted no little attention. How can I consent to reduce them to the state of that desolate hearth?”

His companion, freshly struck with the fine details of the desolation, had walked over to the chimney-corner, where, lost in her deeper impression, she lingered and observed. At last she turned away with her impatience controlled. “It’s magnificent!”

“The fire-back?”

“Everything—everywhere. I don’t understand your haggling.”

He hesitated. “That’s because you’re ignorant.” Then seeing in the light of her eye that he had applied to her the word in the language she least liked, he hastened to attenuate. “I mean of what’s behind my reserves.”

She was silent in a way that made their talk more of a discussion than if she had spoken.

“What *is* behind them?” she presently asked.

“Why, my whole political history. Everything I’ve said, everything I’ve done. My scorching addresses and letters, reproduced in all the papers. I needn’t go into details, but I’m a pure, passionate, pledged Radical.”

Mrs. Gracedew looked him full in the face. “Well, what if you *are*?”

He broke into mirth at her tone. “Simply this—that I can’t therefore, from one day to the other, pop up at Gossage in the purple pomp of the opposite camp. There’s a want of transition. It may be timid of me—it may be abject. But I can’t.”

If she was not yet prepared to contest she was still less prepared to surrender it, and she confined herself for the instant to smoothing down with her foot the corner of an old rug. "Have you thought very much about it?"

He was vague. "About what?"

"About what Mr. Prodmore wants you to do."

He flushed up. "Oh, then, you know it's *he*?"

"I'm not," she said, still gravely enough, "of an intelligence absolutely infantile."

"You're the cleverest Tory I've ever met!" he laughed. "I didn't mean to mention my friend's name, but since *you've* done so——!" He gave up with a shrug his scruple.

Oh, she had already cleared the ground of it! "It's he who's the devouring wolf? It's he who holds your mortgages?"

The very lucidity of her interest just checked his assent. "He holds plenty of others, and he treats me very handsomely."

She showed of a sudden an inconsequent face. "Do you call *that* handsome——such a condition?"

He shed surprise. "Why, I thought it was just the condition you could meet."

She measured her inconsistency, but was not abashed. "We're not talking of what *I* can meet." Yet she found also a relief in dropping the point. "Why doesn't he stand himself?"

"Well, like other devouring wolves, he's not personally adored."

"Not even," she asked, "when he offers such liberal terms?"

Clement Yule had to explain. "I dare say he doesn't offer them to everyone."

"Only to you?"—at this she quite sprang. "You *are* personally adored; you will be still more if you stand; and that, you poor lamb, is why he wants you!"

The young man, obviously pleased to find her after all more at one with him, accepted gracefully enough the burden her sympathy imposed. "I'm the bearer of my name, I'm the representative of my family; and to my family and my name—since you've led me to it—this countryside has been for generations indulgently attached."

She listened to him with a sentiment in her face that showed how now, at last, she felt herself deal with the lawful heir. She seemed to perceive it with a kind of passion. "You do of course what you will with the countryside!"

"Yes"—he went with her—"if we do it as genuine Yules. I'm obliged of course to grant you that your genuine Yule's a Tory of Tories. It's Mr. Prodmore's belief that I should carry Gossage in that character, but in that character only. They won't look at me in any other."

It might have taxed a spectator to say in what character Mrs. Gracedew, on this, for a little, considered him. "Don't be too sure of people's not looking at you!"

He blushed again, but he laughed. "We must leave out my personal beauty."

"We can't!" she replied with decision. "Don't we take in Mr. Prodmore's?"

Captain Yule was not prepared. "You call him beautiful?"

"Hideous." She settled it; then pursued her investigation. "What's the extraordinary interest that he attaches——?"

“To the return of a Tory?” Here the young man *was* prepared. “Oh, his desire is born of his fear—his terror on behalf of Property, which he sees, somehow, with an intensely Personal, with a quite colossal ‘P.’ He has a great deal of that article, and very little of anything else.”

Mrs. Gracedew, accepting provisionally his demonstration, had one of her friendly recalls. “Do you call that nice daughter ‘very little’?”

The young man looked quite at a loss. “Is she very big? I really didn’t notice her—and moreover she’s just a part of the Property. He thinks things are going too far.”

She sat straight down on a stiff chair; on which, with high distinctness: “Well, they *are*!”

He stood before her in the discomposure of her again thus appearing to fail him. “Aren’t you then a lover of justice?”

“A passionate one!” She sat there as upright as if she held the scales. “Where’s the justice of your losing this house?” Generous as well as strenuous, all her fairness thrown out by her dark old high-backed seat, she put it to him as from the judicial bench. “To keep Covering, you must carry Gossage!”

The odd face he made at it might have betrayed a man dazzled. “As a renegade?”

“As a genuine Yule. What business have you to be anything else?” She had already arranged it all. “You must close with Mr. Prodmore—you must stand in the Tory interest.” She hung fire a moment; then as she got up: “If you will, I’ll conduct your canvass!”

He stared at the distracting picture. “That puts the temptation high!”

But she brushed the mere picture away. “Ah, don’t look at me as if *I* were the temptation! Look at this sweet old human home, and feel all its gathered memories. Do you want to know what they do to me?” She took the survey herself again, as if to be really sure. “They speak to me for Mr. Prodmore.”

He followed with a systematic docility the direction of her eyes, but as if with the result only of its again coming home to him that there was no accounting for what things might do. “Well, there are others than these, you know,” he good-naturedly pleaded—“things for which I’ve spoken, repeatedly and loudly, to others than you.” The very manner of his speaking on such occasions appeared, for that matter, now to come back to him. “One’s ‘human home’ is all very well, but the rest of one’s humanity is better!” She gave, at this, a droll soft wail; she turned impatiently away. “I see you’re disgusted with me, and I’m sorry; but one must take one’s self as circumstances and experience have made one, and it’s not my fault, don’t you know? if they’ve made me a very modern man. I see something else in the world than the beauty of old show-houses and the glory of old show-families. There are thousands of people in England who can show no houses at all, and I don’t feel it utterly shameful to share their poor fate!”

She had moved away with impatience, and it was the advantage of this for her that the back she turned prevented him from seeing how intently she listened. She seemed to continue to listen even after he had stopped; but if that gave him a sense of success, he might have been checked by the way she at last turned round with a sad and beautiful headshake. “We share the poor fate of humanity whatever we do, and we do something to help and console when we’ve something precious to show. What on earth is more precious than what the ages have slowly wrought? They’ve trusted us, in such a case, to keep it—to do something, in our turn, for *them*.” She shone out at him as if her contention had the evidence of the noonday sun, and yet in her generosity she superabounded and explained. “It’s such a virtue, in anything, to

have lasted; it's such an honour, for anything, to have been spared. To all strugglers from the wreck of time hold out a pitying hand!"

Yule, on this argument,—of a strain which even a good experience of debate could scarce have prepared him to meet,—had not a congruous rejoinder absolutely pat, and his hesitation unfortunately gave him time to see how soon his companion made out that what had touched him most in it was her particular air in presenting it. She would manifestly have preferred he should have been floored by her mere moral reach; yet he was aware that his own made no great show as he took refuge in general pleasantries. "What a plea for looking backward, dear lady, to come from Missoura Top!"

"We're making a Past at Missoura Top as fast as ever we can, and I should like to see you lay your hand on an hour of the one we've made! It's a tight fit, as yet, I grant," she said, "and that's just why I like, in yours, to find room, don't you see? to turn round. You're *in* it, over here, and you can't get out; so just make the best of that and treat the thing as part of the fun!"

"The whole of the fun, to me," the young man replied, "is in hearing you defend it! It's like your defending hereditary gout or chronic rheumatism and sore throat—the things I feel aching in every old bone of these walls and groaning in every old draught that, I'm sure, has for centuries blown through them."

Mrs. Gracedew looked as if no woman could be shaken who was so prepared to be just all round. "If there be aches—there may be—you're here to soothe them, and if there be draughts—there *must* be!—you're here to stop them up. And do you know what *I'm* here for? If I've come so far and so straight, I've almost wondered myself. I've felt with a kind of passion—but now I see *why* I've felt." She moved about the hall with the excitement of this perception, and, separated from him at last by a distance across which he followed her discovery with a visible suspense, she brought out the news. "I'm here for an act of salvation—I'm here to avert a sacrifice!"

So they stood a little, with more, for the minute, passing between them than either really could say. She might have flung down a glove that he decided on the whole, passing his hand over his head as the seat of some confusion, not to pick up. Again, but flushed as well as smiling, he sought the easiest cover. "You're here, I think, madam, to be a memory for all my future!"

Well, she was willing, she showed as she came nearer, to take it, at the worst, for that. "You'll be one for mine, if I can see you by that hearth. Why do you make such a fuss about changing your politics? If you'd come to Missoura Top, you'd change them quick enough!" Then, as she saw further and struck harder, her eyes grew deep, her face even seemed to pale, and she paused, splendid and serious, with the force of her plea. "What do politics amount to, compared with religions? Parties and programmes come and go, but a duty like this abides. There's nothing you can break with"—she pressed him closer, ringing out—"that would be like breaking *here*. The very words are violent and ugly—as much a sacrilege as if you had been trusted with the key of the temple. This *is* the temple—don't profane it! Keep up the old altar kindly—you can't set up a new one as good. You *must* have beauty in your life, don't you see?—that's the only way to make sure of it for the lives of others. Keep leaving it to *them*, to all the poor others," she went on with her bright irony, "and heaven only knows what will become of it! Does it take one of *us* to feel that?—to preach you the truth? Then it's good, Captain Yule, we come right over—just to see, you know, what you may happen to be about. We know," she went on while her sense of proportion seemed to play into her sense of humour, "what we haven't got, worse luck; so that if you've happily got it you've got it also

for *us*. You've got it in trust, you see, and oh! we have an eye on you. You've had it so for me, all these dear days that I've been drinking it in, that, to be grateful, I've wanted regularly to *do* something." With which, as if in the rich confidence of having convinced him, she came so near as almost to touch him. "Tell me now I shall have done it—I shall have kept you at your post!"

If he moved, on this, immediately further, it was with the oddest air of seeking rather to study her remarks at his ease than to express an independence of them. He kept, to this end, his face averted—he was so completely now in intelligent possession of her own. The sacrifice in question carried him even to the door of the court, where he once more stood so long engaged that the persistent presentation of his back might at last have suggested either a confession or a request.

Mrs. Gracedew, meanwhile, a little spent with her sincerity, seated herself again in the great chair, and if she sought, visibly enough, to read a meaning into his movement, she had as little triumph for one possible view of it as she had resentment for the other. The possibility that he yielded left her after all as vague in respect to a next step as the possibility that he merely wished to get rid of her. The moments elapsed without her abdicating; and indeed when he finally turned round his expression was an equal check to any power to feel she might have won. "You have," he queerly smiled at her, "a standpoint quite your own and a style of eloquence that the few scraps of parliamentary training I've picked up don't seem at all to fit me to deal with. Of course I don't pretend, you know, that I don't *care* for Covering."

That, at all events, she could be glad to hear, if only perhaps for the tone in it that was so almost comically ingenuous. But her relief was reasonable and her exultation temperate. "You haven't even seen it yet." She risked, however, a laugh. "Aren't you a bit afraid?"

He took a minute to reply, then replied—as if to make it up—with a grand collapse. "Yes; awfully. But if I am," he hastened in decency to add, "it isn't only Covering that makes me."

This left his friend apparently at a loss. "What else is it?"

"Everything. But it doesn't in the least matter," he loosely pursued. "You may be quite correct. When we talk of the house your voice comes to me somehow as the wind in its old chimneys."

Her amusement distinctly revived. "I hope you don't mean I roar!"

He blushed again; there was no doubt he was confused. "No—nor yet perhaps that you whistle! I don't believe the wind does either, here. It only whispers," he sought gracefully to explain; "and it sighs——"

"And I hope," she broke in, "that it sometimes laughs!"

The sound she gave only made him, as he looked at her, more serious. "Whatever it does, it's all right."

"All right?"—they were sufficiently together again for her to lay her hand straight on his arm. "Then you promise?"

"Promise what?"

He had turned as pale as if she hurt him, and she took her hand away. "To meet Mr. Prodmore."

"Oh, dear, no; not yet!"—he quite recovered himself. "I must wait—I must think."

She looked disappointed, and there was a momentary silence. “When have you to answer him?”

“Oh, he gives me time!” Clement Yule spoke very much as he might have said, “Oh, in two minutes!”

“I wouldn’t give you time,” Mrs. Gracedew cried with force—“I’d give you a shaking! For God’s sake, at any rate”—and she really tried to push him off—“go upstairs!”

“And literally *find* the dreadful man?” This was so little his personal idea that, distinctly dodging her pressure, he had already reached the safe quarter.

But it befell that at the same moment she saw Cora reappear on the upper landing—a circumstance that promised her a still better conclusion. “He’s coming down!”

Cora, in spite of this announcement, came down boldly enough without him and made directly for Mrs. Gracedew, to whom her eyes had attached themselves with an undeviating glare. Her plain purpose of treating this lady as an isolated presence allowed their companion perfect freedom to consider her arrival with sharp alarm. His disconcerted stare seemed for a moment to balance; it wandered, gave a wild glance at the open door, then searched the ascent of the staircase, in which, apparently, it now found a coercion. “I’ll go up!” he gasped; and he took three steps at a time.

V

The girl threw herself, in her flushed eagerness, straight upon the wonderful lady. “I’ve come back to you—I want to speak to you!” The need had been a rapid growth, but it was clearly immense. “May I confide in you?”

Her instant overflow left Mrs. Gracedew both astonished and amused. “You too?” she laughed. “Why it *is* good we come over!”

“It is, indeed!” Cora gratefully echoed. “You were so very kind to me and seemed to think me so curious.”

The mirth of her friend redoubled. “Well, I loved you for it, and it was nothing moreover to what you thought *me!*”

Miss Prodmore found, for this, no denial—she only presented her frank high colour. “I loved *you*. But I’m the worst!” she generously added. “And I’m solitary.”

“Ah, so am I!” Mrs. Gracedew declared with gaiety, but with emphasis. “A *very* queer thing always *is* solitary! But, since we have that link, by all means confide.”

“Well, I was met here by tremendous news.” Cora produced it with a purple glow. “He wants me to marry him!”

Mrs. Gracedew looked amiably receptive, but as if she failed as yet to follow. “‘He’ wants you?”

“Papa, of course. He has settled it!”

Mrs. Gracedew was still vague. “Settled what?”

“Why, the whole question. That I must take him.”

Mrs. Gracedew seemed to frown at her own scattered wits. “But, my dear, take *whom?*”

The girl looked surprised at this lapse of her powers. “Why, Captain Yule, who just went up.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Gracedew with a full stare. “Oh!” she repeated, looking straight away.

“I thought you would know,” Cora gently explained.

Her friend’s eyes, with a kinder light now, came back to her. “I didn’t know.” Mrs. Gracedew looked, in truth, as if that had been sufficiently odd, and seemed also to wonder at two or three things more. It all, however, broke quickly into a question. “Has Captain Yule asked you?”

“No, but he *will*”—Cora was clear as a bell. “He’ll do it to keep the house. It’s mortgaged to papa, and Captain Yule buys it back.”

Her friend had an illumination that was rapid for the way it spread. “By marrying you?” she quavered.

Cora, under further parental instruction, had plainly mastered the subject. “By giving me his name and his position. They’re awfully great, and they’re the price, don’t you see?” she modestly mentioned. “*My* price. *Papa’s* price. *Papa* wants them.”

Mrs. Gracedew had caught hold; yet there were places where her grasp was weak, and she had, strikingly, begun again to reflect. “But his name and his position, great as they may be, are his dreadful politics!”

Cora threw herself with energy into this advance. “You *know* about his dreadful politics? He’s to change them,” she recited, “to get *me*. And if he gets me——”

“He keeps the house?”—Mrs. Gracedew snatched it up.

Cora continued to show her schooling. “I go *with* it—he’s to have us both. But only,” she admonishingly added, “if he changes. The question is—*will* he change?”

Mrs. Gracedew appeared profoundly to entertain it. “I see. *Will* he change?”

Cora’s consideration of it went even further. “*Has* he changed?”

It went—and the effect was odd—a little too far for her companion, in whom, just discernibly, it had touched the spring of impatience. “My dear child, how in the world should *I* know?”

But Cora knew exactly how anyone would know. “He hasn’t seemed to care enough for the house. *Does* he care?”

Mrs. Gracedew moved away, passed over to the fireplace, and stood a moment looking at the old armorial fire-back she had praised to its master—yet not, it must be added, as if she particularly saw it. Then as she faced about: “You had better ask him!”

They stood thus confronted, with the fine old interval between them, and the girl’s air was for a moment that of considering such a course. “If he does care,” she said at last, “he’ll propose.”

Mrs. Gracedew, from where she stood in relation to the stairs, saw at this point the subject of their colloquy restored to view: Captain Yule was just upon them—he had turned the upper landing. The sight of him forced from her in a flash an ejaculation that she tried, however, to keep private—“He does care!” She passed swiftly, before he reached them, back to the girl and, in a quick whisper, but with full conviction, let her have it: “He’ll propose!”

Her movement had made her friend aware, and the young man, hurrying down, was now in the hall. Cora, at his hurry, looked dismay—“Then I fly!” With which, casting about for a direction, she reached the door to the court.

Captain Yule, however, at this result of his return, expressed instant regret. “I drive Miss Prodmore away!”

Mrs. Gracedew, more quickly still, eased off the situation. "It's all right!" She had embraced both parties with a smile, but it was most liberal now for Cora. "Do you mind, one moment?"—it conveyed, unmistakeably, a full intelligence and a fine explanation. "I've something to say to Captain Yule."

Cora stood in the doorway, robust against the garden-light, and looking from one to the other. "Yes—but I've also something more to say to *you*."

"Do you mean now?" the young man asked.

It was the first time he had spoken to her, and her hesitation might have signified a maidenly flutter. "No—but before she goes."

Mrs. Gracedew took it amiably up. "Come back, then; I'm not going." And there was both dismissal and encouragement in the way that, as on the occasion of the girl's former retreat, she blew her a familiar kiss. Cora, still with her face to them, waited just enough to show that she took it without a response; then, with a quick turn, dashed out, while Mrs. Gracedew looked at their visitor in vague surprise. "What's the matter with her?"

She had turned away as soon as she spoke, moving as far from him as she had moved a few moments before from Cora. The silence that, as he watched her, followed her question would have been seen by a spectator to be a hard one for either to break. "I don't know what's the matter with her," he said at last; "I'm afraid I only know what's the matter with *me*. It will doubtless give you pleasure to learn," he added, "that I've closed with Mr. Prodmore."

It was a speech that, strangely enough, seemed but half to dissipate the hush. Mrs. Gracedew reached the great chimney again; again she stood there with her face averted; and when she finally replied it was in other words than he might have supposed himself naturally to inspire. "I thought you said he gave you time."

"Yes; but you produced just now so deep an effect on me that I thought best not to take any." He appeared to listen to a sound from above, and, for a moment, under this impulse, his eyes travelled about almost as if he were alone. Then he completed, with deliberation, his statement. "I came upon him right there, and I burnt my ships."

Mrs. Gracedew continued not to meet his face. "You do what he requires?"

The young man was markedly, consciously caught. "I do what he requires. I felt the tremendous force of all you said to me."

She turned round on him now, as if perhaps with a slight sharpness, the face of responsibility—even, it might be, of reproach. "So did I—or I shouldn't have said it!"

It was doubtless this element of justification in her tone that drew from him a laugh a tiny trifle dry. "You're perhaps not aware that you wield an influence of which it's not too much to say——"

But he paused at the important point so long that she took him up. "To say what?"

"Well, that it's practically irresistible!"

It sounded a little as if it had not been what he first meant; but it made her, none the less, still graver and just faintly ironical. "You've given me the most flattering proof of my influence that I've ever enjoyed in my life!"

He fixed her very hard, now distinctly so mystified that he could only wonder what different recall of her previous attitude she would have looked for. "This was inevitable, dear madam, from the moment you had converted me—and in about three minutes too!—into the absolute echo of your raptures."

Nothing was, indeed, more extraordinary than her air of having suddenly forgotten them. "My 'raptures'?"

He was amazed. "Why, about my home."

He might look her through and through, but she had no eyes for himself, though she had now quitted the fireplace and finally recognised this allusion. "Oh, yes—your home!" From where had she come back to it? "It's a nice tattered, battered old thing." This account of it was the more shrunken than her observation, even as she spoke, freshly went the rounds. "It has defects of course"—with this renewed attention they appeared suddenly to strike her. They had popped out, conspicuous, and for a little it might have been a matter of conscience. However, her conscience dropped. "But it's no use mentioning them now!"

They had half an hour earlier been vividly present to himself, but to see her thus oddly pulled up by them was to forget on the spot the ground he had taken. "I'm particularly sorry," he returned with some spirit, "that you didn't mention them before!"

At this imputation of inconsequence, of a levity not, after all, without its excuse, Mrs. Gracedew was reduced, in keeping her resentment down, to an effort not quite successfully disguised. It was in a tone, nevertheless, all the more mild in intention that she reminded him of where he had equally failed. "If you had really gone over the house, as I almost went on my knees to you to do, you might have discovered some of them yourself!"

"How can you say that," the young man asked with heat, "when I was precisely in the very act of it? It was just *because* I was that the first person I met above was Mr. Prodmore; on which, feeling that I must come to it sooner or later, I simply gave in to him on the spot—yielded him, to have it well over, the whole of his point."

She listened to this account of the matter as she might have gazed, from afar, at some queer object that was scarce distinguishable. It left her a moment in the deepest thought, but she presently recovered her tone. "Let me then congratulate you on at last knowing what you want!"

But there were, after all, he instantly showed, no such great reasons for that. "I only know it so far as *you* know it! I struck while the iron was hot—or at any rate while the hammer was."

"Of course I recognise"—she adopted his image with her restored gaiety—"that it can rarely have been exposed to such a fire. I blazed up, and I know that when I burn——"

She had pulled up with the foolish sense of this. "When you burn?"

"Well, I do it as Chicago does."

He also could laugh out now. "Isn't that usually down to the ground?"

Meeting his laugh, she threw up her light arms. "As high as the sky!" Then she came back, as with a scruple, to the real question. "I suppose you've still formalities to go through."

"With Mr. Prodmore?" Well, he would suppose it too if she liked. "Oh, endless, tiresome ones, no doubt!"

This sketch of them made her wonder. "You mean they'll take so very, very long?"

He seemed after all to know perfectly what he meant. "Every hour, every month, that I can possibly make them last!"

She was with him here, however, but to a certain point. "You mustn't drag them out *too* much—must you? Won't he think in that case you may want to retract?"

Yule apparently tried to focus Mr. Prodmore under this delusion, and with a success that had a quick, odd result. "I shouldn't be so terribly upset by his mistake, you know, even if he did!"

His manner, with its slight bravado, left her proportionately shocked. "Oh, it would never do to give him any colour whatever for supposing you to have any doubt that, as one may say, you've pledged your honour."

He devoted to this proposition more thought than its simplicity would have seemed to demand; but after a minute, at all events, his intelligence triumphed. "Of course not—not when I *haven't* any doubt!"

Though his intelligence had triumphed, she still wished to show she was there to support it. "How can you *possibly* have any—any more than you can possibly have that one's honour is everything in life?" And her charming eyes expressed to him her need to feel that he was quite at one with her on *that* point.

He could give her every assurance. "Oh, yes—everything in life!"

It did her much good, brought back the rest of her brightness. "Wasn't it just of the question of the honour of things that we talked awhile ago—and of the difficulty of sometimes keeping our sense of it clear? There's no more to be said therefore," she went on with the faintest soft sigh about it, "except that I leave you to your ancient glory as I leave you to your strict duty." She had these things there before her; they might have been a well-spread board from which she turned away fasting. "I hope you'll do justice to dear old Covering in spite of its weak points, and I hope above all you'll not be incommoded——"

As she hesitated here he was too intent. "Incommoded——?"

She saw it better than she could express it. "Well, by such a rage——!"

He challenged this description with a strange gleam. "You suppose it will be a rage?"

She laughed out at his look. "Are you afraid of the love that kills?"

He grew singularly grave. "*Will* it kill——?"

"Great passions *have!*"—she was highly amused.

But he could only stare. "Is it a great passion?"

"Surely—when so many feel it!"

He was fairly bewildered. "But how many——?"

She reckoned them up. "Let's see. If you count them all——"

"All'?" Clement Yule gasped.

She looked at him, in turn, slightly mystified. "I see. You knock off some. About half?"

It was too obscure—he broke down. "Whom on earth are you talking about?"

"Why, the electors——"

"Of Gossage?"—he leaped at it. "Oh!"

"I got the whole thing up—there are six thousand. It's such a fine figure!" said Mrs. Gracedew.

He had sharply passed from her, to cover his mistake, and it carried him half round the hall. Then, as if aware that this pause itself compromised him, he came back confusedly and with her last words in his ear. "*Has* she a fine figure?"

But her own thoughts were off. “‘She’?”

He blushed and recovered himself. “Aren’t we talking——”

“Of Gossage? Oh, yes—she has every charm! Good-bye,” said Mrs. Gracedew.

He pulled, at this, the longest face, but was kept dumb a moment by the very decision with which she again began to gather herself. It held him helpless, and there was finally real despair in his retarded protest. “You don’t mean to say you’re going?”

“You don’t mean to say you’re surprised at it? Haven’t I done,” she luminously asked, “what I told you I had been so mystically moved to come for?” She recalled to him by her renewed supreme survey the limited character of this errand, which she then in a brisk familiar word expressed to the house itself. “You dear old thing—you’re saved!”

Clement Yule might on the other hand, by his simultaneous action, have given himself out for lost. “For God’s sake,” he cried as he circled earnestly round her, “don’t go till I can come back to thank you!” He pulled out his watch. “I promised to return immediately to Prodmore.”

This completely settled his visitor. “Then don’t let me, for a moment more, keep you away from him. You must have such lots”—it went almost without saying—“to talk comfortably over.”

The young man’s embrace of that was, in his restless movement, to roam to the end of the hall furthest from the stairs. But here his assent was entire. “I certainly feel, you know, that I must see him again.” He rambled even to the open door and looked with incoherence into the court. “Yes, decidedly, I *must!*”

“Is he out there?” Mrs. Gracedew lightly asked.

He turned short round. “No—I left him in the long gallery.”

“You *saw* that, then?”—she flashed back into eagerness. “Isn’t it lovely?”

Clement Yule rather wondered. “I didn’t notice it. How *could* I?”

His face was so woeful that she broke into a laugh. “How *couldn’t* you? Notice it now, then. Go up to him!”

He crossed at last to the staircase, but at the foot he stopped again. “Will you wait for me?”

He had such an air of proposing a bargain, of making the wait a condition, that she had to look it well in the face. The result of her doing so, however, was apparently a strong sense that she could give him no pledge. Her silence, after a moment, expressed that; but, for a further emphasis, moving away, she sank suddenly into the chair she had already occupied and in which, serious again and very upright, she continued to withhold her promise. “Go up to him!” she simply repeated. He obeyed, with an abrupt turn, mounting briskly enough several steps, but pausing midway and looking back at her as if he were after all irresolute. He was in fact so much so that, at the sight of her still in her chair and alone by his cold hearth, he descended a few steps again and seemed, with too much decidedly on his mind, on the point of breaking out. She had sat a minute in such thought, figuring him clearly as gone, that at the sound of his return she sprang up with a protest. This checked him afresh, and he remained where he had paused, still on the ascent and exchanging with her a look to which neither party was inspired, oddly enough, to contribute a word. It struck him, without words, at all events, as enough, and he now took his upward course at such a pace that he presently disappeared. She listened awhile to his retreating tread; then her own, on the old flags of the hall, became rapid, though, it may perhaps be added, directed to no visible end. It conveyed

her, in the great space, from point to point, but she now for the first time moved there without attention and without joy, her course determined by a series of such inward throbs as might have been the suppressed beats of a speech. A real observer, had such a monster been present, would have followed this tacit evolution from sign to sign and from shade to shade. “Why didn’t he tell me *all*?—But it was none of my business!—What does he mean to do?—What should he do but what he *has* done?—And what *can* he do, when he’s so deeply committed, when he’s practically engaged, when he’s just the same as married—and buried?—The thing for *me* to ‘do’ is just to pull up short and bundle out: to remove from the scene they encumber the numerous fragments—well, of what?”

Her thought was plainly arrested by the sight of Cora Prodmore, who, returning from the garden, reappeared first in the court and then in the open doorway. Mrs. Gracedew’s was a thought, however, that, even when desperate, was never quite vanquished, and it found a presentable public solution in the pieces of the vase smashed by Chivers and just then, on the table where he had laid them, catching her eye. “Of my old Chelsea pot!” Her gay, sad headshake as she took one of them up pronounced for Cora’s benefit its funeral oration. She laid the morsel thoughtfully down, while her visitor seemed with simple dismay to read the story.

VI

“Has he been *breaking*——?” the girl asked in horror.

Mrs. Gracedew laughingly tapped her heart. “Yes, we’ve had a scene! He went up again to your father.”

Cora was disconcerted. “Papa’s not there. He just came down to me by the other way.”

“Then he can join you here,” said Mrs. Gracedew with instant resignation. “I’m going.”

“Just when I’ve come back to you—at the risk,” Cora made bold to throw off, “of again interrupting, though I really hoped he had gone, your conversation with Captain Yule?”

But Mrs. Gracedew let the ball quite drop. “I’ve nothing to say to Captain Yule.”

Cora picked it up for another toss. “You had a good deal to say a few minutes ago!”

“Well, I’ve said it, and it’s over. I’ve nothing more to say at all,” Mrs. Gracedew insisted. But her announcement of departure left her on this occasion, as each of its predecessors had done, with a last, with indeed a fresh, solicitude. “What has become of my delightful ‘party’?”

“They’ve been dismissed, through the grounds, by the other door. But they mentioned,” the girl pursued, “the probable arrival of a fresh lot.”

Mrs. Gracedew showed on this such a revival of interest as fairly amounted to yearning.

“Why, what times you have! *You*,” she nevertheless promptly decreed, “must take the fresh lot—since the house is now practically yours!”

Poor Cora looked blank. “Mine?”

Her companion matched her stare. “Why, if you’re going to marry Captain Yule.”

Cora coloured, in a flash, to the eyes. “I’m *not* going to marry Captain Yule!”

Her friend as quickly paled again. “Why on earth then did you tell me only ten minutes ago that you were?”

Cora could only look bewildered at the charge. “I told you nothing of the sort. I only told you”—she was almost indignantly positive—“that he had been ordered me!”

It sent Mrs. Gracedew off; she moved away to indulge an emotion that presently put on the form of extravagant mirth. "Like a dose of medicine or a course of baths?"

The girl's gravity and lucidity sustained themselves. "As a remedy for the single life." Oh, she had mastered the matter now! "But I won't take him!"

"Ah, then, why didn't you let me know?" Mrs. Gracedew panted.

"I was on the very point of it when he came in and interrupted us." Cora clearly felt she might be wicked, but was at least not stupid. "It's just to let you know that I'm here now."

Ah, the difference it made! This difference, for Mrs. Gracedew, suddenly shimmered in all the place, and her companion's fixed eyes caught in her face the reflection of it. "Excuse me—I misunderstood. I somehow took for granted——!" She stopped, a trifle awkwardly—suddenly tender, for Cora, as to the way she had inevitably seen it.

"You took for granted I'd jump at him? Well, you can take it for granted I won't!"

Mrs. Gracedew, fairly admiring her, put it sympathetically. "You prefer the single life?"

"No—but I don't prefer *him!*" Cora was crystal-bright.

Her light, indeed, for her friend, was at first almost blinding; it took Mrs. Gracedew a moment to distinguish—which she then did, however, with immense eagerness. "You prefer someone else?" Cora's promptitude dropped at this, and, starting to hear it, as you might well have seen, for the first time publicly phrased, she abruptly moved away. A minute's sense of her scruple was enough for Mrs. Gracedew: this was proved by the tone of soft remonstrance and high benevolence with which that lady went on. She had looked very hard, first, at one of the old warriors hung on the old wall, and almost spoke as if he represented their host. "He seems remarkably clever."

Cora, at something in the sound, quite jumped about. "Then why don't you marry him yourself?"

Mrs. Gracedew gave a sort of happy sigh. "Well, I've got fifty reasons! I rather think one of them must be that he hasn't happened to ask me."

It was a speech, however, that her visitor could easily better. "I haven't got fifty reasons, but I *have* got one."

Mrs. Gracedew smiled as if it were indeed a stroke of wit. "You mean your case is one of those in which safety is *not* in numbers?" And then on Cora's visibly not understanding: "It *is* when reasons are bad that one needs so many!"

The proposition was too general for the girl to embrace, but the simplicity of her answer was far from spoiling it. "My reason is awfully good."

Mrs. Gracedew did it complete justice. "I see. An older friend."

Cora listened as at a warning sound; yet she had by this time practically let herself go, and it took but Mrs. Gracedew's extended encouraging hand, which she quickly seized, to bring the whole thing out. "I've been trying this hour, in my terrible need of advice, to tell you about him!" It came in a small clear torrent, a soft tumble-out of sincerity. "After we parted—you and I—at the station, he suddenly turned up there, and I took a little quiet walk with him which gave you time to get here before me and of which my father is in a state of ignorance that I don't know whether to regard as desirable or dreadful."

Mrs. Gracedew, attentive and wise, might have been, for her face, the old family solicitor. "You want me then to *inform* your father?" It was a wonderful intonation.

Poor Cora, for that matter too, might suddenly have become under this touch the prodigal with a list of debts. She seemed an instant to look out of a blurred office window-pane at a grey London sky; then she broke away. "I really don't know *what* I want. I think," she honestly admitted, "I just want kindness."

Mrs. Gracedew's expression might have hinted—but not for too long—that Bedford Row was an odd place to apply for it; she appeared for an instant to make the revolving office-chair creak. "What do you mean by kindness?"

Cora was a model client—she perfectly knew. "I mean help."

Mrs. Gracedew closed an inkstand with a clap and locked a couple of drawers. "What do you mean by help?"

The client's inevitable answer seemed to perch on the girl's lips: "A thousand pounds." But it came out in another, in a much more charming form. "I mean that I love him."

The family solicitor got up: it was a high figure. "And does he love *you*?"

Cora hesitated. "Ask *him*."

Mrs. Gracedew weighed the necessity. "Where is he?"

"Waiting." And the girl's glance, removed from her companion and wandering aloft and through space, gave the scale of his patience.

Her adviser, however, required the detail. "But *where*?"

Cora briefly demurred again. "In that funny old grotto."

Mrs. Gracedew thought. "Funny?"

"Half-way from the park gate. It's very *nice*!" Cora more eagerly added.

Mrs. Gracedew continued to reflect. "Oh, I know it!" She spoke as if she had known it most of her life.

Her tone encouraged her client. "Then will you see him?"

"No." This time it was almost dry.

"No?"

"No. If you want help——" Mrs. Gracedew, still musing, explained.

"Yes?"

"Well—you want a great deal."

"Oh, so much!"—Cora but too woefully took it in. "I want," she quavered, "all there is!"

"Well—you shall have it."

"All there is?"—she convulsively held her to it.

Mrs. Gracedew had finally mastered it. "I'll see your father."

"You dear, delicious lady!" Her young friend had again encompassed her; but, passive and preoccupied, she showed some of the chill of apprehension. It was indeed as if to meet this that Cora went earnestly on: "He's intensely sympathetic!"

"Your father?" Mrs. Gracedew had her reserves.

"Oh, no—the other person. I so believe in him!" Cora cried.

Mrs. Gracedew looked at her a moment. "Then so do I—and I like him for believing in *you*."

"Oh, he does that," the girl hurried on, "far more than Captain Yule—I could see just with one glance that *he* doesn't at all. Papa has of course seen the young man I mean, but we've been so sure papa would hate it that we've had to be awfully careful. He's the son of the richest man at Bellborough, he's Granny's godson, and he'll inherit his father's business, which is simply immense. Oh, from the point of view of the things he's *in*"—and Cora found herself sharp on this—"he's quite as good as papa himself. He has been away for three days, and if he met me at the station, where, on his way back, he has to change, it was by the merest chance in the world. I wouldn't love him," she brilliantly wound up, "if he wasn't nice."

"A man's always nice if you *will* love him!" Mrs. Gracedew laughed.

Her young friend more than met it. "He's nicer still if he 'will' love *you*!"

But Mrs. Gracedew kept her head. "Nicer of course than if he won't! But are you sure this gentleman *does* love you?"

"As sure as that the other one doesn't."

"Ah, but the other one doesn't know you."

"Yes, thank goodness—and never shall!"

Mrs. Gracedew watched her a little, but on the girl's meeting her eyes turned away with a quick laugh. "You mean of course till it's too late."

"Altogether!" Cora spoke as with quite the measure of the time.

Mrs. Gracedew, revolving a moment in silence, appeared to accept her showing. "Then what's the matter?" she impatiently asked.

"The matter?"

"Your father's objection to the gentleman in the grotto."

Cora now for the first time faltered. "His name."

This for a moment pulled up her friend, in whom, however, relief seemed to contend with alarm. "Only his name?"

"Yes, but——" Cora's eyes rolled.

Her companion invitingly laughed. "But it's enough?"

Her roll confessingly fixed itself. "*Not* enough—that's just the trouble!"

Mrs. Gracedew looked kindly curious. "What then *is* it?"

Cora faced the music. "Pegg."

Mrs. Gracedew stared. "Nothing else?"

"Nothing to speak of." The girl was quite candid now. "Hall."

"Nothing before——?"

"Not a letter."

"Hall Pegg?" Mrs. Gracedew had winced, but she quickly recovered herself, and, for a further articulation, appeared, from delicacy, to form the sound only with her mind. The sound she formed with her lips was, after an instant, simply "Oh!"

It was to the combination of the spoken and the unspoken that Cora desperately replied. “It sounds like a hat-rack!”

“‘Hall Pegg’? ‘Hall Pegg’?” Mrs. Gracedew now made it, like a questionable coin, ring upon the counter. But it lay there as lead and without, for a moment, her taking it up again. “How many has your father?” she inquired instead.

“How many names?” Miss Prodmore seemed dimly to see that there was no hope in that. “He somehow makes out five.”

“Oh, that’s *too* many!” Mrs. Gracedew jeeringly declared.

“Papa unfortunately doesn’t think so, when Captain Yule, I believe, has six.”

“Six?” Mrs. Gracedew, alert, looked as if that might be different.

“Papa, in the morning-room, told me them all.”

Mrs. Gracedew visibly considered, then for a moment dropped Mr. Pegg. “And what *are* they!”

“Oh, all sorts. ‘Marmaduke Clement——’” Cora tried to recall.

Mrs. Gracedew, however, had already checked her. “I see—‘Marmaduke Clement’ will do.” She appeared for a minute intent, but, as with an energetic stoop, she picked up Mr. Pegg. “But so will yours,” she said, with decision.

“Mine?—you mean *his*!”

“The same thing—what you’ll *be*.”

“Mrs. Hall Pegg!”—Cora tried it, with resolution, loudly.

It fell a little flat in the noble space, but Mrs. Gracedew’s manner quickly covered it. “It won’t make you a bit less charming.”

Cora wondered—she hoped. “Only for papa.”

And what was *he*? Mrs. Gracedew by this time seemed assentingly to ask. “Never for *me*!” she soothingly declared.

Cora took this in with deep thanks that gripped and patted her companion’s hand. “You accept it more than gracefully. But if you could only make *him*——!”

Mrs. Gracedew was all concentration. “‘Him’? Mr. Pegg?”

“No—he naturally *has* to accept it. But papa.”

She looked harder still at this greater feat, then seemed to see light. “Well, it will be difficult—but I will.”

Doubt paled before it. “Oh, you heavenly thing!”

Mrs. Gracedew after an instant, sustained by this appreciation, went a step further. “And I’ll make him *say* he does!”

Cora closed her eyes with the dream of it. “Oh, if I could only hear him!”

Her benefactress had at last run it to earth. “It will be enough if *I* do.”

Cora quickly considered; then, with prompt accommodation, gave the comfortable measure of her faith. “Yes—I think it will.” She was quite ready to retire. “I’ll give you time.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Gracedew; “but before you give me time give me something better.”

This pulled the girl up a little, as if in parting with her secret she had parted with her all. “Something better?”

“If I help you, you know,” Mrs. Gracedew explained, “you must help me.”

“But how?”

“By a clear assurance.” The charming woman’s fine face now gave the real example of clearness. “That if Captain Yule should propose to you, you would unconditionally refuse him.”

Cora flushed with the surprise of its being only that. “With my dying breath!”

Mrs. Gracedew scanned her robust vitality. “Will you make it even a promise?”

The girl looked about her in solid certainty. “Do you want me to sign——?”

Mrs. Gracedew was quick. “No, don’t sign!”

Yet Cora was so ready to oblige. “Then what shall I do?”

Mrs. Gracedew turned away, but after a few vague steps faced her again. “Kiss me.”

Cora flew to her arms, and the compact had scarce been sealed before the younger of the parties was already at the passage to the front. “We meet of course at the station.”

Mrs. Gracedew thought. “If all goes well. But where shall you be meanwhile?”

Her confederate had no need to think. “Can’t you guess?”

The bang of the house-door, the next minute, so helped the answer to the riddle as fairly to force it, when she found herself alone, from her lips. “At that funny old grotto? Well,” she sighed, “I *like* funny old grottos!” She found herself alone, however, only for a minute; Mr. Prodmore’s formidable presence had darkened the door from the court.

VII

“My daughter’s not here?” he demanded from the threshold.

“Your daughter’s not here.” She had rapidly got under arms. “But it’s a convenience to me, Mr. Prodmore, that *you* are, for I’ve something very particular to ask you.”

Her interlocutor crossed straight to the morning-room. “I shall be delighted to answer your question, but I must first put my hand on Miss Prodmore.” This hand the next instant stayed itself on the latch, and he appealed to the amiable visitor. “Unless indeed she’s occupied in there with Captain Yule?”

The amiable visitor met the appeal. “I don’t think she’s occupied—anywhere—with Captain Yule.”

Mr. Prodmore came straight away from the door. “Then where the deuce *is* Captain Yule?”

The amiable visitor turned a trifle less direct. “His absence, for which I’m responsible, is just what renders the inquiry I speak of to you possible.” She had already assumed a most inquiring air, yet it was soon clear that she needed every advantage her manner could give her. “What will you take——? what will you take——?”

It had the sound, as she faltered, of a general question, and Mr. Prodmore raised his eyebrows. “Take? Nothing, thank you—I’ve just had a cup of tea.” Then suddenly, as if on the broad hint: “Won’t *you* have one?”

“Yes, with pleasure—but not yet.” She looked about her again; she was now at close quarters and, concentrated, anxious, pressed her hand a moment to her brow.

This struck her companion. "Don't you think you'd be better for it immediately?"

"No." She was positive. "No." Her eyes consciously wandered. "I want to know how you'd value——"

He took her, as his own followed them, more quickly up, expanding in the presence of such a tribute from a real connoisseur. "One of these charming old things that take your fancy?"

She looked at him straight now. "They *all* take my fancy!"

"All?" He enjoyed it as the joke of a rich person—the kind of joke he sometimes made himself.

"Every single one!" said Mrs. Gracedew. Then with still a finer shade of the familiar: "Should you be willing to treat, Mr. Prodmore, for your interest in this property?"

He threw back his head: she had scattered over the word "interest" such a friendly, faded colour. She was either *not* joking or was rich indeed; and there was a place always kept in his conversation for the arrival of money, as there is always a box in a well-appointed theatre for that of royalty. "Am I to take it from you then that you *know* about my interest——?"

"Everything!" said Mrs. Gracedew with a world of wit.

"Excuse me, madam!"—he himself was now more reserved. "You don't know everything if you don't know that my interest—considerable as it might well have struck you—has just ceased to exist. I've given it up"—Mr. Prodmore softened the blow—"for a handsome equivalent."

The blow fell indeed light enough. "You mean for a handsome son-in-law?"

"It will be by some such description as the term you use that I shall doubtless, in the future, permit myself, in the common course, to allude to Captain Yule. Unless indeed I call him——" But Mr. Prodmore dropped the bolder thought. "It will depend on what he calls *me*."

Mrs. Gracedew covered him a moment with the largeness of her charity. "Won't it depend a little on what your daughter herself calls him?"

Mr. Prodmore seriously considered. "No. That," he declared with delicacy, "will be between the happy pair."

"Am I to take it from you then—I adopt your excellent phrase," Mrs. Gracedew said—"that Miss Prodmore has already accepted him?"

Her companion, with his head still in the air, seemed to signify that he simply put it down on the table and that she could take it or not as she liked. "Her character—formed by my assiduous care—enables me to locate her, I may say even to *time* her, from moment to moment." His massive watch, as he opened it, further sustained him in this process. "It's my assured conviction that she's accepting him while we stand here."

Mrs. Gracedew was so affected by his assured conviction that, with an odd, inarticulate sound, she forbore to stand longer—she rapidly moved away, taking one of the brief excursions of step and sense that had been for her, from the first, under the noble roof, so many dumb but decisive communions. But it was soon over, and she floated back on a wave that showed her to be, since she had let herself go, by this time quite in the swing and describing a considerable curve. "Dear Mr. Prodmore, why are you so imprudent as to make your daughter afraid of you? You should have taught her to confide in you. She has clearly shown me," she almost soothingly pursued, "that she *can* confide."

Mr. Prodmore, however, suddenly starting, looked far from soothed. "She confides in *you*?"

“You may take it from me!” Mrs. Gracedew laughed. “Let me suggest that, as fortune has thrown us together a minute, you follow her good example.” She put out a reassuring hand—she could perfectly show him the way. “Tell me, for instance, the ground of your objection to poor Mr. Pegg. I mean Mr. Pegg of Bellborough, Mr. Hall Pegg, the godson of your daughter’s grandmother and the associate of his father in their flourishing house; to whom (as *he* is to *it* and to *her*) Miss Prodmore’s devotedly attached.”

Mr. Prodmore had in the course of this speech availed himself of the support of the nearest chair, where, in spite of his subsidence, he appeared in his amazement twice his natural size. “It has gone so far as *that*?”

She rose before him as if in triumph. “It has gone so far that you had better let it go the rest of the way!”

He had lost breath, but he had positively gained dignity. “It’s too monstrous, to have plotted to keep me in the dark!”

“Why, it’s only when you’re kept in the dark that your daughter’s kept in the light!” She argued it with a candour that might have served for brilliancy. “It’s at her own earnest request that I plead to you for her liberty of choice. She’s an honest girl—perhaps even a peculiar girl; and she’s not a baby. You over-do, I think, the nursing. She has a perfect right to her preference.”

Poor Mr. Prodmore couldn’t help taking it from her, and, this being the case, he still took it in the most convenient way. “And pray haven’t I a perfect right to mine?” he asked from his chair.

She fairly seemed to serve it up to him—to put down the dish with a flourish. “Not at her expense. You expect her to give up too much.”

“And what has she,” he appealed, “expected *me* to give up? What but the desire of my heart and the dream of my life? Captain Yule announced to me but a few minutes since his intention to offer her his hand.”

She faced him on it as over the table. “Well, if he does, I think he’ll simply find——”

“Find what?” They looked at each other hard.

“Why, that she won’t have it.”

Oh, Mr. Prodmore now sprang up. “She *will*!”

“She won’t!” Mrs. Gracedew more distinctly repeated.

“She *shall*!” returned her adversary, making for the staircase with the evident sense of where reinforcement might be most required.

Mrs. Gracedew, however, with a spring, was well before him. “She shan’t!” She spoke with positive passion and practically so barred the way that he stood arrested and bewildered, and they faced each other, for a flash, like enemies. But it all went out, on her part, in a flash too—in a sudden wonderful smile. “Now tell me how much!”

Mr. Prodmore continued to glare—the sweat was on his brow. But while he slowly wiped it with a pocket-handkerchief of splendid scarlet silk, he remained so silent that he would have had for a spectator the effect of meeting in a manner her question. More formally to answer it he had at last to turn away. “How can I tell you anything so preposterous?”

She was all ready to inform him. “Simply by computing the total amount to which, for your benefit, this unhappy estate is burdened.” He listened with his back presented, but that

appeared to strike her, as she fixed this expanse, as an encouragement to proceed. "If I've troubled you by showing you that your speculation is built on the sand, let me atone for it by my eagerness to take off your hands an investment from which you derive so little profit."

He at last gave her his attention, but quite as if there were nothing in it. "And pray what profit will *you* derive——?"

"Ah, that's my own secret!" She would show him as well no glimpse of it—her laugh but rattled the box. "I want this house!"

"So do I, damn me!" he roundly returned; "and that's why I've practically paid for it!" He stuffed away his pocket-handkerchief.

There was nevertheless something in her that could hold him, and it came out, after an instant, quietly and reasonably enough. "I'll practically pay for it, Mr. Prodmore—if you'll only tell me your figure."

"My figure?"

"Your figure."

Mr. Prodmore waited—then removed his eyes from her face. He appeared to have waited on purpose to let her hope of a soft answer fall from a greater height. "My figure would be quite my own!"

"Then it will match, in that respect," Mrs. Gracedew laughed, "this overture, which is quite *my* own! As soon as you've let me know it I cable to Missoura Top to have the money sent right out to you."

Mr. Prodmore surveyed in a superior manner this artless picture of a stroke of business. "You imagine that having the money sent right out to me will make you owner of this place?"

She herself, with her head on one side, studied her sketch and seemed to twirl her pencil.

"No—not quite. But I'll settle the rest with Captain Yule."

Her companion looked, over his white waistcoat, at his large tense shoes, the patent-leather shine of which so flashed propriety back at him that he became, the next moment, doubly erect on it. "Captain Yule has nothing to sell."

She received the remark with surprise. "Then what have you been trying to buy?"

She had touched in himself even a sharper spring. "Do you mean to say," he cried, "you want to buy *that*?" She stared at his queer emphasis, which was intensified by a queer grimace; then she turned from him with a change of colour and an ejaculation that led to nothing more, after a few seconds, than a somewhat conscious silence—a silence of which Mr. Prodmore made use to follow up his unanswered question with another. "Is your proposal that I should transfer my investment to you for the mere net amount of it your conception of a fair bargain?"

This second inquiry, however, she could, as she slowly came round, substantially meet.

"Pray, then, what is yours?"

"Mine would be, not that I should simply get my money back, but that I should get the effective value of the house."

Mrs. Gracedew considered it. "But isn't the effective value of the house just what your money expresses?"

The lid of his hard left eye, the harder of the two, just dipped with the effect of a wink. “No, madam. It’s just what *yours* does. It’s moreover just what your lips have already expressed so distinctly!”

She clearly did her best to follow him. “To those people—when I showed the place off?”

Mr. Prodmore laughed. “You seemed to be *taking* bids then!”

She was candid, but earnest. “Taking them?”

“Oh, like an auctioneer! You ran it up high!” And Mr. Prodmore laughed again.

She turned a little pale, but it added to her brightness. “I certainly did, if saying it was charming——”

“Charming?” Mr. Prodmore broke in. “You said it was magnificent. You said it was unique. That was your very word. You said it was the *perfect* specimen of its class in England.” He was more than accusatory, he was really crushing. “Oh, you got in deep!”

It was indeed an indictment, and her smile was perhaps now rather set. “Possibly. But taunting me with my absurd high spirits and the dreadful liberties I took doesn’t in the least tell me how deep *you’re* in!”

“For you, Mrs. Gracedew?” He took a few steps, looking at his shoes again and as if to give her time to plead—since he wished to be quite fair—that it was *not* for her. “I’m in to the tune of fifty thousand.”

She was silent, on this announcement, so long that he once more faced her; but if what he showed her in doing so at last made her speak, it also took the life from her tone. “That’s a great deal of money, Mr. Prodmore.”

The tone didn’t matter, but only the truth it expressed, which he so thoroughly liked to hear. “So I’ve often had occasion to say to myself!”

“If it’s a large sum for you, then,” said Mrs. Gracedew, “it’s a still larger one for me.” She sank into a chair with a vague melancholy; such a mass loomed huge, and she sat down before it as a solitary herald, resigning himself with a sigh to wait, might have leaned against a tree before a besieged city. “We women”—she wished to conciliate—“have more modest ideas.”

But Mr. Prodmore would scarce condescend to parley. “Is it as a ‘modest idea’ that you describe your extraordinary intrusion——?”

His question scarce reached her; she was so lost for the moment in the sense of innocent community with her sex. “I mean I think we measure things often rather more exactly.”

There would have been no doubt of Mr. Prodmore’s very different community as he rudely replied: “Then you measured *this* thing exactly half an hour ago!”

It was a long way to go back, but Mrs. Gracedew, in her seat, musingly made the journey, from which she then suddenly returned with a harmless, indeed quite a happy, memento.

“Was I *very* grotesque?”

He demurred. “Grotesque?”

“I mean—*did* I go on about it?”

Mr. Prodmore would have no general descriptions; he was specific, he was vivid. “You banged the desk. You raved. You shrieked.”

This was a note she appeared indulgently, almost tenderly, to recognise. “We *do* shriek at Missoura Top!”

“I don’t know what you do at Missoura Top, but I know what you did at Covering End!”

She warmed at last to his tone. “So do *I* then! I surprised you. You weren’t at all prepared—

—”

He took her briskly up. “No—and I’m not prepared yet!”

Mrs. Gracedew could quite see it. “Yes, you’re too astonished.”

“My astonishment’s my own affair,” he retorted—“not less so than my memory!”

“Oh, I yield to your memory,” said the charming woman, “and I confess my extravagance. But quite, you know, *as* extravagance.”

“I don’t at all know,”—Mr. Prodmore shook it off,—“nor what you *call* extravagance.”

“Why, banging the desk. Raving. Shrieking. I over-did it,” she exclaimed; “I wanted to please you!”

She had too happy a beauty, as she sat in her high-backed chair, to have been condemned to say that to any man without a certain effect. The effect on Mr. Prodmore was striking. “So you said,” he sternly inquired, “what you didn’t believe?”

She flushed with the avowal. “Yes—for you.”

He looked at her hard. “For *me*?”

Under his eye—for her flush continued—she slowly got up. “And for those good people.”

“Oh!”—he sounded most sarcastic. “Should you like me to call them back?”

“No.” She was still gay enough, but very decided. “I took them in.”

“And now you want to take *me*?”

“Oh, Mr. Prodmore!” she almost pitifully, but not quite adequately, moaned.

He appeared to feel he had gone a little far. “Well, if we’re not what you say——”

“Yes?”—she looked up askance at the stroke.

“Why the devil do you want us?” The question rang out and was truly for the poor lady, as the quick suffusion of her eyes showed, a challenge it would take more time than he left her properly to pick up. He left her in fact no time at all before he went on: “Why the devil did you say you’d offer fifty?”

She looked quite wan and seemed to wonder. “*Did* I say that?” She could only let his challenge lie. “It was a figure of speech!”

“Then that’s the kind of figure we’re talking about!” Mr. Prodmore’s sharpness would have struck an auditor as the more effective that, on the heels of this thrust, seeing the ancient butler reappear, he dropped the victim of it as comparatively unimportant and directed his fierceness instantly to Chivers, who mildly gaped at him from the threshold of the court. “Have you seen Miss Prodmore? If you haven’t, find her!”

Mrs. Gracedew addressed their visitor in a very different tone, though with the full authority of her benevolence. “You won’t, my dear man.” To Mr. Prodmore also she continued bland. “I happen to know she has gone for a walk.”

“A walk—alone?” Mr. Prodmore gasped.

“No—not alone.” Mrs. Gracedew looked at Chivers with a vague smile of appeal for help, but he could only give her, from under his bent old brow, the blank decency of his wonder. It seemed to make her feel afresh that she was, after all, alone—so that in her loneliness, which had also its fine sad charm, she risked another brush with their formidable friend. “Cora has gone with Mr. Pegg.”

“Pegg has *been* here?”

It was like a splash in a full basin, but she launched the whole craft. “He walked with her from the station.”

“When she arrived?” Mr. Prodmore rose like outraged Neptune. “That’s why she was so late?”

Mrs. Gracedew assented. “Why I got here first. I get everywhere first!” she bravely laughed.

Mr. Prodmore looked round him in purple dismay—it was so clearly a question for him where *he* should get, and what! “In which direction did they go?” he imperiously asked.

His rudeness was too evident to be more than lightly recognised. “I think I must let you ascertain for yourself!”

All he could do then was to shout it to Chivers. “Call my carriage, you ass!” After which, as the old man melted into the vestibule, he dashed about blindly for his hat, pounced upon it and seemed, furious but helpless, on the point of hurling it at his contradictress as a gage of battle. “So you abetted and protected this wicked, low intrigue?”

She had something in her face now that was indifferent to any violence. “You’re too disappointed to see your real interest: oughtn’t I therefore in common charity to point it out to you?”

He faced her question so far as to treat it as one. “What do *you* know of my disappointment?”

There was something in his very harshness that even helped her, for it added at this moment to her sense of making out in his narrowed glare a couple of tears of rage. “I know everything.”

“What do you know of my real interest?” he went on as if he had not heard her.

“I know enough for my purpose—which is to offer you a handsome condition. I think it’s not I who have protected the happy understanding that you call by so ugly a name; it’s the happy understanding that has put me”—she gained confidence—“well, in a position. Do drive after them, if you like—but catch up with them only to forgive them. If you’ll do that, I’ll pay your price.”

The particular air with which, a minute after Mrs. Gracedew had spoken these words, Mr. Prodmore achieved a transfer of his attention to the inside of his hat—this special shade of majesty would have taxed the descriptive resources of the most accomplished reporter. It is none the less certain that he appeared for some time absorbed in that receptacle—appeared at last to breathe into it hard. “What do you call my price?”

“Why, the sum you just mentioned—fifty thousand!” Mrs. Gracedew feverishly quavered.

He looked at her as if stupefied. “*That’s* not my price—and it never for a moment was!” If derision can be dry, Mr. Prodmore’s was of the driest. “Besides,” he rang out, “my price is up!”

She caught it with a long wail. “Up?”

Oh, he let her have it now! “Seventy thousand.”

She turned away overwhelmed, but still with voice for her despair. "Oh, deary me!"

Mr. Prodmore was already at the door, from which he launched his ultimatum. "It's to take or to leave!"

She would have had to leave it, perhaps, had not something happened at this moment to nerve her for the effort of staying him with a quick motion. Captain Yule had come into sight on the staircase and, after just faltering at what he himself saw, had marched resolutely enough down. She watched him arrive—watched him with an attention that visibly and responsively excited his own; after which she passed nearer to their companion. "Seventy thousand, then!"—it gleamed between them, in her muffled hiss, as if she had planted a dagger.

Mr. Prodmore, to do him justice, took his wound in front. "Seventy thousand—done!" And, without another look at Yule, he was presently heard to bang the outer door after him for a sign.

VIII

The young man, meanwhile, had approached in surprise. "He's gone? I've been looking for him!"

Mrs. Gracedew was out of breath; there was a disturbed whiteness of bosom in her which needed time to subside and which she might have appeared to retreat before him on purpose to veil. "I don't think, you know, that you need him—now."

Clement Yule was mystified. "Now?"

She recovered herself enough to explain—made an effort at least to be plausible. "I mean that—if you don't mind—you must deal with *me*. I've arranged with Mr. Prodmore to take it over."

Oh, he gave her no help! "Take what over?"

She looked all about as if not quite thinking what it could be called; at last, however, she offered with a smile a sort of substitute for a name. "Why, your debt."

But he was only the more bewildered. "*Can* you—without arranging with *me*?"

She turned it round, but as if merely to oblige him. "That's precisely what I want to do."

Then, more brightly, as she thought further: "That is, I mean, I want you to arrange with *me*. Surely you will," she said encouragingly.

His own processes, in spite of a marked earnestness, were much less rapid. "But if I arrange with anybody——"

"Yes?" She cheerfully waited.

"How do I perform my engagement?"

"The one to Mr. Prodmore?"

He looked surprised at her speaking as if he had half-a-dozen. "Yes—that's the worst."

"Certainly—the worst!" And she gave a happy laugh that made him stare.

He broke into quite a different one. "You speak as if its being the worst made it the best!"

"It does—for me. You don't," said Mrs. Gracedew, "perform any engagement."

He required a moment to take it in; then something extraordinary leaped into his face. "He lets me off?"

Ah, she could ring out now! "He lets you off."

It lifted him high, but only to drop him with an audible thud. "Oh, I see—I lose my house!" "Dear, no—*that* doesn't follow!" She spoke as if the absurdity he indicated were the last conceivable, but there was a certain want of sharpness of edge in her expression of the alternative. "You arrange with *me* to keep it."

There was quite a corresponding want, clearly, in the image presented to the Captain—of which, for a moment, he seemed with difficulty to follow the contour. "How do I arrange?"

"Well, we must think," said Mrs. Gracedew; "we must wait." She spoke as if this were a detail for which she had not yet had much attention; only bringing out, however, the next instant in an encouraging cry and as if it were by itself almost a solution: "We must find some way!" She might have been talking to a reasonable child.

But even reasonable children ask too many questions. "Yes—and what way *can* we find?" Clement Yule, glancing about him, was so struck with the absence of ways that he appeared to remember with something of regret how different it had been before. "With Prodmore it was simple enough. You see I could marry his daughter."

Mrs. Gracedew was silent just long enough for her soft ironic smile to fill the cup of the pause. "*Could* you?"

It was as if he had tasted in the words the wine at the brim; for he gave, under the effect of them, a sudden headshake and an awkward laugh. "Well, never perhaps *that* exactly—when it came to the point. But I had to, you see——" It was difficult to say just what.

She took advantage of it, looking hard, but not seeing at all. "You had to——?"

"Well," he repeated ruefully, "think a lot about it. You didn't suspect that?"

Oh, if he came to suspicions she could only break off! "Don't ask me too many questions."

He looked an instant as if he wondered why. "But isn't this just the moment for them?" He fronted her, with a quickness he tried to dissimulate, from the other side. "What *did* you suppose?"

She looked everywhere but into his face. "Why, I supposed you were in distress."

He was very grave. "About his terms?"

"About his terms of course!" she laughed. "Not about his religious opinions."

His gratitude was too great for gaiety. "You really, in your beautiful sympathy, *guessed* my fix?"

But she declined to be too solemn. "Dear Captain Yule, it all quite stuck out of you!"

"You mean I floundered like a drowning man——?"

Well, she consented to have meant that. "Till I plunged in!"

He appeared there for a few seconds, to see her again take the jump and to listen again to the splash; then, with an odd, sharp impulse, he turned his back. "You saved me."

She wouldn't deny it—on the contrary. "What a pity, now, *I* haven't a daughter!"

On this he slowly came round again. "What should I do with her?"

"You'd treat her, I hope, better than you've treated Miss Prodmore."

The young man positively coloured. "But I haven't been bad——?"

The sight of this effect of her small joke produced on Mrs. Gracedew's part an emotion less controllable than any she had yet felt. "Oh, you delightful goose!" she irrepressibly dropped.

She made his blush deepen, but the aggravation was a relief. "Of course—I'm all right, and there's only one pity in the matter. I've nothing—nothing whatever, not a scrap of service nor a thing you'd care for—to offer you in compensation."

She looked at him ever so kindly. "I'm not, as they say, 'on the make.'" Never had he been put right with a lighter hand. "I didn't do it for payment."

"Then what did you do it for?"

For something, it might have seemed, as her eyes dropped and strayed, that had got brushed into a crevice of the old pavement. "Because I hated Mr. Prodmore."

He conscientiously demurred. "So much as all that?"

"Oh, well," she replied impatiently, "of course you also know how much I like the house. My hates and my likes," she subtly explained, "can never live together. I get one of them out. The one this time was that man."

He showed a candour of interest. "Yes—you got him out. Yes—I saw him go." And his inner vision appeared to attend for some moments Mr. Prodmore's departure. "But how did you do it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Women——!" Mrs. Gracedew but vaguely sketched it.

A touch or two, however, for that subject, could of course almost always suffice.

"Precisely—women. May I smoke again?" Clement Yule abruptly asked.

"Certainly. But I managed Mr. Prodmore," she laughed as he re-lighted, "without cigarettes."

Her companion puffed. "*I* couldn't manage him."

"So I saw!"

"*I* couldn't get him out."

"So *he* saw!"

Captain Yule, for a little, lost himself in his smoke. "Where is he gone?"

"I haven't the least idea. But I meet him again," she hastened to add—"very soon."

"And when do you meet *me*?"

"Why, whenever you'll come to see me." For the twentieth time she gathered herself as if the words she had just spoken were quite her last hand. "At present, you see, I *have* a train to catch."

Absorbed in the trivial act that engaged him, he gave her no help. "A train?"

"Surely. I didn't walk."

"No; but even trains——!" His eyes clung to her now. "You fly?"

"I try to. Good-bye."

He had got between her and the door of departure quite as, on her attempt to quit him half an hour before, he had anticipated her approach to the stairs; and in this position he took no notice of her farewell. "I said just now that I had nothing to offer you. But of course I've the house itself."

"The house?" She stared. "Why, I've *got* it?"

“Got it?”

“All in my head, I mean. That’s all I want.” She had not yet, save to Mr. Prodmore, made quite so light of it.

This had its action in his markedly longer face. “Why, I thought you loved it so!”

Ah, she was perfectly consistent. “I love it far too much to deprive *you* of it.”

Yet Clement Yule could in a fashion meet her. “Oh, it wouldn’t be depriving——!”

She altogether protested. “Not to turn you out——?”

“Dear lady, I’ve never been *in!*”

Oh, she was none the less downright. “You’re in *now*—I’ve put you, and you must stay.” He looked round so woefully, however, that she presently attenuated. “I don’t mean *all* the while, but long enough——!”

“Long enough for what?”

“For me to feel you’re here.”

“And how long will that take?”

“Well, you think me very fast—but sometimes I’m slow. I told you just now, at any rate,” she went on, “that I had arranged you should lose nothing. Is the very next thing I do, then, to make you lose everything?”

“It isn’t a question of what I lose,” the young man anxiously cried; “it’s a question of what I *do!* What *have* I done to find it all so plain?” Fate was really—fate reversed, improved, and unnatural—too much for him, and his heated young face showed honest stupefaction. “I haven’t lifted a finger. It’s you who have done all.”

“Yes, but if you’re just where you were before, how in the world are you saved?” She put it to him with still superior lucidity.

“By my life’s being my own again—to do what I want.”

“What you ‘want’”—Mrs. Gracedew’s handsome uplifted head had it all there, every inch of it—“is to keep your house.”

“Ah, but only,” he perfectly assented, “if, as you said, you find a way!”

“I *have* found a way—and there the way is: for *me* just simply not to touch the place. What you ‘want,’” she argued more closely, “is what made you give in to Prodmore. What you ‘want’ is these walls and these acres. What you ‘want’ is to take the way I first showed you.”

Her companion’s eyes, quitting for the purpose her face, looked to the quarter marked by her last words as at an horizon now remote. “Why, the way you first showed me was to marry Cora!”

She had to admit it, but as little as possible. “Practically—yes.”

“Well, it’s just ‘practically’ that I can’t!”

“I didn’t know that then,” said Mrs. Gracedew. “You didn’t tell me.”

He passed, with an approach to a grimace, his hand over the back of his head. “I felt a delicacy!”

“I didn’t even know *that*.” She spoke it almost sadly.

“It didn’t strike you that I might?”

She thought a moment. “No.” She thought again. “No. But don’t quarrel with me about it *now!*”

“Quarrel with you?” he looked amazement.

She laughed, but she had changed colour. “Cora, at any rate, felt no delicacy. Cora told me.”

Clement Yule fairly gaped. “Then she did know——?”

“She knew all; and if her father said she didn’t, he simply told you what was not.” She frankly gave him this, but the next minute, as if she had startled him more than she meant, she jumped to reassurance. “It was quite right of her. She would have refused you.”

The young man stared. “Oh!” He was quick, however, to show—by an amusement perhaps a trifle over-done—that he felt no personal wound. “Do you call that quite right?”

Mrs. Gracedew looked at it again. “For *her*—yes; and for Prodmore.”

“Oh, for Prodmore”—his laugh grew more grim—“with all my heart!”

This, then,—her kind eyes seemed to drop it upon him,—was all she meant. “To stay at your post—*that* was the way I showed you.”

He had come round to it now, as mechanically, in intenser thought, he smoothed down the thick hair he had rubbed up; but his face soon enough gave out, in wonder and pain, that his freedom was somehow only a new predicament. “How can I take any way at all, dear lady—?”

“If I only stick here in your path?” She had taken him straight up, and with spirit; and the same spirit bore her to the end. “I won’t stick a moment more! Haven’t I been trying this age to leave you?”

Clement Yule, for all answer, caught her sharply, in her passage, by the arm. “You surrender your rights?” He was for an instant almost terrible.

She quite turned pale with it. “Weren’t you ready to surrender *yours*?”

“I hadn’t any, so it was deuced easy. I hadn’t paid for them.”

Oh that, she let him see,—even though with his continued grasp he might hurt her,—had nothing in it! “Your ancestors had paid: it’s the same thing.” Erect there in the brightness of her triumph and the force of her logic, she must yet, to anticipate his return, take a stride—like a sudden dip into a gully and the scramble up on the other bank—that put her dignity to the test. “You’re just, in a manner, my tenant.”

“But how can I treat that as such a mere detail? I’m your tenant on what terms?”

“Oh, *any* terms—choose them for yourself!” She made an attempt to free her arm—gave it a small vain shake. Then, as if to bribe him to let her go: “You can write me about them.”

He appeared to consider it. “To Missoura Top?”

She fully assented. “I go right back.” As if it had put him off his guard she broke away. “Farewell!”

She broke away, but he broke faster, and once more, nearer the door, he had barred her escape. “Just one little moment, please. If you won’t tell me your own terms, you must at least tell me Prodmore’s.”

Ah, the fiend—she could never squeeze past *that!* All she could do, for the instant, was to reverberate foolishly “Prodmore’s?”

But there was nothing foolish, at last, about *him*. “How you did it—how you managed him.” His feet were firm while he waited, though he had to wait some time. “You bought him out?”

She made less of it than, clearly, he had ever heard made of a stroke of business; it might have been a case of his owing her ninepence. “I bought him out.”

He wanted at least the exact sum. “For how much?” Her silence seemed to say that she had made no note of it, but his pressure only increased. “I really must know.”

She continued to try to treat it as if she had merely paid for his cab—she put even what she could of that suggestion into a tender, helpless, obstinate headshake. “You shall never know!”

The only thing his own manner met was the obstinacy. “I’ll get it from *him*!”

She repeated her headshake, but with a world of sadness added, “Get it if you can!”

He looked into her eyes now as if it was the sadness that struck him most. “He won’t say, because he *did* you?”

They showed each other, on this, the least separated faces yet. “He’ll never, never say.”

The confidence in it was so tender that it sounded almost like pity, and the young man took it up with all the flush of the sense that pity could be but for *him*. This sense broke full in her face. “The scoundrel!”

“Not a bit!” she returned, with equal passion—“I was only too clever for him!” The thought of it was again an exaltation in which she pushed her friend aside. “So let me go!”

The push was like a jar that made the vessel overflow, and he was before her now as if he stretched across the hall. “With the heroic view of your power and the barren beauty of your sacrifice? You pour out money, you move a mountain, and to let you ‘go,’ to close the door fast behind you, is all I can figure out to do for you?” His emotion trembled out of him with the stammer of a new language, but it was as if in a minute or two he had thrown over all consciousness. “You’re the most generous—you’re the noblest of women! The wonderful chance that brought you here——!”

His own arm was grasped now—she knew better than he about the wonderful chance. “It brought *you* at the same happy hour! I’ve done what I liked,” she went on very simply; “and the only way to thank me is to believe it.”

“You’ve done it for a proud, poor man”—his answer was quite as direct. “He has nothing—in the light of such a magic as yours—either to give or to hope; but you’ve made him, in a little miraculous hour, think of you——”

He stumbled with the rush of things, and if silence can, in its way, be active, there was a collapse too, for an instant, on her closed lips. These lips, however, she at last opened. “How have I made him think of me?”

“As he has thought of no other woman!” He had personal possession of her now, and it broke, as he pressed her, as he pleaded, the helpless fall of his eloquence. “Mrs. Gracedew—don’t leave me.” He jerked his head passionately at the whole place and the yellow afternoon. “If you made me care——”

“It was surely that you had made *me* first!” She laughed, and her laugh disengaged her, so that before he could reply she had again put space between them.

He accepted the space now—he appeared so sure of his point. “Then let me go on caring. When I asked you awhile back for some possible adjustment to my new source of credit, you simply put off the question—told me I must trust to time for it. Well,” said Clement Yule,

“I’ve trusted to time so effectually that ten little minutes have made me find it. I’ve found it because I’ve so quickly found *you*. May I, Mrs. Gracedew, keep *all* that I’ve found? I offer you in return the only thing I have to give—I offer you my hand and my life.”

She held him off, across the hall, for a time almost out of proportion to the previous wait he had just made so little of. Then at last also, when she answered, it might have passed for a plea for further postponement, even for a plea for mercy. “Ah, Captain Yule——!” But she turned suddenly off: the flower had been nipped in the bud by the re-entrance of Chivers, at whom his master veritably glowered.

“What the devil is it?”

The old man showed the shock, but he had his duty. “Another party.”

Mrs. Gracedew, at this, wheeled round. “The ‘party up’!” It brought back her voice—indeed, all her gaiety. And her gaiety was always determinant. “Show them in.”

Clement Yule’s face fell while Chivers proceeded to obey. “You’ll *have* them?” he wailed across the hall.

“Ah! mayn’t I be proud of my house?” she tossed back at him.

At this, radiant, he had rushed at her. “Then you accept——?”

Her raised hand checked him. “Hush!”

He fell back—the party was there. Chivers ushered it as he had ushered the other, making the most, this time, of more scanty material—four persons so spectacled, satchelled, shawled, and handbooked that they testified on the spot to a particular foreign origin and presented themselves indeed very much as tourists who, at an hotel, casting up the promise of comfort or the portent of cost, take possession, while they wait for their keys, with expert looks and free sounds. Clement Yule, who had receded, effacing himself, to the quarter opposed to that of his companion, addressed to their visitors a covert but dismayed stare and then, edging round, in his agitation, to the rear, instinctively sought relief by escape through the open passage. One of the invaders meanwhile—a broad-faced gentleman with long hair tucked behind his ears and a ring on each forefinger—had lost no time in showing he knew where to begin. He began at the top—the proper place, and took in the dark pictures ranged above the tapestry. “Olt vamily bortraits?”—he appealed to Chivers and spoke very loud.

Chivers rose to the occasion and, gracefully pawing the air, began also at the beginning. “Dame Dorothy Yule—who lived to a hundred and one.”

“A hundred and one—ach *so!*” broke, with a resigned absence of criticism, from each of the interested group; another member of which, however, indicated with a somewhat fatigued skip the central figure of the series, the personage with the long white legs that Mrs. Gracedew had invited the previous inquirers to remark. “Who’s dis?” the present inquirer asked.

The question affected the lovely lady over by the fireplace as the trumpet of battle affects a generous steed. She flashed on the instant into the middle of the hall and into the friendliest and most familiar relation with everyone and with everything. “John Anthony Yule, sir,—who passed away, poor duck, in his flower!”

They met her with low salutations, a sweep of ugly shawls, and a brush of queer German hats: she had issued, to their glazed convergence, from the dusk of the Middle Ages and the shade of high pieces, and now stood there, beautiful and human and happy, in a light that, whatever it was for themselves, the very breadth of their attention, the expression of their

serious faces, converted straightway for her into a new, and oh! into the right, one. To a detached observer of the whole it would have been promptly clear that she found herself striking these good people very much as the lawful heir had, half an hour before, struck another stranger—that she produced in them, in her setting of assured antiquity, quite the romantic vibration that she had responded to in the presence of that personage. They read her as she read *him*, and a bright and deepening cheer, reflected dimly in their thick thoroughness, went out from her as she accepted their reading. An impression was exchanged, for the minute, from side to side—their grave admiration of the finest feature of the curious house and the deep free radiance of her silent, grateful “Why not?” It made a passage of some intensity and some duration, of which the effect, indeed, the next minute, was to cause the only lady of the party—a matron of rich Jewish type, with small nippers on a huge nose and a face out of proportion to her little Freischütz hat—to break the spell by an uneasy turn and a stray glance at one of the other pictures. “Who’s *dat*?”

“That?” The picture chanced to be a portrait over the wide arch, and something happened, at the very moment, to arrest Mrs. Gracedew’s eyes rather above than below. What took place, in a word, was that Clement Yule, already fidgeting in his impatience back from the front, just occupied the arch, completed her thought, and filled her vision. “Oh, that’s my future husband!” He caught the words, but answered them only by a long look at her as he moved, with a checked wildness of which she alone, of all the spectators, had a sense, straight across the hall again and to the other opening. He paused there as he had done before, then with a last dumb appeal to her dropped into the court and passed into the garden. Mrs. Gracedew, already so wonderful to their visitors, was, before she followed him, wonderful with a greater wonder to poor Chivers. “You dear old thing—I give it all back to you!”

Paste

‘I’ve found a lot more things,’ her cousin said to her the day after the second funeral; ‘they’re up in her room—but they’re things I wish *you’d* look at.’

The pair of mourners, sufficiently stricken, were in the garden of the vicarage together, before luncheon, waiting to be summoned to that meal, and Arthur Prime had still in his face the intention, she was moved to call it rather than the expression, of feeling something or other. Some such appearance was in itself of course natural within a week of his stepmother’s death, within three of his father’s; but what was most present to the girl, herself sensitive and shrewd, was that he seemed somehow to brood without sorrow, to suffer without what she in her own case would have called pain. He turned away from her after this last speech—it was a good deal his habit to drop an observation and leave her to pick it up without assistance. If the vicar’s widow, now in her turn finally translated, had not really belonged to him it was not for want of her giving herself, so far as he ever would take her; and she had lain for three days all alone at the end of the passage, in the great cold chamber of hospitality, the dampish, greenish room where visitors slept and where several of the ladies of the parish had, without effect, offered, in pairs and successions, piously to watch with her. His personal connection with the parish was now slighter than ever, and he had really not waited for this opportunity to show the ladies what he thought of them. She felt that she herself had, during her doleful month’s leave from Bleet, where she was governess, rather taken her place in the same snubbed order; but it was presently, none the less, with a better little hope of coming in for some remembrance, some relic, that she went up to look at the things he had spoken of, the identity of which, as a confused cluster of bright objects on a table in the darkened room, shimmered at her as soon as she had opened the door.

They met her eyes for the first time, but in a moment, before touching them, she knew them as things of the theatre, as very much too fine to have been, with any verisimilitude, things of the vicarage. They were too dreadfully good to be true, for her aunt had had no jewels to speak of, and these were coronets and girdles, diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. Flagrant tinsel and glass, they looked strangely vulgar, but if, after the first queer shock of them, she found herself taking them up, it was for the very proof, never yet so distinct to her, of a far-off faded story. An honest widowed cleric with a small son and a large sense of Shakspeare had, on a brave latitude of habit as well as of taste—since it implied his having in very fact dropped deep into the ‘pit’—conceived for an obscure actress, several years older than himself, an admiration of which the prompt offer of his reverend name and hortatory hand was the sufficiently candid sign. The response had perhaps, in those dim years, in the way of eccentricity, even bettered the proposal, and Charlotte, turning the tale over, had long since drawn from it a measure of the career renounced by the undistinguished *comédienne*—doubtless also tragic, or perhaps pantomimic, at a pinch—of her late uncle’s dreams. This career could not have been eminent and must much more probably have been comfortless.

‘You see what it is—old stuff of the time she never liked to mention.’

Our young woman gave a start; her companion had, after all, rejoined her and had apparently watched a moment her slightly scared recognition. ‘So I said to myself,’ she replied. Then, to show intelligence, yet keep clear of twaddle: ‘How peculiar they look!’

‘They look awful,’ said Arthur Prime. ‘Cheap gilt, diamonds as big as potatoes. These are trappings of a ruder age than ours. Actors do themselves better now.’

‘Oh, now,’ said Charlotte, not to be less knowing, ‘actresses have real diamonds,’

‘Some of them.’ Arthur spoke drily.

‘I mean the bad ones—the nobodies too.’

‘Oh, some of the nobodies have the biggest. But mamma wasn’t of that sort.’

‘A nobody?’ Charlotte risked.

‘Not a nobody to whom somebody—well, not a nobody with diamonds. It isn’t all worth, this trash, five pounds.’

There was something in the old gewgaws that spoke to her, and she continued to turn them over. ‘They’re relics. I think they have their melancholy and even their dignity.’

Arthur observed another pause. ‘Do you care for them?’ he then asked. ‘I mean,’ he promptly added, ‘as a souvenir.’

‘Of you?’ Charlotte threw off.

‘Of me? What have I to do with it? Of your poor dead aunt who was so kind to you,’ he said with virtuous sternness.

‘Well, I would rather have them than nothing.’

‘Then please take them,’ he returned in a tone of relief which expressed somehow more of the eager than of the gracious.

‘Thank you.’ Charlotte lifted two or three objects up and set them down again. Though they were lighter than the materials they imitated they were so much more extravagant that they struck her in truth as rather an awkward heritage, to which she might have preferred even a matchbox or a pen wiper. They were indeed shameless pinchbeck. ‘Had you any idea she had kept them?’

‘I don’t at all believe she *had* kept them or knew they were there, and I’m very sure my father didn’t. They had quite equally worked off any tenderness for the connection. These odds and ends, which she thought had been given away or destroyed, had simply got thrust into a dark corner and been forgotten.’

Charlotte wondered. ‘Where then did you find them?’

‘In that old tin box’—and the young man pointed to the receptacle from which he had dislodged them and which stood on a neighbouring chair. ‘It’s rather a good box still, but I’m afraid I can’t give you *that*.’

The girl gave the box no look; she continued only to look at the trinkets. ‘What corner had she found?’

‘She hadn’t “found” it,’ her companion sharply insisted; ‘she had simply lost it. The whole thing had passed from her mind. The box was on the top shelf of the old schoolroom closet, which, until one put one’s head into it from a step-ladder, looked, from below, quite cleared out. The door is narrow and the part of the closet to the left goes well into the wall. The box had stuck there for years.’

Charlotte was conscious of a mind divided and a vision vaguely troubled, and once more she took up two or three of the subjects of this revelation; a big bracelet in the form of a gilt serpent with many twists and beady eyes, a brazen belt studded with emeralds and rubies, a chain, of flamboyant architecture, to which, at the Theatre Royal, Little Peddlington, Hamlet’s mother had probably been careful to attach the portrait of the successor to Hamlet’s

father. 'Are you very sure they're not really worth something? Their mere weight alone———!' she vaguely observed, balancing a moment a royal diadem that might have crowned one of the creations of the famous Mrs. Jarley.

But Arthur Prime, it was clear, had already thought the question over and found the answer easy. 'If they had been worth anything to speak of she would long ago have sold them. My father and she had unfortunately never been in a position to keep any considerable value locked up.' And while his companion took in the obvious force of this he went on with a flourish just marked enough not to escape her: 'If they're worth anything at all—why, you're only the more welcome to them.'

Charlotte had now in her hand a small bag of faded, figured silk—one of those antique conveniences that speak to us, in the terms of evaporated camphor and lavender, of the part they have played in some personal history; but, though she had for the first time drawn the string, she looked much more at the young man than at the questionable treasure it appeared to contain. 'I shall like them. They're all I have.'

'All you have———?'

'That belonged to her.'

He swelled a little, then looked about him as if to appeal—as against her avidity—to the whole poor place. 'Well, what else do you want?'

'Nothing. Thank you very much.' With which she bent her eyes on the article wrapped, and now only exposed, in her superannuated satchel—a necklace of large pearls, such as might once have graced the neck of a provincial Ophelia and borne company to a flaxen wig. 'This perhaps *is* worth something. Feel it.' And she passed him the necklace, the weight of which she had gathered for a moment into her hand.

He measured it in the same way with his own, but remained quite detached. 'Worth at most thirty shillings.'

'Not more?'

'Surely not if it's paste?'

'But is it paste?'

He gave a small sniff of impatience. 'Pearls nearly as big as filberts?'

'But they're heavy,' Charlotte declared.

'No heavier than anything else.' And he gave them back with an allowance for her simplicity.

'Do you imagine for a moment they're real?'

She studied them a little, feeling them, turning them round. 'Mightn't they possibly be?'

'Of that size—stuck away with that trash?'

'I admit it isn't likely,' Charlotte presently said. 'And pearls are so easily imitated.'

'That's just what—to a person who knows—they're not. These have no lustre, no play.'

'No—they *are* dull. They're opaque.'

'Besides,' he lucidly inquired, 'how could she ever have come by them?'

'Mightn't they have been a present?'

Arthur stared at the question as if it were almost improper. 'Because actresses are exposed———?' He pulled up, however, not saying to what, and before she could supply the deficiency

had, with the sharp ejaculation of 'No, they mightn't!' turned his back on her and walked away. His manner made her feel that she had probably been wanting in tact, and before he returned to the subject, the last thing that evening, she had satisfied herself of the ground of his resentment. They had been talking of her departure the next morning, the hour of her train and the fly that would come for her, and it was precisely these things that gave him his effective chance. 'I really can't allow you to leave the house under the impression that my stepmother was at *any* time of her life the sort of person to allow herself to be approached——'

'With pearl necklaces and that sort of thing?' Arthur had made for her somehow the difficulty that she couldn't show him she understood him without seeming pert.

It at any rate only added to his own gravity. 'That sort of thing, exactly.'

'I didn't think when I spoke this morning—but I see what you mean.'

'I mean that she was beyond reproach,' said Arthur Prime.

'A hundred times yes.'

'Therefore if she couldn't, out of her slender gains, ever have paid for a row of pearls——'

'She couldn't, in that atmosphere, ever properly have had one? Of course she couldn't. I've seen perfectly since our talk,' Charlotte went on, 'that that string of beads isn't even, as an imitation, very good. The little clasp itself doesn't seem even gold. With false pearls, I suppose,' the girl mused, 'it naturally wouldn't be.'

'The whole thing's rotten paste,' her companion returned as if to have done with it. 'If it were not, and she had kept it all these years hidden——'

'Yes?' Charlotte sounded as he paused.

'Why, I shouldn't know what to think!'

'Oh, I see.' She had met him with a certain blankness, but adequately enough, it seemed, for him to regard the subject as dismissed; and there was no reversion to it between them before, on the morrow, when she had with difficulty made a place for them in her trunk, she carried off these florid survivals.

At Bleet she found small occasion to revert to them and, in an air charged with such quite other references, even felt, after she had laid them away, much enshrouded, beneath various piles of clothing, as if they formed a collection not wholly without its note of the ridiculous. Yet she was never, for the joke, tempted to show them to her pupils, though Gwendolen and Blanche, in particular, always wanted, on her return, to know what she had brought back; so that without an accident by which the case was quite changed they might have appeared to enter on a new phase of interment. The essence of the accident was the sudden illness, at the last moment, of Lady Bobby, whose advent had been so much counted on to spice the five days' feast laid out for the coming of age of the eldest son of the house; and its equally marked effect was the despatch of a pressing message, in quite another direction, to Mrs. Guy, who, could she by a miracle be secured—she was always engaged ten parties deep—might be trusted to supply, it was believed, an element of exuberance scarcely less active. Mrs. Guy was already known to several of the visitors already on the scene, but she was not yet known to our young lady, who found her, after many wires and counterwires had at last determined the triumph of her arrival, a strange, charming little red-haired, black-dressed woman, with the face of a baby and the authority of a commodore. She took on the spot the discreet, the exceptional young governess into the confidence of her designs and, still more, of her doubts; intimating that it was a policy she almost always promptly pursued.

‘To-morrow and Thursday are all right,’ she said frankly to Charlotte on the second day, ‘but I’m not half satisfied with Friday.’

‘What improvement then do you suggest?’

‘Well, my strong point, you know, is *tableaux vivants*.’

‘Charming. And what is your favourite character?’

‘Boss!’ said Mrs. Guy with decision; and it was very markedly under that ensign that she had, within a few hours, completely planned her campaign and recruited her troop. Every word she uttered was to the point, but none more so than, after a general survey of their equipment, her final inquiry of Charlotte. She had been looking about, but half appeased, at the muster of decoration and drapery. ‘We shall be dull. We shall want more colour. You’ve nothing else?’

Charlotte had a thought. ‘No—I’ve *some* things.’

‘Then why don’t you bring them?’

The girl hesitated. ‘Would you come to my room?’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Guy—‘bring them to-night to mine.’

So Charlotte, at the evening’s end, after candlesticks had nickered through brown old passages bedward, arrived at her friend’s door with the burden of her aunt’s relics. But she promptly expressed a fear. ‘Are they too garish?’

When she had poured them out on the sofa Mrs. Guy was but a minute, before the glass, in clapping on the diadem. ‘Awfully jolly—we can do Ivanhoe!’

‘But they’re only glass and tin.’

‘Larger than life they are, *rather!*—which is exactly what, for tableaux, is wanted. *Our* jewels, for historic scenes, don’t tell—the real thing falls short. Rowena must have rubies as big as eggs. Leave them with me,’ Mrs. Guy continued—‘they’ll inspire me. Good-night.’

The next morning she was in fact—yet very strangely—inspired. ‘Yes, *I’ll* do Rowena. But I don’t, my dear, understand.’

‘Understand what?’

Mrs. Guy gave a very lighted stare. ‘How you come to have such things.’

Poor Charlotte smiled. ‘By inheritance.’

‘Family jewels?’

‘They belonged to my aunt, who died some months ago. She was on the stage a few years in early life, and these are a part of her trappings.’

‘She left them to you?’

‘No; my cousin, her stepson, who naturally has no use for them, gave them to me for remembrance of her. She was a dear kind thing, always so nice to me, and I was fond of her.’

Mrs. Guy had listened with visible interest. ‘But it’s *he* who must be a dear kind thing!’

Charlotte wondered. ‘You think so?’

‘Is *he*,’ her friend went on, ‘also “always so nice” to you?’

The girl, at this, face to face there with the brilliant visitor in the deserted breakfast-room, took a deeper sounding. ‘What is it?’

‘Don’t you know?’

Something came over her. ‘The pearls——?’ But the question faded on her lips.

‘Doesn’t *he* know?’

Charlotte found herself flushing. ‘They’re *not* paste?’

‘Haven’t you looked at them?’

She was conscious of two kinds of embarrassment. ‘*You* have?’

‘Very carefully.’

‘And they’re real?’

Mrs. Guy became slightly mystifying and returned for all answer: ‘Come again, when you’ve done with the children, to my room.’

Our young woman found she had done with the children, that morning, with a promptitude that was a new joy to them, and when she reappeared before Mrs. Guy this lady had already encircled a plump white throat with the only ornament, surely, in all the late Mrs. Prime’s—the effaced Miss Bradshaw’s—collection, in the least qualified to raise a question. If Charlotte had never yet once, before the glass, tied the string of pearls about her own neck, this was because she had been capable of no such condescension to approved ‘imitation’; but she had now only to look at Mrs. Guy to see that, so disposed, the ambiguous objects might have passed for frank originals. ‘What in the world have you done to them?’

‘Only handled them, understood them, admired them, and put them on. That’s what pearls want; they want to be worn—it wakes them up. They’re alive, don’t you see? How *have* these been treated? They must have been buried, ignored, despised. They were half dead. Don’t you *know* about pearls?’ Mrs. Guy threw off as she fondly fingered the necklace.

‘How *should* I? Do *you*?’

‘Everything. These were simply asleep, and from the moment I really touched them—well,’ said their wearer lovingly, ‘it only took one’s eye!’

‘It took more than mine—though I did just wonder; and than Arthur’s,’ Charlotte brooded. She found herself almost panting. ‘Then their value——?’

‘Oh, their value’s excellent.’

The girl, for a deep moment, took another plunge into the wonder, the beauty and mystery, of them. ‘Are you *sure*?’

Her companion wheeled round for impatience. ‘Sure? For what kind of an idiot, my dear, do you take me?’

It was beyond Charlotte Prime to say. ‘For the same kind as Arthur—and as myself,’ she could only suggest. ‘But my cousin didn’t know. He thinks they’re worthless.’

‘Because of the rest of the lot? Then your cousin’s an ass. But what—if, as I understood you, he gave them to you—has he to do with it?’

‘Why, if he gave them to me as worthless and they turn out precious——’

‘You must give them back? I don’t see that—if he was such a fool. He took the risk.’

Charlotte fed, in fancy, on the pearls, which, decidedly, were exquisite, but which at the present moment somehow presented themselves much more as Mrs. Guy’s than either as

Arthur's or as her own. 'Yes—he did take it; even after I had distinctly hinted to him that they looked to me different from the other pieces.'

'Well, then!' said Mrs. Guy with something more than triumph—with a positive odd relief.

But it had the effect of making our young woman think with more intensity. 'Ah, you see he thought they couldn't be different, because—so peculiarly—they shouldn't be.'

'Shouldn't? I don't understand.'

'Why, how would she have got them?'—so Charlotte candidly put it.

'She? Who?' There was a capacity in Mrs. Guy's tone for a sinking of persons—!

'Why, the person I told you of: his stepmother, my uncle's wife—among whose poor old things, extraordinarily thrust away and out of sight, he happened to find them.'

Mrs. Guy came a step nearer to the effaced Miss Bradshaw. 'Do you mean she may have stolen them?'

'No. But she had been an actress.'

'Oh, well then,' cried Mrs. Guy, 'wouldn't that be just how?'

'Yes, except that she wasn't at all a brilliant one, nor in receipt of large pay.' The girl even threw off a nervous joke. 'I'm afraid she couldn't have been our Rowena.'

Mrs. Guy took it up. 'Was she very ugly?'

'No. She may very well, when young, have looked rather nice.'

'Well, then!' was Mrs. Guy's sharp comment and fresh triumph.

'You mean it was a present? That's just what he so dislikes the idea of her having received—a present from an admirer capable of going such lengths.'

'Because she wouldn't have taken it for nothing? *Speriamo*—that she wasn't a brute. The "length" "her admirer went was the length of a whole row. Let us hope she was just a little kind!'

'Well,' Charlotte went on, 'that she was "kind" might seem to be shown by the fact that neither her husband, nor his son, nor I, his niece, knew or dreamed of her possessing anything so precious; by her having kept the gift all the rest of her life beyond discovery—out of sight and protected from suspicion.'

'As if, you mean'—Mrs. Guy was quick—'she had been wedded to it and yet was ashamed of it? Fancy,' she laughed while she manipulated the rare beads, 'being ashamed of *these!*'

'But you see she had married a clergyman.'

'Yes, she must have been "rum." But at any rate he had married *her*. What did he suppose?'

'Why, that she had never been of the sort by whom such offerings are encouraged.'

'Ah, my dear, the sort by whom they are *not*———!' But Mrs. Guy caught herself up. 'And her stepson thought the same?'

'Overwhelmingly.'

'Was he, then, if only her stepson———'

'So fond of her as that comes to? Yes; he had never known, consciously, his real mother, and, without children of her own, she was very patient and nice with him. And *I* liked her so,' the girl pursued, 'that at the end of ten years, in so strange a manner, to "give her away"———'

‘Is impossible to you? Then don’t!’ said Mrs. Guy with decision.

‘Ah, but if they’re real I can’t keep them!’ Charlotte, with her eyes on them, moaned in her impatience. ‘It’s too difficult.’

‘Where’s the difficulty, if he has such sentiments that he would rather sacrifice the necklace than admit it, with the presumption it carries with it, to be genuine? You’ve only to be silent.’

‘And keep it? How can *I* ever wear it?’

‘You’d have to hide it, like your aunt?’ Mrs. Guy was amused. ‘You can easily sell it.’

Her companion walked round her for a look at the affair from behind. The clasp was certainly, doubtless intentionally, misleading, but everything else was indeed lovely. ‘Well, I must think. Why didn’t *she* sell them?’ Charlotte broke out in her trouble.

Mrs. Guy had an instant answer. ‘Doesn’t that prove what they secretly recalled to her? You’ve only to be silent!’ she ardently repeated.

‘I must think—I must think!’

Mrs. Guy stood with her hands attached but motionless.

‘Then you want them back?’

As if with the dread of touching them Charlotte retreated to the door. ‘I’ll tell you to-night.’

‘But may I wear them?’

‘Meanwhile?’

‘This evening—at dinner.’

It was the sharp, selfish pressure of this that really, on the spot, determined the girl; but for the moment, before closing the door on the question, she only said: ‘As you like!’

They were busy much of the day with preparation and rehearsal, and at dinner, that evening, the concourse of guests was such that a place among them for Miss Prime failed to find itself marked. At the time the company rose she was therefore alone in the schoolroom, where, towards eleven o’clock, she received a visit from Mrs. Guy. This lady’s white shoulders heaved, under the pearls, with an emotion that the very red lips which formed, as if for the full effect, the happiest opposition of colour, were not slow to translate. ‘My dear, you should have seen the sensation—they’ve had a success!’

Charlotte, dumb a moment, took it all in. ‘It *is* as if they knew it—they’re more and more alive. But so much the worse for both of us! I can’t,’ she brought out with an effort, ‘be silent.’

‘You mean to return them?’

‘If I don’t I’m a thief.’

Mrs. Guy gave her a long, hard look: what was decidedly not of the baby in Mrs. Guy’s face was a certain air of established habit in the eyes. Then, with a sharp little jerk of her head and a backward reach of her bare beautiful arms, she undid the clasp and, taking off the necklace, laid it on the table. ‘If you do, you’re a goose.’

‘Well, of the two———!’ said our young lady, gathering it up with a sigh. And as if to get it, for the pang it gave, out of sight as soon as possible, she shut it up, clicking the lock, in the drawer of her own little table; after which, when she turned again, her companion, without it, looked naked and plain. ‘But what will you say?’ it then occurred to her to demand.

‘Downstairs—to explain?’ Mrs. Guy was, after all, trying at least to keep her temper. ‘Oh, I’ll put on something else and say that clasp is broken. And you won’t of course name *me* to him,’ she added.

‘As having undeceived me? No—I’ll say that, looking at the thing more carefully, it’s my own private idea.’

‘And does he know how little you really know?’

‘As an expert—surely. And he has much, always, the conceit of his own opinion.’

‘Then he won’t believe you—as he so hates to. He’ll stick to his judgment and maintain his gift, and we shall have the darlings back!’ With which reviving assurance Mrs. Guy kissed for good-night.

She was not, however, to be gratified or justified by any prompt event, for, whether or no paste entered into the composition of the ornament in question, Charlotte shrank from the temerity of despatching it to town by post. Mrs. Guy was thus disappointed of the hope of seeing the business settled—‘by return,’ she had seemed to expect—before the end of the revels. The revels, moreover, rising to a frantic pitch, pressed for all her attention, and it was at last only in the general confusion of leave-taking that she made, parenthetically, a dash at her young friend.

‘Come, what will you take for them?’

‘The pearls? Ah, you’ll have to treat with my cousin.’

Mrs. Guy, with quick intensity, lent herself. ‘Where then does he live?’

‘In chambers in the Temple. You can find him.’

‘But what’s the use, if *you* do neither one thing nor the other?’

‘Oh, I *shall* do the “other,”’ Charlotte said; ‘I’m only waiting till I go up. You want them so awfully?’ She curiously, solemnly again, sounded her.

‘I’m dying for them. There’s a special charm in them—I don’t know what it is: they tell so their history.’

‘But what do you know of that?’

‘Just what they themselves say. It’s all *in* them—and it comes out. They breathe a tenderness—they have the white glow of it. My dear,’ hissed Mrs. Guy in supreme confidence and as she buttoned her glove—‘they’re things of love!’

‘Oh!’ our young woman vaguely exclaimed.

‘They’re things of passion!’

‘Mercy!’ she gasped, turning short off. But these words remained, though indeed their help was scarce needed, Charlotte being in private face to face with a new light, as she by this time felt she must call it, on the dear dead, kind, colourless lady whose career had turned so sharp a corner in the middle. The pearls had quite taken their place as a revelation. She might have received them for nothing—admit that; but she couldn’t have kept them so long and so unprofitably hidden, couldn’t have enjoyed them only in secret, for nothing; and she had mixed them, in her reliquary, with false things, in order to put curiosity and detection off the scent. Over this strange fact poor Charlotte interminably mused: it became more touching, more attaching for her than she could now confide to any ear. How bad, or how happy—in the sophisticated sense of Mrs. Guy and the young man at the Temple—the effaced Miss Bradshaw must have been to have had to be so mute! The little governess at Bleet put on the

necklace now in secret sessions; she wore it sometimes under her dress; she came to feel, verily, a haunting passion for it. Yet in her penniless state she would have parted with it for money; she gave herself also to dreams of what in this direction it would do for her. The sophistry of her so often saying to herself that Arthur had after all definitely pronounced her welcome to any gain from his gift that might accrue—this trick remained innocent, as she perfectly knew it for what it was. Then there was always the possibility of his—as she could only picture it—rising to the occasion. Mightn't he have a grand magnanimous moment?—mightn't he just say: 'Oh, of course I couldn't have afforded to let you have it if I had known; but since you have got it, and have made out the truth by your own wit, I really can't screw myself down to the shabbiness of taking it back'?

She had, as it proved, to wait a long time—to wait till, at the end of several months, the great house of Bleet had, with due deliberation, for the season, transferred itself to town; after which, however, she fairly snatched at her first freedom to knock, dressed in her best and armed with her disclosure, at the door of her doubting kinsman. It was still with doubt and not quite with the face she had hoped that he listened to her story. He had turned pale, she thought, as she produced the necklace, and he appeared, above all, disagreeably affected. Well, perhaps there was reason, she more than ever remembered; but what on earth was one, in close touch with the fact, to do? She had laid the pearls on his table, where, without his having at first put so much as a finger to them, they met his hard, cold stare.

'I don't believe in them,' he simply said at last.

'That's exactly, then,' she returned with some spirit, 'what I wanted to hear!'

She fancied that at this his colour changed; it was indeed vivid to her afterwards—for she was to have a long recall of the scene—that she had made him quite angrily flush. 'It's a beastly unpleasant imputation, you know!'—and he walked away from her as he had always walked at the vicarage.

'It's none of my making, I'm sure,' said Charlotte Prime. 'If you're afraid to believe they're real——'

'Well?'—and he turned, across the room, sharp round at her.

'Why, it's not my fault.'

He said nothing more, for a moment, on this; he only came back to the table. 'They're what I originally said they were. They're rotten paste.'

'Then I may keep them?'

'No. I want a better opinion.'

'Than your own?'

'Than *your* own.' He dropped on the pearls another queer stare, then, after a moment, bringing himself to touch them, did exactly what she had herself done in the presence of Mrs. Guy at Bleet—gathered them together, marched off with them to a drawer, put them in and clicked the key. 'You say I'm afraid,' he went on as he again met her; 'but I shan't be afraid to take them to Bond Street.'

'And if the people say they're real——?'

He hesitated—then had his strangest manner. 'They won't say it! They shan't!'

There was something in the way he brought it out that deprived poor Charlotte, as she was perfectly aware, of any manner at all. 'Oh!' she simply sounded, as she had sounded for her

last word to Mrs. Guy; and, within a minute, without more conversation, she had taken her departure.

A fortnight later she received a communication from him, and towards the end of the season one of the entertainments in Eaton Square was graced by the presence of Mrs. Guy. Charlotte was not at dinner, but she came down afterwards, and this guest, on seeing her, abandoned a very beautiful young man on purpose to cross and speak to her. The guest had on a lovely necklace and had apparently not lost her habit of overflowing with the pride of such ornaments.

‘Do you see?’ She was in high joy.

They were indeed splendid pearls—so far as poor Charlotte could feel that she knew, after what had come and gone, about such mysteries. Charlotte had a sickly smile. ‘They’re almost as fine as Arthur’s.’

‘Almost? Where, my dear, are your eyes? They are “Arthur’s!”’ After which, to meet the flood of crimson that accompanied her young friend’s start: ‘I tracked them—after your folly, and, by miraculous luck, recognised them in the Bond Street window to which he had disposed of them.’

‘*Disposed* of them?’ the girl gasped. ‘He wrote me that I had insulted his mother and that the people had shown him he was right—had pronounced them utter paste.’

Mrs. Guy gave a stare. ‘Ah, I told you he wouldn’t bear it! No. But I had, I assure you,’ she wound up, ‘to drive my bargain!’

Charlotte scarce heard or saw; she was full of her private wrong. ‘He wrote me,’ she panted, ‘that he had smashed them.’

Mrs. Guy could only wonder and pity. ‘He’s really morbid!’ But it was not quite clear which of the pair she pitied; though Charlotte felt really morbid too after they had separated and she found herself full of thought. She even went the length of asking herself what sort of a bargain Mrs. Guy had driven and whether the marvel of the recognition in Bond Street had been a veracious account of the matter. Hadn’t she perhaps in truth dealt with Arthur directly? It came back to Charlotte almost luridly that she had had his address.

The Tree Of Knowledge

I

It was one of the secret opinions, such as we all have, of Peter Brench that his main success in life would have consisted in his never having committed himself about the work, as it was called, of his friend Morgan Mallow. This was a subject on which it was, to the best of his belief, impossible with veracity to quote him, and it was nowhere on record that he had, in the connexion, on any occasion and in any embarrassment, either lied or spoken the truth. Such a triumph had its honour even for a man of other triumphs—a man who had reached fifty, who had escaped marriage, who had lived within his means, who had been in love with Mrs Mallow for years without breathing it, and who, last but not least, had judged himself once for all. He had so judged himself in fact that he felt an extreme and general humility to be his proper portion; yet there was nothing that made him think so well of his parts as the course he had steered so often through the shallows just mentioned. It became thus a real wonder that the friends in whom he had most confidence were just those with whom he had most reserves. He couldn't tell Mrs Mallow—or at least he supposed, excellent man, he couldn't—that she was the one beautiful reason he had never married; any more than he could tell her husband that the sight of the multiplied marbles in that gentleman's studio was an affliction of which even time had never blunted the edge. His victory, however, as I have intimated, in regard to these productions, was not simply in his not having let it out that he deplored them; it was, remarkably, in his not having kept it in by anything else.

The whole situation, among these good people, was verily a marvel, and there was probably not such another for a long way from the spot that engages us—the point at which the soft declivity of Hampstead began at that time to confess in broken accents to Saint John's Wood. He despised Mallow's statues and adored Mallow's wife, and yet was distinctly fond of Mallow, to whom, in turn, he was equally dear. Mrs Mallow rejoiced in the statues—though she preferred, when pressed, the busts; and if she was visibly attached to Peter Brench it was because of his affection for Morgan. Each loved the other moreover for the love borne in each case to Lancelot, whom the Mallows respectively cherished as their only child and whom the friend of their fireside identified as the third—but decidedly the handsomest—of his godsons. Already in the old years it had come to that—that no one, for such a relation, could possibly have occurred to any of them, even to the baby itself, but Peter. There was luckily a certain independence, of the pecuniary sort, all round: the Master could never otherwise have spent his solemn *Wanderjahre* in Florence and Rome, and continued by the Thames as well as by the Arno and the Tiber to add unpurchased group to group and model, for what was too apt to prove in the event mere love, fancy-heads of celebrities either too busy or too buried—too much of the age or too little of it—to sit. Neither could Peter, lounging in almost daily, have found time to keep the whole complicated tradition so alive by his presence. He was massive but mild, the depositary of these mysteries—large and loose and ruddy and curly, with deep tones, deep eyes, deep pockets, to say nothing of the habit of long pipes, soft hats and brownish greyish weather-faded clothes, apparently always the same.

He had 'written', it was known, but had never spoken, never spoken in particular of that; and he had the air (since, as was believed, he continued to write) of keeping it up in order to have something more—as if he hadn't at the worst enough—to be silent about. Whatever his air, at any rate, Peter's occasional unmentioned prose and verse were quite truly the result of an impulse to maintain the purity of his taste by establishing still more firmly the right relation

of fame to feebleness. The little green door of his domain was in a garden-wall on which the discoloured stucco made patches, and in the small detached villa behind it everything was old, the furniture, the servants, the books, the prints, the immemorial habits and the new improvements. The Mallows, at Carrara Lodge, were within ten minutes, and the studio there was on their little land, to which they had added, in their happy faith, for building it. This was the good fortune, if it was not the ill, of her having brought him in marriage a portion that put them in a manner at their ease and enabled them thus, on their side, to keep it up. And they did keep it up—they always had—the infatuated sculptor and his wife, for whom nature had refined on the impossible by relieving them of the sense of the difficult. Morgan had at all events everything of the sculptor but the spirit of Phidias—the brown velvet, the becoming *beretto*, the ‘plastic’ presence, the fine fingers, the beautiful accent in Italian and the old Italian factotum. He seemed to make up for everything when he addressed Egidio with the ‘tu’ and waved him to turn one of the rotary pedestals of which the place was full. They were tremendous Italians at Carrara Lodge, and the secret of the part played by this fact in Peter’s life was in a large degree that it gave him, sturdy Briton as he was, just the amount of ‘going abroad’ he could bear. The Mallows were all his Italy, but it was in a measure for Italy he liked them. His one worry was that Lance—to which they had shortened his godson—was, in spite of a public school, perhaps a shade too Italian. Morgan meanwhile looked like somebody’s flattering idea of somebody’s own person as expressed in the great room provided at the Uffizi Museum for the general illustration of that idea by eminent hands. The Master’s sole regret that he hadn’t been born rather to the brush than to the chisel sprang from his wish that he might have contributed to that collection.

It appeared with time at any rate to be to the brush that Lance had been born; for Mrs Mallow, one day when the boy was turning twenty, broke it to their friend, who shared, to the last delicate morsel, their problems and pains, that it seemed as if nothing would really do but that he should embrace the career. It had been impossible longer to remain blind to the fact that he was gaining no glory at Cambridge, where Brench’s own college had for a year tempered its tone to him as for Brench’s own sake. Therefore why renew the vain form of preparing him for the impossible? The impossible—it had become clear—was that he should be anything but an artist.

‘Oh dear, dear!’ said poor Peter.

‘Don’t you believe in it?’ asked Mrs Mallow, who still, at more than forty, had her violet velvet eyes, her creamy satin skin and her silken chestnut hair.

‘Believe in what?’

‘Why in Lance’s passion.’

‘I don’t know what you mean by “believing in it”. I’ve never been unaware, certainly, of his disposition, from his earliest time, to daub and draw; but I confess I’ve hoped it would burn out.’

‘But why should it,’ she sweetly smiled, ‘with his wonderful heredity? Passion is passion—though of course indeed *you*, dear Peter, know nothing of that. Has the Master’s ever burned out?’

Peter looked off a little and, in his familiar formless way, kept up for a moment, a sound between a smothered whistle and a subdued hum. ‘Do you think he’s going to be another Master?’

She seemed scarce prepared to go that length, yet she had on the whole a marvellous trust. ‘I know what you mean by that. Will it be a career to incur the jealousies and provoke the

machinations that have been at times almost too much for his father? Well—say it may be, since nothing but clap-trap, in these dreadful days, *can*, it would seem, make its way, and since, with the curse of refinement and distinction, one may easily find one's self begging one's bread. Put it at the worst—say he *has* the misfortune to wing his flight further than the vulgar taste of his stupid countrymen can follow. Think, all the same, of the happiness—the same the Master has had. He'll *know*.'

Peter looked rueful. 'Ah but *what* will he know?'

'Quiet joy!' cried Mrs Mallow, quite impatient and turning away.

II

He had of course before long to meet the boy himself on it and to hear that practically everything was settled. Lance was not to go up again, but to go instead to Paris where, since the die was cast, he would find the best advantages. Peter had always felt he must be taken as he was, but had never perhaps found him so much of that pattern as on this occasion. 'You chuck Cambridge then altogether? Doesn't that seem rather a pity?'

Lance would have been like his father, to his friend's sense, had he had less humour, and like his mother had he had more beauty. Yet it was a good middle way for Peter that, in the modern manner, he was, to the eye, rather the young stock-broker than the young artist. The youth reasoned that it was a question of time—there was such a mill to go through, such an awful lot to learn. He had talked with fellows and had judged. 'One has got, today,' he said, 'don't you see? to know.'

His interlocutor, at this, gave a groan. 'Oh hang it, *don't* know!'

Lance wondered. "'Don't'?" Then what's the use—?'

'The use of what?'

'Why of anything. Don't you think I've talent?'

Peter smoked away for a little in silence; then went on: 'It isn't knowledge, it's ignorance that—as we've been beautifully told—is bliss.'

'Don't you think I've talent?' Lance repeated.

Peter, with his trick of queer kind demonstrations, passed his arm round his godson and held him a moment. 'How do I know?'

'Oh,' said the boy, 'if it's your own ignorance you're defending—!'

Again, for a pause, on the sofa, his godfather smoked. 'It isn't. I've the misfortune to be omniscient.'

'Oh well,' Lance laughed again, 'if you know *too* much—!'

'That's what I do, and it's why I'm so wretched.'

Lance's gaiety grew. 'Wretched? Come, I say!'

'But I forgot,' his companion went on—'you're not to know about that. It would indeed for you too make the too much. Only I'll tell you what I'll do.' And Peter got up from the sofa. 'If you'll go up again I'll pay your way at Cambridge.'

Lance stared, a little rueful in spite of being still more amused. 'Oh Peter! You disapprove so of Paris?'

‘Well, I’m afraid of it.’

‘Ah I see!’

‘No, you don’t see—yet. But you will—that is you would. And you mustn’t.’

The young man thought more gravely. ‘But one’s innocence, already—!’

‘Is considerably damaged? Ah that won’t matter,’ Peter persisted—‘we’ll patch it up here.’

‘Here? Then you want me to stay at home?’

Peter almost confessed to it. ‘Well, we’re so right—we four together—just as we are. We’re so safe. Come, don’t spoil it.’

The boy, who had turned to gravity, turned from this, on the real pressure of his friend’s tone, to consternation. ‘Then what’s a fellow to be?’

‘My particular care. Come, old man’—and Peter now fairly pleaded—‘*I’ll* look out for you.’

Lance, who had remained on the sofa with his legs out and his hands in his pockets, watched him with eyes that showed suspicion. Then he got up. ‘You think there’s something the matter with me—that I can’t make a success.’

‘Well, what do you call a success?’

Lance thought again. ‘Why the best sort, I suppose, is to please one’s self. Isn’t that the sort that, in spite of cabals and things, is—in his own peculiar line—the Master’s?’

There were so much too many things in this question to be answered at once that they practically checked the discussion, which became particularly difficult in the light of such renewed proof that, though the young man’s innocence might, in the course of his studies, as he contended, somewhat have shrunken, the finer essence of it still remained. That was indeed exactly what Peter had assumed and what above all he desired; yet perversely enough it gave him a chill. The boy believed in the cabals and things, believed in the peculiar line, believed, to be brief, in the Master. What happened a month or two later wasn’t that he went up again at the expense of his godfather, but that a fortnight after he had got settled in Paris this personage sent him fifty pounds.

He had meanwhile at home, this personage, made up his mind to the worst; and what that might be had never yet grown quite so vivid to him as when, on his presenting himself one Sunday night, as he never failed to do, for supper, the mistress of Carrara Lodge met him with an appeal as to—of all things in the world—the wealth of the Canadians. She was earnest, she was even excited. ‘Are many of them *really* rich?’

He had to confess he knew nothing about them, but he often thought afterwards of that evening. The room in which they sat was adorned with sundry specimens of the Master’s genius, which had the merit of being, as Mrs Mallow herself frequently suggested, of an unusually convenient size. They were indeed of dimensions not customary in the products of the chisel, and they had the singularity that, if the objects and features intended to be small looked too large, the objects and features intended to be large looked too small. The Master’s idea, either in respect to this matter or to any other, had in almost any case, even after years, remained undiscoverable to Peter Brench. The creations that so failed to reveal it stood about on pedestals and brackets, on tables and shelves, a little staring white population, heroic, idyllic, allegoric, mythic, symbolic, in which ‘scale’ had so strayed and lost itself that the public square and the chimney-piece seemed to have changed places, the monumental being all diminutive and the diminutive all monumental; branches at any rate, markedly, of a family in which stature was rather oddly irrespective of function, age and sex. They formed, like the

Mallows themselves, poor Brench's own family—having at least to such a degree the note of familiarity. The occasion was one of those he had long ago learnt to know and to name—short flickers of the faint flame, soft gusts of a kinder air. Twice a year regularly the Master believed in his fortune, in addition to believing all the year round in his genius. This time it was to be made by a bereaved couple from Toronto, who had given him the handsomest order for a tomb to three lost children, each of whom they desired to see, in the composition, emblematically and characteristically represented.

Such was naturally the moral of Mrs Mallow's question: if their wealth was to be assumed, it was clear, from the nature of their admiration, as well as from mysterious hints thrown out (they were a little odd!) as to other possibilities of the same mortuary sort, what their further patronage might be; and not less evident that should the Master become at all known in those climes nothing would be more inevitable than a run of Canadian custom. Peter had been present before at runs of custom, colonial and domestic—present at each of those of which the aggregation had left so few gaps in the marble company round him; but it was his habit never at these junctures to prick the bubble in advance. The fond illusion, while it lasted, eased the wound of elections never won, the long ache of medals and diplomas carried off, on every chance, by everyone but the Master; it moreover lighted the lamp that would glimmer through the next eclipse. They lived, however, after all—as it was always beautiful to see—at a height scarce susceptible of ups and downs. They strained a point at times charmingly, strained it to admit that the public was here and there not too bad to buy; but they would have been nowhere without their attitude that the Master was always too good to sell. They were at all events deliciously formed, Peter often said to himself, for their fate; the Master had a vanity, his wife had a loyalty, of which success, depriving these things of innocence, would have diminished the merit and the grace. Anyone could be charming under a charm, and as he looked about him at a world of prosperity more void of proportion even than the Master's museum he wondered if he knew another pair that so completely escaped vulgarity.

'What a pity Lance isn't with us to rejoice!' Mrs Mallow on this occasion sighed at supper.

'We'll drink to the health of the absent,' her husband replied, filling his friend's glass and his own and giving a drop to their companion; 'but we must hope he's preparing himself for a happiness much less like this of ours this evening—excusable as I grant it to be!—than like the comfort we have always (whatever has happened or has not happened) been able to trust ourselves to enjoy. The comfort,' the Master explained, leaning back in the pleasant lamplight and firelight, holding up his glass and looking round at his marble family, quartered more or less, a monstrous brood, in every room—the comfort of art in itself.'

Peter looked a little shyly at his wine. 'Well—I don't care what you may call it when a fellow doesn't—but Lance must learn to *sell*, you know. I drink to his acquisition of the secret of a base popularity!'

'Oh yes, *he* must sell,' the boy's mother, who was still more, however, this seemed to give out, the Master's wife, rather artlessly allowed.

'Ah,' the sculptor after a moment confidently pronounced, 'Lance *will*. Don't be afraid. He'll have learnt.'

'Which is exactly what Peter,' Mrs Mallow gaily returned—'why in the world were you so perverse, Peter?—wouldn't, when he told him, hear of.'

Peter, when this lady looked at him with accusatory affection—a grace on her part not infrequent—could never find a word; but the Master, who was always all amenity and tact, helped him out now as he had often helped him before. 'That's his old idea, you know—on which we've so often differed: his theory that the artist should be all impulse and

instinct. *I go in of course for a certain amount of school. Not too much—but a due proportion. There’s where his protest came in,*’ he continued to explain to his wife, ‘as against what *might*, don’t you see? be in question for Lance.’

‘Ah well’—and Mrs Mallow turned the violet eyes across the table at the subject of this discourse—‘he’s sure to have meant of course nothing but good. Only that wouldn’t have prevented him, if Lance *had* taken his advice, from being in effect horribly cruel.’

They had a sociable way of talking of him to his face as if he had been in the clay or—at most—in the plaster, and the Master was unfailingly generous. He might have been waving Egidio to make him revolve. ‘Ah but poor Peter wasn’t so wrong as to what it may after all come to that he *will* learn.’

‘Oh but nothing artistically bad,’ she urged—still, for poor Peter, arch and dewy.

‘Why just the little French tricks,’ said the Master: on which their friend had to pretend to admit, when pressed by Mrs Mallow, that these æsthetic vices had been the objects of his dread.

III

‘I know now,’ Lance said to him the next year, ‘why you were so much against it.’ He had come back supposedly for a mere interval and was looking about him at Carrara Lodge, where indeed he had already on two or three occasions since his expatriation briefly reappeared. This had the air of a longer holiday. ‘Something rather awful has happened to me. It *isn’t* so very good to know.’

‘I’m bound to say high spirits don’t show in your face,’ Peter was rather ruefully forced to confess. ‘Still, are you very sure you do know?’

‘Well, I at least know about as much as I can bear.’ These remarks were exchanged in Peter’s den, and the young man, smoking cigarettes, stood before the fire with his back against the mantel. Something of his bloom seemed really to have left him.

Poor Peter wondered. ‘You’re clear then as to what in particular I wanted you not to go for?’

‘In particular?’ Lance thought. ‘It seems to me that in particular there can have been only one thing.’

They stood for a little sounding each other. ‘Are you quite sure?’

‘Quite sure I’m a beastly duffer? Quite—by this time.’

‘Oh!’—and Peter turned away as if almost with relief.

‘It’s *that* that isn’t pleasant to find out.’

‘Oh I don’t care for “that”,’ said Peter, presently coming round again. ‘I mean I personally don’t.’

‘Yet I hope you can understand a little that I myself should!’

‘Well, what do you mean by it?’ Peter sceptically asked.

And on this Lance had to explain—how the upshot of his studies in Paris had inexorably proved a mere deep doubt of his means. These studies had so waked him up that a new light was in his eyes; but what the new light did was really to show him too much. ‘Do you know what’s the matter with me? I’m too horribly intelligent. Paris was really the last place for me. I’ve learnt what I can’t do.’

Poor Peter stared—it was a staggerer; but even after they had had, on the subject, a longish talk in which the boy brought out to the full the hard truth of his lesson, his friend betrayed less pleasure than usually breaks into a face to the happy tune of ‘I told you so!’ Poor Peter himself made now indeed so little a point of having told him so that Lance broke ground in a different place a day or two after. ‘What was it then that—before I went—you were afraid I should find out?’ This, however, Peter refused to tell him—on the ground that if he hadn’t yet guessed perhaps he never would, and that in any case nothing at all for either of them was to be gained by giving the thing a name. Lance eyed him on this an instant with the bold curiosity of youth—with the air indeed of having in his mind two or three names, of which one or other would be right. Peter nevertheless, turning his back again, offered no encouragement, and when they parted afresh it was with some show of impatience on the side of the boy. Accordingly on their next encounter Peter saw at a glance that he had now, in the interval, divined and that, to sound his note, he was only waiting till they should find themselves alone. This he had soon arranged and he then broke straight out. ‘Do you know your conundrum has been keeping me awake? But in the watches of the night the answer came over me—so that, upon my honour, I quite laughed out. Had you been supposing I had to go to Paris to learn *that*? Even now, to see him still so sublimely on his guard, Peter’s young friend had to laugh afresh. ‘You won’t give a sign till you’re sure? Beautiful old Peter!’ But Lance at last produced it. ‘Why, hang it, the truth about the Master.’

It made between them for some minutes a lively passage, full of wonder for each at the wonder of the other. ‘Then how long have you understood—’

‘The true value of his work? I understood it,’ Lance recalled, ‘as soon as I began to understand anything. But I didn’t begin fully to do that, I admit, till I got *là-bas*.’

‘Dear, dear!’—Peter gasped with retrospective dread.

‘But for what have you taken me? I’m a hopeless muff—that I *had* to have rubbed in. But I’m not such a muff as the Master!’ Lance declared.

‘Then why did you never tell me—?’

‘That I hadn’t, after all’—the boy took him up—‘remained such an idiot? Just because I never dreamed *you* knew. But I beg your pardon. I only wanted to spare you. And what I don’t now understand is how the deuce then for so long you’ve managed to keep bottled.’

Peter produced his explanation, but only after some delay and with a gravity not void of embarrassment. ‘It was for your mother.’

‘Oh!’ said Lance.

‘And that’s the great thing now—since the murder *is* out. I want a promise from you. I mean’—and Peter almost feverishly followed it up—‘a vow from you, solemn and such as you owe me here on the spot, that you’ll sacrifice anything rather than let her ever guess—’

‘That *I’ve* guessed?’—Lance took it in. ‘I see.’ He evidently after a moment had taken in much. ‘But what is it you’ve in mind that I may have a chance to sacrifice?’

‘Oh one has always something.’

Lance looked at him hard. ‘Do you mean that *you’ve* had—?’ The look he received back, however, so put the question by that he found soon enough another. ‘Are you really sure my mother doesn’t know?’

Peter, after renewed reflexion, was really sure. ‘If she does she’s too wonderful.’

‘But aren’t we all too wonderful?’

‘Yes,’ Peter granted—‘but in different ways. The thing’s so desperately important because your father’s little public consists only, as you know then,’ Peter developed—‘well, of how many?’

‘First of all,’ the Master’s son risked, ‘of himself. And last of all too. I don’t quite see of whom else.’

Peter had an approach to impatience. ‘Of your mother, I say—*always*.’

Lance cast it all up. ‘You absolutely feel that?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Well then with yourself that makes three.’

‘Oh *me!*’—and Peter, with a wag of his kind old head, modestly excused himself. The number’s at any rate small enough for any individual dropping out to be too dreadfully missed. Therefore, to put it in a nutshell, take care, my boy—that’s all—that *you’re* not!’

‘*I’ve* got to keep on humbugging?’ Lance wailed.

‘It’s just to warn you of the danger of your failing of that that I’ve seized this opportunity.’

‘And what do you regard in particular,’ the young man asked, ‘as the danger?’

‘Why this certainty: that the moment your mother, who feels so strongly, should suspect your secret—well,’ said Peter desperately, ‘the fat would be on the fire.’

Lance for a moment seemed to stare at the blaze. ‘She’d throw me over?’

‘She’d throw *him* over.’

‘And come round to us?’

Peter, before he answered, turned away. ‘Come round to *you*.’ But he had said enough to indicate—and, as he evidently trusted, to avert—the horrid contingency.

IV

Within six months again, none the less, his fear was on more occasions than one all before him. Lance had returned to Paris for another trial; then had reappeared at home and had had, with his father, for the first time in his life, one of the scenes that strike sparks. He described it with much expression to Peter, touching whom (since they had never done so before) it was the sign of a new reserve on the part of the pair at Carrara Lodge that they at present failed, on a matter of intimate interest, to open themselves—if not in joy then in sorrow—to their good friend. This produced perhaps practically between the parties a shade of alienation and a slight intermission of commerce—marked mainly indeed by the fact that to talk at his ease with his old playmate Lance had in general to come to see him. The closest if not quite the gayest relation they had yet known together was thus ushered in. The difficulty for poor Lance was a tension at home—begotten by the fact that his father wished him to be at least the sort of success he himself had been. He hadn’t ‘chucked’ Paris—though nothing appeared more vivid to him than that Paris had chucked him: he would go back again because of the fascination in trying, in seeing, in sounding the depths—in learning one’s lesson, briefly, even if the lesson were simply that of one’s impotence in the presence of one’s larger vision. But what did the Master, all aloft in his senseless fluency, know of impotence, and what vision—to be called such—had he in all his blind life ever had? Lance, heated and indignant, frankly appealed to his godparent on this score.

His father, it appeared, had come down on him for having, after so long, nothing to show, and hoped that on his next return this deficiency would be repaired. *The* thing, the Master

complacently set forth was—for any artist, however inferior to himself—at least to ‘do’ something. ‘What can you do? That’s all I ask!’ *He* had certainly done enough, and there was no mistake about what he had to show. Lance had tears in his eyes when it came thus to letting his old friend know how great the strain might be on the ‘sacrifice’ asked of him. It wasn’t so easy to continue humbugging—as from son to parent—after feeling one’s self despised for not grovelling in mediocrity. Yet a noble duplicity was what, as they intimately faced the situation, Peter went on requiring; and it was still for a time what his young friend, bitter and sore, managed loyally to comfort him with. Fifty pounds more than once again, it was true, rewarded both in London and in Paris the young friend’s loyalty; none the less sensibly, doubtless, at the moment, that the money was a direct advance on a decent sum for which Peter had long since privately prearranged an ultimate function. Whether by these arts or others, at all events, Lance’s just resentment was kept for a season—but only for a season—at bay. The day arrived when he warned his companion that he could hold out—or hold in—no longer. Carrara Lodge had had to listen to another lecture delivered from a great height—an infliction really heavier at last than, without striking back or in some way letting the Master have the truth, flesh and blood could bear.

‘And what I don’t see is,’ Lance observed with a certain irritated eye for what was after all, if it came to that, owing to himself too; ‘what I don’t see is, upon my honour, how *you*, as things are going, can keep the game up.’

‘Oh the game for me is only to hold my tongue,’ said placid Peter.
‘And I have my reason.’

‘Still my mother?’

Peter showed a queer face as he had often shown it before—that is by turning it straight away. ‘What will you have? I haven’t ceased to like her.’

‘She’s beautiful—she’s a dear of course,’ Lance allowed; ‘but what is she to you, after all, and what is it to you that, as to anything whatever, she should or she shouldn’t?’

Peter, who had turned red, hung fire a little. ‘Well—it’s all simply what I make of it.’

There was now, however, in his young friend a strange, an adopted insistence. ‘What are you after all to *her*?’

‘Oh nothing. But that’s another matter.’

‘She cares only for my father,’ said Lance the Parisian.

‘Naturally—and that’s just why.’

‘Why you’ve wished to spare her?’

‘Because she cares so tremendously much.’

Lance took a turn about the room, but with his eyes still on his host.

‘How awfully—always—you must have liked her!’

‘Awfully. Always,’ said Peter Brench.

The young man continued for a moment to muse—then stopped again in front of him. ‘Do you know how much she cares?’ Their eyes met on it, but Peter, as if his own found something new in Lance’s, appeared to hesitate, for the first time in an age, to say he did know. ‘*I’ve* only just found out,’ said Lance. ‘She came to my room last night, after being present, in silence and only with her eyes on me, at what I had had to take from him: she came—and she was with me an extraordinary hour.’

He had paused again and they had again for a while sounded each other. Then something—and it made him suddenly turn pale—came to Peter. ‘She *does* know?’

‘She does know. She let it all out to me—so as to demand of me no more than “that”, as she said, of which she herself had been capable. She has always, always known,’ said Lance without pity.

Peter was silent a long time; during which his companion might have heard him gently breathe, and on touching him might have felt within him the vibration of a long low sound suppressed. By the time he spoke at last he had taken everything in. ‘Then I do see how tremendously much.’

‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ Lance asked.

‘Wonderful,’ Peter mused.

‘So that if your original effort to keep me from Paris was to keep me from knowledge—!’ Lance exclaimed as if with a sufficient indication of this futility.

It might have been at the futility Peter appeared for a little to gaze. ‘I think it must have been—without my quite at the time knowing it—to keep *me!*’ he replied at last as he turned away.

Mrs. Medwin

CHAPTER I

“Well, we *are* a pair!” the poor lady’s visitor broke out to her at the end of her explanation in a manner disconcerting enough. The poor lady was Miss Cutter, who lived in South Audley Street, where she had an “upper half” so concise that it had to pass boldly for convenient; and her visitor was her half-brother, whom she hadn’t seen for three years. She was remarkable for a maturity of which every symptom might have been observed to be admirably controlled, had not a tendency to stoutness just affirmed its independence. Her present, no doubt, insisted too much on her past, but with the excuse, sufficiently valid, that she must certainly once have been prettier. She was clearly not contented with once—she wished to be prettier again. She neglected nothing that could produce that illusion, and, being both fair and fat, dressed almost wholly in black. When she added a little colour it was not, at any rate, to her drapery. Her small rooms had the peculiarity that everything they contained appeared to testify with vividness to her position in society, quite as if they had been furnished by the bounty of admiring friends. They were adorned indeed almost exclusively with objects that nobody buys, as had more than once been remarked by spectators of her own sex, for herself, and would have been luxurious if luxury consisted mainly in photographic portraits slashed across with signatures, in baskets of flowers beribboned with the cards of passing compatriots, and in a neat collection of red volumes, blue volumes, alphabetical volumes, aids to London lucidity, of every sort, devoted to addresses and engagements. To be in Miss Cutter’s tiny drawing-room, in short, even with Miss Cutter alone—should you by any chance have found her so—was somehow to be in the world and in a crowd. It was like an agency—it bristled with particulars.

This was what the tall lean loose gentleman lounging there before her might have appeared to read in the suggestive scene over which, while she talked to him, his eyes moved without haste and without rest. “Oh come, Mamie!” he occasionally threw off; and the words were evidently connected with the impression thus absorbed. His comparative youth spoke of waste even as her positive—her too positive—spoke of economy. There was only one thing, that is, to make up in him for everything he had lost, though it was distinct enough indeed that this thing might sometimes serve. It consisted in the perfection of an indifference, an indifference at the present moment directed to the plea—a plea of inability, of pure destitution—with which his sister had met him. Yet it had even now a wider embrace, took in quite sufficiently all consequences of queerness, confessed in advance to the false note that, in such a setting, he almost excruciatingly constituted. He cared as little that he looked at moments all his impudence as that he looked all his shabbiness, all his cleverness, all his history. These different things were written in him—in his premature baldness, his seamed strained face, the lapse from bravery of his long tawny moustache; above all in his easy friendly universally acquainted eye, so much too sociable for mere conversation. What possible relation with him could be natural enough to meet it? He wore a scant rough Inverness cape and a pair of black trousers, wanting in substance and marked with the sheen of time, that had presumably once served for evening use. He spoke with the slowness helplessly permitted to Americans—as something too slow to be stopped—and he repeated that he found himself associated with Miss Cutter in a harmony calling for wonder. She had been telling him not only that she couldn’t possibly give him ten pounds, but that his unexpected arrival, should he insist on being much in view, might seriously interfere with arrangements necessary to her own maintenance; on which he had begun by replying that he

of course knew she had long ago spent her money, but that he looked to her now exactly because she had, without the aid of that convenience, mastered the art of life.

“I’d really go away with a fiver, my dear, if you’d only tell me how you do it. It’s no use saying only, as you’ve always said, that ‘people are very kind to you.’ What the devil are they kind to you *for*?”

“Well, one reason is precisely that no particular inconvenience has hitherto been supposed to attach to me. I’m just what I am,” said Mamie Cutter; “nothing less and nothing more. It’s awkward to have to explain to you, which moreover I really needn’t in the least. I’m clever and amusing and charming.” She was uneasy and even frightened, but she kept her temper and met him with a grace of her own. “I don’t think you ought to ask me more questions than I ask you.”

“Ah my dear,” said the odd young man, “I’VE no mysteries. Why in the world, since it was what you came out for and have devoted so much of your time to, haven’t you pulled it off? Why haven’t you married?”

“Why haven’t *you*?” she retorted. “Do you think that if I had it would have been better for you?—that my husband would for a moment have put up with you? Do you mind my asking you if you’ll kindly go *now*?” she went on after a glance at the clock. “I’m expecting a friend, whom I must see alone, on a matter of great importance—”

“And my being seen with you may compromise your respectability or undermine your nerve?” He sprawled imperturbably in his place, crossing again, in another sense, his long black legs and showing, above his low shoes, an absurd reach of parti-coloured sock. “I take your point well enough, but mayn’t you be after all quite wrong? If you can’t do anything for me couldn’t you at least do something with me? If it comes to that, I’m clever and amusing and charming too! I’ve been such an ass that you don’t appreciate me. But people like me—I assure you they do. They usually don’t know what an ass I’ve been; they only see the surface, which”—and he stretched himself afresh as she looked him up and down—“you *can* imagine them, can’t you, rather taken with? I’M ‘what I am’ too; nothing less and nothing more. That’s true of us as a family, you see. We *are* a crew!” He delivered himself serenely. His voice was soft and flat, his pleasant eyes, his simple tones tending to the solemn, achieved at moments that effect of quaintness which is, in certain connexions, socially so known and enjoyed. “English people have quite a weakness for me—more than any others. I get on with them beautifully. I’ve always been with them abroad. They think me,” the young man explained, “diabolically American.”

“You!” Such stupidity drew from her a sigh of compassion.

Her companion apparently quite understood it. “Are you homesick, Mamie?” he asked, with wondering irrelevance.

The manner of the question made her, for some reason, in spite of her preoccupations, break into a laugh. A shade of indulgence, a sense of other things, came back to her. “You are funny, Scott!”

“Well,” remarked Scott, “that’s just what I claim. But *are* you so homesick?” he spaciously inquired, not as to a practical end, but from an easy play of intelligence.

“I’m just dying of it!” said Mamie Cutter.

“Why so am I!” Her visitor had a sweetness of concurrence.

“We’re the only decent people,” Miss Cutter declared. “And I know. You don’t—you can’t; and I can’t explain. Come in,” she continued with a return of her impatience and an increase of her decision, “at seven sharp.”

She had quitted her seat some time before, and now, to get him into motion, hovered before him while, still motionless, he looked up at her. Something intimate, in the silence, appeared to pass between them—a community of fatigue and failure and, after all, of intelligence. There was a final cynical humour in it. It determined him, in any case, at last, and he slowly rose, taking in again as he stood there the testimony of the room. He might have been counting the photographs, but he looked at the flowers with detachment. “Who’s coming?”

“Mrs. Medwin.”

“American?”

“Dear no!”

“Then what are you doing for her?”

“I work for every one,” she promptly returned.

“For every one who pays? So I suppose. Yet isn’t it only we who do pay?”

There was a drollery, not lost on her, in the way his queer presence lent itself to his emphasised plural.

“Do you consider that *you* do?”

At this, with his deliberation, he came back to his charming idea. “Only try me, and see if I can’t be *made* to. Work me in.” On her sharply presenting her back he stared a little at the clock. “If I come at seven may I stay to dinner?”

It brought her round again. “Impossible. I’m dining out.”

“With whom?”

She had to think. “With Lord Considine.”

“Oh my eye!” Scott exclaimed.

She looked at him gloomily. “Is *that* sort of tone what makes you pay? I think you might understand,” she went on, “that if you’re to sponge on me successfully you mustn’t ruin me. I must have *some* remote resemblance to a lady.”

“Yes? But why must *I*?” Her exasperated silence was full of answers, of which however his inimitable manner took no account. “You don’t understand my real strength; I doubt if you even understand your own. You’re clever, Mamie, but you’re not so clever as I supposed. However,” he pursued, “it’s out of Mrs. Medwin that you’ll get it.”

“Get what?”

“Why the cheque that will enable you to assist me.”

On this, for a moment, she met his eyes. “If you’ll come back at seven sharp—not a minute before, and not a minute after, I’ll give you two five-pound notes.”

He thought it over. “Whom are you expecting a minute after?”

It sent her to the window with a groan almost of anguish, and she answered nothing till she had looked at the street. “If you injure me, you know, Scott, you’ll be sorry.”

“I wouldn’t injure you for the world. What I want to do in fact is really to help you, and I promise you that I won’t leave you—by which I mean won’t leave London—till I’ve effected

something really pleasant for you. I like you, Mamie, because I like pluck; I like you much more than you like me. I like you very, *very* much.” He had at last with this reached the door and opened it, but he remained with his hand on the latch. “What does Mrs. Medwin want of you?” he thus brought out.

She had come round to see him disappear, and in the relief of this prospect she again just indulged him.

“The impossible.”

He waited another minute. “And you’re going to do it?”

“I’m going to do it,” said Mamie Cutter.

“Well then that ought to be a haul. Call it *three* fivers!” he laughed. “At seven sharp.” And at last he left her alone.

CHAPTER II

Miss Cutter waited till she heard the house-door close; after which, in a sightless mechanical way, she moved about the room readjusting various objects he had not touched. It was as if his mere voice and accent had spoiled her form. But she was not left too long to reckon with these things, for Mrs. Medwin was promptly announced. This lady was not, more than her hostess, in the first flush of her youth; her appearance—the scattered remains of beauty manipulated by taste—resembled one of the light repasts in which the fragments of yesterday’s dinner figure with a conscious ease that makes up for the want of presence. She was perhaps of an effect still too immediate to be called interesting, but she was candid, gentle and surprised—not fatiguingly surprised, only just in the right degree; and her white face—it was too white—with the fixed eyes, the somewhat touzled hair and the Louis Seize hat, might at the end of the very long neck have suggested the head of a princess carried on a pike in a revolution. She immediately took up the business that had brought her, with the air however of drawing from the omens then discernible less confidence than she had hoped. The complication lay in the fact that if it was Mamie’s part to present the omens, that lady yet had so to colour them as to make her own service large. She perhaps over-coloured; for her friend gave way to momentary despair.

“What you mean is then that it’s simply impossible?”

“Oh no,” said Mamie with a qualified emphasis. “It’s *possible*.”

“But disgustingly difficult?”

“As difficult as you like.”

“Then what can I do that I haven’t done?”

“You can only wait a little longer.”

“But that’s just what I *have* done. I’ve done nothing else. I’m always waiting a little longer!”

Miss Cutter retained, in spite of this pathos, her grasp of the subject. “*The* thing, as I’ve told you, is for you first to be seen.”

“But if people won’t look at me?”

“They will.”

“They *will*?” Mrs. Medwin was eager.

“They shall,” her hostess went on. “It’s their only having heard—without having seen.”

“But if they stare straight the other way?” Mrs. Medwin continued to object. “You can’t simply go up to them and twist their heads about.”

“It’s just what I can,” said Mamie Cutter.

But her charming visitor, heedless for the moment of this attenuation, had found the way to put it. “It’s the old story. You can’t go into the water till you swim, and you can’t swim till you go into the water. I can’t be spoken to till I’m seen, but I can’t be seen till I’m spoken to.”

She met this lucidity, Miss Cutter, with but an instant’s lapse. “You say I can’t twist their heads about. But I *have* twisted them.”

It had been quietly produced, but it gave her companion a jerk. “They say ‘Yes’?”

She summed it up. “All but one. *She* says ‘No.’”

Mrs. Medwin thought; then jumped. “Lady Wantridge?”

Miss Cutter, as more delicate, only bowed admission. “I shall see her either this afternoon or late to-morrow. But she has written.”

Her visitor wondered again. “May I see her letter?”

“No.” She spoke with decision. “But I shall square her.”

“Then how?”

“Well”—and Miss Cutter, as if looking upward for inspiration, fixed her eyes a while on the ceiling—“well, it will come to me.”

Mrs. Medwin watched her—it was impressive. “And will they come to you—the others?” This question drew out the fact that they would—so far at least as they consisted of Lady Edward, Lady Bellhouse and Mrs. Pouncer, who had engaged to muster, at the signal of tea, on the 14th—prepared, as it were, for the worst. There was of course always the chance that Lady Wantridge might take the field, in such force as to paralyse them, though that danger, at the same time, seemed inconsistent with her being squared. It didn’t perhaps all quite ideally hang together; but what it sufficiently came to was that if she was the one who could do most *for* a person in Mrs. Medwin’s position she was also the one who could do most against. It would therefore be distinctly what our friend familiarly spoke of as “collar-work.” The effect of these mixed considerations was at any rate that Mamie eventually acquiesced in the idea, handsomely thrown out by her client, that she should have an “advance” to go on with. Miss Cutter confessed that it seemed at times as if one scarce *could* go on; but the advance was, in spite of this delicacy, still more delicately made—made in the form of a banknote, several sovereigns, some loose silver, and two coppers, the whole contents of her purse, neatly disposed by Mrs. Medwin on one of the tiny tables. It seemed to clear the air for deeper intimacies, the fruit of which was that Mamie, lonely after all in her crowd and always more helpful than helped, eventually brought out that the way Scott had been going on was what seemed momentarily to overshadow her own power to do so.

“I’ve had a descent from him.” But she had to explain. “My half-brother—Scott Homer. A wretch.”

“What kind of a wretch?”

“Every kind. I lose sight of him at times—he disappears abroad. But he always turns up again, worse than ever.”

“Violent?”

“No.”

“Maudlin?”

“No.”

“Only unpleasant?”

“No. Rather pleasant. Awfully clever—awfully travelled and easy.”

“Then what’s the matter with him?”

Mamie mused, hesitated—seemed to see a wide past. “I don’t know.”

“Something in the background?” Then as her friend was silent, “Something queer about cards?” Mrs. Medwin threw off.

“I don’t know—and I don’t want to!”

“Ah well, I’m sure *I* don’t,” Mrs. Medwin returned with spirit. The note of sharpness was perhaps also a little in the observation she made as she gathered herself to go. “Do you mind my saying something?”

Mamie took her eyes quickly from the money on the little stand. “You may say what you like.”

“I only mean that anything awkward you may have to keep out of the way does seem to make more wonderful, doesn’t it, that you should have got just where you are? I allude, you know, to your position.”

“I see.” Miss Cutter somewhat coldly smiled. “To my power.”

“So awfully remarkable in an American.”

“Ah you like us so.”

Mrs. Medwin candidly considered. “But we don’t, dearest.”

Her companion’s smile brightened. “Then why do you come to me?”

“Oh I like *you!*” Mrs. Medwin made out.

“Then that’s it. There are no ‘Americans.’ It’s always ‘you.’”

“Me?” Mrs. Medwin looked lovely, but a little muddled.

“ME!” Mamie Cutter laughed. “But if you like me, you dear thing, you can judge if I like *you.*” She gave her a kiss to dismiss her. “I’ll see you again when I’ve seen her.”

“Lady Wantridge? I hope so, indeed. I’ll turn up late to-morrow, if you don’t catch me first. Has it come to you yet?” the visitor, now at the door, went on.

“No; but it will. There’s time.”

“Oh a little less every day!”

Miss Cutter had approached the table and glanced again at the gold and silver and the note, not indeed absolutely overlooking the two coppers. “The balance,” she put it, “the day after?”

“That very night if you like.”

“Then count on me.”

“Oh if I didn’t—!” But the door closed on the dark idea. Yearningly then, and only when it had done so, Miss Cutter took up the money.

She went out with it ten minutes later, and, the calls on her time being many, remained out so long that at half-past six she hadn't come back. At that hour, on the other hand, Scott Homer knocked at her door, where her maid, who opened it with a weak pretence of holding it firm, ventured to announce to him, as a lesson well learnt, that he hadn't been expected till seven. No lesson, none the less, could prevail against his native art. He pleaded fatigue, her, the maid's, dreadful depressing London, and the need to curl up somewhere. If she'd just leave him quiet half an hour that old sofa upstairs would do for it; of which he took quickly such effectual possession that when five minutes later she peeped, nervous for her broken vow, into the drawing-room, the faithless young woman found him extended at his length and peacefully asleep.

CHAPTER III

The situation before Miss Cutter's return developed in other directions still, and when that event took place, at a few minutes past seven, these circumstances were, by the foot of the stair, between mistress and maid, the subject of some interrogative gasps and scared admissions. Lady Wantridge had arrived shortly after the interloper, and wishing, as she said, to wait, had gone straight up in spite of being told he was lying down.

"She distinctly understood he was there?"

"Oh yes ma'am; I thought it right to mention."

"And what did you call him?"

"Well, ma'am, I thought it unfair to *you* to call him anything but a gentleman."

Mamie took it all in, though there might well be more of it than one could quickly embrace.

"But if she has had time," she flashed, "to find out he isn't one?"

"Oh ma'am, she had a quarter of an hour."

"Then she isn't with him still?"

"No ma'am; she came down again at last. She rang, and I saw her here, and she said she wouldn't wait longer."

Miss Cutter darkly mused. "Yet had already waited—?"

"Quite a quarter."

"Mercy on us!" She began to mount. Before reaching the top however she had reflected that quite a quarter was long if Lady Wantridge had only been shocked. On the other hand it was short if she had only been pleased. But how *could* she have been pleased? The very essence of their actual crisis was just that there was no pleasing her. Mamie had but to open the drawing-room door indeed to perceive that this was not true at least of Scott Homer, who was horribly cheerful.

Miss Cutter expressed to her brother without reserve her sense of the constitutional, the brutal selfishness that had determined his mistimed return. It had taken place, in violation of their agreement, exactly at the moment when it was most cruel to her that he should be there, and if she must now completely wash her hands of him he had only himself to thank. She had come in flushed with resentment and for a moment had been voluble, but it would have been striking that, though the way he received her might have seemed but to aggravate, it presently justified him by causing their relation really to take a stride. He had the art of confounding those who would quarrel with him by reducing them to the humiliation of a stirred curiosity.

"What *could* she have made of you?" Mamie demanded.

“My dear girl, she’s not a woman who’s eager to make too much of anything—anything, I mean, that will prevent her from doing as she likes, what she takes into her head. Of course,” he continued to explain, “if it’s something she doesn’t want to do, she’ll make as much as Moses.”

Mamie wondered if that was the way he talked to her visitor, but felt obliged to own to his acuteness. It was an exact description of Lady Wantridge, and she was conscious of tucking it away for future use in a corner of her miscellaneous little mind. She withheld however all present acknowledgment, only addressing him another question. “Did you really get on with her?”

“Have you still to learn, darling—I can’t help again putting it to you—that I get on with everybody? That’s just what I don’t seem able to drive into you. Only see how I get on with *you*.”

She almost stood corrected. “What I mean is of course whether—”

“Whether she made love to me? Shyly, yet—or because—shamefully? She would certainly have liked awfully to stay.”

“Then why didn’t she?”

“Because, on account of some other matter—and I could see it was true—she hadn’t time. Twenty minutes—she was here less—were all she came to give you. So don’t be afraid I’ve frightened her away. She’ll come back.”

Mamie thought it over. “Yet you didn’t go with her to the door?”

“She wouldn’t let me, and I know when to do what I’m told—quite as much as what I’m not told. She wanted to find out about me. I mean from your little creature; a pearl of fidelity, by the way.”

“But what on earth did she come up for?” Mamie again found herself appealing, and just by that fact showing her need of help.

“Because she always goes up.” Then as, in the presence of this rapid generalisation, to say nothing of that of such a relative altogether, Miss Cutter could only show as comparatively blank: “I mean she knows when to go up and when to come down. She has instincts; she didn’t know whom you might have up here. It’s a kind of compliment to you anyway. Why Mamie,” Scott pursued, “you don’t know the curiosity we any of us inspire. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve seen. The bigger bugs they are the more they’re on the lookout.”

Mamie still followed, but at a distance. “The lookout for what?”

“Why for anything that will help them to live. You’ve been here all this time without making out then, about them, what I’ve had to pick out as I can? They’re dead, don’t you see? And WE’RE alive.”

“You? Oh!”—Mamie almost laughed about it.

“Well, they’re a worn-out old lot anyhow; they’ve used up their resources. They do look out and I’ll do them the justice to say they’re not afraid—not even of me!” he continued as his sister again showed something of the same irony. “Lady Wantridge at any rate wasn’t; that’s what I mean by her having made love to me. She does what she likes. Mind it, you know.” He was by this time fairly teaching her to read one of her best friends, and when, after it, he had come back to the great point of his lesson—that of her failure, through feminine inferiority, practically to grasp the truth that their being just as they were, he and she, was the real card for them to play—when he had renewed that reminder he left her absolutely in a

state of dependence. Her impulse to press him on the subject of Lady Wantridge dropped; it was as if she had felt that, whatever had taken place, something would somehow come of it. She was to be in a manner disappointed, but the impression helped to keep her over to the next morning, when, as Scott had foretold, his new acquaintance did reappear, explaining to Miss Cutter that she had acted the day before to gain time and that she even now sought to gain it by not waiting longer. What, she promptly intimated she had asked herself, could that friend be thinking of? She must show where she stood before things had gone too far. If she had brought her answer without more delay she wished to make it sharp. Mrs. Medwin? Never! “No, my dear—not I. *There* I stop.”

Mamie had known it would be “collar-work,” but somehow now, at the beginning she felt her heart sink. It was not that she had expected to carry the position with a rush, but that, as always after an interval, her visitor’s defences really loomed—and quite, as it were, to the material vision—too large. She was always planted with them, voluminous, in the very centre of the passage; was like a person accommodated with a chair in some unlawful place at the theatre. She wouldn’t move and you couldn’t get round. Mamie’s calculation indeed had not been on getting round; she was obliged to recognise that, too foolishly and fondly, she had dreamed of inducing a surrender. Her dream had been the fruit of her need; but, conscious that she was even yet unequipped for pressure, she felt, almost for the first time in her life, superficial and crude. She was to be paid—but with what was she, to that end, to pay? She had engaged to find an answer to this question, but the answer had not, according to her promise, “come.” And Lady Wantridge meanwhile massed herself, and there was no view of her that didn’t show her as verily, by some process too obscure to be traced, the hard depository of the social law. She was no younger, no fresher, no stronger, really, than any of them; she was only, with a kind of haggard fineness, a sharpened taste for life, and, with all sorts of things behind and beneath her, more abysmal and more immoral, more secure and more impertinent. The points she made were two in number. One was that she absolutely declined; the other was that she quite doubted if Mamie herself had measured the job. The thing couldn’t be done. But say it *could* be; was Mamie quite the person to do it? To this Miss Cutter, with a sweet smile, replied that she quite understood how little she might seem so. “I’m only one of the persons to whom it has appeared that *you* are.”

“Then who are the others?”

“Well, to begin with, Lady Edward, Lady Bellhouse and Mrs. Pouncer.”

“Do you mean that they’ll come to meet her?”

“I’ve seen them, and they’ve promised.”

“To come, of course,” Lady Wantridge said, “if *I* come.”

Her hostess cast about. “Oh of course you could prevent them. But I should take it as awfully kind of you not to. *Won’t* you do this for me?” Mamie pleaded.

Her friend looked over the room very much as Scott had done. “Do they really understand what it’s *for*?”

“Perfectly. So that she may call.”

“And what good will that do her?”

Miss Cutter faltered, but she presently brought it out. “Naturally what one hopes is that, you’ll ask her.”

“Ask her to call?”

“Ask her to dine. Ask her, if you’d be so truly sweet, for a Sunday; or something of that sort, and even if only in one of your *most* mixed parties, to Catchmore.”

Miss Cutter felt the less hopeful after this effort in that her companion only showed a strange good nature. And it wasn’t a satiric amiability, though it *was* amusement. “Take Mrs. Medwin into my family?”

“Some day when you’re taking forty others.”

“Ah but what I don’t see is what it does for *you*. You’re already so welcome among us that you can scarcely improve your position even by forming for us the most delightful relation.”

“Well, I know how dear you are,” Mamie Cutter replied; “but one has after all more than one side and more than one sympathy. I like her, you know.” And even at this Lady Wantridge wasn’t shocked; she showed that ease and blandness which were her way, unfortunately, of being most impossible. She remarked that *she* might listen to such things, because she was clever enough for them not to matter; only Mamie should take care how she went about saying them at large. When she became definite however, in a minute, on the subject of the public facts, Miss Cutter soon found herself ready to make her own concession. Of course she didn’t dispute *them*: there they were; they were unfortunately on record, and, nothing was to be done about them but to—Mamie found it in truth at this point a little difficult.

“Well, what? Pretend already to have forgotten them?”

“Why not, when you’ve done it in so many other cases?”

“There *are* no other cases so bad. One meets them at any rate as they come. Some you can manage, others you can’t. It’s no use, you must give them up. They’re past patching; there’s nothing to be done with them. There’s nothing accordingly to be done with Mrs. Medwin but to put her off.” And Lady Wantridge rose to her height.

“Well, you know, I *DO* do things,” Mamie quavered with a smile so strained that it partook of exaltation.

“You help people? Oh yes, I’ve known you to do wonders. But stick,” said Lady Wantridge with strong and cheerful emphasis, “to your Americans!”

Miss Cutter, gazing, got up. “You don’t do justice, Lady Wantridge, to your own compatriots. Some of them are really charming. Besides,” said Mamie, “working for mine often strikes me, so far as the interest—the inspiration and excitement, don’t you know?—go, as rather too easy. You all, as I constantly have occasion to say, like us so!”

Her companion frankly weighed it. “Yes; it takes that to account for your position. I’ve always thought of you nevertheless as keeping for their benefit a regular working agency. They come to you, and you place them. There remains, I confess,” her ladyship went on in the same free spirit, “the great wonder—”

“Of how I first placed my poor little self? Yes,” Mamie bravely conceded, “when *I* began there was no agency. I just worked my passage. I didn’t even come to *you*, did I? You never noticed me till, as Mrs. Short Stokes says, ‘I was ‘way, ‘way up!’ Mrs. Medwin,” she threw in, “can’t get over it.” Then, as her friend looked vague: “Over my social situation.”

“Well, it’s no great flattery to you to say,” Lady Wantridge good-humouredly returned, “that she certainly can’t hope for one resembling it.” Yet it really seemed to spread there before them. “You simply *made* Mrs. Short Stokes.”

“In spite of her name!” Mamie smiled.

“Oh your ‘names’—! In spite of everything.”

“Ah I’m something of an artist.” With which, and a relapse marked by her wistful eyes into the gravity of the matter, she supremely fixed her friend. She felt how little she minded betraying at last the extremity of her need, and it was out of this extremity that her appeal proceeded. “Have I really had your last word? It means so much to me.”

Lady Wantridge came straight to the point. “You mean you depend on it?”

“Awfully!”

“Is it all you have?”

“All. Now.”

“But Mrs. Short Stokes and the others—’rolling,’ aren’t they? Don’t they pay up?”

“Ah,” sighed Mamie, “if it wasn’t for *them*—!”

Lady Wantridge perceived. “You’ve had so much?”

“I couldn’t have gone on.”

“Then what do you do with it all?”

“Oh most of it goes back to them. There are all sorts, and it’s all help. Some of them have nothing.”

“Oh if you feed the hungry,” Lady Wantridge laughed, “you’re indeed in a great way of business. Is Mrs. Medwin”—her transition was immediate—“really rich?”

“Really. He left her everything.”

“So that if I do say ‘yes’—”

“It will quite set me up.”

“I see—and how much more responsible it makes one! But I’d rather myself give you the money.”

“Oh!” Mamie coldly murmured.

“You mean I mayn’t suspect your prices? Well, I daresay I don’t! But I’d rather give you ten pounds.”

“Oh!” Mamie repeated in a tone that sufficiently covered her prices. The question was in every way larger. “Do you never forgive?” she reproachfully inquired. The door opened however at the moment she spoke and Scott Homer presented himself.

CHAPTER IV

Scott Homer wore exactly, to his sister’s eyes, the aspect he had worn the day before, and it also formed to her sense the great feature of his impartial greeting.

“How d’ye do, Mamie? How d’ye do, Lady Wantridge?”

“How d’ye do again?” Lady Wantridge replied with an equanimity striking to her hostess. It was as if Scott’s own had been contagious; it was almost indeed as if she had seen him before. Had she ever so seen him—before the previous day? While Miss Cutter put to herself this question her visitor at all events met the one she had previously uttered. “Ever ‘forgive’?” this personage echoed in a tone that made as little account as possible of the interruption. “Dear yes! The people I *have* forgiven!” She laughed—perhaps a little nervously; and she was now looking at Scott. The way she looked at him was precisely what had already had its effect for his sister. “The people I can!”

“Can you forgive me?” asked Scott Homer.

She took it so easily. “But—what?”

Mamie interposed; she turned directly to her brother. “Don’t try her. Leave it so.” She had had an inspiration, it was the most extraordinary thing in the world. “Don’t try *him*”—she had turned to their companion. She looked grave, sad, strange. “Leave it so.” Yes, it was a distinct inspiration, which she couldn’t have explained, but which had come, prompted by something she had caught—the extent of the recognition expressed—in Lady Wantridge’s face. It had come absolutely of a sudden, straight out of the opposition of the two figures before her—quite as if a concussion had struck a light. The light was helped by her quickened sense that her friend’s silence on the incident of the day before showed some sort of consciousness. She looked surprised. “Do you know my brother?”

“DO I know you?” Lady Wantridge asked of him.

“No, Lady Wantridge,” Scott pleasantly confessed, “not one little mite!”

“Well then if you *must* go—” and Mamie offered her a hand. “But I’ll go down with you. *Not you!*” she launched at her brother, who immediately effaced himself. His way of doing so—and he had already done so, as for Lady Wantridge, in respect to their previous encounter—struck her even at the moment as an instinctive if slightly blind tribute to her possession of an idea; and as such, in its celerity, made her so admire him, and their common wit, that she on the spot more than forgave him his queerness. He was right. He could be as queer as he liked! The queerer the better! It was at the foot of the stairs, when she had got her guest down, that what she had assured Mrs. Medwin would come did indeed come. “*Did* you meet him here yesterday?”

“Dear yes. Isn’t he too funny?”

“Yes,” said Mamie gloomily. “He IS funny. But had you ever met him before?”

“Dear no!”

“Oh!”—and Mamie’s tone might have meant many things.

Lady Wantridge however, after all, easily overlooked it. “I only knew he was one of your odd Americans. That’s why, when I heard yesterday here that he was up there awaiting your return, I didn’t let that prevent me. I thought he might be. He certainly,” her ladyship laughed, “IS.”

“Yes, he’s very American,” Mamie went on in the same way.

“As you say, we *are* fond of you! Good-bye,” said Lady Wantridge.

But Mamie had not half done with her. She felt more and more—or she hoped at least—that she looked strange. She *was*, no doubt, if it came to that, strange. “Lady Wantridge,” she almost convulsively broke out, “I don’t know whether you’ll understand me, but I seem to feel that I must act with you—I don’t know what to call it!—responsibly. He IS my brother.”

“Surely—and why not?” Lady Wantridge stared. “He’s the image of you!”

“Thank you!”—and Mamie was stranger than ever.

“Oh he’s good-looking. He’s handsome, my dear. Oddly—but distinctly!” Her ladyship was for treating it much as a joke.

But Mamie, all sombre, would have none of this. She boldly gave him up. “I think he’s awful.”

“He is indeed—delightfully. And where DO you get your ways of saying things? It isn’t anything—and the things aren’t anything. But it’s so droll.”

“Don’t let yourself, all the same,” Mamie consistently pursued, “be carried away by it. The thing can’t be done—simply.”

Lady Wantridge wondered. “‘Done simply’?”

“Done at all.”

“But what can’t be?”

“Why, what you might think—from his pleasantness. What he spoke of your doing for him.”

Lady Wantridge recalled. “Forgiving him?”

“He asked you if you couldn’t. But you can’t. It’s too dreadful for me, as so near a relation, to have, loyally—loyally to *you*—to say it. But he’s impossible.”

It was so portentously produced that her ladyship had somehow to meet it. “What’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then what’s the matter with *you*?” Lady Wantridge inquired.

“It’s because I *won’t* know,” Mamie—not without dignity—explained.

“Then *I* won’t either.”

“Precisely. Don’t. It’s something,” Mamie pursued, with some inconsequence, “that—somewhere or other, at some time or other—he appears to have done. Something that has made a difference in his life.”

“‘Something’?” Lady Wantridge echoed again. “What kind of thing?”

Mamie looked up at the light above the door, through which the London sky was doubly dim.

“I haven’t the least idea.”

“Then what kind of difference?”

Mamie’s gaze was still at the light. “The difference you see.”

Lady Wantridge, rather obligingly, seemed to ask herself what she saw. “But I don’t see any! It seems, at least,” she added, “such an amusing one! And he has such nice eyes.”

“Oh *dear* eyes!” Mamie conceded; but with too much sadness, for the moment, about the connexions of the subject, to say more.

It almost forced her companion after an instant to proceed. “Do you mean he can’t go home?”

She weighed her responsibility. “I only make out—more’s the pity!—that he doesn’t.”

“Is it then something too terrible—?”

She thought again. “I don’t know what—for men—*IS* too terrible.”

“Well then as you don’t know what ‘is’ for women either—good-bye!” her visitor laughed.

It practically wound up the interview; which, however, terminating thus on a considerable stir of the air, was to give Miss Cutter for several days the sense of being much blown about. The degree to which, to begin with, she had been drawn—or perhaps rather pushed—closer to Scott was marked in the brief colloquy that she on her friend’s departure had with him. He had immediately said it. “You’ll see if she doesn’t ask me down!”

“So soon?”

“Oh I’ve known them at places—at Cannes, at Pau, at Shanghai—do it sooner still. I always know when they will. You *can’t* make out they don’t love me!” He spoke almost plaintively, as if he wished she could.

“Then I don’t see why it hasn’t done you more good.”

“Why Mamie,” he patiently reasoned, “what more good *could* it? As I tell you,” he explained, “it has just been my life.”

“Then why do you come to me for money?”

“Oh they don’t give me *that!*” Scott returned.

“So that it only means then, after all, that I, at the best, must keep you up?”

He fixed on her the nice eyes Lady Wantridge admired. “Do you mean to tell me that already—at this very moment—I’m not distinctly keeping you?”

She gave him back his look. “Wait till she *has* asked you, and then,” Mamie added, “decline.”

Scott, not too grossly, wondered. “As acting for *you?*”

Mamie’s next injunction was answer enough. “But *before*—yes—call.”

He took it in. “Call—but decline. Good!”

“The rest,” she said, “I leave to you.” And she left it in fact with such confidence that for a couple of days she was not only conscious of no need to give Mrs. Medwin another turn of the screw, but positively evaded, in her fortitude, the reappearance of that lady. It was not till the fourth day that she waited upon her, finding her, as she had expected, tense.

“Lady Wantridge *will*—?”

“Yes, though she says she won’t.”

“She says she won’t? O-oh!” Mrs. Medwin moaned.

“Sit tight all the same. I *have* her!”

“But how?”

“Through Scott—whom she wants.”

“Your bad brother!” Mrs. Medwin stared. “What does she want of him?”

“To amuse them at Catchmore. Anything for that. And he *would*. But he shan’t!” Mamie declared. “He shan’t go unless she comes. She must meet you first—you’re my condition.”

“O-o-oh!” Mrs. Medwin’s tone was a wonder of hope and fear. “But doesn’t he want to go?”

“He wants what I want. She draws the line at *you*. I draw the line at *him*.”

“But *she*—doesn’t she mind that he’s bad?”

It was so artless that Mamie laughed. “No—it doesn’t touch her. Besides, perhaps he isn’t. It isn’t as for you—people seem not to know. He has settled everything, at all events, by going to see her. It’s before her that he’s the thing she’ll have to have.”

“Have to?”

“For Sundays in the country. A feature—*the* feature.”

“So she has asked him?”

“Yes—and he has declined.”

“For ME?” Mrs. Medwin panted.

“For me,” said Mamie on the door-step. “But I don’t leave him for long.” Her hansom had waited. “She’ll come.”

Lady Wantridge did come. She met in South Audley Street, on the fourteenth, at tea, the ladies whom Mamie had named to her, together with three or four others, and it was rather a master-stroke for Miss Cutter that if Mrs. Medwin was modestly present Scott Homer was as markedly not. This occasion, however, is a medal that would take rare casting, as would also, for that matter, even the minor light and shade, the lower relief, of the pecuniary transaction that Mrs. Medwin’s flushed gratitude scarce awaited the dispersal of the company munificently to complete. A new understanding indeed on the spot rebounded from it, the conception of which, in Mamie’s mind, had promptly bloomed. “He shan’t go now unless he takes you.” Then, as her fancy always moved quicker for her client than her client’s own—

”Down with him to Catchmore! When he goes to amuse them *you*,” she serenely developed, “shall amuse them too.” Mrs. Medwin’s response was again rather oddly divided, but she was sufficiently intelligible when it came to meeting the hint that this latter provision would represent success to the tune of a separate fee. “Say,” Mamie had suggested, “the same.”

“Very well; the same.”

The knowledge that it was to be the same had perhaps something to do also with the obliging spirit in which Scott eventually went. It was all at the last rather hurried—a party rapidly got together for the Grand Duke, who was in England but for the hour, who had good-naturedly proposed himself, and who liked his parties small, intimate and funny. This one was of the smallest and was finally judged to conform neither too little nor too much to the other conditions—after a brief whirlwind of wires and counterwires, and an iterated waiting of hansoms at various doors—to include Mrs. Medwin. It was from Catchmore itself that, snatching, a moment—on the wondrous Sunday afternoon, this lady had the harmonious thought of sending the new cheque. She was in bliss enough, but her scribble none the less intimated that it was Scott who amused them most. He *was* the feature.

The Beldonald Holbein

CHAPTER I

Mrs. Munden had not yet been to my studio on so good a pretext as when she first intimated that it would be quite open to me—should I only care, as she called it, to throw the handkerchief—to paint her beautiful sister-in-law. I needn't go here more than is essential into the question of Mrs. Munden, who would really, by the way, be a story in herself. She has a manner of her own of putting things, and some of those she has put to me—! Her implication was that Lady Beldonald hadn't only seen and admired certain examples of my work, but had literally been prepossessed in favour of the painter's "personality." Had I been struck with this sketch I might easily have imagined her ladyship was throwing me the handkerchief. "She hasn't done," my visitor said, "what she ought."

"Do you mean she has done what she oughtn't?"

"Nothing horrid—ah dear no." And something in Mrs. Munden's tone, with the way she appeared to muse a moment, even suggested to me that what she "oughtn't" was perhaps what Lady Beldonald had too much neglected. "She hasn't got on."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Well, to begin with, she's American."

"But I thought that was the way of ways to get on."

"It's one of them. But it's one of the ways of being awfully out of it too. There are so many!"

"So many Americans?" I asked.

"Yes, plenty of *them*," Mrs. Munden sighed. "So many ways, I mean, of being one."

"But if your sister-in-law's way is to be beautiful—?"

"Oh there are different ways of that too."

"And she hasn't taken the right way?"

"Well," my friend returned as if it were rather difficult to express, "she hasn't done with it—"

"I see," I laughed; "what she oughtn't!"

Mrs. Munden in a manner corrected me, but it *was* difficult to express. "My brother at all events was certainly selfish. Till he died she was almost never in London; they wintered, year after year, for what he supposed to be his health—which it didn't help, since he was so much too soon to meet his end—in the south of France and in the dullest holes he could pick out, and when they came back to England he always kept her in the country. I must say for her that she always behaved beautifully. Since his death she has been more in London, but on a stupidly unsuccessful footing. I don't think she quite understands. She hasn't what I should call a life. It may be of course that she doesn't want one. That's just what I can't exactly find out. I can't make out how much she knows."

"I can easily make out," I returned with hilarity, "how much *you* do!"

"Well, you're very horrid. Perhaps she's too old."

"Too old for what?" I persisted.

“For anything. Of course she’s no longer even a little young; only preserved—oh but preserved, like bottled fruit, in syrup! I want to help her if only because she gets on my nerves, and I really think the way of it would be just the right thing of yours at the Academy and on the line.”

“But suppose,” I threw out, “she should give on my nerves?”

“Oh she will. But isn’t that all in the day’s work, and don’t great beauties always—?”

“*You* don’t,” I interrupted; but I at any rate saw Lady Beldonald later on—the day came when her kinswoman brought her, and then I saw how her life must have its centre in her own idea of her appearance. Nothing else about her mattered—one knew her all when one knew that. She’s indeed in one particular, I think, sole of her kind—a person whom vanity has had the odd effect of keeping positively safe and sound. This passion is supposed surely, for the most part, to be a principle of perversion and of injury, leading astray those who listen to it and landing them sooner or later in this or that complication; but it has landed her ladyship nowhere whatever—it has kept her from the first moment of full consciousness, one feels, exactly in the same place. It has protected her from every danger, has made her absolutely proper and prim. If she’s “preserved,” as Mrs. Munden originally described her to me, it’s her vanity that has beautifully done it—putting her years ago in a plate-glass case and closing up the receptacle against every breath of air. How shouldn’t she be preserved when you might smash your knuckles on this transparency before you could crack it? And she is—oh amazingly! Preservation is scarce the word for the rare condition of her surface. She looks *naturally* new, as if she took out every night her large lovely varnished eyes and put them in water. The thing was to paint her, I perceived, in the glass case—a most tempting attaching feat; render to the full the shining interposing plate and the general show-window effect.

It was agreed, though it wasn’t quite arranged, that she should sit to me. If it wasn’t quite arranged this was because, as I was made to understand from an early stage, the conditions from our start must be such as should exclude all elements of disturbance, such, in a word, as she herself should judge absolutely favourable. And it seemed that these conditions were easily imperilled. Suddenly, for instance, at a moment when I was expecting her to meet an appointment—the first—that I had proposed, I received a hurried visit from Mrs. Munden, who came on her behalf to let me know that the season happened just not to be propitious and that our friend couldn’t be quite sure, to the hour, when it would again become so. She felt nothing would make it so but a total absence of worry.

“Oh a ‘total absence,’” I said, “is a large order! We live in a worrying world.”

“Yes; and she feels exactly that—more than you’d think. It’s in fact just why she mustn’t have, as she has now, a particular distress on at the very moment. She wants of course to look her best, and such things tell on her appearance.”

I shook my head. “Nothing tells on her appearance. Nothing reaches it in any way; nothing gets *at* it. However, I can understand her anxiety. But what’s her particular distress?”

“Why the illness of Miss Dadd.”

“And who in the world’s Miss Dadd?”

“Her most intimate friend and constant companion—the lady who was with us here that first day.”

“Oh the little round black woman who gurgled with admiration?”

“None other. But she was taken ill last week, and it may very well be that she’ll gurgle no more. She was very bad yesterday and is no better to-day, and Nina’s much upset. If anything happens to Miss Dadd she’ll have to get another, and, though she has had two or three before, that won’t be so easy.”

“Two or three Miss Dadds? is it possible? And still wanting another!” I recalled the poor lady completely now. “No; I shouldn’t indeed think it would be easy to get another. But why is a succession of them necessary to Lady Beldonald’s existence?”

“Can’t you guess?” Mrs. Munden looked deep, yet impatient. “They help.”

“Help what? Help whom?”

“Why every one. You and me for instance. To do what? Why to think Nina beautiful. She has them for that purpose; they serve as foils, as accents serve on syllables, as terms of comparison. They make her ‘stand out.’ It’s an effect of contrast that must be familiar to you artists; it’s what a woman does when she puts a band of black velvet under a pearl ornament that may, require, as she thinks, a little showing off.”

I wondered. “Do you mean she always has them black?”

“Dear no; I’ve seen them blue, green, yellow. They may be what they like, so long as they’re always one other thing.”

“Hideous?”

Mrs. Munden made a mouth for it. “Hideous is too much to say; she doesn’t really require them as bad as that. But consistently, cheerfully, loyally plain. It’s really a most happy relation. She loves them for it.”

“And for what do they love *her*?”

“Why just for the amiability that they produce in her. Then also for their ‘home.’ It’s a career for them.”

“I see. But if that’s the case,” I asked, “why are they so difficult to find?”

“Oh they must be safe; it’s all in that: her being able to depend on them to keep to the terms of the bargain and never have moments of rising—as even the ugliest woman will now and then (say when she’s in love)—superior to themselves.”

I turned it over. “Then if they can’t inspire passions the poor things mayn’t even at least feel them?”

“She distinctly deprecates it. That’s why such a man as you may be after all a complication.”

I continued to brood. “You’re very sure Miss Dadd’s ailment isn’t an affection that, being smothered, has struck in?” My joke, however, wasn’t well timed, for I afterwards learned that the unfortunate lady’s state had been, even while I spoke, such as to forbid all hope. The worst symptoms had appeared; she was destined not to recover; and a week later I heard from Mrs. Munden that she would in fact “gurgle” no more.

CHAPTER II

All this had been for Lady Beldonald an agitation so great that access to her apartment was denied for a time even to her sister-in-law. It was much more out of the question of course that she should unveil her face to a person of my special business with it; so that the question of the portrait was by common consent left to depend on that of the installation of a successor to her late companion. Such a successor, I gathered from Mrs. Munden, widowed childless and lonely, as well as inapt for the minor offices, she had absolutely to have; a more or less

humble *alter ago* to deal with the servants, keep the accounts, make the tea and watch the window-blinds. Nothing seemed more natural than that she should marry again, and obviously that might come; yet the predecessors of Miss Dadd had been contemporaneous with a first husband, so that others formed in her image might be contemporaneous with a second. I was much occupied in those months at any rate, and these questions and their ramifications losing themselves for a while to my view, I was only brought back to them by Mrs. Munden's arrival one day with the news that we were all right again—her sister-in-law was once more “suited.” A certain Mrs. Brash, an American relative whom she hadn't seen for years, but with whom she had continued to communicate, was to come out to her immediately; and this person, it appeared, could be quite trusted to meet the conditions. She was ugly—ugly enough, without abuse of it, and was unlimitedly good. The position offered her by Lady Beldonald was moreover exactly what she needed; widowed also, after many troubles and reverses, with her fortune of the smallest, and her various children either buried or placed about, she had never had time or means to visit England, and would really be grateful in her declining years for the new experience and the pleasant light work involved in her cousin's hospitality. They had been much together early in life and Lady Beldonald was immensely fond of her—would in fact have tried to get hold of her before hadn't Mrs. Brash been always in bondage to family duties, to the variety of her tribulations. I daresay I laughed at my friend's use of the term “position”—the position, one might call it, of a candlestick or a sign-post, and I daresay I must have asked if the special service the poor lady was to render had been made clear to her. Mrs. Munden left me in any case with the rather droll image of her faring forth across the sea quite consciously and resignedly to perform it.

The point of the communication had however been that my sitter was again looking up and would doubtless, on the arrival and due initiation of Mrs. Brash, be in form really to wait on me. The situation must further, to my knowledge, have developed happily, for I arranged with Mrs. Munden that our friend, now all ready to begin, but wanting first just to see the things I had most recently done, should come once more, as a final preliminary, to my studio. A good foreign friend of mine, a French painter, Paul Outreau, was at the moment in London, and I had proposed, as he was much interested in types, to get together for his amusement a small afternoon party. Every one came, my big room was full, there was music and a modest spread; and I've not forgotten the light of admiration in Outreau's expressive face as at the end of half an hour he came up to me in his enthusiasm. “*Bonté divine, mon cher—que cette vieille est donc belle!*”

I had tried to collect all the beauty I could, and also all the youth, so that for a moment I was at a loss. I had talked to many people and provided for the music, and there were figures in the crowd that were still lost to me. “What old woman do you mean?”

“I don't know her name—she was over by the door a moment ago. I asked somebody and was told, I think, that she's American.”

I looked about and saw one of my guests attach a pair of fine eyes to Outreau very much as if she knew he must be talking of her. “Oh Lady Beldonald! Yes, she's handsome; but the great point about her is that she has been ‘put up’ to keep, and that she wouldn't be flattered if she knew you spoke of her as old. A box of sardines is ‘old’ only after it has been opened, Lady Beldonald never has yet been—but I'm going to do it.” I joked, but I was somewhat disappointed. It was a type that, with his unerring sense for the *banal*, I shouldn't have expected Outreau to pick out.

“You're going to paint her? But, my dear man, she is painted—and as neither you nor I can do it. *Où est-elle donc?* He had lost her, and I saw I had made a mistake. She's the greatest of all the great Holbeins.”

I was relieved. “Ah then not Lady Beldonald! But do I possess a Holbein of *any* price unawares?”

“There she is—there she is! Dear, dear, dear, what a head!” And I saw whom he meant—and what: a small old lady in a black dress and a black bonnet, both relieved with a little white, who had evidently just changed, her place to reach a corner from which more of the room and of the scene was presented to her. She appeared unnoticed and unknown, and I immediately recognised that some other guest must have brought her and, for want of opportunity, had as yet to call my attention to her. But two things, simultaneously with this and with each other, struck me with force; one of them the truth of Outreau’s description of her, the other the fact that the person bringing her could only have been Lady Beldonald. She *was* a Holbein—of the first water; yet she was also Mrs. Brash, the imported “foil,” the indispensable “accent,” the successor to the dreary Miss Dadd! By the time I had put these things together—Outreau’s “American” having helped me—I was in just such full possession of her face as I had found myself, on the other first occasion, of that of her patroness. Only with so different a consequence. I couldn’t look at her enough, and I stared and stared till I became aware she might have fancied me challenging her as a person unrepresented. “All the same,” Outreau went on, equally held, “*c’est une tête à faire*. If I were only staying long enough for a crack at her! But I tell you what”—and he seized my arm—”bring her over!”

“Over?”

“To Paris. She’d have a *succès fou*.”

“Ah thanks, my dear fellow,” I was now quite in a position to say; “she’s the handsomest thing in London, and”—for what I might do with her was already before me with intensity—”I propose to keep her to myself.” It was before me with intensity, in the light of Mrs. Brash’s distant perfection of a little white old face, in which every wrinkle was the touch of a master; but something else, I suddenly felt, was not less so, for Lady Beldonald, in the other quarter, and though she couldn’t have made out the subject of our notice, continued to fix us, and her eyes had the challenge of those of the woman of consequence who has missed something. A moment later I was close to her, apologising first for not having been more on the spot at her arrival, but saying in the next breath uncontrollably: “Why my dear lady, it’s a Holbein!”

“A Holbein? What?”

“Why the wonderful sharp old face so extraordinarily, consummately drawn—in the frame of black velvet. That of Mrs. Brash, I mean—isn’t it her name?—your companion.”

This was the beginning of a most odd matter—the essence of my anecdote; and I think the very first note of the oddity must have sounded for me in the tone in which her ladyship spoke after giving me a silent look. It seemed to come to me out of a distance immeasurably removed from Holbein. “Mrs. Brash isn’t my ‘companion’ in the sense you appear to mean. She’s my rather near relation and a very dear old friend. I love her—and you must know her.”

“Know her? Rather! Why to see her is to want on the spot to ‘go’ for her. She also must sit for me,”

“*She?* Louisa Brash?” If Lady Beldonald had the theory that her beauty directly showed it when things weren’t well with her, this impression, which the fixed sweetness of her serenity had hitherto struck me by no means as justifying, gave me now my first glimpse of its grounds. It was as if I had never before seen her face invaded by anything I should have

called an expression. This expression moreover was of the faintest—was like the effect produced on a surface by an agitation both deep within and as yet much confused. “Have you told her so?” she then quickly asked, as if to soften the sound of her surprise.

“Dear no, I’ve but just noticed her—Outreau, a moment ago put me on her. But we’re both so taken, and he also wants—”

“To *paint* her?” Lady Beldonald uncontrollably murmured.

“Don’t be afraid we shall fight for her,” I returned with a laugh for this tone. Mrs. Brash was still where I could see her without appearing to stare, and she mightn’t have seen I was looking at her, though her protectress, I’m afraid, could scarce have failed of that certainty. “We must each take our turn, and at any rate she’s a wonderful thing, so that if you’ll let her go to Paris Outreau promises her there—”

“*There?*” my companion gasped.

“A career bigger still than among us, as he considers we haven’t half their eye. He guarantees her *a succès fou*.”

She couldn’t get over it. “Louisa Brash? In Paris?”

“They do see,” I went on, “more than we and they live extraordinarily, don’t you know, in that. But she’ll do something here too.”

“And what will she do?”

If frankly now I couldn’t help giving Mrs. Brash a longer look, so after it I could as little resist sounding my converser. “You’ll see. Only give her time.”

She said nothing during the moment in which she met my eyes; but then: “Time, it seems to me, is exactly what you and your friend want. If you haven’t talked with her—”

“We haven’t seen her? Oh we see bang off—with a click like a steel spring. It’s our trade, it’s our life, and we should be donkeys if we made mistakes. That’s the way I saw you yourself, my lady, if I may say so; that’s the way, with a long pin straight through your body, I’ve got you. And just so I’ve got *her!*”

All this, for reasons, had brought my guest to her feet; but her eyes had while we talked never once followed the direction of mine. “You call her a Holbein?”

“Outreau did, and I of course immediately recognised it. Don’t you? She brings the old boy to life! It’s just as I should call you a Titian. You bring *him* to life.”

She couldn’t be said to relax, because she couldn’t be said to have hardened; but something at any rate on this took place in her—something indeed quite disconnected from what I would have called her. “Don’t you understand that she has always been supposed—?” It had the ring of impatience; nevertheless it stopped short on a scruple.

I knew what it was, however, well enough to say it for her if she preferred. “To be nothing whatever to look at? To be unfortunately plain—or even if you like repulsively ugly? Oh yes, I understand it perfectly, just as I understand—I have to as a part of my trade—many other forms of stupidity. It’s nothing new to one that ninety-nine people out of a hundred have no eyes, no sense, no taste. There are whole communities impenetrably sealed. I don’t say your friend’s a person to make the men turn round in Regent Street. But it adds to the joy of the few who do see that they have it so much to themselves. Where in the world can she have lived? You must tell me all about that—or rather, if she’ll be so good, *she* must.”

“You mean then to speak to her—?”

I wondered as she pulled up again. “Of her beauty?”

“Her beauty!” cried Lady Beldonald so loud that two or three persons looked round.

“Ah with every precaution of respect!” I declared in a much lower tone. But her back was by this time turned to me, and in the movement, as it were, one of the strangest little dramas I’ve ever known was well launched.

CHAPTER III

It was a drama of small smothered intensely private things, and I knew of but one other person in the secret; yet that person and I found it exquisitely susceptible of notation, followed it with an interest the mutual communication of which did much for our enjoyment, and were present with emotion at its touching catastrophe. The small case—for so small a case—had made a great stride even before my little party separated, and in fact within the next ten minutes.

In that space of time two things had happened one of which was that I made the acquaintance of Mrs. Brash; and the other that Mrs. Munden reached me, cleaving the crowd, with one of her usual pieces of news. What she had to impart was that, on her having just before asked Nina if the conditions of our sitting had been arranged with me, Nina had replied, with something like perversity, that she didn’t propose to arrange them, that the whole affair was “off” again and that she preferred not to be further beset for the present. The question for Mrs. Munden was naturally what had happened and whether I understood. Oh I understood perfectly, and what I at first most understood was that even when I had brought in the name of Mrs. Brash intelligence wasn’t yet in Mrs. Munden. She was quite as surprised as Lady Beldonald had been on hearing of the esteem in which I held Mrs. Brash’s appearance. She was stupefied at learning that I had just in my ardour proposed to its proprietress to sit to me. Only she came round promptly—which Lady Beldonald really never did. Mrs. Munden was in fact wonderful; for when I had given her quickly “Why she’s a Holbein, you know, absolutely,” she took it up, after a first fine vacancy, with an immediate abysmal “Oh *is* she?” that, as a piece of social gymnastics, did her the greatest honour; and she was in fact the first in London to spread the tidings. For a face—about it was magnificent. But she was also the first, I must add, to see what would really happen—though this she put before me only a week or two later. “It will kill her, my dear—that’s what it will do!”

She meant neither more nor less than that it would kill Lady Beldonald if I were to paint Mrs. Brash; for at this lurid light had we arrived in so short a space of time. It was for me to decide whether my æsthetic need of giving life to my idea was such as to justify me in destroying it in a woman after all in most eyes so beautiful. The situation was indeed sufficiently queer; for it remained to be seen what I should positively gain by giving up Mrs. Brash. I appeared to have in any case lost Lady Beldonald, now too “upset”—it was always Mrs. Munden’s word about her and, as I inferred, her own about herself—to meet me again on our previous footing. The only thing, I of course soon saw, was to temporise to drop the whole question for the present and yet so far as possible keep each of the pair in view. I may as well say at once that this plan and this process gave their principal interest to the next several months. Mrs. Brash had turned up, if I remember, early in the new year, and her little wonderful career was in our particular circle one of the features of the following season. It was at all events for myself the most attaching; it’s not my fault if I am so put together as often to find more life in situations obscure and subject to interpretation than in the gross rattle of the foreground. And there were all sorts of things, things touching, amusing, mystifying—and above all such an instance as I had never yet met—in this funny little fortune of the useful American cousin. Mrs. Munden was promptly at one with me as to the

rarity and, to a near and human view, the beauty and interest of the position. We had neither of us ever before seen that degree and that special sort of personal success come to a woman for the first time so late in life. I found it an example of poetic, of absolutely retributive justice; so that my desire grew great to work it, as we say, on those lines. I had seen it all from the original moment at my studio; the poor lady had never known an hour's appreciation—which moreover, in perfect good faith, she had never missed. The very first thing I did after inducing so unintentionally the resentful retreat of her protectress had been to go straight over to her and say almost without preliminaries that I should hold myself immeasurably obliged for a few patient sittings. What I thus came face to face with was, on the instant, her whole unenlightened past and the full, if foreshortened, revelation of what among us all was now unfailingly in store for her. To turn the handle and start that tune came to me on the spot as a temptation. Here was a poor lady who had waited for the approach of old age to find out what she was worth. Here was a benighted being to whom it was to be disclosed in her fifty-seventh year—I was to make that out—that she had something that might pass for a face. She looked much more than her age, and was fairly frightened—as if I had been trying on her some possibly heartless London trick—when she had taken in my appeal. That showed me in what an air she had lived and—as I should have been tempted to put it had I spoken out—among what children of darkness. Later on I did them more justice; saw more that her wonderful points must have been points largely the fruit of time, and even that possibly she might never in all her life have looked so well as at this particular moment. It might have been that if her hour had struck I just happened to be present at the striking. What had occurred, all the same, was at the worst a notable comedy.

The famous “irony of fate” takes many forms, but I had never yet seen it take quite this one. She had been “had over” on an understanding, and she wasn't playing fair. She had broken the law of her ugliness and had turned beautiful on the hands of her employer. More interesting even perhaps than a view of the conscious triumph that this might prepare for her, and of which, had I doubted of my own judgement, I could still take Outreau's fine start as the full guarantee—more interesting was the question of the process by which such a history could get itself enacted. The curious thing was that all the while the reasons of her having passed for plain—the reasons for Lady Beldonald's fond calculation, which they quite justified—were written large in her face, so large that it was easy to understand them as the only ones she herself had ever read. What was it then that actually made the old stale sentence mean something so different?—into what new combinations, what extraordinary language, unknown but understood at a glance, had time and life translated it? The only thing to be said was that time and life were artists who beat us all, working with recipes and secrets we could never find out. I really ought to have, like a lecturer or a showman, a chart or a blackboard to present properly the relation, in the wonderful old tender battered blanched face, between the original elements and the exquisite final “style.” I could do it with chalks, but I can scarcely do it with words. However, the thing was, for any artist who respected himself, to *feel* it—which I abundantly did; and then not to conceal from *her* I felt it—which I neglected as little. But she was really, to do her complete justice, the last to understand; and I'm not sure that, to the end—for there was an end—she quite made it all out or knew where she was. When you've been brought up for fifty years on black it must be hard to adjust your organism at a day's notice to gold-colour. Her whole nature had been pitched in the key of her supposed plainness. She had known how to be ugly—it was the only thing she had learnt save, if possible, how not to mind it. Being beautiful took in any case a new set of muscles. It was on the prior conviction, literally, that she had developed her admirable dress, instinctively felicitous, always either black or white and a matter of rather severe squareness and studied line. She was magnificently neat; everything she showed had a way of looking both old and fresh; and there was on every occasion the same picture in her draped head—

draped in low-falling black—and the fine white plaits (of a painter’s white, somehow) disposed on her chest. What had happened was that these arrangements, determined by certain considerations, lent themselves in effect much better to certain others. Adopted in mere shy silence they had really only deepened her accent. It was singular, moreover, that, so constituted, there was nothing in her aspect of the ascetic or the nun. She was a good hard sixteenth-century figure, not withered with innocence, bleached rather by life in the open. She was in short just what we had made of her, a Holbein for a great Museum; and our position, Mrs. Munden’s and mine, rapidly became that of persons having such a treasure to dispose of. The world—I speak of course mainly of the art-world—flocked to see it.

CHAPTER IV

“But has she any idea herself, poor thing?” was the way I had put it to Mrs. Munden on our next meeting after the incident at my studio; with the effect, however, only of leaving my friend at first to take me as alluding to Mrs. Brash’s possible prevision of the chatter she might create. I had my own sense of that—this provision had been nil; the question was of her consciousness of the office for which Lady Beldonald had counted on her and for which we were so promptly proceeding to spoil her altogether.

“Oh I think she arrived with a goodish notion,” Mrs. Munden had replied when I had explained; “for she’s clever too, you know, as well as good-looking, and I don’t see how, if she ever really *knew* Nina, she could have supposed for a moment that she wasn’t wanted for whatever she might have left to give up. Hasn’t she moreover always been made to feel that she’s ugly enough for anything?” It was even at this point already wonderful how my friend had mastered the case and what lights, alike for its past and its future, she was prepared to throw on it. “If she has seen herself as ugly enough for anything she has seen herself—and that was the only way—as ugly enough for Nina; and she has had her own manner of showing that she understands without making Nina commit herself to anything vulgar. Women are never without ways for doing such things—both for communicating and receiving knowledge—that I can’t explain to you, and that you wouldn’t understand if I could, since you must be a woman even to do that. I daresay they’ve expressed it all to each other simply in the language of kisses. But doesn’t it at any rate make something rather beautiful of the relation between them as affected by our discovery—?”

I had a laugh for her plural possessive. “The point is of course that if there was a conscious bargain, and our action on Mrs. Brash is to deprive her of the sense of keeping her side of it, various things may happen that won’t be good either for her or for ourselves. She may conscientiously throw up the position.”

“Yes,” my companion mused—“for she is conscientious. Or Nina, without waiting for that, may cast her forth.”

I faced it all. “Then we should have to keep her.”

“As a regular model?” Mrs. Munden was ready for anything. “Oh that would be lovely!”

But I further worked it out. “The difficulty is that she’s not a model, hang it—that she’s too good for one, that she’s the very thing herself. When Outreau and I have each had our go, that will be all; there’ll be nothing left for any one else. Therefore it behoves us quite to understand that our attitude’s a responsibility. If we can’t do for her positively more than Nina does—”

“We must let her alone?” My companion continued to muse. “I see!”

“Yet don’t,” I returned, “see too much. We *can* do more.”

“Than Nina?” She was again on the spot. “It wouldn’t after all be difficult. We only want the directly opposite thing—and which is the only one the poor dear can give. Unless indeed,” she suggested, “we simply retract—we back out.”

I turned it over. “It’s too late for that. Whether Mrs. Brash’s peace is gone I can’t say. But Nina’s is.”

“Yes, and there’s no way to bring it back that won’t sacrifice her friend. We can’t turn round and say Mrs. Brash is ugly, can we? But fancy Nina’s not having *seen!*” Mrs. Munden exclaimed.

“She doesn’t see now,” I answered. “She can’t, I’m certain, make out what we mean. The woman, for *her* still, is just what she always was. But she has nevertheless had her stroke, and her blindness, while she wavers and gropes in the dark, only adds to her discomfort. Her blow was to see the attention of the world deviate.”

“All the same I don’t think, you know,” my interlocutress said, “that Nina will have made her a scene or that, whatever we do, she’ll ever make her one. That isn’t the way it will happen, for she’s exactly as conscientious as Mrs. Brash.”

“Then what is the way?” I asked.

“It will just happen in silence.”

“And what will ‘it,’ as you call it, be?”

“Isn’t that what we want really to see?”

“Well,” I replied after a turn or two about, “whether we want it or not it’s exactly what we *shall* see; which is a reason the more for fancying, between the pair there—in the quiet exquisite house, and full of superiorities and suppressions as they both are—the extraordinary situation. If I said just now that it’s too late to do anything but assent it’s because I’ve taken the full measure of what happened at my studio. It took but a few moments—but she tasted of the tree.”

My companion wondered. “Nina?”

“Mrs. Brash.” And to have to put it so ministered, while I took yet another turn, to a sort of agitation. Our attitude was a responsibility.

But I had suggested something else to my friend, who appeared for a moment detached. “Should you say she’ll hate her worse if she *doesn’t* see?”

“Lady Beldonald? Doesn’t see what we see, you mean, than if she does? Ah I give *that* up!” I laughed. “But what I can tell you is why I hold that, as I said just now, we can do most. We can do this: we can give to a harmless and sensitive creature hitherto practically disinherited—and give with an unexpectedness that will immensely add to its price—the pure joy of a deep draught of the very pride of life, of an acclaimed personal triumph in our superior sophisticated world.”

Mrs. Munden had a glow of response for my sudden eloquence. Oh it will be beautiful!

CHAPTER V

Well, that’s what, on the whole and in spite of everything, it really was. It has dropped into my memory a rich little gallery of pictures, a regular panorama of those occasions that were to minister to the view from which I had so for a moment extracted a lyric inspiration. I see Mrs. Brash on each of these occasions practically enthroned and surrounded and more or less mobbed; see the hurrying and the nudging and the pressing and the staring; see the people

“making up” and introduced, and catch the word when they have had their turn; hear it above all, the great one—”Ah yes, the famous Holbein!”—passed about with that perfection of promptitude that makes the motions of the London mind so happy a mixture of those of the parrot and the sheep. Nothing would be easier of course than to tell the whole little tale with an eye only for that silly side of it. Great was the silliness, but great also as to this case of poor Mrs. Brash, I will say for it, the good nature. Of course, furthermore, it took in particular “our set,” with its positive child-terror of the *banal*, to be either so foolish or so wise; though indeed I’ve never quite known where our set begins and ends, and have had to content myself on this score with the indication once given me by a lady next whom I was placed at dinner: “Oh it’s bounded on the north by Ibsen and on the south by Sargent!” Mrs. Brash never sat to me; she absolutely declined; and when she declared that it was quite enough for her that I had with that fine precipitation invited her, I quite took this as she meant it; before we had gone very far our understanding, hers and mine, was complete. Her attitude was as happy as her success was prodigious. The sacrifice of the portrait was a sacrifice to the true inwardness of Lady Beldonald, and did much, for the time, I divined, toward muffling their domestic tension. All it was thus in her power to say—and I heard of a few cases of her having said it—was that she was sure I would have painted her beautifully if she hadn’t prevented me. She couldn’t even tell the truth, which was that I certainly would have done so if Lady Beldonald hadn’t; and she never could mention the subject at all before that personage. I can only describe the affair, naturally, from the outside, and heaven forbid indeed that I should try too closely to, reconstruct the possible strange intercourse of these good friends at home.

My anecdote, however, would lose half the point it may have to show were I to omit all mention of the consummate turn her ladyship appeared gradually to have found herself able to give her deportment. She had made it impossible I should myself bring up our old, our original question, but there was real distinction in her manner of now accepting certain other possibilities. Let me do her that justice; her effort at magnanimity must have been immense. There couldn’t fail of course to be ways in which poor Mrs. Brash paid for it. How much she had to pay we were in fact soon enough to see; and it’s my intimate conviction that, as a climax, her life at last was the price. But while she lived at least—and it was with an intensity, for those wondrous weeks, of which she had never dreamed—Lady Beldonald herself faced the music. This is what I mean by the possibilities, by the sharp actualities indeed, that she accepted. She took our friend out, she showed her at home, never attempted to hide or to betray her, played her no trick whatever so long as the ordeal lasted. She drank deep, on her side too, of the cup—the cup that for her own lips could only be bitterness. There was, I think, scarce a special success of her companion’s at which she wasn’t personally present. Mrs. Munden’s theory of the silence in which all this would be muffled for them was none the less, and in abundance, confirmed by our observations. The whole thing was to be the death of one or the other of them, but they never spoke of it at tea. I remember even that Nina went so far as to say to me once, looking me full in the eyes, quite sublimely, “I’ve made out what you mean—she *is* a picture.” The beauty of this moreover was that, as I’m persuaded, she hadn’t really made it out at all—the words were the mere hypocrisy of her reflective endeavour for virtue. She couldn’t possibly have made it out; her friend was as much as ever “dreadfully plain” to her; she must have wondered to the last what on earth possessed us. Wouldn’t it in fact have been after all just this failure of vision, this supreme stupidity in short, that kept the catastrophe so long at bay? There was a certain sense of greatness for her in seeing so many of us so absurdly mistaken; and I recall that on various occasions, and in particular when she uttered the words just quoted, this high serenity, as a sign of the relief of her soreness, if not of the effort of her conscience, did something quite visible to my eyes, and also quite unprecedented, for the beauty of her

face. She got a real lift from it—such a momentary discernible sublimity that I recollect coming out on the spot with a queer crude amused “Do you know I believe I could paint you *now*?”

She was a fool not to have closed with me then and there; for what has happened since has altered everything—what was to happen a little later was so much more than I could swallow. This was the disappearance of the famous Holbein from one day to the other—producing a consternation among us all as great as if the Venus of Milo had suddenly vanished from the Louvre. “She has simply shipped her straight back”—the explanation was given in that form by Mrs. Munden, who added that any cord pulled tight enough would end at last by snapping. At the snap, in any case, we mightily jumped, for the masterpiece we had for three or four months been living with had made us feel its presence as a luminous lesson and a daily need. We recognised more than ever that it had been, for high finish, the gem of our collection—we found what a blank it left on the wall. Lady Beldonald might fill up the blank, but we couldn’t. That she did soon fill it up—and, heaven help us, *how* was put before me after an interval of no great length, but during which I hadn’t seen her. I dined on the Christmas of last year at Mrs. Munden’s, and Nina, with a “scratch lot,” as our hostess said, was there, so that, the preliminary wait being longish, she could approach me very sweetly. “I’ll come to you tomorrow if you like,” she said; and the effect of it, after a first stare at her, was to make me look all round. I took in, by these two motions, two things; one of which was that, though now again so satisfied herself of her high state, she could give me nothing comparable to what I should have got had she taken me up at the moment of my meeting her on her distinguished concession; the other that she was “suited” afresh and that Mrs. Brash’s successor was fully installed. Mrs. Brash’s successor, was at the other side of the room, and I became conscious that Mrs. Munden was waiting to see my eyes seek her. I guessed the meaning of the wait; what was one, this time, to say? Oh first and foremost assuredly that it was immensely droll, for this time at least there was no mistake. The lady I looked upon, and as to whom my friend, again quite at sea, appealed to me for a formula, was as little a Holbein, or a specimen of any other school, as she was, like Lady Beldonald herself, a Titian. The formula was easy to give, for the amusement was that her prettiness—yes, literally, prodigiously, her prettiness—was distinct. Lady Beldonald had been magnificent—had been almost intelligent. Miss What’s-her-name continues pretty, continues even young, and doesn’t matter a straw! She matters so ideally little that Lady Beldonald is practically safer, I judge, than she has ever been. There hasn’t been a symptom of chatter about this person, and I believe her protectress is much surprised that we’re not more struck.

It was at any rate strictly impossible to me to make an appointment for the day as to which I have just recorded Nina’s proposal; and the turn of events since then has not quickened my eagerness. Mrs. Munden remained in correspondence with Mrs. Brash—to the extent, that is, of three letters, each of which she showed me. They so told to our imagination her terrible little story that we were quite prepared—or thought we were—for her going out like a snuffed candle. She resisted, on her return to her original conditions, less than a year; the taste of the tree, as I had called it, had been fatal to her; what she had contentedly enough lived without before for half a century she couldn’t now live without for a day. I know nothing of her original conditions—some minor American city—save that for her to have gone back to them was clearly to have stepped out of her frame. We performed, Mrs. Munden and I, a small funeral service for her by talking it all over and making it all out. It wasn’t—the minor American city—a market for Holbeins, and what had occurred was that the poor old picture, banished from its museum and refreshed by the rise of no new movement to hang it, was capable of the miracle of a silent revolution; of itself turning, in its dire dishonour, its face to the wall. So it stood, without the intervention of the ghost of a

critic, till they happened to pull it round again and find it mere dead paint. Well, it had had, if that's anything, its season of fame, its name on a thousand tongues and printed in capitals in the catalogue. We hadn't been at fault. I haven't, all the same, the least note of her—not a scratch. And I did her so in intention! Mrs. Munden continues to remind me, however, that this is not the sort of rendering with which, on the other side, after all, Lady Beldonald proposes to content herself. She has come back to the question of her own portrait. Let me settle it then at last. Since she *will* have the real thing—well, hang it, she shall!

The Story In It

CHAPTER I

The weather had turned so much worse that the rest of the day was certainly lost. The wind had risen and the storm gathered force; they gave from time to time a thump at the firm windows and dashed even against those protected by the verandah their vicious splotches of rain. Beyond the lawn, beyond the cliff, the great wet brush of the sky dipped deep into the sea. But the lawn, already vivid with the touch of May, showed a violence of watered green; the budding shrubs and trees repeated the note as they tossed their thick masses, and the cold troubled light, filling the pretty saloon, marked the spring afternoon as sufficiently young. The two ladies seated there in silence could pursue without difficulty—as well as, clearly, without interruption—their respective tasks; a confidence expressed, when the noise of the wind allowed it to be heard, by the sharp scratch of Mrs. Dyott's pen at the table where she was busy with letters.

Her visitor, settled on a small sofa that, with a palm-tree, a screen, a stool, a stand, a bowl of flowers and three photographs in silver frames, had been arranged near the light wood-fire as a choice "corner"—Maud Blessingbourne, her guest, turned audibly, though at intervals neither brief nor regular, the leaves of a book covered in lemon-coloured paper and not yet despoiled of a certain fresh crispness. This effect of the volume, for the eye, would have made it, as presumably the newest French novel—and evidently, from the attitude of the reader, "good"—consort happily with the special tone of the room, a consistent air of selection and suppression, one of the finer aesthetic evolutions. If Mrs. Dyott was fond of ancient French furniture and distinctly difficult about it, her inmates could be fond—with whatever critical cocks of charming dark-braided heads over slender sloping shoulders—of modern French authors. Nothing had passed for half an hour—nothing at least, to be exact, but that each of the companions occasionally and covertly intermitted her pursuit in such a manner as to ascertain the degree of absorption of the other without turning round. What their silence was charged with therefore was not only a sense of the weather, but a sense, so to speak, of its own nature. Maud Blessingbourne, when she lowered her book into her lap, closed her eyes with a conscious patience that seemed to say she waited; but it was nevertheless she who at last made the movement representing a snap of their tension. She got up and stood by the fire, into which she looked a minute; then came round and approached the window as if to see what was really going on. At this Mrs. Dyott wrote with refreshed intensity. Her little pile of letters had grown, and if a look of determination was compatible with her fair and slightly faded beauty, the habit of attending to her business could always keep pace with any excursion of her thought. Yet she was the first who spoke.

"I trust your book has been interesting."

"Well enough; a little mild."

A louder throb of the tempest had blurred the sound of the words. "A little wild?"

"Dear no—timid and tame; unless I've quite lost my sense."

"Perhaps you have," Mrs. Dyott placidly suggested—"reading so many."

Her companion made a motion of feigned despair. "Ah you take away my courage for going to my room, as I was just meaning to, for another."

"Another French one?"

“I’m afraid.”

“Do you carry them by the dozen—?”

“Into innocent British homes?” Maud tried to remember. “I believe I brought three—seeing them in a shop-window as I passed through town. It never rains but it pours! But I’ve already read two.”

“And are they the only ones you do read?”

“French ones?” Maud considered. “Oh no. D’Annunzio.”

“And what’s that?” Mrs. Dyott asked as she affixed a stamp.

“Oh you dear thing!” Her friend was amused, yet almost showed pity. “I know you don’t read,” Maud went on; “but why should you? *You* live!”

“Yes—wretchedly enough,” Mrs. Dyott returned, getting her letters together. She left her place, holding them as a neat achieved handful, and came over to the fire, while Mrs. Blessingbourne turned once more to the window, where she was met by another flurry.

Maud spoke then as if moved only by the elements. “Do you expect him through all this?”

Mrs. Dyott just waited, and it had the effect, indescribably, of making everything that had gone before seem to have led up to the question. This effect was even deepened by the way she then said “Whom do you mean?”

“Why I thought you mentioned at luncheon that Colonel Voyt was to walk over. Surely he can’t.”

“Do you care very much?” Mrs. Dyott asked.

Her friend now hesitated. “It depends on what you call ‘much.’ If you mean should I like to see him—then certainly.”

“Well, my dear, I think he understands you’re here.”

“So that as he evidently isn’t coming,” Maud laughed, “it’s particularly flattering! Or rather,” she added, giving up the prospect again, “it would be, I think, quite extraordinarily flattering if he did. Except that of course,” she threw in, “he might come partly for you.”

“‘Partly’ is charming. Thank you for ‘partly.’ If you *are* going upstairs, will you kindly,” Mrs. Dyott pursued, “put these into the box as you pass?”

The younger woman, taking the little pile of letters, considered them with envy. “Nine! You *are* good. You’re always a living reproach!”

Mrs. Dyott gave a sigh. “I don’t do it on purpose. The only thing, this afternoon,” she went on, reverting to the other question, “would be their not having come down.”

“And as to that you don’t know.”

“No—I don’t know.” But she caught even as she spoke a rat-tat-tat of the knocker, which struck her as a sign. “Ah there!”

“Then I go.” And Maud whisked out.

Mrs. Dyott, left alone, moved with an air of selection to the window, and it was as so stationed, gazing out at the wild weather, that the visitor, whose delay to appear spoke of the wiping of boots and the disposal of drenched mackintosh and cap, finally found her. He was tall lean fine, with little in him, on the whole, to confirm the titular in the “Colonel Voyt” by which he was announced. But he had left the army, so that his reputation for gallantry mainly

depended now on his fighting Liberalism in the House of Commons. Even these facts, however, his aspect scantily matched; partly, no doubt, because he looked, as was usually said, un-English. His black hair, cropped close, was lightly powdered with silver, and his dense glossy beard, that of an emir or a caliph, and grown for civil reasons, repeated its handsome colour and its somewhat foreign effect. His nose had a strong and shapely arch, and the dark grey of his eyes was tinted with blue. It had been said of him—in relation to these signs—that he would have struck you as a Jew had he not, in spite of his nose, struck you so much as an Irishman. Neither responsibility could in fact have been fixed upon him, and just now, at all events, he was only a pleasant weather-washed wind-battered Briton, who brought in from a struggle with the elements that he appeared quite to have enjoyed a certain amount of unremoved mud and an unusual quantity of easy expression. It was exactly the silence ensuing on the retreat of the servant and the closed door that marked between him and his hostess the degree of this ease. They met, as it were, twice: the first time while the servant was there and the second as soon as he was not. The difference was great between the two encounters, though we must add in justice to the second that its marks were at first mainly negative. This communion consisted only in their having drawn each other for a minute as close as possible—as possible, that is, with no help but the full clasp of hands. Thus they were mutually held, and the closeness was at any rate such that, for a little, though it took account of dangers, it did without words. When words presently came the pair were talking by the fire and she had rung for tea. He had by this time asked if the note he had despatched to her after breakfast had been safely delivered.

“Yes, before luncheon. But I’m always in a state when—except for some extraordinary reason—you send such things by hand. I knew, without it, that you had come. It never fails. I’m sure when you’re there—I’m sure when you’re not.”

He wiped, before the glass, his wet moustache. “I see. But this morning I had an impulse.”

“It was beautiful. But they make me as uneasy, sometimes, your impulses, as if they were calculations; make me wonder what you have in reserve.”

“Because when small children are too awfully good they die? Well, I AM a small child compared to you—but I’m not dead yet. I cling to life.”

He had covered her with his smile, but she continued grave. “I’m not half so much afraid when you’re nasty.”

“Thank you! What then did you do,” he asked, “with my note?”

“You deserve that I should have spread it out on my dressing-table—or left it, better still, in Maud Blessingbourne’s room.”

He wondered while he laughed. “Oh but what does *she* deserve?”

It was her gravity that continued to answer. “Yes—it would probably kill her.”

“She believes so in you?”

“She believes so in *you*. So don’t be *too* nice to her.”

He was still looking, in the chimney-glass, at the state of his beard—brushing from it, with his handkerchief, the traces of wind and wet. “If she also then prefers me when I’m nasty it seems to me I ought to satisfy her. Shall I now at any rate see her?”

“She’s so like a pea on a pan over the possibility of it that she’s pulling herself together in her room.”

“Oh then we must try and keep her together. But why, graceful, tender, pretty too—quite or almost as she is—doesn’t she re-marry?”

Mrs. Dyott appeared—and as if the first time—to look for the reason. “Because she likes too many men.”

It kept up his spirits. “And how many *may* a lady like—?”

“In order not to like any of them too much? Ah that, you know, I never found out—and it’s too late now. When,” she presently pursued, “did you last see her?”

He really had to think. “Would it have been since last November or so?—somewhere or other where we spent three days.”

“Oh at Surreidge? I know all about that. I thought you also met afterwards.”

He had again to recall. “So we did! Wouldn’t it have been somewhere at Christmas? But it wasn’t by arrangement!” he laughed, giving with his forefinger a little pleasant nick to his hostess’s chin. Then as if something in the way she received this attention put him back to his question of a moment before: “Have you kept my note?”

She held him with her pretty eyes. “Do you want it back?”

“Ah don’t speak as if I did take things—!”

She dropped her gaze to the fire. “No, you don’t; not even the hard things a really generous nature often would.” She quitted, however, as if to forget that, the chimney-place. “I put it *there!*”

“You’ve burnt it? Good!” It made him easier, but he noticed the next moment on a table the lemon-coloured volume left there by Mrs. Blessingbourne, and, taking it up for a look, immediately put it down. “You might while you were about it have burnt that too.”

“You’ve read it?”

“Dear yes. And you?”

“No,” said Mrs. Dyott; “it wasn’t for me Maud brought it.”

It pulled her visitor up. “Mrs. Blessingbourne brought it?”

“For such a day as this.” But she wondered. “How you look! Is it so awful?”

“Oh like his others.” Something had occurred to him; his thought was already far. “Does she know?”

“Know what?”

“Why anything.”

But the door opened too soon for Mrs. Dyott, who could only murmur quickly—“Take care!”

CHAPTER II

It was in fact Mrs. Blessingbourne, who had under her arm the book she had gone up for—a pair of covers showing this time a pretty, a candid blue. She was followed next minute by the servant, who brought in tea, the consumption of which, with the passage of greetings, inquiries and other light civilities between the two visitors, occupied a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Dyott meanwhile, as a contribution to so much amenity, mentioned to Maud that her fellow guest wished to scold her for the books she read—a statement met by this friend with the remark that he must first be sure about them. But as soon as he had picked up the new, the blue volume he broke out into a frank “Dear, dear!”

“Have you read that too?” Mrs. Dyott inquired. “How much you’ll have to talk over together! The other one,” she explained to him, “Maud speaks of as terribly tame.”

“Ah I must have that out with her! You don’t feel the extraordinary force of the fellow?” Voyt went on to Mrs. Blessingbourne.

And so, round the hearth, they talked—talked soon, while they warmed their toes, with zest enough to make it seem as happy a chance as any of the quieter opportunities their imprisonment might have involved. Mrs. Blessingbourne did feel, it then appeared, the force of the fellow, but she had her reserves and reactions, in which Voyt was much interested. Mrs. Dyott rather detached herself, mainly gazing, as she leaned back, at the fire; she intervened, however, enough to relieve Maud of the sense of being listened to. That sense, with Maud, was too apt to convey that one was listened to for a fool. “Yes, when I read a novel I mostly read a French one,” she had said to Voyt in answer to a question about her usual practice; “for I seem with it to get hold more of the real thing—to get more life for my money. Only I’m not so infatuated with them but that sometimes for months and months on end I don’t read any fiction at all.”

The two books were now together beside them. “Then when you begin again you read a mass?”

“Dear no. I only keep up with three or four authors.”

He laughed at this over the cigarette he had been allowed to light. “I like your ‘keeping up,’ and keeping up in particular with ‘authors.’”

“One must keep up with somebody,” Mrs. Dyott threw off.

“I daresay I’m ridiculous,” Mrs. Blessingbourne conceded without heeding it; “but that’s the way we express ourselves in my part of the country.”

“I only alluded,” said Voyt, “to the tremendous conscience of your sex. It’s more than mine can keep up with. You take everything too hard. But if you can’t read the novel of British and American manufacture, heaven knows I’m at one with you. It seems really to show our sense of life as the sense of puppies and kittens.”

“Well,” Maud more patiently returned, “I’m told all sorts of people are now doing wonderful things; but somehow I remain outside.”

“Ah it’s *they*, it’s our poor twangers and twaddlers who remain outside. They pick up a living in the street. And who indeed would want them in?”

Mrs. Blessingbourne seemed unable to say, and yet at the same time to have her idea. The subject, in truth, she evidently found, was not so easy to handle. “People lend me things, and I try; but at the end of fifty pages—”

“There you are! Yes—heaven help us!”

“But what I mean,” she went on, “isn’t that I don’t get woefully weary of the eternal French thing. What’s *their* sense of life?”

“*Ah voilà!*” Mrs. Dyott softly sounded.

“Oh but it IS one; you can make it out,” Voyt promptly declared. “They do what they feel, and they feel more things than we. They strike so many more notes, and with so different a hand. When it comes to any account of a relation say between a man and a woman—I mean an intimate or a curious or a suggestive one—where are we compared to them? They don’t exhaust the subject, no doubt,” he admitted; “but we don’t touch it, don’t even skim it. It’s as if we denied its existence, its possibility. You’ll doubtless tell me, however,” he went on,

“that as all such relations *are* for us at the most much simpler we can only have all round less to say about them.”

She met this imputation with the quickest amusement. “I beg your pardon. I don’t think I shall tell you anything of the sort. I don’t know that I even agree with your premiss.”

“About such relations?” He looked agreeably surprised. “You think we make them larger?—or subtler?”

Mrs. Blessingbourne leaned back, not looking, like Mrs. Dyott, at the fire, but at the ceiling. “I don’t know what I think.”

“It’s not that she doesn’t know,” Mrs. Dyott remarked. “It’s only that she doesn’t say.”

But Voyt had this time no eye for their hostess. For a moment he watched Maud. “It sticks out of you, you know, that you’ve yourself written something. Haven’t you—and published? I’ve a notion I could read *you*.”

“When I do publish,” she said without moving, “you’ll be the last one I shall tell. I *have*,” she went on, “a lovely subject, but it would take an amount of treatment—!”

“Tell us then at least what it is.”

At this she again met his eyes. “Oh to tell it would be to express it, and that’s just what I can’t do. What I meant to say just now,” she added, “was that the French, to my sense, give us only again and again, for ever and ever, the same couple. There they are once more, as one has had them to satiety, in that yellow thing, and there I shall certainly again find them in the blue.”

“Then why do you keep reading about them?” Mrs. Dyott demanded.

Maud cast about. “I don’t!” she sighed. “At all events, I shan’t any more. I give it up.”

“You’ve been looking for something, I judge,” said Colonel Voyt, “that you’re not likely to find. It doesn’t exist.”

“What is it?” Mrs. Dyott desired to know.

“I never look,” Maud remarked, “for anything but an interest.”

“Naturally. But your interest,” Voyt replied, “is in something different from life.”

“Ah not a bit! I *love* life in art, though I hate it anywhere else. It’s the poverty of the life those people show, and the awful bounders, of both sexes, that they represent.”

“Oh now we have you!” her interlocutor laughed. “To me, when all’s said and done, they seem to be—as near as art can come—in the truth of the truth. It can only take what life gives it, though it certainly may be a pity that that isn’t better. Your complaint of their monotony is a complaint of their conditions. When you say we get always the same couple what do you mean but that we get always the same passion? Of course we do!” Voyt pursued. “If what you’re looking for is another, that’s what you won’t anywhere find.”

Maud for a while said nothing, and Mrs. Dyott seemed to wait. “Well, I suppose I’m looking, more than anything else, for a decent woman.”

“Oh then you mustn’t look for her in pictures of passion. That’s not her element nor her whereabouts.”

Mrs. Blessingbourne weighed the objection. “Does it not depend on what you mean by passion?”

“I think I can mean only one thing: the enemy to behaviour.”

“Oh I can imagine passions that are on the contrary friends to it.”

Her fellow-guest thought. “Doesn’t it depend perhaps on what you mean by behaviour?”

“Dear no. Behaviour’s just behaviour—the most definite thing in the world.”

“Then what do you mean by the ‘interest’ you just now spoke of? The picture of that definite thing?”

“Yes—call it that. Women aren’t *always* vicious, even when they’re—”

“When they’re what?” Voyt pressed.

“When they’re unhappy. They can be unhappy and good.”

“That one doesn’t for a moment deny. But can they be ‘good’ and interesting?”

“That must be Maud’s subject!” Mrs. Dyott interposed. “To show a woman who IS. I’m afraid, my dear,” she continued, “you could only show yourself.”

“You’d show then the most beautiful specimen conceivable”—and Voyt addressed himself to Maud. “But doesn’t it prove that life is, against your contention, more interesting than art? Life you embellish and elevate; but art would find itself able to do nothing with you, and, on such impossible terms, would ruin you.”

The colour in her faint consciousness gave beauty to her stare. “‘Ruin’ me?”

“He means,” Mrs. Dyott again indicated, “that you’d ruin ‘art.’”

“Without on the other hand”—Voyt seemed to assent—“its giving at all a coherent impression of you.”

“She wants her romance cheap!” said Mrs. Dyott.

“Oh no—I should be willing to pay for it. I don’t see why the romance—since you give it that name—should be all, as the French inveterately make it, for the women who are bad.”

“Oh they pay for it!” said Mrs. Dyott.

“DO they?”

“So at least”—Mrs. Dyott a little corrected herself—“one has gathered (for I don’t read your books, you know!) that they’re usually shown as doing.”

Maud wondered, but looking at Voyt, “They’re shown often, no doubt, as paying for their badness. But are they shown as paying for their romance?”

“My dear lady,” said Voyt, “their romance is their badness. There isn’t any other. It’s a hard law, if you will, and a strange, but goodness has to go without that luxury. Isn’t to BE good just exactly, all round, to go without?” He put it before her kindly and clearly—regretfully too, as if he were sorry the truth should be so sad. He and she, his pleasant eyes seemed to say, would, had they had the making of it, have made it better. “One has heard it before—at least I have; one has heard your question put. But always, when put to a mind not merely muddled, for an inevitable answer. ‘Why don’t you, *cher monsieur*, give us the drama of virtue?’ ‘Because, *chère madame*, the high privilege of virtue is precisely to avoid drama.’ The adventures of the honest lady? The honest lady hasn’t, can’t possibly have, adventures.”

Mrs. Blessingbourne only met his eyes at first, smiling with some intensity. “Doesn’t it depend a little on what you call adventures?”

“My poor Maud,” said Mrs. Dyott as if in compassion for sophistry so simple, “adventures are just adventures. That’s all you can make of them!”

But her friend talked for their companion and as if without hearing. “Doesn’t it depend a good deal on what you call drama?” Maud spoke as one who had already thought it out. “Doesn’t it depend on what you call romance?”

Her listener gave these arguments his very best attention. “Of course you may call things anything you like—speak of them as one thing and mean quite another. But why should it depend on anything? Behind these words we use—the adventure, the novel, the drama, the romance, the situation, in short, as we most comprehensively say—behind them all stands the same sharp fact which they all in their different ways represent.”

“Precisely!” Mrs. Dyott was full of approval.

Maud however was full of vagueness. “What great fact?”

“The fact of a relation. The adventure’s a relation; the relation’s an adventure. The romance, the novel, the drama are the picture of one. The subject the novelist treats is the rise, the formation, the development, the climax and for the most part the decline of one. And what is the honest lady doing on that side of the town?”

Mrs. Dyott was more pointed. “She doesn’t so much as *form* a relation.”

But Maud bore up. “Doesn’t it depend again on what you call a relation?”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Dyott, “if a gentleman picks up her pocket-handkerchief—”

“Ah even that’s one,” their friend laughed, “if she has thrown it to him. We can only deal with one that is one.”

“Surely,” Maud replied. “But if it’s an innocent one—”

“Doesn’t it depend a good deal,” Mrs. Dyott asked, “on what you call innocent?”

“You mean that the adventures of innocence have so often been the material of fiction? Yes,” Voyt replied; “that’s exactly what the bored reader complains of. He has asked for bread and been given a stone. What is it but, with absolute directness, a question of interest or, as people say, of the story? What’s a situation undeveloped but a subject lost? If a relation stops, where’s the story? If it doesn’t stop, where’s the innocence? It seems to me you must choose. It would be very pretty if it were otherwise, but that’s how we flounder. Art is our floundering shown.”

Mrs. Blessingbourne—and with an air of deference scarce supported perhaps by its sketchiness—kept her deep eyes on this definition. “But sometimes we flounder out.”

It immediately touched in Colonel Voyt the spring of a genial derision. “That’s just where I expected *you* would! One always sees it come.”

“He has, you notice,” Mrs. Dyott parenthesised to Maud, “seen it come so often; and he has always waited for it and met it.”

“Met it, dear lady, simply enough! It’s the old story, Mrs. Blessingbourne. The relation’s innocent that the heroine gets out of. The book’s innocent that’s the story of her getting out. But what the devil—in the name of innocence—was she doing IN?”

Mrs. Dyott promptly echoed the question. “You have to be in, you know, to *get* out. So there you are already with your relation. It’s the end of your goodness.”

“And the beginning,” said Voyt, “of your play!”

“Aren’t they all, for that matter, even the worst,” Mrs. Dyott pursued, “supposed *some* time or other to get out? But if meanwhile they’ve been in, however briefly, long enough to adorn a tale?”

“They’ve been in long enough to point a moral. That is to point ours!” With which, and as if a sudden flush of warmer light had moved him, Colonel Voyt got up. The veil of the storm had parted over a great red sunset.

Mrs. Dyott also was on her feet, and they stood before his charming antagonist, who, with eyes lowered and a somewhat fixed smile, had not moved.

“We’ve spoiled her subject!” the elder lady sighed.

“Well,” said Voyt, “it’s better to spoil an artist’s subject than to spoil his reputation. I mean,” he explained to Maud with his indulgent manner, “his appearance of knowing what he has got hold of, for that, in the last resort, is his happiness.”

She slowly rose at this, facing him with an aspect as handsomely mild as his own. “You can’t spoil my happiness.”

He held her hand an instant as he took leave. “I wish I could add to it!”

CHAPTER III

When he had quitted them and Mrs. Dyott had candidly asked if her friend had found him rude or crude, Maud replied—though not immediately—that she had feared showing only too much how charming she found him. But if Mrs. Dyott took this it was to weigh the sense.

“How could you show it too much?”

“Because I always feel that that’s my only way of showing anything. It’s absurd, if you like,” Mrs. Blessingbourne pursued, “but I never know, in such intense discussions, what strange impression I may give.”

Her companion looked amused. “Was it intense?”

“I was,” Maud frankly confessed.

“Then it’s a pity you were so wrong. Colonel Voyt, you know, is right.” Mrs. Blessingbourne at this gave one of the slow soft silent headshakes to which she often resorted and which, mostly accompanied by the light of cheer, had somehow, in spite of the small obstinacy that smiled in them, a special grace. With this grace, for a moment, her friend, looking her up and down, appeared impressed, yet not too much so to take the next minute a decision. “Oh my dear, I’m sorry to differ from any one so lovely—for you’re awfully beautiful to-night, and your frock’s the very nicest I’ve ever seen you wear. But he’s as right as he can be.”

Maud repeated her motion. “Not so right, at all events as he thinks he is. Or perhaps I can say,” she went on, after an instant, “that I’m not so wrong. I do know a little what I’m talking about.”

Mrs. Dyott continued to study her. “You *are* vexed. You naturally don’t like it—such destruction.”

“Destruction?”

“Of your illusion.”

“I *have* no illusion. If I had moreover it wouldn’t be destroyed. I have on the whole, I think, my little decency.”

Mrs. Dyott stared. “Let us grant it for argument. What, then?”

“Well, I’ve also my little drama.”

“An attachment?”

“An attachment.”

“That you shouldn’t have?”

“That I shouldn’t have.”

“A passion?”

“A passion.”

“Shared?”

“Ah thank goodness, no!”

Mrs. Dyott continued to gaze. “The object’s unaware—?”

“Utterly.”

Mrs. Dyott turned it over. “Are you sure?”

“Sure.”

“That’s what you call your decency? But isn’t it,” Mrs. Dyott asked, “rather his?”

“Dear no. It’s only his good fortune.”

Mrs. Dyott laughed. “But yours, darling—your good fortune: where does *that* come in?”

“Why, in my sense of the romance of it.”

“The romance of what? Of his not knowing?”

“Of my not wanting him to. If I did”—Maud had touchingly worked it out—“where would be my honesty?”

The inquiry, for an instant, held her friend, yet only, it seemed, for a stupefaction that was almost amusement. “Can you want or not want as you like? Where in the world, if you don’t want, is your romance?”

Mrs. Blessingbourne still wore her smile, and she now, with a light gesture that matched it, just touched the region of her heart. “There!”

Her companion admiringly marvelled. “A lovely place for it, no doubt!—but not quite a place, that I can see, to make the sentiment a relation.”

“Why not? What more is required for a relation for me?”

“Oh all sorts of things, I should say! And many more, added to those, to make it one for the person you mention.”

“Ah that I don’t pretend it either should be or *can* be. I only speak for myself.”

This was said in a manner that made Mrs. Dyott, with a visible mixture of impressions, suddenly turn away. She indulged in a vague movement or two, as if to look for something; then again found herself near her friend, on whom with the same abruptness, in fact with a strange sharpness, she conferred a kiss that might have represented either her tribute to exalted consistency or her idea of a graceful close of the discussion. “You deserve that one should speak *for* you!”

Her companion looked cheerful and secure. “How *can* you without knowing—?”

“Oh by guessing! It’s not—?”

But that was as far as Mrs. Dyott could get. “It’s not,” said Maud, “any one you’ve ever seen.”

“Ah then I give you up!”

And Mrs. Dyott conformed for the rest of Maud’s stay to the spirit of this speech. It was made on a Saturday night, and Mrs. Blessingbourne remained till the Wednesday following, an interval during which, as the return of fine weather was confirmed by the Sunday, the two ladies found a wider range of action. There were drives to be taken, calls made, objects of interest seen at a distance; with the effect of much easy talk and still more easy silence. There had been a question of Colonel Voyt’s probable return on the Sunday, but the whole time passed without a sign from him, and it was merely mentioned by Mrs. Dyott, in explanation, that he must have been suddenly called, as he was so liable to be, to town. That this in fact was what had happened he made clear to her on Thursday afternoon, when, walking over again late, he found her alone. The consequence of his Sunday letters had been his taking, that day, the 4.15. Mrs. Voyt had gone back on Thursday, and he now, to settle on the spot the question of a piece of work begun at his place, had rushed down for a few hours in anticipation of the usual collective move for the week’s end. He was to go up again by the late train, and had to count a little—a fact accepted by his hostess with the hard pliancy of practice—his present happy moments. Too few as these were, however, he found time to make of her an inquiry or two not directly bearing on their situation. The first was a recall of the question for which Mrs. Blessingbourne’s entrance on the previous Saturday had arrested her answer. Had that lady the idea of anything between them?

“No. I’m sure. There’s one idea she has got,” Mrs. Dyott went on; “but it’s quite different and not so very wonderful.”

“What then is it?”

“Well, that she’s herself in love.”

Voyt showed his interest. “You mean she told you?”

“I got it out of her.”

He showed his amusement. “Poor thing! And with whom?”

“With you.”

His surprise, if the distinction might be made, was less than his wonder. “You got that out of her too?”

“No—it remains in. Which is much the best way for it. For you to know it would be to end it.”

He looked rather cheerfully at sea. “Is that then why you tell me?”

“I mean for her to know you know it. Therefore it’s in your interest not to let her.”

“I see,” Voyt after a moment returned. “Your real calculation is that my interest will be sacrificed to my vanity—so that, if your other idea is just, the flame will in fact, and thanks to her morbid conscience, expire by her taking fright at seeing me so pleased. But I promise you,” he declared, “that she shan’t see it. So there you are!” She kept her eyes on him and had evidently to admit after a little that there she was. Distinct as he had made the case, however, he wasn’t yet quite satisfied. “Why are you so sure I’m the man?”

“From the way she denies you.”

“You put it to her?”

“Straight. If you hadn’t been she’d of course have confessed to you—to keep me in the dark about the real one.”

Poor Voyt laughed out again. “Oh you dear souls!”

“Besides,” his companion pursued, “I wasn’t in want of that evidence.”

“Then what other had you?”

“Her state before you came—which was what made me ask you how much you had seen her. And her state after it,” Mrs. Dyott added. “And her state,” she wound up, “while you were here.”

“But her state while I was here was charming.”

“Charming. That’s just what I say.”

She said it in a tone that placed the matter in its right light—a light in which they appeared kindly, quite tenderly, to watch Maud wander away into space with her lovely head bent under a theory rather too big for it. Voyt’s last word, however, was that there was just enough in it—in the theory—for them to allow that she had not shown herself, on the occasion of their talk, wholly bereft of sense. Her consciousness, if they let it alone—as they of course after this mercifully must—*was*, in the last analysis, a kind of shy romance. Not a romance like their own, a thing to make the fortune of any author up to the mark—one who should have the invention or who *could* have the courage; but a small scared starved subjective satisfaction that would do her no harm and nobody else any good. Who but a duffer—he stuck to his contention—would see the shadow of a “story” in it?

Flickerbridge

CHAPTER I

Frank Granger had arrived from Paris to paint a portrait—an order given him, as a young compatriot with a future, whose early work would some day have a price, by a lady from New York, a friend of his own people and also, as it happened, of Addie's, the young woman to whom it was publicly both affirmed and denied that he was engaged. Other young women in Paris—fellow-members there of the little tight transpontine world of art-study—professed to know that the pair had “several times” over renewed their fond understanding. This, however, was their own affair; the last phase of the relation, the last time of the times, had passed into vagueness; there was perhaps even an impression that if they were inscrutable to their friends they were not wholly crystalline to each other and themselves. What had occurred for Granger at all events in connexion with the portrait was that Mrs. Bracken, his intending model, whose return to America was at hand, had suddenly been called to London by her husband, occupied there with pressing business, but had yet desired that her displacement should not interrupt her sittings. The young man, at her request, had followed her to England and profited by all she could give him, making shift with a small studio lent him by a London painter whom he had known and liked a few years before in the French atelier that then cradled, and that continued to cradle, so many of their kind.

The British capital was a strange grey world to him, where people walked, in more ways than one, by a dim light; but he was happily of such a turn that the impression, just as it came, could nowhere ever fail him, and even the worst of these things was almost as much an occupation—putting it only at that—as the best. Mrs. Bracken moreover passed him on, and while the darkness ebbed a little in the April days he found himself consolingly committed to a couple of fresh subjects. This cut him out work for more than another month, but meanwhile, as he said, he saw a lot—a lot that, with frequency and with much expression, he wrote about to Addie. She also wrote to her absent friend, but in briefer snatches, a meagreness to her reasons for which he had long since assented. She had other play for her pen as well as, fortunately, other remuneration; a regular correspondence for a “prominent Boston paper,” fitful connexions with public sheets perhaps also in cases fitful, and a mind above all engrossed at times, to the exclusion of everything else, with the study of the short story. This last was what she had mainly come out to go into, two or three years after he had found himself engulfed in the mystery of Carolus. She was indeed, on her own deep sea, more engulfed than he had ever been, and he had grown to accept the sense that, for progress too, she sailed under more canvas. It hadn't been particularly present to him till now that he had in the least got on, but the way in which Addie had—and evidently still more would—was the theme, as it were, of every tongue. She had thirty short stories out and nine descriptive articles. His three or four portraits of fat American ladies—they were all fat, all ladies and all American—were a poor show compared with these triumphs; especially as Addie had begun to throw out that it was about time they should go home. It kept perpetually coming up in Paris, in the transpontine world, that, as the phrase was, America had grown more interesting since they left. Addie was attentive to the rumour, and, as full of conscience as she was of taste, of patriotism as of curiosity, had often put it to him frankly, with what he, who was of New York, recognised as her New England emphasis: “I'm not sure, you know, that we do *real* justice to our country.” Granger felt he would do it on the day—if the day ever came—he should irrevocably marry her. No other country could possibly have produced her.

CHAPTER II

But meanwhile it befell that, in London, he was stricken with influenza and with subsequent sorrow. The attack was short but sharp—had it lasted Addie would certainly have come to his aid; most of a blight really in its secondary stage. The good ladies his sitters—the ladies with the frizzled hair, with the diamond earrings, with the chins tending to the massive—left for him, at the door of his lodgings, flowers, soup and love, so that with their assistance he pulled through; but his convalescence was slow and his weakness out of proportion to the muffled shock. He came out, but he went about lame; it tired him to paint—he felt as if he had been ill three months. He strolled in Kensington Gardens when he should have been at work; he sat long on penny chairs and helplessly mused and mooned. Addie desired him to return to Paris, but there were chances under his hand that he felt he had just wit enough left not to relinquish. He would have gone for a week to the sea—he would have gone to Brighton; but Mrs. Bracken had to be finished—Mrs. Bracken was so soon to sail. He just managed to finish her in time—the day before the date fixed for his breaking ground on a greater business still, the circumvallation of Mrs. Dunn. Mrs. Dunn duly waited on him, and he sat down before her, feeling, however, ere he rose, that he must take a long breath before the attack. While asking himself that night, therefore, where he should best replenish his lungs he received from Addie, who had had from Mrs. Bracken a poor report of him, a communication which, besides being of sudden and startling interest, applied directly to his case.

His friend wrote to him under the lively emotion of having from one day to another become aware of a new relative, an ancient cousin, a sequestered gentlewoman, the sole survival of “the English branch of the family,” still resident, at Flickerbridge, in the “old family home,” and with whom, that he might immediately betake himself to so auspicious a quarter for change of air, she had already done what was proper to place him, as she said, in touch. What came of it all, to be brief, was that Granger found himself so placed almost as he read: he was in touch with Miss Wenham of Flickerbridge, to the extent of being in correspondence with her, before twenty-four hours had sped. And on the second day he was in the train, settled for a five-hours’ run to the door of this amiable woman who had so abruptly and kindly taken him on trust and of whom but yesterday he had never so much as heard. This was an oddity—the whole incident was—of which, in the corner of his compartment, as he proceeded, he had time to take the size. But the surprise, the incongruity, as he felt, could but deepen as he went. It was a sufficiently queer note, in the light, or the absence of it, of his late experience, that so complex a product as Addie should have *any* simple insular tie; but it was a queerer note still that she should have had one so long only to remain unprofitably unconscious of it. Not to have done something with it, used it, worked it, talked about it at least, and perhaps even written—these things, at the rate she moved, represented a loss of opportunity under which as he saw her, she was peculiarly formed to wince. She was at any rate, it was clear, doing something with it now; using it, working it, certainly, already talking—and, yes, quite possibly writing—about it. She was in short smartly making up what she had missed, and he could take such comfort from his own action as he had been helped to by the rest of the facts, succinctly reported from Paris on the very morning of his start.

It was the singular story of a sharp split—in a good English house—that dated now from years back. A worthy Briton, of the best middling stock, had, during the fourth decade of the century, as a very young man, in Dresden, whither he had been despatched to qualify in German for a stool in an uncle’s counting-house, met, admired, wooed and won an American girl, of due attractions, domiciled at that period with her parents and a sister, who was also attractive, in the Saxon capital. He had married her, taken her to England, and there, after some years of harmony and happiness, lost her. The sister in question had, after her death, come to him and to his young child on a visit, the effect of which, between the pair,

eventually defined itself as a sentiment that was not to be resisted. The bereaved husband, yielding to a new attachment and a new response, and finding a new union thus prescribed, had yet been forced to reckon with the unaccommodating law of the land. Encompassed with frowns in his own country, however, marriages of this particular type were wreathed in smiles in his sister's-in-law, so that his remedy was not forbidden. Choosing between two allegiances he had let the one go that seemed the least close, and had in brief transplanted his possibilities to an easier air. The knot was tied for the couple in New York, where, to protect the legitimacy of such other children as might come to them, they settled and prospered. Children came, and one of the daughters, growing up and marrying in her turn, was, if Frank rightly followed, the mother of his own Addie, who had been deprived of the knowledge of her indeed, in childhood, by death, and been brought up, though without undue tension, by a stepmother—a character breaking out thus anew.

The breach produced in England by the invidious action, as it was there held, of the girl's grandfather, had not failed to widen—all the more that nothing had been done on the American side to close it. Frigidity had settled, and hostility had been arrested only by indifference. Darkness therefore had fortunately supervened, and a cousinship completely divided. On either side of the impassable gulf, of the impenetrable curtain, each branch had put forth its leaves—a foliage wanting, in the American quarter, it was distinct enough to Granger, of no sign or symptom of climate and environment. The graft in New York had taken, and Addie was a vivid, an unmistakable flower. At Flickerbridge, or wherever, on the other hand, strange to say, the parent stem had had a fortune comparatively meagre. Fortune, it was true, in the vulgarest sense, had attended neither party. Addie's immediate belongings were as poor as they were numerous, and he gathered that Miss Wenham's pretensions to wealth were not so marked as to expose the claim of kinship to the imputation of motive. To this lady's single identity the original stock had at all events dwindled, and our young man was properly warned that he would find her shy and solitary. What was singular was that in these conditions she should desire, she should endure, to receive him. But that was all another story, lucid enough when mastered. He kept Addie's letters, exceptionally copious, in his lap; he coned them at intervals; he held the threads.

He looked out between whiles at the pleasant English land, an April *aquarelle* washed in with wondrous breadth. He knew the French thing, he knew the American, but he had known nothing of this. He saw it already as the remarkable Miss Wenham's setting. The doctor's daughter at Flickerbridge, with nippers on her nose, a palette on her thumb and innocence in her heart, had been the miraculous link. She had become aware even there, in our world of wonders, that the current fashion for young women so equipped was to enter the Parisian lists. Addie had accordingly chanced upon her, on the slopes of Montparnasse, as one of the English girls in one of the thorough-going sets. They had met in some easy collocation and had fallen upon common ground; after which the young woman, restored to Flickerbridge for an interlude and retailing there her adventures and impressions, had mentioned to Miss Wenham, who had known and protected her from babyhood, that that lady's own name of Adelaide was, as well as the surname conjoined with it, borne, to her knowledge, in Paris, by an extraordinary American specimen. She had then recrossed the Channel with a wonderful message, a courteous challenge, to her friend's duplicate, who had in turn granted through her every satisfaction. The duplicate had in other words bravely let Miss Wenham know exactly who she was. Miss Wenham, in whose personal tradition the flame of resentment appeared to have been reduced by time to the palest ashes—for whom indeed the story of the great schism was now but a legend only needing a little less dimness to make it romantic—Miss Wenham had promptly responded by a letter fragrant with the hope that old threads might be taken up. It was a relationship that they must puzzle out together, and she had earnestly sounded the

other party to it on the subject of a possible visit. Addie had met her with a definite promise; she would come soon, she would come when free, she would come in July; but meanwhile she sent her deputy. Frank asked himself by what name she had described, by what character introduced him to Flickerbridge. He mainly felt on the whole as if he were going there to find out if he were engaged to her. He was at sea really now as to which of the various views Addie herself took of it. To Miss Wenham she must definitely have taken one, and perhaps Miss Wenham would reveal it. This expectation was in fact his excuse for a possible indiscretion.

CHAPTER III

He was indeed to learn on arrival to what he had been committed; but that was for a while so much a part of his first general impression that the particular truth took time to detach itself, the first general impression demanding verily all his faculties of response. He almost felt for a day or two the victim of a practical joke, a gross abuse of confidence. He had presented himself with the moderate amount of flutter involved in a sense of due preparation; but he had then found that, however primed with prefaces and prompted with hints, he hadn't been prepared at all. How *could* he be, he asked himself, for anything so foreign to his experience, so alien to his proper world, so little to be preconceived in the sharp north light of the newest impressionism, and yet so recognised after all in the event, so noted and tasted and assimilated? It was a case he would scarce have known how to describe—could doubtless have described best with a full clean brush, supplemented by a play of gesture; for it was always his habit to see an occasion, of whatever kind, primarily as a picture, so that he might get it, as he was wont to say, so that he might keep it, well together. He had been treated of a sudden, in this adventure, to one of the sweetest fairest coolest impressions of his life—one moreover visibly complete and homogeneous from the start. Oh it was *there*, if that was all one wanted of a thing! It was so “there” that, as had befallen him in Italy, in Spain, confronted at last, in dusky side-chapel or rich museum, with great things dreamed of or with greater ones unexpectedly presented, he had held his breath for fear of breaking the spell; had almost, from the quick impulse to respect, to prolong, lowered his voice and moved on tiptoe. Supreme beauty suddenly revealed is apt to strike us as a possible illusion playing with our desire—instant freedom with it to strike us as a possible rashness.

This fortunately, however—and the more so as his freedom for the time quite left him—didn't prevent his hostess, the evening of his advent and while the vision was new, from being exactly as queer and rare and *impayable*, as improbable, as impossible, as delightful at the eight o'clock dinner—she appeared to keep these immense hours—as she had overwhelmingly been at the five o'clock tea. She was in the most natural way in the world one of the oddest apparitions, but that the particular means to such an end *could* be natural was an inference difficult to make. He failed in fact to make it for a couple of days; but then—though then only—he made it with confidence. By this time indeed he was sure of everything, luckily including himself. If we compare his impression, with slight extravagance, to some of the greatest he had ever received, this is simply because the image before him was so rounded and stamped. It expressed with pure perfection, it exhausted its character. It was so absolutely and so unconsciously what it was. He had been floated by the strangest of chances out of the rushing stream into a clear still backwater—a deep and quiet pool in which objects were sharply mirrored. He had hitherto in life known nothing that was old except a few statues and pictures; but here everything was old, was immemorial, and nothing so much so as the very freshness itself. Vaguely to have supposed there were such nooks in the world had done little enough, he now saw, to temper the glare of their opposites. It was the fine touches that counted, and these had to be seen to be believed.

Miss Wenham, fifty-five years of age and unappeasably timid, unaccountably strange, had, on her reduced scale, an almost Gothic grotesqueness; but the final effect of one's sense of it was an amenity that accompanied one's steps like wafted gratitude. More flurried, more spasmodic, more apologetic, more completely at a loss at one moment and more precipitately abounding at another, he had never before in all his days seen any maiden lady; yet for no maiden lady he had ever seen had he so promptly conceived a private enthusiasm. Her eyes protruded, her chin receded and her nose carried on in conversation a queer little independent motion. She wore on the top of her head an upright circular cap that made her resemble a caryatid disburdened, and on other parts of her person strange combinations of colours, stuffs, shapes, of metal, mineral and plant. The tones of her voice rose and fell, her facial convulsions, whether tending—one could scarce make out—to expression or *repression*, succeeded each other by a law of their own; she was embarrassed at nothing and at everything, frightened at everything and at nothing, and she approached objects, subjects, the simplest questions and answers and the whole material of intercourse, either with the indirectness of terror or with the violence of despair. These things, none the less, her refinements of oddity and intensities of custom, her betrayal at once of conventions and simplicities, of ease and of agony, her roundabout retarded suggestions and perceptions, still permitted her to strike her guest as irresistibly charming. He didn't know what to call it; she was a fruit of time. She had a queer distinction. She had been expensively produced and there would be a good deal more of her to come.

The result of the whole quality of her welcome, at any rate, was that the first evening, in his room, before going to bed, he relieved his mind in a letter to Addie, which, if space allowed us to embody it in our text, would usefully perform the office of a "plate." It would enable us to present ourselves as profusely illustrated. But the process of reproduction, as we say, costs. He wished his friend to know how grandly their affair turned out. She had put him in the way of something absolutely special—an old house untouched, untouchable, indescribable, an old corner such as one didn't believe existed, and the holy calm of which made the chatter of studios, the smell of paint, the slang of critics, the whole sense and sound of Paris, come back as so many signs of a huge monkey-cage. He moved about, restless, while he wrote; he lighted cigarettes and, nervous and suddenly scrupulous, put them out again; the night was mild and one of the windows of his large high room, which stood over the garden, was up. He lost himself in the things about him, in the type of the room, the last century with not a chair moved, not a point stretched. He hung over the objects and ornaments, blissfully few and adorably good, perfect pieces all, and never one, for a change, French. The scene was as rare as some fine old print with the best bits down in the corners. Old books and old pictures, allusions remembered and aspects conjectured, reappeared to him; he knew not what anxious islanders had been trying for in their backward hunt for the homely. But the homely at Flickerbridge was all style, even as style at the same time was mere honesty. The larger, the smaller past—he scarce knew which to call it—was at all events so hushed to sleep round him as he wrote that he had almost a bad conscience about having come. How one might love it, but how one might spoil it! To look at it too hard was positively to make it conscious, and to make it conscious was positively to wake it up. Its only safety, of a truth, was to be left still to sleep—to sleep in its large fair chambers and under its high clean canopies.

He added thus restlessly a line to his letter, maundered round the room again, noted and fingered something else, and then, dropping on the old flowered sofa, sustained by the tight cubes of its cushions, yielded afresh to the cigarette, hesitated, stared, wrote a few words more. He wanted Addie to know, that was what he most felt, unless he perhaps felt, more how much she herself would want to. Yes, what he supremely saw was all that Addie would make of it. Up to his neck in it there he fairly turned cold at the sense of suppressed

opportunity, of the outrage of privation that his correspondent would retrospectively and, as he even divined with a vague shudder, almost vindictively nurse. Well, what had happened was that the acquaintance had been kept for her, like a packet enveloped and sealed for delivery, till her attention was free. He saw her there, heard her and felt her—felt how she would feel and how she would, as she usually said, “rave.” Some of her young compatriots called it “yell,” and in the reference itself, alas! illustrated their meaning. She would understand the place at any rate, down to the ground; there wasn’t the slightest doubt of that. Her sense of it would be exactly like his own, and he could see, in anticipation, just the terms of recognition and rapture in which she would abound. He knew just what she would call quaint, just what she would call bland, just what she would call weird, just what she would call wild. She would take it all in with an intelligence much more fitted than his own, in fact, to deal with what he supposed he must regard as its literary relations. She would have read the long-winded obsolete memoirs and novels that both the figures and the setting ought clearly to remind one of; she would know about the past generations—the lumbering country magnates and their turbaned wives and round-eyed daughters, who, in other days, had treated the ruddy sturdy tradeless town,—the solid square houses and wide walled gardens, the streets to-day all grass and gossip, as the scene of a local “season.” She would have warrant for the assemblies, dinners, deep potations; for the smoked sconces in the dusky parlours; for the long muddy century of family coaches, “holsters,” highwaymen. She would put a finger in short, just as he had done, on the vital spot—the rich humility of the whole thing, the fact that neither Flickerbridge in general nor Miss Wenham in particular, nor anything nor any one concerned, had a suspicion of their characters and their merit. Addie and he would have to come to let in light.

He let it in then, little by little, before going to bed, through the eight or ten pages he addressed to her; assured her that it was the happiest case in the world, a little picture—yet full of “style” too—absolutely composed and transmitted, with tradition, and tradition only, in every stroke, tradition still noiselessly breathing and visibly flushing, marking strange hours in the tall mahogany clocks that were never wound up and that yet audibly ticked on. All the elements, he was sure he should see, would hang together with a charm, presenting his hostess—a strange iridescent fish for the glazed exposure of an aquarium—as afloat in her native medium. He left his letter open on the table, but, looking it over next morning, felt of a sudden indisposed to send it. He would keep it to add more, for there would be more to know; yet when three days had elapsed he still had not sent it. He sent instead, after delay, a much briefer report, which he was moved to make different and, for some reason, less vivid. Meanwhile he learned from Miss Wenham how Addie had introduced him. It took time to arrive with her at that point, but after the Rubicon was crossed they went far afield.

CHAPTER IV

“Oh yes, she said you were engaged to her. That was why—since I *had* broken out—she thought I might like to see you; as I assure you I’ve been so delighted to. But *aren’t* you?” the good lady asked as if she saw in his face some ground for doubt.

“Assuredly—if she says so. It may seem very odd to you, but I haven’t known, and yet I’ve felt that, being nothing whatever to you directly, I need some warrant for consenting thus to be thrust on you. We *were*,” the young man explained, “engaged a year ago; but since then (if you don’t mind my telling you such things; I feel now as if I could tell you anything!) I haven’t quite known how I stand. It hasn’t seemed we were in a position to marry. Things are better now, but I haven’t quite known how she’d see them. They were so bad six months ago that I understood her, I thought, as breaking off. I haven’t broken; I’ve only accepted, for the time—because men must be easy with women—being treated as ‘the best of friends.’ Well, I

try to be. I wouldn't have come here if I hadn't been. I thought it would be charming for her to know you—when I heard from her the extraordinary way you had dawned upon her; and charming therefore if I could help her to it. And if I'm helping you to know *her*," he went on, "isn't that charming too?"

"Oh I so want to!" Miss Wenham murmured in her unpractical impersonal way. "You're so different!" she wistfully declared.

"It's *you*, if I may respectfully, ecstatically say so, who are different. That's the point of it all. I'm not sure that anything so terrible really ought to happen to you as to know us."

"Well," said Miss Wenham, "I do know you a little by this time, don't I? And I don't find it terrible. It's a delightful change for me."

"Oh I'm not sure you ought to have a delightful change!"

"Why not—if you do?"

"Ah I can bear it. I'm not sure you can. I'm too bad to spoil—I AM spoiled. I'm nobody, in short; I'm nothing. I've no type. You're *all* type. It has taken delicious long years of security and monotony to produce you. You fit your frame with a perfection only equalled by the perfection with which your frame fits you. So this admirable old house, all time-softened white within and time-faded red without, so everything that surrounds you here and that has, by some extraordinary mercy, escaped the inevitable fate of exploitation: so it all, I say, is the sort of thing that, were it the least bit to fall to pieces, could never, ah never more be put together again. I have, dear Miss Wenham," Granger went on, happy himself in his extravagance, which was yet all sincere, and happier still in her deep but altogether pleased mystification—"I've found, do you know, just the thing one has ever heard of that you most resemble. You're the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood."

He still had no compunction when he heard her bewilderedly sigh: "Oh you're too delightfully droll!"

"No, I only put things just as they are, and as I've also learned a little, thank heaven, to see them—which isn't, I quite agree with you, at all what any one does. You're in the deep doze of the spell that has held you for long years, and it would be a shame, a crime, to wake you up. Indeed I already feel with a thousand scruples that I'm giving you the fatal shake. I say it even though it makes me sound a little as if I thought myself the fairy prince."

She gazed at him with her queerest kindest look, which he was getting used to in spite of a faint fear, at the back of his head, of the strange things that sometimes occurred when lonely ladies, however mature, began to look at interesting young men from over the seas as if the young men desired to flirt. "It's so wonderful," she said, "that you should be so very odd and yet so very good-natured." Well, it all came to the same thing—it was so wonderful that *she* should be so simple and yet so little of a bore. He accepted with gratitude the theory of his languor—which moreover was real enough and partly perhaps why he was so sensitive; he let himself go as a convalescent, let her insist on the weakness always left by fever. It helped him to gain time, to preserve the spell even while he talked of breaking it; saw him through slow strolls and soft sessions, long gossips, fitful hopeless questions—there was so much more to tell than, by any contortion, she *could*—and explanations addressed gallantly and patiently to her understanding, but not, by good fortune, really reaching it. They were perfectly at cross-purposes, and it was the better, and they wandered together in the silver haze with all communication blurred.

When they sat in the sun in her formal garden he quite knew how little even the tenderest consideration failed to disguise his treating her as the most exquisite of curiosities. The term

of comparison most present to him was that of some obsolete musical instrument. The old-time order of her mind and her air had the stillness of a painted spinnet that was duly dusted, gently rubbed, but never tuned nor played on. Her opinions were like dried rose-leaves; her attitudes like British sculpture; her voice what he imagined of the possible tone of the old gilded silver-stringed harp in one of the corners of the drawing-room. The lonely little decencies and modest dignities of her life, the fine grain of its conservatism, the innocence of its ignorance, all its monotony of stupidity and salubrity, its cold dulness and dim brightness, were there before him. Meanwhile within him strange things took place. It was literally true that his impression began again, after a lull, to make him nervous and anxious, and for reasons peculiarly confused, almost grotesquely mingled, or at least comically sharp. He was distinctly an agitation and a new taste—that he could see; and he saw quite as much therefore the excitement she already drew from the vision of Addie, an image intensified by the sense of closer kinship and presented to her, clearly, with various erratic enhancements, by her friend the doctor’s daughter. At the end of a few days he said to her: “Do you know she wants to come without waiting any longer? She wants to come while I’m here. I received this morning her letter proposing it, but I’ve been thinking it over and have waited to speak to you. The thing is, you see, that if she writes to *you* proposing it—”

“Oh I shall be so particularly glad!”

CHAPTER V

They were as usual in the garden, and it hadn’t yet been so present to him that if he were only a happy cad there would be a good way to protect her. As she wouldn’t hear of his being yet beyond precautions she had gone into the house for a particular shawl that was just the thing for his knees, and, blinking in the watery sunshine, had come back with it across the fine little lawn. He was neither fatuous nor asinine, but he had almost to put it to himself as a small task to resist the sense of his absurd advantage with her. It filled him with horror and awkwardness, made him think of he didn’t know what, recalled something of Maupassant’s—the smitten “Miss Harriet” and her tragic fate. There was a preposterous possibility—yes, he held the strings quite in his hands—of keeping the treasure for himself. That was the art of life—what the real artist would consistently do. He would close the door on his impression, treat it as a private museum. He would see that he could lounge and linger there, live with wonderful things there, lie up there to rest and refit. For himself he was sure that after a little he should be able to paint there—do things in a key he had never thought of before. When she brought him the rug he took it from her and made her sit down on the bench and resume her knitting; then, passing behind her with a laugh, he placed it over her own shoulders; after which he moved to and fro before her, his hands in his pockets and his cigarette in his teeth. He was ashamed of the cigarette—a villainous false note; but she allowed, liked, begged him to smoke, and what he said to her on it, in one of the pleasantries she benevolently missed, was that he did so for fear of doing worse. That only showed how the end was really in sight. “I dare say it will strike you as quite awful, what I’m going to say to you, but I can’t help it. I speak out of the depths of my respect for you. It will seem to you horrid disloyalty to poor Addie. Yes—there we are; there *I* am at least in my naked monstrosity.” He stopped and looked at her till she might have been almost frightened. “Don’t let her come. Tell her not to. I’ve tried to prevent it, but she suspects.”

The poor woman wondered. “Suspects?”

“Well, I drew it, in writing to her, on reflexion, as mild as I could—having been visited in the watches of the night by the instinct of what might happen. Something told me to keep back my first letter—in which, under the first impression, I myself rashly ‘raved’; and I concocted instead of it an insincere and guarded report. But guarded as I was I clearly didn’t keep you

‘down,’ as we say, enough. The wonder of your colour—daub you over with grey as I might—must have come through and told the tale. She scents battle from afar—by which I mean she scents ‘quaintness.’ But keep her off. It’s hideous, what I’m saying—but I owe it to you. I owe it to the world. She’ll kill you.”

“You mean I shan’t get on with her?”

“Oh fatally! See how *I* have. And see how you have with ME. She’s intelligent, moreover, remarkably pretty, remarkably good. And she’ll adore you.”

“Well then?”

“Why that will be just how she’ll do for you.”

“Oh I can hold my own!” said Miss Wenham with the headshake of a horse making his sleigh-bells rattle in frosty air.

“Ah but you can’t hold hers! She’ll rave about you. She’ll write about you. You’re Niagara before the first white traveller—and you know, or rather you can’t know, what Niagara became *after* that gentleman. Addie will have discovered Niagara. She’ll understand you in perfection; she’ll feel you down to the ground; not a delicate shade of you will she lose or let any one else lose. You’ll be too weird for words, but the words will nevertheless come. You’ll be too exactly the real thing and be left too utterly just as you are, and all Addie’s friends and all Addie’s editors and contributors and readers will cross the Atlantic and flock to Flickerbridge just in order so—unanimously, universally, vociferously—to leave you. You’ll be in the magazines with illustrations; you’ll be in the papers with headings; you’ll be everywhere with everything. You don’t understand—you think you do, but you don’t. Heaven forbid you *should* understand! That’s just your beauty—your ‘sleeping’ beauty. But you needn’t. You can take me on trust. Don’t have her. Give as a pretext, as a reason, anything in the world you like. Lie to her—scare her away. I’ll go away and give you up—I’ll sacrifice everything myself.” Granger pursued his exhortation, convincing himself more and more. “If I saw my way out, my way completely through, I’d pile up some fabric of fiction for her—I should only want to be sure of its not tumbling down. One would have, you see, to keep the thing up. But I’d throw dust in her eyes. I’d tell her you don’t do at all—that you’re not in fact a desirable acquaintance. I’d tell her you’re vulgar, improper, scandalous; I’d tell her you’re mercenary, designing, dangerous; I’d tell her the only safe course is immediately to let you drop. I’d thus surround you with an impenetrable legend of conscientious misrepresentation, a circle of pious fraud, and all the while privately keep you for myself.”

She had listened to him as if he were a band of music and she herself a small shy garden-party. “I shouldn’t like you to go away. I shouldn’t in the least like you not to come again.”

“Ah there it is!” he replied. “How can I come again if Addie ruins you?”

“But how will she ruin me—even if she does what you say? I know I’m too old to change and really much too queer to please in any of the extraordinary ways you speak of. If it’s a question of quizzing me I don’t think my cousin, or any one else, will have quite the hand for it that *you* seem to have. So that if *you* haven’t ruined me—!”

“But I *have*—that’s just the point!” Granger insisted. “I’ve undermined you at least. I’ve left after all terribly little for Addie to do.”

She laughed in clear tones. “Well then, we’ll admit that you’ve done everything but frighten me.”

He looked at her with surpassing gloom. “No—that again is one of the most dreadful features. You’ll positively like it—what’s to come. You’ll be caught up in a chariot of fire like the prophet—wasn’t there, was there one?—of old. That’s exactly why—if one could but have done it—you’d have been to be kept ignorant and helpless. There’s something or other in Latin that says it’s the finest things that change the most easily for the worse. You already enjoy your dishonour and revel in your shame. It’s too late—you’re lost!”

CHAPTER VI

All this was as pleasant a manner of passing the time as any other, for it didn’t prevent his old-world corner from closing round him more entirely, nor stand in the way of his making out from day to day some new source as well as some new effect of its virtue. He was really scared at moments at some of the liberties he took in talk—at finding himself so familiar; for the great note of the place was just that a certain modern ease had never crossed its threshold, that quick intimacies and quick oblivions were a stranger to its air. It had known in all its days no rude, no loud invasion. Serenely unconscious of most contemporary things, it had been so of nothing so much as of the diffused social practice of running in and out. Granger held his breath on occasions to think how Addie would run. There were moments when, more than at others, for some reason, he heard her step on the staircase and her cry in the hall. If he nevertheless played freely with the idea with which we have shown him as occupied it wasn’t that in all palpable ways he didn’t sacrifice so far as mortally possible to stillness. He only hovered, ever so lightly, to take up again his thread. She wouldn’t hear of his leaving her, of his being in the least fit again, as she said, to travel. She spoke of the journey to London—which was in fact a matter of many hours—as an experiment fraught with lurking complications. He added then day to day, yet only hereby, as he reminded her, giving other complications a larger chance to multiply. He kept it before her, when there was nothing else to do, that she must consider; after which he had his times of fear that she perhaps really would make for him this sacrifice.

He knew she had written again to Paris, and knew he must himself again write—a situation abounding for each in the elements of a plight. If he stayed so long why then he wasn’t better, and if he wasn’t better Addie might take it into her head—! They must make it clear that he *was* better, so that, suspicious, alarmed at what was kept from her, she shouldn’t suddenly present herself to nurse him. If he was better, however, why did he stay so long? If he stayed only for the attraction the sense of the attraction might be contagious. This was what finally grew clearest for him, so that he had for his mild disciple hours of still sharper prophecy. It consorted with his fancy to represent to her that their young friend had been by this time unsparingly warned; but nothing could be plainer than that this was ineffectual so long as he himself resisted the ordeal. To plead that he remained because he was too weak to move was only to throw themselves back on the other horn of their dilemma. If he was too weak to move Addie would bring him her strength—of which, when she got there, she would give them specimens enough. One morning he broke out at breakfast with an intimate conviction. They’d see that she was actually starting—they’d receive a wire by noon. They didn’t receive it, but by his theory the portent was only the stronger. It had moreover its grave as well as its gay side, since Granger’s paradox and pleasantry were only the method most open to him of conveying what he felt. He literally heard the knell sound, and in expressing this to Miss Wenham with the conversational freedom that seemed best to pay his way he the more vividly faced the contingency. He could never return, and though he announced it with a despair that did what might be to make it pass as a joke, he saw how, whether or no she at last understood, she quite at last believed him. On this, to his knowledge, she wrote again to Addie, and the contents of her letter excited his curiosity. But that sentiment, though not

assuaged, quite dropped when, the day after, in the evening, she let him know she had had a telegram an hour before.

“She comes Thursday.”

He showed not the least surprise. It was the deep calm of the fatalist. It *had* to be. “I must leave you then to-morrow.”

She looked, on this, as he had never seen her; it would have been hard to say whether what showed in her face was the last failure to follow or the first effort to meet. “And really not to come back?”

“Never, never, dear lady. Why should I come back? You can never be again what you *have* been. I shall have seen the last of you.”

“Oh!” she touchingly urged.

“Yes, for I should next find you simply brought to self-consciousness. You’ll be exactly what you are, I charitably admit—nothing more or less, nothing different. But you’ll be it all in a different way. We live in an age of prodigious machinery, all organised to a single end. That end is publicity—a publicity as ferocious as the appetite of a cannibal. The thing therefore is not to have any illusions—fondly to flatter yourself in a muddled moment that the cannibal will spare you. He spares nobody. He spares nothing. It will be all right. You’ll have a lovely time. You’ll be only just a public character—blown about the world ‘for all you’re worth,’ and proclaimed ‘for all you’re worth’ on the house-tops. It will be for *that*, mind, I quite recognise—because Addie is superior—as well as for all you aren’t. So good-bye.”

He remained however till the next day, and noted at intervals the different stages of their friend’s journey; the hour, this time, she would really have started, the hour she’d reach Dover, the hour she’d get to town, where she’d alight at Mrs. Dunn’s. Perhaps she’d bring Mrs. Dunn, for Mrs. Dunn would swell the chorus. At the last, on the morrow, as if in anticipation of this stillness settled between them: he became as silent as his hostess. But before he went she brought out shyly and anxiously, as an appeal, the question that for hours had clearly been giving her thought. “Do you meet her then to-night in London?”

“Dear no. In what position am I, alas! to do that? When can I *ever* meet her again?” He had turned it all over. “If I could meet Addie after this, you know, I could meet *you*. And if I do meet Addie,” he lucidly pursued, “what will happen by the same stroke is that I *shall* meet you. And that’s just what I’ve explained to you I dread.”

“You mean she and I will be inseparable?”

He hesitated. “I mean she’ll tell me all about you. I can hear her and her ravings now.”

She gave again—and it was infinitely sad—her little whinnying laugh. “Oh but if what you say is true you’ll know.”

“Ah but Addie won’t! Won’t, I mean, know that *I* know—or at least won’t believe it. Won’t believe that any one knows. Such,” he added with a strange smothered sigh, “is Addie. Do you know,” he wound up, “that what, after all, has most definitely happened is that you’ve made me see her as I’ve never done before?”

She blinked and gasped, she wondered and despaired. “Oh no, it will be *you*. I’ve had nothing to do with it. Everything’s all you!”

But for all it mattered now! “You’ll see,” he said, “that she’s charming. I shall go for to-night to Oxford. I shall almost cross her on the way.”

“Then if she’s charming what am I to tell her from you in explanation of such strange behaviour as your flying away just as she arrives?”

“Ah you needn’t mind about that—you needn’t tell her anything.”

She fixed him as if as never again. “It’s none of my business, of course I feel; but isn’t it a little cruel if you’re engaged?”

Granger gave a laugh almost as odd as one of her own. “Oh you’ve cost me that!”—and he put out his hand to her.

She wondered while she took it. “Cost you—?”

“We’re not engaged. Good-bye.”

The Birthplace

I

It seemed to them at first, the offer, too good to be true, and their friend's letter, addressed to them to feel, as he said, the ground, to sound them as to inclinations and possibilities, had almost the effect of a brave joke at their expense. Their friend, Mr. Grant-Jackson, a highly preponderant pushing person, great in discussion and arrangement, abrupt in overture, unexpected, if not perverse, in attitude, and almost equally acclaimed and objected to in the wide midland region to which he had taught, as the phrase was, the size of his foot—their friend had launched his bolt quite out of the blue and had thereby so shaken them as to make them fear almost more than hope. The place had fallen vacant by the death of one of the two ladies, mother and daughter, who had discharged its duties for fifteen years; the daughter was staying on alone, to accommodate, but had found, though extremely mature, an opportunity of marriage that involved retirement, and the question of the new incumbents was not a little pressing. The want thus determined was of a united couple of some sort, of the right sort, a pair of educated and competent sisters possibly preferred, but a married pair having its advantages if other qualifications were marked. Applicants, candidates, besiegers of the door of every one supposed to have a voice in the matter, were already beyond counting, and Mr. Grant-Jackson, who was in his way diplomatic and whose voice, though not perhaps of the loudest, possessed notes of insistence, had found his preference fixing itself on some person or brace of persons who had been decent and dumb. The Gedges appeared to have struck him as waiting in silence—though absolutely, as happened, no busy body had brought them, far away in the North, a hint either of bliss or of danger; and the happy spell, for the rest, had obviously been wrought in him by a remembrance which, though now scarcely fresh, had never before borne any such fruit.

Morris Gedge had for a few years, as a young man, carried on a small private school of the order known as preparatory, and had happened then to receive under his roof the small son of the great man, who was not at that time so great. The little boy, during an absence of his parents from England, had been dangerously ill, so dangerously that they had been recalled in haste, though with inevitable delays, from a far country—they had gone to America, with the whole continent and the great sea to cross again—and had got back to find the child saved, but saved, as couldn't help coming to light, by the extreme devotion and perfect judgement of Mrs. Gedge. Without children of her own she had particularly attached herself to this tiniest and tenderest of her husband's pupils, and they had both dreaded as a dire disaster the injury to their little enterprise that would be caused by their losing him. Nervous anxious sensitive persons, with a pride—as they were for that matter well aware—above their position, never, at the best, to be anything but dingy, they had nursed him in terror and had brought him through in exhaustion. Exhaustion, as befell, had thus overtaken them early and had for one reason and another managed to assert itself as their permanent portion. The little boy's death would, as they said, have done for them, yet his recovery hadn't saved them; with which it was doubtless also part of a shy but stiff candour in them that they didn't regard themselves as having in a more indirect manner laid up treasure. Treasure was not to be, in any form whatever, of their dreams or of their waking sense; and the years that followed had limped under their weight, had now and then rather grievously stumbled, had even barely escaped laying them in the dust. The school hadn't prospered, had but dwindled to a close. Gedge's health had failed and still more every sign in him of a capacity to publish himself as practical. He had tried several things, he had tried many, but the final appearance was of their having

tried him not less. They mostly, at the time I speak of, were trying his successors, while he found himself, with an effect of dull felicity that had come in this case from the mere postponement of change, in charge of the grey town-library of Blackport-on-Dwindle, all granite, fog and female fiction. This was a situation in which his general intelligence—admittedly his strong point—was doubtless imaged, around him, as feeling less of a strain than that mastery of particulars in which he was recognised as weak.

It was at Blackport-on-Dwindle that the silver shaft reached and pierced him; it was as an alternative to dispensing dog's-eared volumes the very titles of which, on the lips of innumerable glib girls, were a challenge to his nerves, that the wardenship of so different a temple presented itself. The stipend named exceeded little the slim wage at present paid him, but even had it been less the interest and the honour would have struck him as determinant. The shrine at which he was to preside—though he had always lacked occasion to approach it—figured to him as the most sacred known to the steps of men, the early home of the supreme poet, the Mecca of the English-speaking race. The tears came into his eyes sooner still than into his wife's while he looked about with her at their actual narrow prison, so grim with enlightenment, so ugly with industry, so turned away from any dream, so intolerable to any taste. He felt as if a window had opened into a great green woodland, a woodland that had a name all glorious, immortal, that was peopled with vivid figures, each of them renowned, and that gave out a murmur, deep as the sound of the sea, which was the rustle in forest shade of all the poetry, the beauty, the colour of life. It would be prodigious that of this transfigured world *he* should keep the key. No—he couldn't believe it, not even when Isabel, at sight of his face, came and helpfully kissed him. He shook his head with a strange smile. "We shan't get it. Why should we? It's perfect."

"If we don't he'll simply have been cruel; which is impossible when he has waited all this time to be kind." Mrs. Gedge did believe—she *would*; since the wide doors of the world of poetry had suddenly pushed back for them it was in the form of poetic justice that they were first to know it. She had her faith in their patron; it was sudden, but now complete. "He remembers—that's all; and that's our strength."

"And what's *his*?" Gedge asked. "He may want to put us through, but that's a different thing from being able. What are our special advantages?"

"Well, that we're just the thing." Her knowledge of the needs of the case was as yet, thanks to scant information, of the vaguest, and she had never, more than her husband, stood on the sacred spot; but she saw herself waving a nicely-gloved hand over a collection of remarkable objects and saying to a compact crowd of gaping awestruck persons: "And now, please, *this* way." She even heard herself meeting with promptness and decision an occasional inquiry from a visitor in whom audacity had prevailed over awe. She had once been with a cousin, years before, to a great northern castle, and that was the way the housekeeper had taken them round. And it was not moreover, either, that she thought of herself as a housekeeper: she was well above that, and the wave of her hand wouldn't fail to be such as to show it. This and much else she summed up as she answered her mate. "Our special advantages are that you're a gentleman."

"Oh!" said Gedge as if he had never thought of it, and yet as if too it were scarce worth thinking of.

"I see it all," she went on; "they've *had* the vulgar—they find they don't do. We're poor and we're modest, but any one can see what we are."

Gedge wondered. "Do you mean——?" More modest than she, he didn't know quite what she meant.

“We’re refined. We know how to speak.”

“Do we?”—he still, suddenly, wondered.

But she was from the first surer of everything than he; so that when a few weeks more had elapsed and the shade of uncertainty—though it was only a shade—had grown almost to sicken him, her triumph was to come with the news that they were fairly named. “We’re on poor pay, though we manage”—she had at the present juncture contended for her point. “But we’re highly cultivated, and for them to get *that*, don’t you see? without getting too much with it in the way of pretensions and demands, must be precisely their dream. We’ve no social position, but we don’t *mind* that we haven’t, do we? a bit; which is because we know the difference between realities and shams. We hold to reality, and that gives us common sense, which the vulgar have less than anything and which yet must be wanted there, after all, as well as anywhere else.”

Her companion followed her, but musingly, as if his horizon had within a few moments grown so great that he was almost lost in it and required a new orientation. The shining spaces surrounded him; the association alone gave a nobler arch to the sky. “Allow that we hold also a little to the romance. It seems to me that that’s the beauty. We’ve missed it all our life, and now it’s come. We shall be at headquarters for it. We shall have our fill of it.”

She looked at his face, at the effect in it of these prospects, and her own lighted as if he had suddenly grown handsome. “Certainly—we shall live as in a fairy-tale. But what I mean is that we shall give, in a way—and so gladly—quite as much as we get. With all the rest of it we’re for instance neat.” Their letter had come to them at breakfast, and she picked a fly out of the butter-dish. “It’s the way we’ll *keep* the place”—with which she removed from the sofa to the top of the cottage-piano a tin of biscuits that had refused to squeeze into the cupboard. At Blackport they were in lodgings—of the lowest description, she had been known to declare with a freedom felt by Blackport to be slightly invidious. The Birthplace—and that itself, after such a life, was exaltation—wouldn’t be lodgings, since a house close beside it was set apart for the warden, a house joining on to it as a sweet old parsonage is often annexed to a quaint old church. It would all together be their home, and such a home as would make a little world that they would never want to leave. She dwelt on the gain, for that matter, to their income; as obviously, though the salary was not a change for the better, the house given them would make all the difference. He assented to this, but absently, and she was almost impatient at the range of his thoughts. It was as if something for him—the very swarm of them—veiled the view; and he presently of himself showed what it was.

“What I can’t get over is its being such a man—!” He almost, from inward emotion, broke down.

“Such a man——?”

“Him, *him*, HIM——!” It was too much.

“Grant-Jackson? Yes, it’s a surprise, but one sees how he has been meaning, all the while, the right thing by us.”

“I mean *Him*,” Gedge returned more coldly; “our becoming familiar and intimate—for that’s what it will come to. We shall just live with Him.”

“Of course—it *is* the beauty.” And she added quite gaily: “The more we do the more we shall love Him.”

“No doubt—but it’s rather awful. The more we *know* Him,” Gedge reflected, “the more we shall love Him. We don’t as yet, you see, know Him so very tremendously.”

“We do so quite as well, I imagine, as the sort of people they’ve had. And that probably isn’t—unless you care, as we do—so awfully necessary. For there are the facts.”

“Yes—there are the facts.”

“I mean the principal ones. They’re all that the people—the people who come—want.”

“Yes—they must be all *they* want.”

“So that they’re all that those who’ve been in charge have needed to know.”

“Ah,” he said as if it were a question of honour, “we must know everything.”

She cheerfully acceded: she had the merit, he felt, of keeping the case within bounds.

“Everything. But about him personally,” she added, “there isn’t, is there? so very very much.”

“More, I believe, than there used to be. They’ve made discoveries.”

It was a grand thought. “Perhaps *we* shall make some!”

“Oh I shall be content to be a little better up in what has been done.” And his eyes rested on a shelf of books, half of which, little worn but much faded, were of the florid “gift” order and belonged to the house. Of those among them that were his own most were common specimens of the reference sort, not excluding an old Bradshaw and a catalogue of the town-library. “We’ve not even a Set of our own. Of the Works,” he explained in quick repudiation of the sense, perhaps more obvious, in which she might have taken it.

As a proof of their scant range of possessions this sounded almost abject, till the painful flush with which they met on the admission melted presently into a different glow. It was just for that kind of poorness that their new situation was, by its intrinsic charm, to console them. And Mrs. Gedge had a happy thought. “Wouldn’t the Library more or less have them?”

“Oh no, we’ve nothing of that sort: for what do you take us?” This, however, was but the play of Gedge’s high spirits: the form both depression and exhilaration most frequently took with him being a bitterness on the subject of the literary taste of Blackport. No one was so deeply acquainted with it. It acted with him in fact as so lurid a sign of the future that the charm of the thought of removal was sharply enhanced by the prospect of escape from it. The institution he served didn’t of course deserve the particular reproach into which his irony had flowered; and indeed if the several Sets in which the Works were present were a trifle dusty, the dust was a little his own fault. To make up for that now he had the vision of immediately giving his time to the study of them; he saw himself indeed, inflamed with a new passion, earnestly commenting and collating. Mrs. Gedge, who had suggested that, till their move should come, they ought to read Him regularly of an evening—certain as they were to do it still more when in closer quarters with Him—Mrs. Gedge felt also, in her degree, the spell; so that the very happiest time of their anxious life was perhaps to have been the series of lamplight hours, after supper, in which, alternately taking the book, they declaimed, they almost performed, their beneficent author. He became speedily more than their author—their personal friend, their universal light, their final authority and divinity. Where in the world, they were already asking themselves, would they have been without Him? By the time their appointment arrived in form their relation to Him had immensely developed. It was amusing to Morris Gedge that he had so lately blushed for his ignorance, and he made this remark to his wife during the last hour they were able to give their study before proceeding, across half the country, to the scene of their romantic future. It was as if, in deep close throbs, in cool after-waves that broke of a sudden and bathed his mind, all possession and comprehension and sympathy, all the truth and the life and the story, had come to him, and come, as the

newspapers said, to stay. "It's absurd," he didn't hesitate to say, "to talk of our not 'knowing.' So far as we don't it's because we're dunces. He's *in* the thing, over His ears, and the more we get into it the more we're with Him. I seem to myself at any rate," he declared, "to *see* Him in it as if He were painted on the wall."

"Oh *doesn't* one rather, the dear thing? And don't you feel where it is?" Mrs. Gedge finely asked. "We see Him because we love Him—that's what we do. How can we not, the old darling—with what He's doing for us? There's no light"—she had a sententious turn—"like true affection."

"Yes, I suppose that's it. And yet," her husband mused, "I see, confound me, the faults."

"That's because you're so critical. You see them, but you don't mind them. You see them, but you forgive them. You mustn't mention them *there*. We shan't, you know, be there for *that*."

"Dear no!" he laughed: "we'll chuck out any one who hints at them."

II

If the sweetness of the preliminary months had been great, great too, though almost excessive as agitation, was the wonder of fairly being housed with Him, of treading day and night in the footsteps He had worn, of touching the objects, or at all events the surfaces, the substances, over which His hands had played, which His arms, His shoulders had rubbed, of breathing the air—or something not too unlike it—in which His voice had sounded. They had had a little at first their bewilderments, their disconcertedness; the place was both humbler and grander than they had exactly prefigured, more at once of a cottage and of a museum, a little more archaically bare and yet a little more richly official. But the sense was strong with them that the point of view, for the inevitable ease of the connexion, patiently, indulgently awaited them; in addition to which, from the first evening, after closing-hour, when the last blank pilgrim had gone, the mere spell, the mystic presence—as if they had had it quite to themselves—were all they could have desired. They had received, at Grant-Jackson's behest and in addition to a table of instructions and admonitions by the number and in some particulars by the nature of which they found themselves slightly depressed, various little guides, manuals, travellers' tributes, literary memorials and other catch-penny publications; which, however, were to be for the moment swallowed up in the interesting episode of the induction or initiation appointed for them in advance at the hands of several persons whose relation to the establishment was, as superior to their own, still more official, and at those in especial of one of the ladies who had for so many years borne the brunt. About the instructions from above, about the shilling books and the well-known facts and the full-blown legend, the supervision, the subjection, the submission, the view as of a cage in which he should circulate and a groove in which he should slide, Gedge had preserved a certain play of mind; but all power of reaction appeared suddenly to desert him in the presence of his so visibly competent predecessor and as an effect of her good offices. He had not the resource, enjoyed by his wife, of seeing himself, with impatience, attired in black silk of a make characterised by just the right shade of austerity; so that this firm smooth expert and consummately respectable middle-aged person had him somehow, on the whole ground, completely at her mercy.

It was evidently something of a rueful moment when, as a lesson—she being for the day or two still in the field—he accepted Miss Putchin's suggestion of "going round" with her and with the successive squads of visitors she was there to deal with. He appreciated her method—he saw there had to be one; he admired her as succinct and definite; for there were the facts, as his wife had said at Blackport, and they were to be disposed of in the time; yet he

felt a very little boy as he dangled, more than once, with Mrs. Gedge, at the tail of the human comet. The idea had been that they should by this attendance more fully embrace the possible accidents and incidents, so to put it, of the relation to the great public in which they were to find themselves; and the poor man's excited perception of the great public rapidly became such as to resist any diversion meaner than that of the admirable manner of their guide. It wandered from his gaping companions to that of the priestess in black silk, whom he kept asking himself if either he or Isabel could hope by any possibility ever remotely to resemble; then it bounded restlessly back to the numerous persons who revealed to him as it had never yet been revealed the happy power of the simple to hang upon the lips of the wise. The great thing seemed to be—and quite surprisingly—that the business was easy and the strain, which as a strain they had feared, moderate; so that he might have been puzzled, had he fairly caught himself in the act, by his recognising as the last effect of the impression an odd absence of the power really to rest in it, an agitation deep within him that vaguely threatened to grow. "It isn't, you see, so very complicated," the black silk lady seemed to throw off, with everything else, in her neat crisp cheerful way; in spite of which he already, the very first time—that is after several parties had been in and out and up and down—went so far as to wonder if there weren't more in it than she imagined. She was, so to speak, kindness itself—was all encouragement and reassurance; but it was just her slightly coarse redolence of these very things that, on repetition, before they parted, dimmed a little, as he felt, the light of his acknowledging smile. This again she took for a symptom of some pleading weakness in him—he could never be as brave as she; so that she wound up with a few pleasant words from the very depth of her experience. "You'll get into it, never fear—it will *come*; and then you'll feel as if you had never done anything else." He was afterwards to know that, on the spot, at this moment, he must have begun to wince a little at such a menace; that he might come to feel as if he had never done anything but what Miss Putchin did loomed for him, in germ, as a penalty to pay. The support she offered, none the less, continued to strike him; she put the whole thing on so sound a basis when she said: "You see they're so nice about it—they take such an interest. And they never do a thing they shouldn't. That was always every thing to mother and me." "They," Gedge had already noticed, referred constantly and hugely, in the good woman's talk, to the millions who shuffled through the house; the pronoun in question was for ever on her lips, the hordes it represented filled her consciousness, the addition of their numbers ministered to her glory. Mrs. Gedge promptly fell in. "It must be indeed delightful to see the effect on so many and to feel that one may perhaps do something to make it—well, permanent." But he was kept silent by his becoming more sharply aware that this was a new view, for him, of the reference made, that he had never thought of the quality of the place as derived from Them, but from Somebody Else, and that They, in short, seemed to have got into the way of crowding Him out. He found himself even a little resenting this for Him—which perhaps had something to do with the slightly invidious cast of his next inquiry.

"And are They always, as one might say—a—stupid?"

"Stupid!" She stared, looking as if no one *could* be such a thing in such a connexion. No one had ever been anything but neat and cheerful and fluent, except to be attentive and unobjectionable and, so far as was possible, American.

"What I mean is," he explained, "is there any perceptible proportion that take an interest in Him?"

His wife stepped on his toe; she deprecated levity.

But his mistake fortunately was lost on their friend.

“That’s just why they come, that they take such an interest. I sometimes think they take more than about anything else in the world.” With which Miss Putchin looked about at the place. “It *is* pretty, don’t you think, the way they’ve got it now?” This, Gedge saw, was a different “They”; it applied to the powers that were—the people who had appointed him, the governing, visiting Body, in respect to which he was afterwards to remark to Mrs. Gedge that a fellow—it was the difficulty—didn’t know “where to have her.” His wife, at a loss, questioned at that moment the necessity of having her anywhere, and he said, good-humouredly, “Of course; it’s all right.” He was in fact content enough with the last touches their friend had given the picture. “There are many who know all about it when they come, and the Americans often are tremendously up. Mother and me really enjoyed”—it was her only slip—the interest of the Americans. We’ve sometimes had ninety a day, and all wanting to see and hear everything. But you’ll work them off; you’ll see the way—it’s all experience.” She came back for his comfort to that. She came back also to other things: she did justice to the considerable class who arrived positive and primed. “There are those who know more about it than you do. But *that* only comes from their interest.”

“Who know more about what?” Gedge inquired.

“Why about the place. I mean they have their ideas—of what everything is, and *where* it is, and what it isn’t and where it *should* be. They do ask questions,” she said, yet not so much in warning as in the complacency of being herself seasoned and sound; “and they’re down on you when they think you go wrong. As if you ever could! You know too much,” she astutely smiled; “or you *will*.”

“Oh you mustn’t know *too* much, must you?” And Gedge now smiled as well. He knew, he thought, what he meant.

“Well, you must know as much as anybody else. I claim at any rate that I do,” Miss Putchin declared. “They never really caught me out.”

“I’m very certain of *that*”—and Mrs. Gedge had an elation almost personal.

“Surely,” he said, “I don’t want to be caught out.” She rejoined that in such a case he would have *Them* down on him, and he saw that this time she meant the powers above. It quickened his sense of all the elements that were to reckon with, yet he felt at the same time that the powers above were not what he should most fear. “I’m glad,” he observed, “that they ever ask questions; but I happened to notice, you know, that no one did to-day.”

“Then you missed several—and no loss. There were three or four put to me too silly to remember. But of course they mostly *are* silly.”

“You mean the questions?”

She laughed with all her cheer. “Yes, sir; I don’t mean the answers.”

Whereupon, for a moment snubbed and silent, he felt like one of the crowd. Then it made him slightly vicious. “I didn’t know but you meant the people in general—till I remembered that I’m to understand from you that *they’re* wise, only occasionally breaking down.”

It wasn’t really till then, he thought, that she lost patience; and he had had, much more than he meant no doubt, a cross-questioning air. “You’ll see for yourself.” Of which he was sure enough. He was in fact so ready to take this that she came round to full accommodation, put it frankly that every now and then they broke out—not the silly, oh no, the intensely inquiring. “We’ve had quite lively discussions, don’t you know, about well-known points. They want it all *their* way, and I know the sort that are going to as soon as I see them. That’s one of the things you do—you get to know the sorts. And if it’s what you’re afraid of—their taking you

up," she was further gracious enough to say, "you needn't mind a bit. What *do* they know, after all, when for us it's our life? I've never moved an inch, because, you see, I shouldn't have been here if I didn't know where I was. No more will *you* be a year hence—you know what I mean, putting it impossibly—if you don't. I expect you do, in spite of your fancies." And she dropped once more to bed-rock. "There are the facts. Otherwise where would any of us be? That's all you've got to go upon. A person, however cheeky, can't have them *his* way just because he takes it into his head. There can only be *one* way, and," she gaily added as she took leave of them, "I'm sure it's quite enough!"

III

Gedge not only assented eagerly—one way *was* quite enough if it were the right one—but repeated it, after this conversation, at odd moments, several times over to his wife. "There can only be one way, one way," he continued to remark—though indeed much as if it were a joke; till she asked him how many more he supposed she wanted. He failed to answer this question, but resorted to another repetition. "There are the facts, the facts," which perhaps, however, he kept a little more to himself, sounding it at intervals in different parts of the house. Mrs. Gedge was full of comment on their clever introductress, though not restrictively save in the matter of her speech, "Me and mother," and a general tone—which certainly was not their sort of thing. "I don't know," he said, "perhaps it comes with the place, since speaking in immortal verse doesn't seem to come. It must be, one seems to see, one thing or the other. I daresay that in a few months I shall also be at it—'me and the wife.'"

"Why not 'me and the missus' at once?" Mrs. Gedge resentfully inquired. "I don't think," she observed at another time, "that I quite know what's the matter with you."

"It's only that I'm excited, awfully excited—as I don't see how one can't be. You wouldn't have a fellow drop into this berth as into an appointment at the Post Office. Here on the spot it goes to my head—how can that be helped? But we shall live into it, and perhaps," he said with an implication of the other possibility that was doubtless but part of his fine ecstasy, "we shall live through it." The place acted on his imagination—how, surely, shouldn't it? And his imagination acted on his nerves, and these things together, with the general vividness and the new and complete immersion, made rest for him almost impossible, so that he could scarce go to bed at night and even during the first week more than once rose in the small hours to move about, up and down, with his lamp—standing, sitting, listening, wondering, in the stillness, as if positively to recover some echo, to surprise some secret, of the *genius loci*. He couldn't have explained it—and didn't in fact need to explain it, at least to himself, since the impulse simply held him and shook him; but the time after closing, the time above all after the people—Them, as he felt himself on the way habitually to put it, predominant, insistent, all in the foreground—brought him, or ought to have brought him, he seemed to see, nearer to the enshrined Presence, enlarging the opportunity for communion and intensifying the sense of it. These nightly prowls, as he called them, were disquieting to his wife, who had no disposition to share in them, speaking with decision of the whole place as just the place to be forbidding after dark. She rejoiced in the distinctness, contiguous though it was, of their own little residence, where she trimmed the lamp and stirred the fire and heard the kettle sing, repairing the while the omissions of the small domestic who slept out; she foresaw her self, with some promptness, drawing rather sharply the line between her own precinct and that in which the great spirit might walk. It would be with them, the great spirit, all day—even if indeed on her making that remark, and in just that form, to her husband, he replied with a queer "But will he though?" And she vaguely imaged the development of a domestic antidote after a while, precisely, in the shape of curtains more markedly drawn and everything most

modern and lively, tea, “patterns,” the newspapers, the female fiction itself that they had reacted against at Blackport, quite defiantly cultivated.

These possibilities, however, were all right, as her companion said it was, all the first autumn—they had arrived at summer’s end; and he might have been more than content with a special set of his own that he had access to from behind, passing out of their low door for the few steps between it and the Birthplace. With his lamp ever so carefully guarded and his nursed keys that made him free of treasures, he crossed the dusky interval so often that she began to qualify it as a habit that “grew.” She spoke of it almost as if he had taken to drink, and he humoured that view of it by allowing the cup to be strong. This had been in truth altogether his immediate sense of it; strange and deep for him the spell of silent sessions before familiarity and, to some small extent, disappointment had set in. The exhibitional side of the establishment had struck him, even on arrival, as qualifying too much its character; he scarce knew what he might best have looked for, but the three or four rooms bristled overmuch, in the garish light of day, with busts and relics, not even ostensibly always *His*, old prints and old editions, old objects fashioned in His likeness, furniture “of the time” and autographs of celebrated worshippers. In the quiet hours and the deep dusk, none the less, under the play of the shifted lamp and that of his own emotion, these things too recovered their advantage, ministered to the mystery, or at all events to the impression, seemed consciously to offer themselves as personal to the poet. Not one of them was really or unchallengeably so, but they had somehow, through long association, got, as Gedge always phrased it, into the secret, and it was about the secret he asked them while he restlessly wandered. It wasn’t till months had elapsed that he found how little they had to tell him, and he was quite at his ease with them when he knew they were by no means where his sensibility had first placed them. They were as out of it as he; only, to do them justice, they had made him immensely feel. And still, too, it was not they who had done that most, since his sentiment had gradually cleared itself to deep, to deeper refinements.

The Holy of Holies of the Birthplace was the low, the sublime Chamber of Birth, sublime because, as the Americans usually said—unlike the natives they mostly found words—it was so pathetic; and pathetic because it was—well, really nothing else in the world that one could name, number or measure. It was as empty as a shell of which the kernel has withered, and contained neither busts nor prints nor early copies; it contained only the Fact—the Fact itself—which, as he stood sentient there at midnight, our friend, holding his breath, allowed to sink into him. He *had* to take it as the place where the spirit would most walk and where He would therefore be most to be met, with possibilities of recognition and reciprocity. He hadn’t, most probably—*He* hadn’t—much inhabited the room, as men weren’t apt, as a rule, to convert to their later use and involve in their wider fortune the scene itself of their nativity. But as there were moments when, in the conflict of theories, the sole certainty surviving for the critic threatened to be that He had not—unlike other successful men—*not* been born, so Gedge, though little of a critic, clung to the square feet of space that connected themselves, however feebly, with the positive appearance. He was little of a critic—he was nothing of one; he hadn’t pretended to the character before coming, nor come to pretend to it; also, luckily for him, he was seeing day by day how little use he could possibly have for it. It would be to him, the attitude of a high expert, distinctly a stumbling-block, and that he rejoiced, as the winter waned, in his ignorance, was one of the propositions he betook himself, in his odd manner, to enunciating to his wife. She denied it, for hadn’t she in the first place been present, wasn’t she still present, at his pious, his tireless study of everything connected with the subject?—so present that she had herself learned more about it than had ever seemed likely. Then in the second place he wasn’t to proclaim on the house-tops any

point at which he might be weak, for who knew, if it should get abroad that they were ignorant, what effect might be produced?—

“On the attraction”—he took her up—“of the Show?”

He had fallen into the harmless habit of speaking of the place as the “Show”; but she didn’t mind this so much as to be diverted by it. “No; on the attitude of the Body. You know they’re pleased with us, and I don’t see why you should want to spoil it. We got in by a tight squeeze—you know we’ve had evidence of that, and that it was about as much as our backers could manage. But we’re proving a comfort to them, and it’s absurd of you to question your suitability to people who were content with the Putchins.”

“I don’t, my dear,” he returned, “question any thing; but if I should do so it would be precisely because of the greater advantage constituted for the Putchins by the simplicity of their spirit. They were kept straight by the quality of their ignorance—which was denser even than mine. It was a mistake in us from the first to have attempted to correct or to disguise ours. We should have waited simply to become good parrots, to learn our lesson—all on the spot here, so little of it is wanted—and squawk it off.”

“Ah ‘squawk,’ love—what a word to use about Him!”

“It isn’t about Him—nothing’s about Him. None of Them care tuppence about Him. The only thing They care about is this empty shell—or rather, for it isn’t empty, the extraneous preposterous stuffing of it.”

“Preposterous?”—he made her stare with this as he hadn’t yet done.

At sight of her look, however—the gleam, as it might have been, of a queer suspicion—he bent to her kindly and tapped her cheek. “Oh it’s all right. We *must* fall back on the Putchins. Do you remember what she said?—‘They’ve made it so pretty now.’ They *have* made it pretty, and it’s a first-rate show. It’s a first-rate show and a first-rate billet, and He was a first-rate poet, and you’re a first-rate woman—to put up so sweetly, I mean, with my nonsense.”

She appreciated his domestic charm and she justified that part of his tribute which concerned herself. “I don’t care how much of your nonsense you talk to me, so long as you *keep* it all for me and don’t treat *Them* to it.”

“The pilgrims? No,” he conceded—“it isn’t fair to Them. They mean well.”

“What complaint have we after all to make of Them so long as They don’t break off bits—as They used, Miss Putchin told us, so awfully—in order to conceal them about Their Persons? She broke Them at least of that.”

“Yes,” Gedge mused again; “I wish awfully she hadn’t!”

“You’d like the relics destroyed, removed? That’s all that’s wanted!”

“There *are* no relics.”

“There won’t be any *soon*—unless you take care.” But he was already laughing, and the talk wasn’t dropped without his having patted her once more. An impression or two nevertheless remained with her from it, as he saw from a question she asked him on the morrow. “What did you mean yesterday about Miss Putchin’s simplicity—its keeping her ‘straight’? Do you mean mentally?”

Her “mentally” was rather portentous, but he practically confessed. “Well, it kept her up. I mean,” he amended, laughing, “it kept her down.”

It was really as if she had been a little uneasy. “You consider there’s a danger of your being affected? You know what I mean—of its going to your head. You do know,” she insisted as he said nothing. “Through your caring for him so. You’d certainly be right in that case about its having been a mistake for you to plunge so deep.” And then as his listening without reply, though with his look a little sad for her, might have denoted that, allowing for extravagance of statement, he saw there was something in it: “Give up your prowls. Keep it for daylight. Keep it for *Them*.”

“Ah,” he smiled, “if one could! My prowls,” he added, “are what I most enjoy. They’re the only time, as I’ve told you before, that I’m really with *Him*. Then I don’t see the place. He isn’t the place.”

“I don’t care for what you ‘don’t see,’” she returned with vivacity; “the question is of what you do see.”

Well, if it was, he waited before meeting it. “Do you know what I sometimes do?” And then as she waited too: “In the Birthroom there, when I look in late, I often put out my light. That makes it better.”

“Makes what——?”

“Everything.”

“What is it then you see in the dark?”

“Nothing!” said Morris Gedge.

“And what’s the pleasure of that?”

“Well, what the American ladies say. It’s so fascinating!”

IV

The autumn was brisk, as Miss Putchin had told them it would be, but business naturally fell off with the winter months and the short days. There was rarely an hour indeed without a call of some sort, and they were never allowed to forget that they kept the shop in all the world, as they might say, where custom was least fluctuating. The seasons told on it, as they tell on travel, but no other influence, consideration or convulsion to which the population of the globe is exposed. This population, never exactly in simultaneous hordes, but in a full swift and steady stream, passed through the smoothly-working mill and went, in its variety of degrees duly impressed and edified, on its artless way. Gedge gave himself up, with much ingenuity of spirit, to trying to keep in relation with it; having even at moments, in the early time, glimpses of the chance that the impressions gathered from so rare an opportunity for contact with the general mind might prove as interesting as anything else in the connexion. Types, classes, nationalities, manners, diversities of behaviour, modes of seeing, feeling, of expression, would pass before him and become for him, after a fashion, the experience of an untravelled man. His journeys had been short and saving, but poetic justice again seemed inclined to work for him in placing him just at the point in all Europe perhaps where the confluence of races was thickest. The theory at any rate carried him on, operating helpfully for the term of his anxious beginnings and gilding in a manner—it was the way he characterised the case to his wife—the somewhat stodgy gingerbread of their daily routine. They hadn’t known many people and their visiting-list was small—which made it again poetic justice that they should be visited on such a scale. They dressed and were at home, they were under arms and received, and except for the offer of refreshment—and Gedge had his view that there would eventually be a *buffet* farmed out to a great firm—their hospitality would have made them princely if mere hospitality ever did. Thus they were launched, and it

was interesting; so that from having been ready to drop, originally, with fatigue they emerged as even-winded and strong in the legs as if they had had an Alpine holiday. This experience, Gedge opined, also represented, as a gain, a like seasoning of the spirit—by which he meant a certain command of impenetrable patience.

The patience was needed for the particular feature of the ordeal that, by the time the lively season was with them again, had disengaged itself as the sharpest—the immense assumption of veracities and sanctities, of the general soundness of the legend, with which every one arrived. He was well provided certainly for meeting it, and he gave all he had, yet he had sometimes the sense of a vague resentment on the part of his pilgrims at his not ladling out their fare with a bigger spoon. An irritation had begun to grumble in him during the comparatively idle months of winter when a pilgrim would turn up singly. The pious individual, entertained for the half-hour, had occasionally seemed to offer him the promise of beguilement or the semblance of a personal relation; it came back again to the few pleasant calls he had received in the course of a life almost void of social amenity. Sometimes he liked the person, the face, the speech: an educated man, a gentleman, not one of the herd; a graceful woman, vague, accidental, unconscious of him, but making him wonder, while he hovered, who she was. These chances represented for him light yearnings and faint flutters; they acted indeed within him to a special, an extraordinary tune. He would have liked to talk with such stray companions, to talk with them *really*, to talk with them as he might have talked had he met them where he couldn't meet them—at dinner, in the “world,” on a visit at a country-house. Then he could have said—and about the shrine and the idol always—things he couldn't say now. The form in which his irritation first came to him was that of his feeling obliged to say to them—to the single visitor, even when sympathetic, quite as to the gaping group—the particular things, a dreadful dozen or so, that they expected. If he had thus arrived at characterising these things as dreadful the reason touched the very point that, for a while turning everything over, he kept dodging, not facing, trying to ignore. The point was that he was on his way to become two quite different persons, the public and the private—as to which it would somehow have to be managed that these persons should live together. He was splitting into halves, unmistakably—he who, whatever else he had been, had at least always been so entire and in his way so solid. One of the halves, or perhaps even, since the split promised to be rather unequal, one of the quarters, was the keeper, the showman, the priest of the idol; the other piece was the poor unsuccessful honest man he had always been.

There were moments when he recognised this primary character as he had never done before; when he in fact quite shook in his shoes at the idea that it perhaps had in reserve some supreme assertion of its identity. It was honest, verily, just by reason of the possibility. It was poor and unsuccessful because here it was just on the verge of quarrelling with its bread and butter. Salvation would be of course—the salvation of the showman—rigidly to *keep* it on the verge; not to let it, in other words, overpass by an inch. He might count on this, he said to himself, if there weren't any public—if there weren't thousands of people demanding of him what he was paid for. He saw the approach of the stage at which they would affect him, the thousands of people—and perhaps even more the earnest individual—as coming really to see if he were earning his wage. Wouldn't he soon begin to fancy them in league with the Body, practically deputed by it—given, no doubt, a kindled suspicion—to look in and report observations? It was the way he broke down with the lonely pilgrim that led to his first heart-searchings—broke down as to the courage required for damping an uncritical faith. What they all most wanted was to feel that everything was “just as it was”; only the shock of having to part with that vision was greater than any individual could bear unsupported. The bad moments were upstairs in the Birthroom, for here the forces pressing on the very edge assumed a dire intensity. The mere expression of eye, all-credulous, omnivorous and fairly

moistening in the act, with which many persons gazed about, might eventually make it difficult for him to remain fairly civil. Often they came in pairs—sometimes one had come before—and then they explained to each other. He in that case never corrected; he listened, for the lesson of listening: after which he would remark to his wife that there was no end to what he was learning. He saw that if he should really ever break down it would be with her he would begin. He had given her hints and digs enough, but she was so inflamed with appreciation that she either didn't feel them or pretended not to understand.

This was the greater complication that, with the return of the spring and the increase of the public, her services were more required. She took the field with him from an early hour; she was present with the party above while he kept an eye, and still more an ear, on the party below; and how could he know, he asked himself, what she might say to them and what she might suffer *Them* to say—or in other words, poor wretches, to believe—while removed from his control? Some day or other, and before too long, he couldn't but think, he must have the matter out with her—the matter, namely, of the *morality* of their position. The morality of women was special—he was getting lights on that. Isabel's conception of her office was to cherish and enrich the legend. It was already, the legend, very taking, but what was she there for but to make it more so? She certainly wasn't there to chill any natural piety. If it was all in the air—all in their “eye,” as the vulgar might say—that He *had* been born in the Birthroom, where was the value of the sixpences they took? where the equivalent they had engaged to supply? “Oh dear, yes—just about *here*”; and she must tap the place with her foot. “Altered? Oh dear, no—save in a few trifling particulars; you see the place—and isn't that just the charm of it?—quite as *He* saw it. Very poor and homely, no doubt; but that's just what's so wonderful.” He didn't want to hear her, and yet he didn't want to give her her head; he didn't want to make difficulties or to snatch the bread from her mouth. But he must none the less give her a warning before they had gone *too* far. That was the way, one evening in June, he put it to her; the affluence, with the finest weather, having lately been of the largest and the crowd all day fairly gorged with the story. “We mustn't, you know, go *too* far.”

The odd thing was that she had now ceased even to be conscious of what troubled him—she was so launched in her own career. “Too far for what?”

“To save our immortal souls. We mustn't, love, tell too many lies.”

She looked at him with dire reproach. “Ah now are you going to begin again?”

“I never *have* begun; I haven't wanted to worry you. But, you know, we don't know anything about it.” And then as she stared, flushing: “About His having been born up there. About anything really. Not the least little scrap that would weigh in any other connexion as evidence. So don't rub it in so.”

“Rub it in how?”

“That He *was* born——” But at sight of her face he only sighed. “Oh dear, oh dear!”

“Don't you think,” she replied cuttingly, “that He was born anywhere?”

He hesitated—it was such an edifice to shake. “Well, we don't know. There's very little *to* know. He covered His tracks as no other human being has ever done.”

She was still in her public costume and hadn't taken off the gloves she made a point of wearing as a part of that uniform; she remembered how the rustling housekeeper in the Border castle, on whom she had begun by modelling herself, had worn them. She seemed official and slightly distant. “To cover His tracks He must have had to exist. Have we got to give *that* up?”

“No, I don’t ask you to give it up *yet*. But there’s very little to go upon.”

“And is that what I’m to tell Them in return for everything?”

Gedge waited—he walked about. The place was doubly still after the bustle of the day, and the summer evening rested on it as a blessing, making it, in its small state and ancience, mellow and sweet. It was good to be there and it would be good to stay. At the same time there was something incalculable in the effect on one’s nerves of the great gregarious density. This was an attitude that had nothing to do with degrees and shades, the attitude of wanting all or nothing. And you couldn’t talk things over with it. You could only do that with friends, and then but in cases where you were sure the friends wouldn’t betray you. “Couldn’t you adopt,” he replied at last, “a slightly more discreet method? What we can say is that things have been *said*; that’s all we have to do with. ‘And is this really’—when they jam their umbrellas into the floor—the very *spot* where He was born?’ ‘So it has, from a long time back, been described as being.’ Couldn’t one meet Them, to be decent a little, in some such way as that?”

She looked at him very hard. “Is that the way *you* meet them?”

“No; I’ve kept on lying—without scruple, without shame.”

“Then why do you haul me up?”

“Because it has seemed to me we might, like true companions, work it out a little together.”

This was not strong, he felt, as, pausing with his hands in his pockets, he stood before her; and he knew it as weaker still after she had looked at him a minute. “Morris Gedge, I propose to be *your* true companion, and I’ve come here to stay. That’s all I’ve got to say.” It was not, however, for “You had better try yourself and see,” she presently added. “Give the place, give the story away, by so much as a look, and—well, I’d allow you about nine days. Then you’d see.”

He feigned, to gain time, an innocence. “They’d take it so ill?” And then as she said nothing: “They’d turn and rend me? They’d tear me to pieces?”

But she wouldn’t make a joke of it. “They wouldn’t *have* it, simply.”

“No—They wouldn’t. That’s what I say. They won’t.”

“You had better,” she went on, “begin with Grant-Jackson. But even that isn’t necessary. It would get to him, it would get to the Body, like wildfire.”

“I see,” said poor Gedge. And indeed for the moment he did see, while his companion followed up what she believed her advantage.

“Do you consider it’s *all* a fraud?”

“Well, I grant you there was somebody. But the details are naught. The links are missing. The evidence—in particular about that room upstairs, in itself our Casa Santa—is *nil*. It was so awfully long ago.” Which he knew again sounded weak.

“Of course it was awfully long ago—that’s just the beauty and the interest. Tell Them, *tell* Them,” she continued, “that the evidence is *nil*, and I’ll tell Them something else.” She spoke it with such meaning that his face seemed to show a question, to which she was on the spot of replying, “I’ll tell Them you’re a——” She stopped, however, changing it. “I’ll tell Them exactly the opposite. And I’ll find out what you say—it won’t take long—to do it. If we tell different stories *that* possibly may save us.”

“I see what you mean. It would perhaps, as an oddity, have a success of curiosity. It might become a draw. Still, They but want broad masses.” And he looked at her sadly. “You’re no more than one of Them.”

“If it’s being no more than one of Them to love it,” she answered, “then I certainly am. And I’m not ashamed of my company.”

“To love *what?*” said Morris Gedge.

“To love to think He was born there.”

“You think too much. It’s bad for you.” He turned away with his chronic moan. But it was without losing what she called after him.

“I decline to let the place down.” And what was there indeed to say? They *were* there to keep it up.

V

He kept it up through the summer, but with the queerest consciousness, at times, of the want of proportion between his secret rage and the spirit of those from whom the friction came. He said to himself—so sore his sensibility had grown—that They were gregariously ferocious at the very time he was seeing Them as individually mild. He said to himself that They were mild only because *he* was—he flattered himself that he was divinely so, considering what he might be; and that he should, as his wife had warned him, soon enough have news of it were he to deflect by a hair’s breadth from the line traced for him. *That* was the collective fatuity—that it was capable of turning on the instant both to a general and to a particular resentment. Since the least breath of discrimination would get him the sack without mercy, it was absurd, he reflected, to speak of his discomfort as light. He was gagged, he was goaded, as in omnivorous companies he doubtless sometimes showed by a strange silent glare. They’d get him the sack for that as well, if he didn’t look out; therefore wasn’t it in effect ferocity when you mightn’t even hold your tongue? They wouldn’t let you off with silence—They insisted on your committing yourself. It was the pound of flesh—They *would* have it; so under his coat he bled. But a wondrous peace, by exception, dropped on him one afternoon at the end of August. The pressure had, as usual, been high, but it had diminished with the fall of day, and the place was empty before the hour for closing. Then it was that, within a few minutes of this hour, there presented themselves a pair of pilgrims to whom in the ordinary course he would have remarked that they were, to his regret, too late. He was to wonder afterwards why the course had at sight of the visitors—a gentleman and a lady, appealing and fairly young—shown for him as other than ordinary; the consequence sprang doubtless from something rather fine and unnameable, something for example in the tone of the young man or in the light of his eye, after hearing the statement on the subject of the hour. “Yes, we know it’s late; but it’s just, I’m afraid, *because* of that. We’ve had rather a notion of escaping the crowd—as I suppose you mostly have one now; and it was really on the chance of finding you alone——!”

These things the young man said before being quite admitted, and they were words any one might have spoken who hadn’t taken the trouble to be punctual or who desired, a little ingratiatingly, to force the door. Gedge even guessed at the sense that might lurk in them, the hint of a special tip if the point were stretched. There were no tips, he had often thanked his stars, at the Birthplace; there was the charged fee and nothing more; everything else was out of order, to the relief of a palm not formed by nature as a scoop. Yet in spite of everything, in spite especially of the almost audible chink of the gentleman’s sovereigns, which might in another case exactly have put him out, he presently found himself, in the Birthroom, access to which he had gracefully enough granted, almost treating the visit as personal and private. The

reason—well, the reason would have been, if anywhere, in something naturally persuasive on the part of the couple; unless it had been rather again, in the way the young man, once he was in the place, met the caretaker's expression of face, held it a moment and seemed to wish to sound it. That they were Americans was promptly clear, and Gedge could very nearly have told what kind; he had arrived at the point of distinguishing kinds, though the difficulty might have been with him now that the case before him was rare. He saw it suddenly in the light of the golden midland evening which reached them through low old windows, saw it with a rush of feeling, unexpected and smothered, that made him a moment wish to keep it before him as a case of inordinate happiness. It made him feel old shabby poor, but he watched it no less intensely for its doing so. They were children of fortune, of the greatest, as it might seem to Morris Gedge, and they were of course lately married; the husband, smooth-faced and soft, but resolute and fine, several years older than the wife, and the wife vaguely, delicately, irregularly, but mercilessly pretty. Some how the world was theirs; they gave the person who took the sixpences at the Birthplace such a sense of the high luxury of freedom as he had never had. The thing was that the world was theirs not simply because they had money—he had seen rich people enough—but because they could in a supreme degree think and feel and say what they liked. They had a nature and a culture, a tradition, a facility of some sort—and all producing in them an effect of positive beauty—that gave a light to their liberty and an ease to their tone. These things moreover suffered nothing from the fact that they happened to be in mourning; this was probably worn for some lately-deceased opulent father—if not some delicate mother who would be sure to have been a part of the source of the beauty; and it affected Gedge, in the gathered twilight and at his odd crisis, as the very uniform of their distinction.

He couldn't quite have said afterwards by what steps the point had been reached, but it had become at the end of five minutes a part of their presence in the Birthroom, a part of the young man's look, a part of the charm of the moment, and a part above all of a strange sense within him of "Now or never!" that Gedge had suddenly, thrillingly, let himself go. He hadn't been definitely conscious of drifting to it; he had been, for that, too conscious merely of thinking how different, in all their range, were such a united couple from another united couple known to him. They were everything he and his wife weren't; this was more than anything else the first lesson of their talk. Thousands of couples of whom the same was true certainly had passed before him, but none of whom it was true with just that engaging intensity. And just *because* of their transcendent freedom; that was what, at the end of five minutes, he saw it all come back to. The husband, who had been there at some earlier time, had his impression, which he wished now to make his wife share. But he already, Gedge could see, hadn't concealed it from her. A pleasant irony in fine our friend seemed to taste in the air—he who hadn't yet felt free to taste his own.

"I think you weren't here four years ago"—that was what the young man had almost begun by remarking. Gedge liked his remembering it, liked his frankly speaking to him; all the more that he had offered, as it were, no opening. He had let them look about below and then had taken them up, but without words, without the usual showman's song, of which he would have been afraid. The visitors didn't ask for it; the young man had taken the matter out of his hands by himself dropping for the benefit of the young woman a few detached remarks. What Gedge oddly felt was that these remarks were not inconsiderate of him; he had heard others, both of the priggish order and the crude, that might have been called so. And as the young man hadn't been aided to this cognition of him as new, it already began to make for them a certain common ground. The ground became immense when the visitor presently added with a smile: "There was a good lady, I recollect, who had a great deal to say."

It was the gentleman's smile that had done it; the irony *was* there. "Ah there has been a great deal said." And Gedge's look at his interlocutor doubtless showed his sense of being sounded. It was extraordinary of course that a perfect stranger should have guessed the travail of his spirit, should have caught the gleam of his inner commentary. That probably leaked in spite of him out of his poor old eyes. "Much of it, in such places as this," he heard himself adding, "is of course said very irresponsibly." *Such places as this!*—he winced at the words as soon as he had uttered them.

There was no wincing, however, on the part of his pleasant companions. "Exactly so; the whole thing becomes a sort of stiff smug convention—like a dressed-up sacred doll in a Spanish church—which you're a monster if you touch."

"A monster," Gedge assented, meeting his eyes.

The young man smiled, but he thought looking at him a little harder. "A blasphemer."

"A blasphemer."

It seemed to do his visitor good—he certainly *was* looking at him harder. Detached as he was he was interested—he was at least amused. "Then you don't claim or at any rate don't insist——? I mean you personally."

He had an identity for him, Gedge felt, that he couldn't have had for a Briton, and the impulse was quick in our friend to testify to this perception. "I don't insist to *you*."

The young man laughed. "It really—I assure you if I may—wouldn't do any good. I'm too awfully interested."

"Do you mean," his wife lightly inquired, "in—a—pulling it down? That's rather in what you've said to me."

"Has he said to you," Gedge intervened, though quaking a little, "that he would like to pull it down?"

She met, in her free sweetness, this appeal with such a charm! "Oh perhaps not quite the *house*——!"

"Good. You see we live on it—I mean *we* people."

The husband had laughed, but had now so completely ceased to look about him that there seemed nothing left for him but to talk avowedly with the caretaker. "I'm interested," he explained, "in what I think *the* interesting thing—or at all events the eternally tormenting one. The fact of the abysmally little that, in proportion, we know."

"In proportion to what?" his companion asked.

"Well, to what there must have been—to what in fact there *is*—to wonder about. That's the interest; it's immense. He escapes us like a thief at night, carrying off—well, carrying off everything. And people pretend to catch Him like a flown canary, over whom you can close your hand, and put Him back in the cage. He won't *go* back; he won't *come* back. He's not"—the young man laughed—"such a fool! It makes Him the happiest of all great men."

He had begun by speaking to his wife, but had ended, with his friendly, his easy, his indescribable competence, for Gedge—poor Gedge who quite held his breath and who felt, in the most unexpected way, that he had somehow never been in such good society. The young wife, who for herself meanwhile had continued to look about, sighed out, smiled out—Gedge couldn't have told which—her little answer to these remarks. "It's rather a pity, you know, that He *isn't* here. I mean as Goethe's at Weimar. For Goethe *is* at Weimar."

“Yes, my dear; that’s Goethe’s bad luck. There he sticks. *This* man isn’t anywhere. I defy you to catch him.”

“Why not say, beautifully,” the young woman laughed, “that, like the wind, He’s everywhere?”

It wasn’t of course the tone of discussion, it was the tone of pleasantry, though of better pleasantry, Gedge seemed to feel, and more within his own appreciation, than he had ever listened to; and this was precisely why the young man could go on without the effect of irritation, answering his wife but still with eyes for their companion. “I’ll be hanged if He’s *here!*”

It was almost as if he were taken—that is, struck and rather held—by their companion’s unruffled state, which they hadn’t meant to ruffle, but which suddenly presented its interest, perhaps even projected its light. The gentleman didn’t know, Gedge was afterwards to say to himself, how that hypocrite was inwardly all of a tremble, how it seemed to him his fate was being literally pulled down on his head. He was trembling for the moment certainly too much to speak; abject he might be, but he didn’t want his voice to have the absurdity of a quaver. And the young woman—charming creature!—still had another word. It was for the guardian of the spot, and she made it in her way delightful. They had remained in the Holy of Holies, where she had been looking for a minute, with a ruefulness just marked enough to be pretty, at the queer old floor. “Then if you say it *wasn’t* in this room He was born—well, what’s the use?”

“What’s the use of what?” her husband asked. “The use, you mean, of our coming here? Why the place is charming in itself. And it’s also interesting,” he added to Gedge, “to know how you get on.”

Gedge looked at him a moment in silence, but answering the young woman first. If poor Isabel, he was thinking, could only have been like that!—not as to youth, beauty, arrangement of hair or picturesque grace of hat—these things he didn’t mind; but as to sympathy, facility, light perceptive, and yet not cheap, detachment! “I don’t say it wasn’t—but I don’t say it *was*.”

“Ah but doesn’t that,” she returned, “come very much to the same thing? And don’t They want also to see where He had His dinner and where He had His tea?”

“They want everything,” said Morris Gedge. “They want to see where He hung up His hat and where He kept His boots and where His mother boiled her pot.”

“But if you don’t show them——?”

“They show *me*. It’s in all their little books.”

“You mean,” the husband asked, “that you’ve only to hold your tongue?”

“I try to,” said Gedge.

“Well,” his visitor smiled, “I see you *can*.”

Gedge hesitated. “I can’t.”

“Oh well,” said his friend, “what does it matter?”

“I do speak,” he continued. “I can’t sometimes not.”

“Then how do you get on?”

Gedge looked at him more abjectly, to his own sense, than ever at any one—even at Isabel when she frightened him. “I don’t get on. I speak,” he said—“since I’ve spoken to *you*.”

“Oh *we* shan’t hurt you!” the young man reassuringly laughed.

The twilight meanwhile had sensibly thickened, the end of the visit was indicated. They turned together out of the upper room and came down the narrow stair. The words just exchanged might have been felt as producing an awkwardness which the young woman gracefully felt the impulse to dissipate. “You must rather wonder why we’ve come.” And it was the first note for Gedge of a further awkwardness—as if he had definitely heard it make the husband’s hand, in a full pocket, begin to fumble.

It was even a little awkwardly that the husband still held off. “Oh we like it as it is. There’s always *something*.” With which they had approached the door of egress.

“What is there, please?” asked Morris Gedge, not yet opening the door, since he would fain have kept the pair on, and conscious only for a moment after he had spoken that his question was just having for the young man too dreadfully wrong a sound. This personage wondered yet feared, and had evidently for some minutes been putting himself a question; so that, with his preoccupation, the caretaker’s words had represented to him inevitably: “What is there, please, for *me*?” Gedge already knew with it moreover that he wasn’t stopping him in time. He had uttered that challenge to show he himself wasn’t afraid, and he must have had in consequence, he was subsequently to reflect, a lamentable air of waiting.

The visitor’s hand came out. “I hope I may take the liberty——?” What afterwards happened our friend scarcely knew, for it fell into a slight confusion, the confusion of a queer gleam of gold—a sovereign fairly thrust at him; of a quick, almost violent motion on his own part, which, to make the matter worse, might well have sent the money roiling on the floor; and then of marked blushes all round and a sensible embarrassment; producing indeed in turn rather oddly and ever so quickly an increase of communion. It was as if the young man had offered him money to make up to him for having, as it were, led him on, and then, perceiving the mistake, but liking him the better for his refusal, had wanted to obliterate this aggravation of his original wrong. He had done so, presently, while Gedge got the door open, by saying the best thing, he could, and by saying it frankly and gaily. “Luckily it doesn’t at all affect the *work*!”

The small town-street, quiet and empty in the summer eventide, stretched to right and left, with a gabled and timbered house or two, and fairly seemed to have cleared itself to congruity with the historic void over which our friends, lingering an instant to converse, looked at each other. The young wife, rather, looked about a moment at all there wasn’t to be seen, and then, before Gedge had found a reply to her husband’s remark, uttered, evidently in the interest of conciliation, a little question of her own that she tried to make earnest. “It’s our unfortunate ignorance, you mean, that doesn’t?”

“Unfortunate or fortunate. I like it so,” said the husband. “‘The play’s the thing.’ Let the author alone.”

Gedge, with his key on his forefinger, leaned against the door-post, took in the stupid little street and was sorry to see them go—they seemed so to abandon him. “That’s just what They won’t do—nor let *me* do. It’s all I want—to let the author alone. Practically”—he felt himself getting the last of his chance—“there is no author; that is for us to deal with. There are all the immortal people—in the work; but there’s nobody else.”

“Yes,” said the young man—“that’s what it comes to. There should really, to clear the matter up, be no such Person.”

“As you say,” Gedge returned, “it’s what it comes to. There *is* no such Person.”

The evening air listened, in the warm thick midland stillness, while the wife's little cry rang out. "But *wasn't* there——?"

"There was somebody," said Gedge against the door-post. "But They've killed Him. And, dead as He is, They keep it up, They do it over again, They kill Him every day."

He was aware of saying this so grimly—more than he wished—that his companions exchanged a glance and even perhaps looked as if they felt him extravagant. That was really the way Isabel had warned him all the others would be looking if he should talk to Them as he talked to *her*. He liked, however, for that matter, to hear how he should sound when pronounced incapable through deterioration of the brain. "Then if there's no author, if there's nothing to be said but that there isn't anybody," the young woman smilingly asked, "why in the world should there be a house?"

"There shouldn't," said Morris Gedge.

Decidedly, yes, he affected the young man. "Oh, I don't say, mind you, that you should pull it down!"

"Then where would you *go*?" their companion sweetly inquired.

"That's what my wife asks," Gedge returned.

"Then keep it up, keep it up!" And the husband held out his hand.

"That's what my wife says," Gedge went on as he shook it.

The young woman, charming creature, emulated the other visitor; she offered their remarkable friend her handshake. "Then mind your wife."

The poor man faced her gravely. "I would if she were such a wife as you!"

VI

It had made for him, all the same, an immense difference; it had given him an extraordinary lift, so that a certain sweet aftertaste of his freedom might a couple of months later have been suspected of aiding to produce for him another and really a more considerable adventure. It was an absurd way to reason, but he had been, to his imagination, for twenty minutes in good society—that being the term that best described for him the company of people to whom he hadn't to talk, as he phrased it, rot. It was his title to good society that he had, in his doubtless awkward way, affirmed; and the difficulty was just that, having affirmed it, he couldn't take back the affirmation. Few things had happened to him in life, that is few that were agreeable, but at least *this* had, and he wasn't so constructed that he could go on as if it hadn't. It was going on as if it had, however, that landed him, alas! in the situation unmistakably marked by a visit from Grant-Jackson late one afternoon toward the end of October. This had been the hour of the call of the young Americans. Every day that hour had come round something of the deep throb of it, the successful secret, woke up; but the two occasions were, of a truth, related only by being so intensely opposed. The secret had been successful in that he had said nothing of it to Isabel, who, occupied in their own quarter while the incident lasted, had neither heard the visitors arrive nor seen them depart. It was on the other hand scarcely successful in guarding itself from indirect betrayals. There were two persons in the world at least who felt as he did; they were persons also who had treated him, benignly, as feeling after *their* style; who had been ready in fact to overflow in gifts as a sign of it, and though they were now off in space they were still with him sufficiently in spirit to make him play, as it were, with the sense of their sympathy. This in turn made him, as he was perfectly aware, more than a shade or two reckless, so that, in his reaction from that gluttony of the public for false facts which had from the first tormented him, he fell into the habit of sailing, as he

would have said, too near the wind, or in other words—all in presence of the people—of washing his hands of the legend. He had crossed the line—he knew it; he had struck wild—They drove him to it; he had substituted, by a succession of uncontrollable profanities, an attitude that couldn't be understood for an attitude that but too evidently *had* been.

This was of course the franker line, only he hadn't taken it, alas! for frankness—hadn't in the least really adopted it at all, but had been simply himself caught up and disposed of by it, hurled by his fate against the bedizened walls of the temple, quite in the way of a priest possessed to excess of the god, or, more vulgarly, that of a blind bull in a china-shop—an animal to which he often compared himself. He had let himself fatally go, in fine, just for irritation, for rage, having, in his predicament, nothing whatever to do with frankness—a luxury reserved for quite other situations. It had always been his view that one lived to learn; he had learned something every hour of his life, though people mostly never knew what, in spite of its having generally been—hadn't it?—at somebody's expense. What he was at present continually learning was the sense of a form of words heretofore so vain—the famous “false position” that had so often helped out a phrase. One used names in that way without knowing what they were worth; then of a sudden, one fine day, their meaning grew bitter in the mouth. This was a truth with the relish of which his fireside hours were occupied, and he was aware of how much it exposed a man to look so perpetually as if something had disagreed with him. The look to be worn at the Birthplace was properly the beatific, and when once it had fairly been missed by those who took it for granted, who indeed paid sixpence for it—like the table-wine in provincial France it was *compris*—one would be sure to have news of the remark.

News accordingly was what Gedge had been expecting—and what he knew, above all, had been expected by his wife, who had a way of sitting at present as with an ear for a certain knock. She didn't watch him, didn't follow him about the house, at the public hours, to spy upon his treachery; and that could touch him even though her averted eyes went through him more than her fixed. Her mistrust was so perfectly expressed by her manner of showing she trusted that he never felt so nervous, never tried so to keep straight, as when she most let him alone. When the crowd thickened and they had of necessity to receive together he tried himself to get off by allowing her as much as possible the word. When people appealed to him he turned to her—and with more of ceremony than their relation warranted: he couldn't help *this* either, if it seemed ironic—as to the person most concerned or most competent. He flattered himself at these moments that no one would have guessed her being his wife; especially as to do her justice, she met his manner with a wonderful grim bravado—grim, so to say, for himself, grim by its outrageous cheerfulness for the simple-minded. The lore she *did* produce for them, the associations of the sacred spot she developed, multiplied, embroidered; the things in short she said and the stupendous way she said them! She wasn't a bit ashamed, since why need virtue be ever ashamed? It was virtue, for it put bread into his mouth—he meanwhile on his side taking it out of hers. He had seen Grant-Jackson on the October day in the Birthplace itself—the right setting of course for such an interview; and what had occurred was that, precisely, when the scene had ended and he had come back to their own sitting-room, the question she put to him for information was: “Have you settled it that I'm to starve?”

She had for a long time said nothing to him so straight—which was but a proof of her real anxiety; the straightness of Grant-Jackson's visit, following on the very slight sinuosity of a note shortly before received from him, made tension show for what it was. By this time, really, however, his decision had been taken; the minutes elapsing between his reappearance at the domestic fireside and his having, from the other threshold, seen Grant-Jackson's broad well-fitted back, the back of a banker and a patriot, move away, had, though few, presented

themselves to him as supremely critical. They formed, as it were, the hinge of his door, that door actually ajar so as to show him a possible fate beyond it, but which, with his hand, in a spasm, thus tightening on the knob, he might either open wide or close partly or altogether. He stood at autumn dusk in the little museum that constituted the vestibule of the temple, and there, as with a concentrated push at the crank of a windlass, he brought himself round. The portraits on the walls seemed vaguely to watch for it; it was in their august presence—kept dimly august for the moment by Grant-Jackson’s impressive check of his application of a match to the vulgar gas—that the great man had uttered, as if it said all, his “You know, my dear fellow, really——!” He had managed it with the special tact of a fat man, always, when there *was* any, very fine; he had got the most out of the time, the place, the setting, all the little massed admonitions and symbols; confronted there with his victim on the spot that he took occasion to name afresh as, to *his* piety and patriotism, the most sacred on earth, he had given it to be understood that in the first place he was lost in amazement and that in the second he expected a single warning now to suffice. Not to insist too much moreover on the question of gratitude, he would let his remonstrance rest, if need be, solely on the question of taste. *As a matter of taste alone——!*

But he was surely not to be obliged to follow that up. Poor Gedge indeed would have been sorry to oblige him, for he saw it was exactly to the atrocious taste of unthankfulness the allusion was made. When he said he wouldn’t dwell on what the fortunate occupant of the post owed him for the stout battle originally fought on his behalf, he simply meant he *would*. That was his tact—which, with everything else that has been mentioned, in the scene, to help, really had the ground to itself. The day *had* been when Gedge couldn’t have thanked him enough—though he had thanked him, he considered, almost fulsomely—and nothing, nothing that he could coherently or reputably name, had happened since then. From the moment he was pulled up, in short, he had no case, and if he exhibited, instead of one, only hot tears in his eyes, the mystic gloom of the temple either prevented his friend from seeing them or rendered it possible that they stood for remorse. He had dried them, with the pads formed by the base of his bony thumbs, before he went in to Isabel. This was the more fortunate as, in spite of her inquiry, prompt and pointed, he but moved about the room looking at her hard. Then he stood before the fire a little with his hands behind him and his coat-tails divided, quite as the person in permanent possession. It was an indication his wife appeared to take in; but she put nevertheless presently another question. “You object to telling me what he said?”

“He said ‘You know, my dear fellow, really——!’”

“And is that all?”

“Practically. Except that I’m a thankless beast.”

“Well!” she responded, not with dissent.

“You mean that I *am*?”

“Are those the words he used?” she asked with a scruple.

Gedge continued to think. “The words he used were that I give away the Show and that, from several sources, it has come round to Them.”

“As of course a baby would have known!” And then as her husband said nothing:

“Were *those* the words he used?”

“Absolutely. He couldn’t have used better ones.”

“Did he call it,” Mrs. Gedge inquired, “the ‘Show’?”

“Of course he did. The Biggest on Earth.”

She winced, looking at him hard—she wondered, but only for a moment. “Well, it *is*.”

“Then it’s something,” Gedge went on, “to have given *that* away. But,” he added, “I’ve taken it back.”

“You mean you’ve been convinced?”

“I mean I’ve been scared.”

“At last, at last!” she gratefully breathed.

“Oh it was easily done. It was only two words. But here I am.”

Her face was now less hard for him. “And what two words?”

“You know, Mr. Gedge, that it simply won’t do.’ That was all. But it was the way such a man says them.”

“I’m glad then,” Mrs. Gedge frankly averred, “that he *is* such a man. How did you ever think it *could* do?”

“Well, it was my critical sense. I didn’t ever know I had one—till They came and (by putting me here) waked it up in me. Then I had somehow, don’t you see? to live with it; and I seemed to feel that, with one thing and another, giving it time and in the long run, it might, it *ought* to, come out on top of the heap. Now that’s where, he says, it simply won’t ‘do.’ So I must put it—I *have* put it—at the bottom.”

“A very good place then for a critical sense!” And Isabel, more placidly now, folded her work. “*If*, that is, you can only keep it there. If it doesn’t struggle up again.”

“It can’t struggle.” He was still before the fire, looking round at the warm low room, peaceful in the lamplight, with the hum of the kettle for the ear, with the curtain drawn over the leaded casement, a short moreen curtain artfully chosen by Isabel for the effect of the olden time, its virtue of letting the light within show ruddy to the street. “It’s dead,” he went on; “I killed it just now.”

He really spoke so that she wondered. “Just now?”

“There in the other place—I strangled it, poor thing, in the dark. If you’ll go out and see, there must be blood. Which, indeed,” he added, “on an altar of sacrifice, is all right. But the place is for ever spattered.”

“I don’t want to go out and see.” She locked her hands over the needlework folded on her knee, and he knew, with her eyes on him, that a look he had seen before was in her face.

“You’re off your head, you know, my dear, in a way.” Then, however, more cheerily: “It’s a good job it hasn’t been too late.”

“Too late to get it under?”

“Too late for Them to give you the second chance that I thank God you accept.”

“Yes, if it *had* been——!” And he looked away as through the ruddy curtain and into the chill street. Then he faced her again. “I’ve scarcely got over my fright yet. I mean,” he went on, “for you.”

“And I mean for *you*. Suppose what you had come to announce to me now were that we had *got* the sack. How should I enjoy, do you think, seeing you turn out? Yes, out *there!*” she added as his eyes again moved from their little warm circle to the night of early winter on the other side of the pane, to the rare quick footsteps, to the closed doors, to the curtains drawn

like their own, behind which the small flat town, intrinsically dull, was sitting down to supper.

He stiffened himself as he warmed his back; he held up his head, shaking himself a little as if to shake the stoop out of his shoulders, but he had to allow she was right. "What would have become of us?"

"What indeed? We should have begged our bread—or I should be taking in washing."

He was silent a little. "I'm too old. I should have begun sooner."

"Oh God forbid!" she cried.

"The pinch," he pursued, "is that I can do nothing else."

"Nothing whatever!" she agreed with elation.

"Whereas here—if I cultivate it—I perhaps *can* still lie. But I must cultivate it."

"Oh you old dear!" And she got up to kiss him.

"I'll do my best," he said.

VII

"Do you remember us?" the gentleman asked and smiled—with the lady beside him smiling too; speaking so much less as an earnest pilgrim or as a tiresome tourist than as an old acquaintance. It was history repeating itself as Gedge had somehow never expected, with almost everything the same except that the evening was now a mild April-end, except that the visitors had put off mourning and showed all their bravery—besides showing, as he doubtless did himself, though so differently, for a little older; except, above all, that—oh seeing them again suddenly affected him not a bit as the thing he'd have supposed it. "We're in England again and we were near; I've a brother at Oxford with whom we've been spending a day, so that we thought we'd come over." This the young man pleasantly said while our friend took in the queer fact that he must himself seem to them rather coldly to gape. They had come in the same way at the quiet close; another August had passed, and this was the second spring; the Birthplace, given the hour, was about to suspend operations till the morrow; the last lingerer had gone and the fancy of the visitors was once more for a look round by themselves. This represented surely no greater presumption than the terms on which they had last parted with him seemed to warrant; so that if he did inconsequently stare it was just in fact because he was so supremely far from having forgotten them. But the sight of the pair luckily had a double effect, and the first precipitated the second—the second being really his sudden vision that everything perhaps depended for him on his recognising no complication. He must go straight on, since it was what had for more than a year now so handsomely answered; he must brazen it out consistently, since that only was what his dignity was at last reduced to. He mustn't be afraid in one way any more than he had been in another; besides which it came over him to the point of his flushing for it that their visit, in its essence, must have been for himself. It was good society again, and *they* were the same. It wasn't for him therefore to behave as if he couldn't meet them.

These deep vibrations, on Gedge's part, were as quick as they were deep; they came in fact all at once, so that his response, his declaration that it was all right—"Oh *rather*; the hour doesn't matter for *you*!"—had hung fire but an instant; and when they were well across the threshold and the door closed behind them, housed in the twilight of the temple, where, as before, the votive offerings glimmered on the walls, he drew the long breath of one who might by a self-betrayal have done something too dreadful. For what had brought them back was indubitably not the glamour of the shrine itself—since he had had a glimpse of their

analysis of that quantity; but their critical (not to say their sentimental) interest in the queer case of the priest. Their call was the tribute of curiosity, of sympathy, of a compassion really, as such things went, exquisite—a tribute *to* that queerness which entitled them to the frankest welcome. They had wanted, for the generous wonder of it, to judge how he was getting on, how such a man in such a place *could*; and they had doubtless more than half-expected to see the door opened by somebody who had succeeded him. Well, somebody *had*—only with a strange equivocation; as they would have, poor things, to make out themselves, an embarrassment for which he pitied them. Nothing could have been more odd, but verily it was this troubled vision of their possible bewilderment, and this compunctious view of such a return for their amenity, that practically determined in him his tone. The lapse of the months had but made their name familiar to him; they had on the other occasion inscribed it, among the thousand names, in the current public register, and he had since then, for reasons of his own, reasons of feeling, again and again turned back to it. It was nothing in itself; it told him nothing—“Mr. and Mrs. B. D. Hayes, New York”—one of those American labels that were just like every other American label and that were precisely the most remarkable thing about people reduced to achieving an identity in such other ways. They could be Mr. and Mrs. B. D. Hayes and yet could be, with all presumptions missing—well, what these callers were. It had quickly enough indeed cleared the situation a little further that his friends had absolutely, the other time, as it came back to him, warned him of his original danger, their anxiety about which had been the last note sounded among them. What he was afraid of, with this reminiscence, was that, finding him still safe, they would, the next thing, definitely congratulate him and perhaps even, no less candidly, ask him how he had managed. It was with the sense of nipping some such inquiry in the bud that, losing no time and holding himself with a firm grip, he began on the spot, downstairs, to make plain to them how he had managed. He routed the possibility of the question in short by the assurance of his answer. “Yes, yes, I’m still here; I suppose it *is* in a manner to one’s profit that one does, such as it is, one’s best.” He did his best on the present occasion, did it with the gravest face he had ever worn and a soft serenity that was like a large damp sponge passed over their previous meeting—over everything in it, that is, but the fact of its pleasantness.

“We stand here, you see, in the old living-room, happily still to be reconstructed in the mind’s eye, in spite of the havoc of time, which we have fortunately of late years been able to arrest. It was of course rude and humble, but it must have been snug and quaint, and we have at least the pleasure of knowing that the tradition in respect to the features that do remain is delightfully uninterrupted. Across that threshold He habitually passed; through those low windows, in childhood, He peered out into the world that He was to make so much happier by the gift to it of His genius; over the boards of this floor—that is over *some* of them, for we mustn’t be carried away!—his little feet often pattered; and the beams of this ceiling (we must really in some places take care of *our* heads!) he endeavoured, in boyish strife, to jump up and touch. It’s not often that in the early home of genius and renown the whole tenor of existence is laid so bare, not often that we are able to retrace, from point to point and from step to step, its connexion with objects, with influences—to build it round again with the little solid facts out of which it sprang. This therefore, I need scarcely remind you, is what makes the small space between these walls—so modest to measurement, so insignificant of aspect—unique on all the earth. *There’s nothing like it*,” Morris Gedge went on, insisting as solemnly and softly, for his bewildered hearers, as over a pulpit-edge; “there’s nothing at all like it anywhere in the world. There’s nothing, only reflect, for the combination of greatness and, as we venture to say, of intimacy. You may find elsewhere perhaps absolutely fewer changes, but where shall you find a *Presence* equally diffused, uncontested and undisturbed? Where in particular shall you find, on the part of the abiding spirit, an equally towering eminence? You may find elsewhere eminence of a considerable order, but where shall you find *with* it, don’t

you see, changes after all so few and the contemporary element caught so, as it were, in the very fact?" His visitors, at first confounded but gradually spellbound, were still gaping with the universal gape—wondering, he judged, into what strange pleasantries he had been suddenly moved to explode, and yet beginning to see in him an intention beyond a joke, so that they started, at this point, they almost jumped, when, by as rapid a transition, he made, toward the old fireplace, a dash that seemed to illustrate precisely the act of eager catching. "It is in this old chimney-corner, the quaint inglenook of our ancestors—just there in the far angle, where His little stool was placed, and where, I daresay, if we could look close enough, we should find the hearth stone scraped with His little feet—that we see the inconceivable child gazing into the blaze of the old oaken logs and making out there pictures and stories, see Him conning, with curly bent head, His well-worn hornbook, or poring over some scrap of an ancient ballad, some page of some such rudely-bound volume of chronicles as lay, we may be sure, in His father's window-seat."

It was, he even himself felt at this moment, wonderfully done; no auditors, for all his thousands, had ever yet so inspired him. The odd slightly alarmed shyness in the two faces, as if in a drawing-room, in their "good society" exactly, some act incongruous, something grazing the indecent, had abruptly been perpetrated, the painful reality of which stayed itself before coming home—the visible effect on his friends in fine wound him up as to the sense that *they* were worth the trick. It came of itself now—he had got it so by heart; but perhaps really it had never come so well, with the staleness so disguised, the interest so renewed and the clerical unction demanded by the priestly character so successfully distilled. Mr. Hayes of New York had more than once looked at his wife, and Mrs. Hayes of New York had more than once looked at her husband—only, up to now, with a stolen glance, with eyes it hadn't been easy to detach from the remarkable countenance by the aid of which their entertainer held them. At present, however, after an exchange less furtive, they ventured on a sign that they hadn't been appealed to in vain. "Charming, charming, Mr. Gedge!" Mr. Hayes broke out. "We feel that we've caught you in the mood."

His wife hastened to assent—it eased the tension. "It *would* be quite the way; except," she smiled, "that you'd be too dangerous. You've really a genius!"

Gedge looked at her hard, but yielding no inch, even though she touched him there at a point of consciousness that quivered. This was the prodigy for him, and had been, the year through—that he did it all, he found, easily, did it better than he had done anything else in life; with so high and broad an effect, in truth, an inspiration so rich and free, that his poor wife now, literally, had been moved more than once to fresh fear. She had had her bad moments, he knew, after taking the measure of his new direction—moments of readjusted suspicion in which she wondered if he hadn't simply adopted another, a different perversity. There would be more than one fashion of giving away the Show, and wasn't *this* perhaps a question of giving it away by excess? He could dish them by too much romance as well as by too little; she hadn't hitherto fairly grasped that there might *be* too much. It was a way like another, at any rate, of reducing the place to the absurd; which reduction, if he didn't look out, would reduce *them* again to the prospect of the streets, and this time surely without appeal. It all depended indeed—he knew she knew that—on how much Grant-Jackson and the others, how much the Body, in a word, would take. He knew she knew what he himself held it would take—that he considered no limit could be imputed to the quantity. They simply wanted it piled up, and so did every one else; wherefore if no one reported him as before why were They to be uneasy? It was in consequence of idiots tempted to reason that he had been dealt with before; but as there was now no form of idiocy that he didn't systematically flatter, goading it on really to its *own* private doom, who was ever to pull the string of the guillotine? The axe was in the air—yes; but in a world gorged to satiety there were no revolutions. And

it had been vain for Isabel to ask if the other thunder-growl also hadn't come out of the blue. There was actually proof positive that the winds were now at rest. How could they be more so?—he appealed to the receipts. These were golden days—the Show had never so flourished. So he had argued, so he was arguing still—and, it had to be owned, with every appearance in his favour. Yet if he inwardly winced at the tribute to his plausibility rendered by his flushed friends, this was because he felt in it the real ground of his optimism. The charming woman before him acknowledged his “genius” as he himself had had to do. He had been surprised at his facility until he had grown used to it. Whether or no he had, as a fresh menace to his future, found a new perversity, he had found a vocation much older, evidently, than he had at first been prepared to recognise. He had done himself injustice. He liked to be brave because it came so easy; he could measure it off by the yard. It was in the Birthroom, above all, that he continued to do this, having ushered up his companions without, as he was still more elated to feel, the turn of a hair. She might take it as she liked, but he had had the lucidity—all, that is, for his own safety—to meet without the grace of an answer the homage of her beautiful smile. She took it apparently, and her husband took it, but as a part of his odd humour, and they followed him aloft with faces now a little more responsive to the manner in which on *that* spot he would naturally come out. He came out, according to the word of his assured private receipt, “strong.” He missed a little, in truth, the usual round-eyed question from them—the inveterate artless cue with which, from moment to moment, clustered troops had for a year obliged him. Mr. and Mrs. Hayes were from New York, but it was a little like singing, as he had heard one of his Americans once say about something, to a Boston audience. He did none the less what he could, and it was ever his practice to stop still at a certain spot in the room and, after having secured attention by look and gesture, suddenly shoot off: “Here!”

They always understood, the good people—he could fairly love them now for it; they always said breathlessly and unanimously “There?” and stared down at the designated point quite as if some trace of the grand event were still to be made out. This movement produced he again looked round. “Consider it well: *the* spot of earth——!” “Oh but it isn't *earth!*” the boldest spirit—there was always a boldest—would generally pipe out. Then the guardian of the Birthplace would be truly superior—as if the unfortunate had figured the Immortal coming up, like a potato, through the soil. “I'm not suggesting that He was born on the bare ground. He was born *here!*”—with an uncompromising dig of his heel. “There ought to be a brass, with an inscription, let in.” “Into the floor?”—it always came. “Birth and burial: seedtime, summer, autumn!”—that always, with its special right cadence, thanks to his unflinching spring, came too. “Why not as well as into the pavement of the church?—you've *seen* our grand old church?” The former of which questions nobody ever answered—abounding, on the other hand, to make up, in relation to the latter. Mr. and Mrs. Hayes even were at first left dumb by it—not indeed, to do them justice, having uttered the word that called for it. They had uttered no word while he kept the game up, and (though that made it a little more difficult) he could yet stand triumphant before them after he had finished with his flourish. Only then it was that Mr. Hayes of New York broke silence.

“Well, if we wanted to see I think I may say we're quite satisfied. As my wife says, it *would* seem your line.” He spoke now, visibly, with more ease, as if a light had come: though he made no joke of it, for a reason that presently appeared. They were coming down the little stair, and it was on the descent that his companion added her word.

“Do you know what we half *did* think——?” And then to her husband: “Is it dreadful to tell him?” They were in the room below, and the young woman, also relieved, expressed the feeling with gaiety. She smiled as before at Morris Gedge, treating him as a person with whom relations were possible, yet remaining just uncertain enough to invoke Mr. Hayes's

opinion. “We *have* awfully wanted—from what we had heard.” But she met her husband’s graver face; he was not quite out of the wood. At this she was slightly flurried—but she cut it short. “You must know—don’t you?—that, with the crowds who listen to you, we’d have heard.”

He looked from one to the other, and once more again, with force, something came over him. They had kept him in mind, they were neither ashamed nor afraid to show it, and it was positively an interest on the part of this charming creature and this keen cautious gentleman, an interest resisting oblivion and surviving separation, that had governed their return. Their other visit had been the brightest thing that had ever happened to him, but this was the gravest; so that at the end of a minute something broke in him and his mask dropped of itself. He chuckled, as he would have said, consistency; which, in its extinction, left the tears in his eyes. His smile was therefore queer. “Heard how I’m going it?”

The young man, though still looking at him hard, felt sure, with this, of his own ground. “Of course you’re tremendously talked about. You’ve gone round the world.”

“You’ve heard of me in America?”

“Why almost of nothing else!”

“That was what made us feel——!” Mrs. Hayes contributed.

“That you must see for yourselves?” Again he compared, poor Gedge, their faces. “Do you mean I excite—a—scandal?”

“Dear no! Admiration. You renew so,” the young man observed, “the interest.”

“Ah there it is!” said Gedge with eyes of adventure that seemed to rest beyond the Atlantic.

“They listen, month after month, when they’re out here, as you must have seen; then they go home and talk. But they sing your praise.”

Our friend could scarce take it in. “Over *there!*”

“Over there. I think you must be even in the papers.”

“Without abuse?”

“Oh we don’t abuse every one.”

Mrs. Hayes, in her beauty, it was clear, stretched the point. “They rave about you.”

“Then they *don’t* know?”

“Nobody knows,” the young man declared; “it wasn’t any one’s knowledge, at any rate, that made us uneasy.”

“It was your own? I mean your own sense?”

“Well, call it that. We remembered, and we wondered what had happened. So,” Mr. Hayes now frankly laughed, “we came to see.”

Gedge stared through his film of tears. “Came from America to see *me?*”

“Oh a part of the way. But we wouldn’t, in England, have missed you.”

“And now we *haven’t!*” the young woman soothingly added.

Gedge still could only gape at the candour of the tribute. But he tried to meet them—it was what was least poor for him—in their own key. “Well, how do you like it?”

Mrs. Hayes, he thought—if their answer were important—laughed a little nervously. “Oh you see.”

Once more he looked from one to the other. “It’s too beastly easy, you know.”

Her husband raised his eyebrows. “You conceal your art. The emotion—yes; that must be easy; the general tone must flow. But about your facts—you’ve so many: how do you get *them* through?”

Gedge wondered. “You think I get too many——?”

At this they were amused together. “That’s just what we came to see!”

“Well, you know, I’ve felt my way; I’ve gone step by step; you wouldn’t believe how I’ve tried it on. *This*—where you see me—is where I’ve come out.” After which, as they said nothing: “You hadn’t thought I *could* come out?”

Again they just waited, but the husband spoke: “Are you so awfully sure you are out?”

Gedge drew himself up in the manner of his moments of emotion, almost conscious even that, with his sloping shoulders, his long lean neck and his nose so prominent in proportion to other matters, he resembled the more a giraffe. It was now at last he really caught on.

“I *may* be in danger again—and the danger is what has moved you? Oh!” the poor man fairly moaned. His appreciation of it quite weakened him, yet he pulled himself together. “You’ve your view of my danger?”

It was wondrous how, with that note definitely sounded, the air was cleared. Lucid Mr. Hayes, at the end of a minute, had put the thing in a nutshell. “I don’t know what you’ll think of us—for being so beastly curious.”

“I think,” poor Gedge grimaced, “you’re only too beastly kind.”

“It’s all your own fault,” his friend returned, “for presenting us (who are not idiots, say) with so striking a picture of a crisis. At our other visit, you remember,” he smiled, “you created an anxiety for the opposite reason. Therefore if *this* should again be a crisis for you, you’d really give us the case with an ideal completeness.”

“You make me wish,” said Morris Gedge, “that it might be one.”

“Well, don’t try—for our amusement—to bring one on. I don’t see, you know, how you can have much margin. Take care—take care.”

Gedge did it pensive justice. “Yes, that was what you said a year ago. You did me the honour to be uneasy—as my wife was.”

Which determined on the young woman’s part an immediate question. “May I ask then if Mrs. Gedge is now at rest?”

“No—since you do ask. *She* fears at least that I go too far; she doesn’t believe in my margin. You see we *had* our scare after your visit. They came down.”

His friends were all interest. “Ah! They came down?”

“Heavy. They brought *me* down. That’s *why*—”

“Why you *are* down?” Mrs. Hayes sweetly demanded.

“Ah but my dear man,” her husband interposed, “you’re not down; you’re *up*! You’re only up a different tree, but you’re up at the tip-top.”

“You mean I take it too high?”

“That’s exactly the question,” the young man answered; “and the possibility, as matching your first danger, is just what we felt we couldn’t, if you didn’t mind, miss the measure of.”

Gedge gazed at him. “I feel that I know what you at bottom *hoped*.”

“We at bottom ‘hope,’ surely, that you’re all right?”

“In spite of the fool it makes of every one?”

Mr. Hayes of New York smiled. “Say *because* of that. We only ask to believe every one *is* a fool!”

“Only you haven’t been, without reassurance, able to imagine fools of the size that my case demands?” And Gedge had a pause while, as if on the chance of some proof, his companion waited. “Well, I won’t pretend to you that your anxiety hasn’t made me, doesn’t threaten to make me, a bit nervous; though I don’t quite understand it if, as you say, people but rave about me.”

“Oh *that* report was from the other side; people in our country so very easily rave. You’ve seen small children laugh to shrieks when tickled in a new place. So there are amiable millions with us who are but small shrieking children. They perpetually present new places for the tickler. What we’ve seen in further lights,” Mr. Hayes good-humouredly pursued, “is your people *here*—the Committee, the Board, or whatever the powers to whom you’re responsible.”

“Call them my friend Grant-Jackson then—my original backer, though I admit for that reason perhaps my most formidable critic. It’s with him practically I deal; or rather it’s by him I’m dealt with—*was* dealt with before. I stand or fall by him. But he has given me my head.”

“Mayn’t he then want you,” Mrs. Hayes inquired, “just to show as flagrantly running away?”

“Of course—I see what you mean. I’m riding, blindly, for a fall, and They’re watching (to be tender of me!) for the smash that may come of itself. It’s Machiavellic—but everything’s possible. And what did you just now mean,” Gedge asked—“especially if you’ve only heard of my prosperity—by your ‘further lights’?”

His friends for an instant looked embarrassed, but Mr. Hayes came to the point. “We’ve heard of your prosperity, but we’ve also, remember, within a few minutes, heard *you*.”

“I was determined you *should*,” said Gedge. “I’m good then—but I overdo?” His strained grin was still sceptical.

Thus challenged, at any rate, his visitor pronounced. “Well, if you don’t; if at the end of six months more it’s clear that you haven’t overdone; then, *then*——”

“Then what?”

“Then it’s great.”

“But it *is* great—greater than anything of the sort ever was. I overdo, thank goodness, yes; or I would if it were a thing you *could*.”

“Oh well, if there’s *proof* that you can’t——!” With which and an expressive gesture Mr. Hayes threw up his fears.

His wife, however, for a moment seemed unable to let them go. “Don’t They want then *any* truth?—none even for the mere look of it?”

“The look of it,” said Morris Gedge, “is what I give!”

It made them, the others, exchange a look of their own. Then she smiled. "Oh, well, if they think so——!"

"You at least don't? You're like my wife—which indeed, I remember," Gedge added, "is a similarity I expressed a year ago the wish for! At any rate I frighten *her*."

The young husband, with an "Ah wives are terrible!" smoothed it over, and their visit would have failed of further excuse had not at this instant a movement at the other end of the room suddenly engaged them. The evening had so nearly closed in, though Gedge, in the course of their talk, had lighted the lamp nearest them, that they had not distinguished, in connexion with the opening of the door of communication to the warden's lodge, the appearance of another person, an eager woman who in her impatience had barely paused before advancing. Mrs. Gedge—her identity took but a few seconds to become vivid—was upon them, and she had not been too late for Mr. Hayes's last remark. Gedge saw at once that she had come with news; no need even, for that certitude, of her quick retort to the words in the air—"You may say as well, sir, that they're often, poor wives, terrified!" She knew nothing of the friends whom, at so unnatural an hour, he was showing about; but there was no livelier sign for him that this didn't matter than the possibility with which she intensely charged her "Grant-Jackson, to see you at once!"—letting it, so to speak, fly in his face.

"He has been with you?"

"Only a minute—he's there. But it's you he wants to see."

He looked at the others. "And what does he want, dear?"

"God knows! There it is. It's his horrid hour—it *was* that other time."

She had nervously turned to the others, overflowing to them, in her dismay, for all their strangeness—quite, as he said to himself, like a woman of the people. She was the bareheaded good wife talking in the street about the row in the house, and it was in this character that he instantly introduced her: "My dear doubting wife, who will do her best to entertain you while I wait upon our friend." And he explained to her as he could his now protesting companions—"Mr. and Mrs. Hayes of New York, who have been here before." He knew, without knowing why, that her announcement chilled him; he failed at least to see why it should chill him so much. His good friends had themselves been visibly affected by it, and heaven knew that the depths of brooding fancy in him were easily stirred by contact. If they had wanted a crisis they accordingly had found one, albeit they had already asked leave to retire before it. This he wouldn't have. "Ah no, you must really see!"

"But we shan't be able to bear it, you know," said the young woman, "if it *is* to turn you out."

Her crudity attested her sincerity, and it was the latter, doubtless, that instantly held Mrs. Gedge. "It *is* to turn us out."

"Has he told you that, madam?" Mr. Hayes inquired of her—it being wondrous how the breath of doom had drawn them together.

"No, not told me; but there's something in him there—I mean in his awful manner—that matches too well with other things. We've seen," said the poor pale lady, "other things enough."

The young woman almost clutched her. "Is his manner very awful?"

"It's simply the manner," Gedge interposed, "of a very great man."

"Well, very great men," said his wife, "are very awful things."

“It’s exactly,” he laughed, “what we’re finding out! But I mustn’t keep him waiting. Our friends here,” he went on, “are directly interested. You mustn’t, mind you, let them go until we know.”

Mr. Hayes, however, held him; he found himself stayed. “We’re so directly interested that I want you to understand this. If anything happens——”

“Yes?” said Gedge, all gentle as he faltered.

“Well, *we* must set you up.”

Mrs. Hayes quickly abounded. “Oh *do* come to us!”

Again he could but take them in. They were really wonderful folk. And with it all but Mr. and Mrs. Hayes! It affected even Isabel through her alarm; though the balm, in a manner, seemed to foretell the wound. He had reached the threshold of his own quarters; he stood there as at the door of the chamber of judgement. But he laughed; at least he could be gallant in going up for sentence. “Very good then—I’ll come to you!”

This was very well, but it didn’t prevent his heart, a minute later, at the end of the passage, from thumping with beats he could count. He had paused again before going in; on the other side of this second door his poor future was to be let loose at him. It was broken, at best, and spiritless, but wasn’t Grant-Jackson there like a beast-tamer in a cage, all tights and spangles and circus attitudes, to give it a cut with the smart official whip and make it spring at him? It was during this moment that he fully measured the effect for his nerves of the impression made on his so oddly earnest friends—whose earnestness he verily, in the spasm of this last effort, came within an ace of resenting. They had upset him by contact; he was afraid literally of meeting his doom on his knees; it wouldn’t have taken much more, he absolutely felt, to make him approach with his forehead in the dust the great man whose wrath was to be averted. Mr. and Mrs. Hayes of New York had brought tears to his eyes, but was it to be reserved for Grant-Jackson to make him cry like a baby? He wished, yes, while he palpitated, that Mr. and Mrs. Hayes of New York hadn’t had such an eccentricity of interest, for it seemed somehow to come from *them* that he was going so fast to pieces. Before he turned the knob of the door, however, he had another queer instant; making out that it had been, strictly, his case that was interesting, his funny power, however accidental, to show as in a picture the attitude of others—not his poor pale personality. It was this latter quantity, none the less, that was marching to execution. It is to our friend’s credit that he *believed*, as he prepared to turn the knob, that he was going to be hanged; and it’s certainly not less to his credit that his wife, on the chance, had his supreme thought. Here it was that—possibly with his last articulate breath—he thanked his stars, such as they were, for Mr. and Mrs. Hayes of New York. At least they would take care of her.

They were doing that certainly with some success when he returned to them ten minutes later. She sat between them in the beautified Birthplace, and he couldn’t have been sure afterwards that each wasn’t holding her hand. The three together had at any rate the effect of recalling to him—it was too whimsical—some picture, a sentimental print, seen and admired in his youth, a “Waiting for the Verdict,” a “Counting the Hours,” or something of that sort; humble respectability in suspense about humble innocence. He didn’t know how he himself looked, and he didn’t care; the great thing was that he wasn’t crying—though he might have been; the glitter in his eyes was assuredly dry, though that there *was* a glitter, or something slightly to bewilder, the faces of the others as they rose to meet him sufficiently proved. His wife’s eyes pierced his own, but it was Mrs. Hayes of New York who spoke. “*Was* it then for that——?”

He only looked at them at first—he felt he might now enjoy it. “Yes, it was for ‘that.’ I mean it was about the way I’ve been going on. He came to speak of it.”

“And he’s gone?” Mr. Hayes permitted himself to inquire.

“He’s gone.”

“It’s over?” Isabel hoarsely asked.

“It’s over.”

“Then we go?”

This it was that he enjoyed. “No, my dear; we stay.”

There was fairly a triple gasp; relief took time to operate. “Then why did he come?”

“In the fulness of his kind heart and of *Their* discussed and decreed satisfaction. To express Their sense——!”

Mr. Hayes broke into a laugh, but his wife wanted to know. “Of the grand work you’re doing?”

“Of the way I polish it off. They’re most handsome about it. The receipts, it appears, speak——”

He was nursing his effect; Isabel intently watched him and the others hung on his lips. “Yes, speak——?”

“Well, volumes. They tell the truth.”

At this Mr. Hayes laughed again. “Oh *they* at least do?”

Near him thus once more Gedge knew their intelligence as one—which was so good a consciousness to get back that his tension now relaxed as by the snap of a spring and he felt his old face at ease. “So you can’t say,” he continued, “that we don’t want it.”

“I bow to it,” the young man smiled. “It’s what I said then. It’s *great*.”

“It’s great,” said Morris Gedge. “It couldn’t be greater.”

His wife still watched him; her irony hung behind. “Then we’re just as we were?”

“No, not as we were.”

She jumped at it. “Better?”

“Better. They give us a rise.”

“Of income?”

“Of our sweet little stipend—by a vote of the Committee. That’s what, as Chairman, he came to announce.”

The very echoes of the Birthplace were themselves, for the instant, hushed; the warden’s three companions showed in the conscious air a struggle for their own breath. But Isabel, almost with a shriek, was the first to recover hers. “They double us?”

“Well—call it that. ‘In recognition.’ There you are.” Isabel uttered another sound—but this time inarticulate; partly because Mrs. Hayes of New York had already jumped at her to kiss her. Mr. Hayes meanwhile, as with too much to say, but put out his hand, which our friend took in silence. So Gedge had the last word. “And there *you* are!”

The Beast in the Jungle

CHAPTER I

What determined the speech that startled him in the course of their encounter scarcely matters, being probably but some words spoken by himself quite without intention—spoken as they lingered and slowly moved together after their renewal of acquaintance. He had been conveyed by friends an hour or two before to the house at which she was staying; the party of visitors at the other house, of whom he was one, and thanks to whom it was his theory, as always, that he was lost in the crowd, had been invited over to luncheon. There had been after luncheon much dispersal, all in the interest of the original motive, a view of Weatherend itself and the fine things, intrinsic features, pictures, heirlooms, treasures of all the arts, that made the place almost famous; and the great rooms were so numerous that guests could wander at their will, hang back from the principal group and in cases where they took such matters with the last seriousness give themselves up to mysterious appreciations and measurements. There were persons to be observed, singly or in couples, bending toward objects in out-of-the-way corners with their hands on their knees and their heads nodding quite as with the emphasis of an excited sense of smell. When they were two they either mingled their sounds of ecstasy or melted into silences of even deeper import, so that there were aspects of the occasion that gave it for Marcher much the air of the “look round,” previous to a sale highly advertised, that excites or quenches, as may be, the dream of acquisition. The dream of acquisition at Weatherend would have had to be wild indeed, and John Marcher found himself, among such suggestions, disconcerted almost equally by the presence of those who knew too much and by that of those who knew nothing. The great rooms caused so much poetry and history to press upon him that he needed some straying apart to feel in a proper relation with them, though this impulse was not, as happened, like the gloating of some of his companions, to be compared to the movements of a dog sniffing a cupboard. It had an issue promptly enough in a direction that was not to have been calculated.

It led, briefly, in the course of the October afternoon, to his closer meeting with May Bartram, whose face, a reminder, yet not quite a remembrance, as they sat much separated at a very long table, had begun merely by troubling him rather pleasantly. It affected him as the sequel of something of which he had lost the beginning. He knew it, and for the time quite welcomed it, as a continuation, but didn't know what it continued, which was an interest or an amusement the greater as he was also somehow aware—yet without a direct sign from her—that the young woman herself hadn't lost the thread. She hadn't lost it, but she wouldn't give it back to him, he saw, without some putting forth of his hand for it; and he not only saw that, but saw several things more, things odd enough in the light of the fact that at the moment some accident of grouping brought them face to face he was still merely fumbling with the idea that any contact between them in the past would have had no importance. If it had had no importance he scarcely knew why his actual impression of her should so seem to have so much; the answer to which, however, was that in such a life as they all appeared to be leading for the moment one could but take things as they came. He was satisfied, without in the least being able to say why, that this young lady might roughly have ranked in the house as a poor relation; satisfied also that she was not there on a brief visit, but was more or less a part of the establishment—almost a working, a remunerated part. Didn't she enjoy at periods a protection that she paid for by helping, among other services, to show the place and explain it, deal with the tiresome people, answer questions

about the dates of the building, the styles of the furniture, the authorship of the pictures, the favourite haunts of the ghost? It wasn't that she looked as if you could have given her shillings—it was impossible to look less so. Yet when she finally drifted toward him, distinctly handsome, though ever so much older—older than when he had seen her before—it might have been as an effect of her guessing that he had, within the couple of hours, devoted more imagination to her than to all the others put together, and had thereby penetrated to a kind of truth that the others were too stupid for. She *was* there on harder terms than any one; she was there as a consequence of things suffered, one way and another, in the interval of years; and she remembered him very much as she was remembered—only a good deal better.

By the time they at last thus came to speech they were alone in one of the rooms—remarkable for a fine portrait over the chimney-place—out of which their friends had passed, and the charm of it was that even before they had spoken they had practically arranged with each other to stay behind for talk. The charm, happily, was in other things too—partly in there being scarce a spot at Weatherend without something to stay behind for. It was in the way the autumn day looked into the high windows as it waned; the way the red light, breaking at the close from under a low sombre sky, reached out in a long shaft and played over old wainscots, old tapestry, old gold, old colour. It was most of all perhaps in the way she came to him as if, since she had been turned on to deal with the simpler sort, he might, should he choose to keep the whole thing down, just take her mild attention for a part of her general business. As soon as he heard her voice, however, the gap was filled up and the missing link supplied; the slight irony he divined in her attitude lost its advantage. He almost jumped at it to get there before her. “I met you years and years ago in Rome. I remember all about it.” She confessed to disappointment—she had been so sure he didn't; and to prove how well he did he began to pour forth the particular recollections that popped up as he called for them. Her face and her voice, all at his service now, worked the miracle—the impression operating like the torch of a lamplighter who touches into flame, one by one, a long row of gas-jets. Marcher flattered himself the illumination was brilliant, yet he was really still more pleased on her showing him, with amusement, that in his haste to make everything right he had got most things rather wrong. It hadn't been at Rome—it had been at Naples; and it hadn't been eight years before—it had been more nearly ten. She hadn't been, either, with her uncle and aunt, but with her mother and brother; in addition to which it was not with the Pemples *he* had been, but with the Boyers, coming down in their company from Rome—a point on which she insisted, a little to his confusion, and as to which she had her evidence in hand. The Boyers she had known, but didn't know the Pemples, though she had heard of them, and it was the people he was with who had made them acquainted. The incident of the thunderstorm that had raged round them with such violence as to drive them for refuge into an excavation—this incident had not occurred at the Palace of the Caesars, but at Pompeii, on an occasion when they had been present there at an important find.

He accepted her amendments, he enjoyed her corrections, though the moral of them was, she pointed out, that he *really* didn't remember the least thing about her; and he only felt it as a drawback that when all was made strictly historic there didn't appear much of anything left. They lingered together still, she neglecting her office—for from the moment he was so clever she had no proper right to him—and both neglecting the house, just waiting as to see if a memory or two more wouldn't again breathe on them. It hadn't taken them many minutes, after all, to put down on the table, like the cards of a pack, those that constituted their respective hands; only what came out was that the pack was unfortunately not perfect—that the past, invoked, invited, encouraged, could give them, naturally, no more than it had. It had made them anciently meet—her at twenty, him at twenty-five; but nothing was so strange, they seemed to say to each other, as that, while so occupied, it hadn't done a little more for

them. They looked at each other as with the feeling of an occasion missed; the present would have been so much better if the other, in the far distance, in the foreign land, hadn't been so stupidly meagre. There weren't, apparently, all counted, more than a dozen little old things that had succeeded in coming to pass between them; trivialities of youth, simplicities of freshness, stupidities of ignorance, small possible germs, but too deeply buried—too deeply (didn't it seem?) to sprout after so many years. Marcher could only feel he ought to have rendered her some service—saved her from a capsized boat in the bay or at least recovered her dressing-bag, filched from her cab in the streets of Naples by a lazzarone with a stiletto. Or it would have been nice if he could have been taken with fever all alone at his hotel, and she could have come to look after him, to write to his people, to drive him out in convalescence. *Then* they would be in possession of the something or other that their actual show seemed to lack. It yet somehow presented itself, this show, as too good to be spoiled; so that they were reduced for a few minutes more to wondering a little helplessly why—since they seemed to know a certain number of the same people—their reunion had been so long averted. They didn't use that name for it, but their delay from minute to minute to join the others was a kind of confession that they didn't quite want it to be a failure. Their attempted supposition of reasons for their not having met but showed how little they knew of each other. There came in fact a moment when Marcher felt a positive pang. It was vain to pretend she was an old friend, for all the communities were wanting, in spite of which it was as an old friend that he saw she would have suited him. He had new ones enough—was surrounded with them for instance on the stage of the other house; as a new one he probably wouldn't have so much as noticed her. He would have liked to invent something, get her to make-believe with him that some passage of a romantic or critical kind *had* originally occurred. He was really almost reaching out in imagination—as against time—for something that would do, and saying to himself that if it didn't come this sketch of a fresh start would show for quite awkwardly bungled. They would separate, and now for no second or no third chance. They would have tried and not succeeded. Then it was, just at the turn, as he afterwards made it out to himself, that, everything else failing, she herself decided to take up the case and, as it were, save the situation. He felt as soon as she spoke that she had been consciously keeping back what she said and hoping to get on without it; a scruple in her that immensely touched him when, by the end of three or four minutes more, he was able to measure it. What she brought out, at any rate, quite cleared the air and supplied the link—the link it was so odd he should frivolously have managed to lose.

“You know you told me something I've never forgotten and that again and again has made me think of you since; it was that tremendously hot day when we went to Sorrento, across the bay, for the breeze. What I allude to was what you said to me, on the way back, as we sat under the awning of the boat enjoying the cool. Have you forgotten?”

He had forgotten, and was even more surprised than ashamed. But the great thing was that he saw in this no vulgar reminder of any “sweet” speech. The vanity of women had long memories, but she was making no claim on him of a compliment or a mistake. With another woman, a totally different one, he might have feared the recall possibly even some imbecile “offer.” So, in having to say that he had indeed forgotten, he was conscious rather of a loss than of a gain; he already saw an interest in the matter of her mention. “I try to think—but I give it up. Yet I remember the Sorrento day.”

“I'm not very sure you do,” May Bartram after a moment said; “and I'm not very sure I ought to want you to. It's dreadful to bring a person back at any time to what he was ten years before. If you've lived away from it,” she smiled, “so much the better.”

“Ah if *you* haven't why should I?” he asked.

“Lived away, you mean, from what I myself was?”

“From what *I* was. I was of course an ass,” Marcher went on; “but I would rather know from you just the sort of ass I was than—from the moment you have something in your mind—not know anything.”

Still, however, she hesitated. “But if you’ve completely ceased to be that sort—?”

“Why I can then all the more bear to know. Besides, perhaps I haven’t.”

“Perhaps. Yet if you haven’t,” she added, “I should suppose you’d remember. Not indeed that *I* in the least connect with my impression the invidious name you use. If I had only thought you foolish,” she explained, “the thing I speak of wouldn’t so have remained with me. It was about yourself.” She waited as if it might come to him; but as, only meeting her eyes in wonder, he gave no sign, she burnt her ships. “Has it ever happened?”

Then it was that, while he continued to stare, a light broke for him and the blood slowly came to his face, which began to burn with recognition.

“Do you mean I told you—?” But he faltered, lest what came to him shouldn’t be right, lest he should only give himself away.

“It was something about yourself that it was natural one shouldn’t forget—that is if one remembered you at all. That’s why I ask you,” she smiled, “if the thing you then spoke of has ever come to pass?”

Oh then he saw, but he was lost in wonder and found himself embarrassed. This, he also saw, made her sorry for him, as if her allusion had been a mistake. It took him but a moment, however, to feel it hadn’t been, much as it had been a surprise. After the first little shock of it her knowledge on the contrary began, even if rather strangely, to taste sweet to him. She was the only other person in the world then who would have it, and she had had it all these years, while the fact of his having so breathed his secret had unaccountably faded from him. No wonder they couldn’t have met as if nothing had happened. “I judge,” he finally said, “that I know what you mean. Only I had strangely enough lost any sense of having taken you so far into my confidence.”

“Is it because you’ve taken so many others as well?”

“I’ve taken nobody. Not a creature since then.”

“So that I’m the only person who knows?”

“The only person in the world.”

“Well,” she quickly replied, “I myself have never spoken. I’ve never, never repeated of you what you told me.” She looked at him so that he perfectly believed her. Their eyes met over it in such a way that he was without a doubt. “And I never will.”

She spoke with an earnestness that, as if almost excessive, put him at ease about her possible derision. Somehow the whole question was a new luxury to him—that is from the moment she was in possession. If she didn’t take the sarcastic view she clearly took the sympathetic, and that was what he had had, in all the long time, from no one whomsoever. What he felt was that he couldn’t at present have begun to tell her, and yet could profit perhaps exquisitely by the accident of having done so of old. “Please don’t then. We’re just right as it is.”

“Oh I am,” she laughed, “if you are!” To which she added: “Then you do still feel in the same way?”

It was impossible he shouldn't take to himself that she was really interested, though it all kept coming as a perfect surprise. He had thought of himself so long as abominably alone, and lo he wasn't alone a bit. He hadn't been, it appeared, for an hour—since those moments on the Sorrento boat. It was she who had been, he seemed to see as he looked at her—she who had been made so by the graceless fact of his lapse of fidelity. To tell her what he had told her—what had it been but to ask something of her? something that she had given, in her charity, without his having, by a remembrance, by a return of the spirit, failing another encounter, so much as thanked her. What he had asked of her had been simply at first not to laugh at him. She had beautifully not done so for ten years, and she was not doing so now. So he had endless gratitude to make up. Only for that he must see just how he had figured to her. “What, exactly, was the account I gave—?”

“Of the way you did feel? Well, it was very simple. You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you, that you had in your bones the foreboding and the conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you.”

“Do you call that very simple?” John Marcher asked.

She thought a moment. “It was perhaps because I seemed, as you spoke, to understand it.”

“You do understand it?” he eagerly asked.

Again she kept her kind eyes on him. “You still have the belief?”

“Oh!” he exclaimed helplessly. There was too much to say.

“Whatever it's to be,” she clearly made out, “it hasn't yet come.”

He shook his head in complete surrender now. “It hasn't yet come. Only, you know, it isn't anything I'm to do, to achieve in the world, to be distinguished or admired for. I'm not such an ass as *that*. It would be much better, no doubt, if I were.”

“It's to be something you're merely to suffer?”

“Well, say to wait for—to have to meet, to face, to see suddenly break out in my life; possibly destroying all further consciousness, possibly annihilating me; possibly, on the other hand, only altering everything, striking at the root of all my world and leaving me to the consequences, however they shape themselves.”

She took this in, but the light in her eyes continued for him not to be that of mockery. “Isn't what you describe perhaps but the expectation—or at any rate the sense of danger, familiar to so many people—of falling in love?”

John Marcher thought. “Did you ask me that before?”

“No—I wasn't so free-and-easy then. But it's what strikes me now.”

“Of course,” he said after a moment, “it strikes you. Of course it strikes *me*. Of course what's in store for me may be no more than that. The only thing is,” he went on, “that I think if it had been that I should by this time know.”

“Do you mean because you've *been* in love?” And then as he but looked at her in silence: “You've been in love, and it hasn't meant such a cataclysm, hasn't proved the great affair?”

“Here I am, you see. It hasn't been overwhelming.”

“Then it hasn't been love,” said May Bartram.

“Well, I at least thought it was. I took it for that—I’ve taken it till now. It was agreeable, it was delightful, it was miserable,” he explained. “But it wasn’t strange. It wasn’t what my affair’s to be.”

“You want something all to yourself—something that nobody else knows or *has* known?”

“It isn’t a question of what I ‘want’—God knows I don’t want anything. It’s only a question of the apprehension that haunts me—that I live with day by day.”

He said this so lucidly and consistently that he could see it further impose itself. If she hadn’t been interested before she’d have been interested now.

“Is it a sense of coming violence?”

Evidently now too again he liked to talk of it. “I don’t think of it as—when it does come—necessarily violent. I only think of it as natural and as of course above all unmistakable. I think of it simply as *the* thing. *The* thing will of itself appear natural.”

“Then how will it appear strange?”

Marcher bethought himself. “It won’t—to *me*.”

“To whom then?”

“Well,” he replied, smiling at last, “say to you.”

“Oh then I’m to be present?”

“Why you are present—since you know.”

“I see.” She turned it over. “But I mean at the catastrophe.”

At this, for a minute, their lightness gave way to their gravity; it was as if the long look they exchanged held them together. “It will only depend on yourself—if you’ll watch with me.”

“Are you afraid?” she asked.

“Don’t leave me now,” he went on.

“Are you afraid?” she repeated.

“Do you think me simply out of my mind?” he pursued instead of answering. “Do I merely strike you as a harmless lunatic?”

“No,” said May Bartram. “I understand you. I believe you.”

“You mean you feel how my obsession—poor old thing—may correspond to some possible reality?”

“To some possible reality.”

“Then you *will* watch with me?”

She hesitated, then for the third time put her question. “Are you afraid?”

“Did I tell you I was—at Naples?”

“No, you said nothing about it.”

“Then I don’t know. And I should like to know,” said John Marcher. “You’ll tell me yourself whether you think so. If you’ll watch with me you’ll see.”

“Very good then.” They had been moving by this time across the room, and at the door, before passing out, they paused as for the full wind-up of their understanding. “I’ll watch with you,” said May Bartram.

CHAPTER II

The fact that she “knew”—knew and yet neither chaffed him nor betrayed him—had in a short time begun to constitute between them a goodly bond, which became more marked when, within the year that followed their afternoon at Weatherend, the opportunities for meeting multiplied. The event that thus promoted these occasions was the death of the ancient lady her great-aunt, under whose wing, since losing her mother, she had to such an extent found shelter, and who, though but the widowed mother of the new successor to the property, had succeeded—thanks to a high tone and a high temper—in not forfeiting the supreme position at the great house. The deposition of this personage arrived but with her death, which, followed by many changes, made in particular a difference for the young woman in whom Marcher’s expert attention had recognised from the first a dependent with a pride that might ache though it didn’t bristle. Nothing for a long time had made him easier than the thought that the aching must have been much soothed by Miss Bartram’s now finding herself able to set up a small home in London. She had acquired property, to an amount that made that luxury just possible, under her aunt’s extremely complicated will, and when the whole matter began to be straightened out, which indeed took time, she let him know that the happy issue was at last in view. He had seen her again before that day, both because she had more than once accompanied the ancient lady to town and because he had paid another visit to the friends who so conveniently made of Weatherend one of the charms of their own hospitality. These friends had taken him back there; he had achieved there again with Miss Bartram some quiet detachment; and he had in London succeeded in persuading her to more than one brief absence from her aunt. They went together, on these latter occasions, to the National Gallery and the South Kensington Museum, where, among vivid reminders, they talked of Italy at large—not now attempting to recover, as at first, the taste of their youth and their ignorance. That recovery, the first day at Weatherend, had served its purpose well, had given them quite enough; so that they were, to Marcher’s sense, no longer hovering about the head-waters of their stream, but had felt their boat pushed sharply off and down the current.

They were literally afloat together; for our gentleman this was marked, quite as marked as that the fortunate cause of it was just the buried treasure of her knowledge. He had with his own hands dug up this little hoard, brought to light—that is to within reach of the dim day constituted by their discretions and privacies—the object of value the hiding-place of which he had, after putting it into the ground himself, so strangely, so long forgotten. The rare luck of his having again just stumbled on the spot made him indifferent to any other question; he would doubtless have devoted more time to the odd accident of his lapse of memory if he hadn’t been moved to devote so much to the sweetness, the comfort, as he felt, for the future, that this accident itself had helped to keep fresh. It had never entered into his plan that any one should “know”, and mainly for the reason that it wasn’t in him to tell any one. That would have been impossible, for nothing but the amusement of a cold world would have waited on it. Since, however, a mysterious fate had opened his mouth betimes, in spite of him, he would count that a compensation and profit by it to the utmost. That the right person *should* know tempered the asperity of his secret more even than his shyness had permitted him to imagine; and May Bartram was clearly right, because—well, because there she was. Her knowledge simply settled it; he would have been sure enough by this time had she been wrong. There was that in his situation, no doubt, that disposed him too much to see her as a mere confidant, taking all her light for him from the fact—the fact only—of her interest in his predicament; from her mercy, sympathy, seriousness, her consent not to regard him as the funniest of the funny. Aware, in fine, that her price for him was just in her giving him this constant sense of his being admirably spared, he was careful to remember that she

had also a life of her own, with things that might happen to *her*, things that in friendship one should likewise take account of. Something fairly remarkable came to pass with him, for that matter, in this connexion—something represented by a certain passage of his consciousness, in the suddenest way, from one extreme to the other.

He had thought himself, so long as nobody knew, the most disinterested person in the world, carrying his concentrated burden, his perpetual suspense, ever so quietly, holding his tongue about it, giving others no glimpse of it nor of its effect upon his life, asking of them no allowance and only making on his side all those that were asked. He hadn't disturbed people with the queerness of their having to know a haunted man, though he had had moments of rather special temptation on hearing them say they were forsooth "unsettled." If they were as unsettled as he was—he who had never been settled for an hour in his life—they would know what it meant. Yet it wasn't, all the same, for him to make them, and he listened to them civilly enough. This was why he had such good—though possibly such rather colourless—manners; this was why, above all, he could regard himself, in a greedy world, as decently—as in fact perhaps even a little sublimely—unselfish. Our point is accordingly that he valued this character quite sufficiently to measure his present danger of letting it lapse, against which he promised himself to be much on his guard. He was quite ready, none the less, to be selfish just a little, since surely no more charming occasion for it had come to him. "Just a little," in a word, was just as much as Miss Bartram, taking one day with another, would let him. He never would be in the least coercive, and would keep well before him the lines on which consideration for her—the very highest—ought to proceed. He would thoroughly establish the heads under which her affairs, her requirements, her peculiarities—he went so far as to give them the latitude of that name—would come into their intercourse. All this naturally was a sign of how much he took the intercourse itself for granted. There was nothing more to be done about that. It simply existed; had sprung into being with her first penetrating question to him in the autumn light there at Weatherend. The real form it should have taken on the basis that stood out large was the form of their marrying. But the devil in this was that the very basis itself put marrying out of the question. His conviction, his apprehension, his obsession, in short, wasn't a privilege he could invite a woman to share; and that consequence of it was precisely what was the matter with him. Something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and the turns of the months and the years, like a crouching Beast in the Jungle. It signified little whether the crouching Beast were destined to slay him or to be slain. The definite point was the inevitable spring of the creature; and the definite lesson from that was that a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt. Such was the image under which he had ended by figuring his life.

They had at first, none the less, in the scattered hours spent together, made no allusion to that view of it; which was a sign he was handsomely alert to give that he didn't expect, that he in fact didn't care, always to be talking about it. Such a feature in one's outlook was really like a hump on one's back. The difference it made every minute of the day existed quite independently of discussion. One discussed of course *like* a hunchback, for there was always, if nothing else, the hunchback face. That remained, and she was watching him; but people watched best, as a general thing, in silence, so that such would be predominantly the manner of their vigil. Yet he didn't want, at the same time, to be tense and solemn; tense and solemn was what he imagined he too much showed for with other people. The thing to be, with the one person who knew, was easy and natural—to make the reference rather than be seeming to avoid it, to avoid it rather than be seeming to make it, and to keep it, in any case, familiar, facetious even, rather than pedantic and portentous. Some such consideration as the latter was doubtless in his mind for instance when he wrote pleasantly to Miss Bartram that perhaps the great thing he had so long felt as in the lap of the gods was no more than this

circumstance, which touched him so nearly, of her acquiring a house in London. It was the first allusion they had yet again made, needing any other hitherto so little; but when she replied, after having given him the news, that she was by no means satisfied with such a trifle as the climax to so special a suspense, she almost set him wondering if she hadn't even a larger conception of singularity for him than he had for himself. He was at all events destined to become aware little by little, as time went by, that she was all the while looking at his life, judging it, measuring it, in the light of the thing she knew, which grew to be at last, with the consecration of the years, never mentioned between them save as "the real truth" about him. That had always been his own form of reference to it, but she adopted the form so quietly that, looking back at the end of a period, he knew there was no moment at which it was traceable that she had, as he might say, got inside his idea, or exchanged the attitude of beautifully indulging for that of still more beautifully believing him.

It was always open to him to accuse her of seeing him but as the most harmless of maniacs, and this, in the long run—since it covered so much ground—was his easiest description of their friendship. He had a screw loose for her but she liked him in spite of it and was practically, against the rest of the world, his kind wise keeper, unremunerated but fairly amused and, in the absence of other near ties, not disreputably occupied. The rest of the world of course thought him queer, but she, she only, knew how, and above all why, queer; which was precisely what enabled her to dispose the concealing veil in the right folds. She took his gaiety from him—since it had to pass with them for gaiety—as she took everything else; but she certainly so far justified by her unerring touch his finer sense of the degree to which he had ended by convincing her. *She* at least never spoke of the secret of his life except as "the real truth about you," and she had in fact a wonderful way of making it seem, as such, the secret of her own life too. That was in fine how he so constantly felt her as allowing for him; he couldn't on the whole call it anything else. He allowed for himself, but she, exactly, allowed still more; partly because, better placed for a sight of the matter, she traced his unhappy perversion through reaches of its course into which he could scarce follow it. He knew how he felt, but, besides knowing that, she knew how he looked as well; he knew each of the things of importance he was insidiously kept from doing, but she could add up the amount they made, understand how much, with a lighter weight on his spirit, he might have done, and thereby establish how, clever as he was, he fell short. Above all she was in the secret of the difference between the forms he went through—those of his little office under Government, those of caring for his modest patrimony, for his library, for his garden in the country, for the people in London whose invitations he accepted and repaid—and the detachment that reigned beneath them and that made of all behaviour, all that could in the least be called behaviour, a long act of dissimulation. What it had come to was that he wore a mask painted with the social simper, out of the eye-holes of which there looked eyes of an expression not in the least matching the other features. This the stupid world, even after years, had never more than half discovered. It was only May Bartram who had, and she achieved, by an art indescribable, the feat of at once—or perhaps it was only alternately—meeting the eyes from in front and mingling her own vision, as from over his shoulder, with their peep through the apertures.

So while they grew older together she did watch with him, and so she let this association give shape and colour to her own existence. Beneath *her* forms as well detachment had learned to sit, and behaviour had become for her, in the social sense, a false account of herself. There was but one account of her that would have been true all the while and that she could give straight to nobody, least of all to John Marcher. Her whole attitude was a virtual statement, but the perception of that only seemed called to take its place for him as one of the many things necessarily crowded out of his consciousness. If she had moreover, like himself, to

make sacrifices to their real truth, it was to be granted that her compensation might have affected her as more prompt and more natural. They had long periods, in this London time, during which, when they were together, a stranger might have listened to them without in the least pricking up his ears; on the other hand the real truth was equally liable at any moment to rise to the surface, and the auditor would then have wondered indeed what they were talking about. They had from an early hour made up their mind that society was, luckily, unintelligent, and the margin allowed them by this had fairly become one of their commonplaces. Yet there were still moments when the situation turned almost fresh—usually under the effect of some expression drawn from herself. Her expressions doubtless repeated themselves, but her intervals were generous. “What saves us, you know, is that we answer so completely to so usual an appearance: that of the man and woman whose friendship has become such a daily habit—or almost—as to be at last indispensable.” That for instance was a remark she had frequently enough had occasion to make, though she had given it at different times different developments. What we are especially concerned with is the turn it happened to take from her one afternoon when he had come to see her in honour of her birthday. This anniversary had fallen on a Sunday, at a season of thick fog and general outward gloom; but he had brought her his customary offering, having known her now long enough to have established a hundred small traditions. It was one of his proofs to himself, the present he made her on her birthday, that he hadn’t sunk into real selfishness. It was mostly nothing more than a small trinket, but it was always fine of its kind, and he was regularly careful to pay for it more than he thought he could afford. “Our habit saves you, at least, don’t you see? because it makes you, after all, for the vulgar, indistinguishable from other men. What’s the most inveterate mark of men in general? Why the capacity to spend endless time with dull women—to spend it I won’t say without being bored, but without minding that they are, without being driven off at a tangent by it; which comes to the same thing. I’m your dull woman, a part of the daily bread for which you pray at church. That covers your tracks more than anything.”

“And what covers yours?” asked Marcher, whom his dull woman could mostly to this extent amuse. “I see of course what you mean by your saving me, in this way and that, so far as other people are concerned—I’ve seen it all along. Only what is it that saves *you*? I often think, you know, of that.”

She looked as if she sometimes thought of that too, but rather in a different way. “Where other people, you mean, are concerned?”

“Well, you’re really so in with me, you know—as a sort of result of my being so in with yourself. I mean of my having such an immense regard for you, being so tremendously mindful of all you’ve done for me. I sometimes ask myself if it’s quite fair. Fair I mean to have so involved and—since one may say it—interested you. I almost feel as if you hadn’t really had time to do anything else.”

“Anything else but be interested?” she asked. “Ah what else does one ever want to be? If I’ve been ‘watching’ with you, as we long ago agreed I was to do, watching’s always in itself an absorption.”

“Oh certainly,” John Marcher said, “if you hadn’t had your curiosity—! Only doesn’t it sometimes come to you as time goes on that your curiosity isn’t being particularly repaid?”

May Bartram had a pause. “Do you ask that, by any chance, because you feel at all that yours isn’t? I mean because you have to wait so long.”

Oh he understood what she meant! “For the thing to happen that never does happen? For the Beast to jump out? No, I’m just where I was about it. It isn’t a matter as to which I

can *choose*, I can decide for a change. It isn't one as to which there *can* be a change. It's in the lap of the gods. One's in the hands of one's law—there one is. As to the form the law will take, the way it will operate, that's its own affair."

"Yes," Miss Bartram replied; "of course one's fate's coming, of course it *has* come in its own form and its own way, all the while. Only, you know, the form and the way in your case were to have been—well, something so exceptional and, as one may say, so particularly *your* own."

Something in this made him look at her with suspicion. "You say 'were to *have* been,' as if in your heart you had begun to doubt."

"Oh!" she vaguely protested.

"As if you believed," he went on, "that nothing will now take place."

She shook her head slowly but rather inscrutably. "You're far from my thought."

He continued to look at her. "What then is the matter with you?"

"Well," she said after another wait, "the matter with me is simply that I'm more sure than ever my curiosity, as you call it, will be but too well repaid."

They were frankly grave now; he had got up from his seat, had turned once more about the little drawing-room to which, year after year, he brought his inevitable topic; in which he had, as he might have said, tasted their intimate community with every sauce, where every object was as familiar to him as the things of his own house and the very carpets were worn with his fitful walk very much as the desks in old counting-houses are worn by the elbows of generations of clerks. The generations of his nervous moods had been at work there, and the place was the written history of his whole middle life. Under the impression of what his friend had just said he knew himself, for some reason, more aware of these things; which made him, after a moment, stop again before her. "Is it possibly that you've grown afraid?"

"Afraid?" He thought, as she repeated the word, that his question had made her, a little, change colour; so that, lest he should have touched on a truth, he explained very kindly: "You remember that that was what you asked *me* long ago—that first day at Weatherend."

"Oh yes, and you told me you didn't know—that I was to see for myself. We've said little about it since, even in so long a time."

"Precisely," Marcher interposed—"quite as if it were too delicate a matter for us to make free with. Quite as if we might find, on pressure, that I *am* afraid. For then," he said, "we shouldn't, should we? quite know what to do."

She had for the time no answer to this question. "There have been days when I thought you were. Only, of course," she added, "there have been days when we have thought almost anything."

"Everything. Oh!" Marcher softly groaned, as with a gasp, half spent, at the face, more uncovered just then than it had been for a long while, of the imagination always with them. It had always had its incalculable moments of glaring out, quite as with the very eyes of the very Beast, and, used as he was to them, they could still draw from him the tribute of a sigh that rose from the depths of his being. All they had thought, first and last, rolled over him; the past seemed to have been reduced to mere barren speculation. This in fact was what the place had just struck him as so full of—the simplification of everything but the state of suspense. That remained only by seeming to hang in the void surrounding it. Even his

original fear, if fear it as had been, had lost itself in the desert. "I judge, however," he continued, "that you see I'm not afraid now."

"What I see, as I make it out, is that you've achieved something almost unprecedented in the way of getting used to danger. Living with it so long and so closely you've lost your sense of it; you know it's there, but you're indifferent, and you cease even, as of old, to have to whistle in the dark. Considering what the danger is," May Bartram wound up, "I'm bound to say I don't think your attitude could well be surpassed."

John Marcher faintly smiled. "It's heroic?"

"Certainly—call it that."

It was what he would have liked indeed to call it. "I *am* then a man of courage?"

"That's what you were to show me."

He still, however, wondered. "But doesn't the man of courage know what he's afraid of—or not afraid of? I don't know *that*, you see. I don't focus it. I can't name it. I only know I'm exposed."

"Yes, but exposed—how shall I say?—so directly. So intimately. That's surely enough."

"Enough to make you feel then—as what we may call the end and the upshot of our watch—that I'm not afraid?"

"You're not afraid. But it isn't," she said, "the end of our watch. That is it isn't the end of yours. You've everything still to see."

"Then why haven't you?" he asked. He had had, all along, to-day, the sense of her keeping something back, and he still had it. As this was his first impression of that it quite made a date. The case was the more marked as she didn't at first answer; which in turn made him go on. "You know something I don't." Then his voice, for that of a man of courage, trembled a little. "You know what's to happen." Her silence, with the face she showed, was almost a confession—it made him sure. "You know, and you're afraid to tell me. It's so bad that you're afraid I'll find out."

All this might be true, for she did look as if, unexpectedly to her, he had crossed some mystic line that she had secretly drawn round her. Yet she might, after all, not have worried; and the real climax was that he himself, at all events, needn't. "You'll never find out."

CHAPTER III

It was all to have made, none the less, as I have said, a date; which came out in the fact that again and again, even after long intervals, other things that passed between them were in relation to this hour but the character of recalls and results. Its immediate effect had been indeed rather to lighten insistence—almost to provoke a reaction; as if their topic had dropped by its own weight and as if moreover, for that matter, Marcher had been visited by one of his occasional warnings against egotism. He had kept up, he felt, and very decently on the whole, his consciousness of the importance of not being selfish, and it was true that he had never sinned in that direction without promptly enough trying to press the scales the other way. He often repaired his fault, the season permitting, by inviting his friend to accompany him to the opera; and it not infrequently thus happened that, to show he didn't wish her to have but one sort of food for her mind, he was the cause of her appearing there with him a dozen nights in the month. It even happened that, seeing her home at such times, he occasionally went in with her to finish, as he called it, the evening, and, the better to make his point, sat down to the frugal but always careful little supper that awaited his pleasure. His

point was made, he thought, by his not eternally insisting with her on himself; made for instance, at such hours, when it befell that, her piano at hand and each of them familiar with it, they went over passages of the opera together. It chanced to be on one of these occasions, however, that he reminded her of her not having answered a certain question he had put to her during the talk that had taken place between them on her last birthday. “What is it that saves *you*?”—saved her, he meant, from that appearance of variation from the usual human type. If he had practically escaped remark, as she pretended, by doing, in the most important particular, what most men do—find the answer to life in patching up an alliance of a sort with a woman no better than himself—how had she escaped it, and how could the alliance, such as it was, since they must suppose it had been more or less noticed, have failed to make her rather positively talked about?

“I never said,” May Bartram replied, “that it hadn’t made me a good deal talked about.”

“Ah well then you’re not ‘saved.’”

“It hasn’t been a question for me. If you’ve had your woman I’ve had,” she said, “my man.”

“And you mean that makes you all right?”

Oh it was always as if there were so much to say!

“I don’t know why it shouldn’t make me—humanly, which is what we’re speaking of—as right as it makes you.”

“I see,” Marcher returned. “‘Humanly,’ no doubt, as showing that you’re living for something. Not, that is, just for me and my secret.”

May Bartram smiled. “I don’t pretend it exactly shows that I’m not living for you. It’s my intimacy with you that’s in question.”

He laughed as he saw what she meant. “Yes, but since, as you say, I’m only, so far as people make out, ordinary, you’re—aren’t you? no more than ordinary either. You help me to pass for a man like another. So if I *am*, as I understand you, you’re not compromised. Is that it?”

She had another of her waits, but she spoke clearly enough. “That’s it. It’s all that concerns me—to help you to pass for a man like another.”

He was careful to acknowledge the remark handsomely. “How kind, how beautiful, you are to me! How shall I ever repay you?”

She had her last grave pause, as if there might be a choice of ways. But she chose. “By going on as you are.”

It was into this going on as he was that they relapsed, and really for so long a time that the day inevitably came for a further sounding of their depths. These depths, constantly bridged over by a structure firm enough in spite of its lightness and of its occasional oscillation in the somewhat vertiginous air, invited on occasion, in the interest of their nerves, a dropping of the plummet and a measurement of the abyss. A difference had been made moreover, once for all, by the fact that she had all the while not appeared to feel the need of rebutting his charge of an idea within her that she didn’t dare to express—a charge uttered just before one of the fullest of their later discussions ended. It had come up for him then that she “knew” something and that what she knew was bad—too bad to tell him. When he had spoken of it as visibly so bad that she was afraid he might find it out, her reply had left the matter too equivocal to be let alone and yet, for Marcher’s special sensibility, almost too formidable again to touch. He circled about it at a distance that alternately narrowed and widened and that still wasn’t much affected by the consciousness in him that there was nothing she could

“know,” after all, any better than he did. She had no source of knowledge he hadn’t equally—except of course that she might have finer nerves. That was what women had where they were interested; they made out things, where people were concerned, that the people often couldn’t have made out for themselves. Their nerves, their sensibility, their imagination, were conductors and revealers, and the beauty of May Bartram was in particular that she had given herself so to his case. He felt in these days what, oddly enough, he had never felt before, the growth of a dread of losing her by some catastrophe—some catastrophe that yet wouldn’t at all be the catastrophe: partly because she had almost of a sudden begun to strike him as more useful to him than ever yet, and partly by reason of an appearance of uncertainty in her health, co-incident and equally new. It was characteristic of the inner detachment he had hitherto so successfully cultivated and to which our whole account of him is a reference, it was characteristic that his complications, such as they were, had never yet seemed so as at this crisis to thicken about him, even to the point of making him ask himself if he were, by any chance, of a truth, within sight or sound, within touch or reach, within the immediate jurisdiction, of the thing that waited.

When the day came, as come it had to, that his friend confessed to him her fear of a deep disorder in her blood, he felt somehow the shadow of a change and the chill of a shock. He immediately began to imagine aggravations and disasters, and above all to think of her peril as the direct menace for himself of personal privation. This indeed gave him one of those partial recoveries of equanimity that were agreeable to him—it showed him that what was still first in his mind was the loss she herself might suffer. “What if she should have to die before knowing, before seeing—?” It would have been brutal, in the early stages of her trouble, to put that question to her; but it had immediately sounded for him to his own concern, and the possibility was what most made him sorry for her. If she did “know,” moreover, in the sense of her having had some—what should he think?—mystical irresistible light, this would make the matter not better, but worse, inasmuch as her original adoption of his own curiosity had quite become the basis of her life. She had been living to see what would *be* to be seen, and it would quite lacerate her to have to give up before the accomplishment of the vision. These reflexions, as I say, quickened his generosity; yet, make them as he might, he saw himself, with the lapse of the period, more and more disconcerted. It lapsed for him with a strange steady sweep, and the oddest oddity was that it gave him, independently of the threat of much inconvenience, almost the only positive surprise his career, if career it could be called, had yet offered him. She kept the house as she had never done; he had to go to her to see her—she could meet him nowhere now, though there was scarce a corner of their loved old London in which she hadn’t in the past, at one time or another, done so; and he found her always seated by her fire in the deep old-fashioned chair she was less and less able to leave. He had been struck one day, after an absence exceeding his usual measure, with her suddenly looking much older to him than he had ever thought of her being; then he recognised that the suddenness was all on his side—he had just simply and suddenly noticed. She looked older because inevitably, after so many years, she *was* old, or almost; which was of course true in still greater measure of her companion. If she was old, or almost, John Marcher assuredly was, and yet it was her showing of the lesson, not his own, that brought the truth home to him. His surprises began here; when once they had begun they multiplied; they came rather with a rush: it was as if, in the oddest way in the world, they had all been kept back, sown in a thick cluster, for the late afternoon of life, the time at which for people in general the unexpected has died out.

One of them was that he should have caught himself—for he *had* so done—*really* wondering if the great accident would take form now as nothing more than his being condemned to see this charming woman, this admirable friend, pass away from him. He had never so

unreservedly qualified her as while confronted in thought with such a possibility; in spite of which there was small doubt for him that as an answer to his long riddle the mere effacement of even so fine a feature of his situation would be an abject anticlimax. It would represent, as connected with his past attitude, a drop of dignity under the shadow of which his existence could only become the most grotesques of failures. He had been far from holding it a failure—long as he had waited for the appearance that was to make it a success. He had waited for quite another thing, not for such a thing as that. The breath of his good faith came short, however, as he recognised how long he had waited, or how long at least his companion had. That she, at all events, might be recorded as having waited in vain—this affected him sharply, and all the more because of his at first having done little more than amuse himself with the idea. It grew more grave as the gravity of her condition grew, and the state of mind it produced in him, which he himself ended by watching as if it had been some definite disfigurement of his outer person, may pass for another of his surprises. This conjoined itself still with another, the really stupefying consciousness of a question that he would have allowed to shape itself had he dared. What did everything mean—what, that is, did *she* mean, she and her vain waiting and her probable death and the soundless admonition of it all—unless that, at this time of day, it was simply, it was overwhelmingly too late? He had never at any stage of his queer consciousness admitted the whisper of such a correction; he had never till within these last few months been so false to his conviction as not to hold that what was to come to him had time, whether *he* struck himself as having it or not. That at last, at last, he certainly hadn't it, to speak of, or had it but in the scantiest measure—such, soon enough, as things went with him, became the inference with which his old obsession had to reckon: and this it was not helped to do by the more and more confirmed appearance that the great vagueness casting the long shadow in which he had lived had, to attest itself, almost no margin left. Since it was in Time that he was to have met his fate, so it was in Time that his fate was to have acted; and as he waked up to the sense of no longer being young, which was exactly the sense of being stale, just as that, in turn, was the sense of being weak, he waked up to another matter beside. It all hung together; they were subject, he and the great vagueness, to an equal and indivisible law. When the possibilities themselves had accordingly turned stale, when the secret of the gods had grown faint, had perhaps even quite evaporated, that, and that only, was failure. It wouldn't have been failure to be bankrupt, dishonoured, pilloried, hanged; it was failure not to be anything. And so, in the dark valley into which his path had taken its unlooked-for twist, he wondered not a little as he groped. He didn't care what awful crash might overtake him, with what ignominy or what monstrosity he might yet be associated—since he wasn't after all too utterly old to suffer—if it would only be decently proportionate to the posture he had kept, all his life, in the threatened presence of it. He had but one desire left—that he shouldn't have been “sold.”

CHAPTER IV

Then it was that, one afternoon, while the spring of the year was young and new she met all in her own way his frankest betrayal of these alarms. He had gone in late to see her, but evening hadn't settled and she was presented to him in that long fresh light of waning April days which affects us often with a sadness sharper than the greyest hours of autumn. The week had been warm, the spring was supposed to have begun early, and May Bartram sat, for the first time in the year, without a fire; a fact that, to Marcher's sense, gave the scene of which she formed part a smooth and ultimate look, an air of knowing, in its immaculate order and cold meaningless cheer, that it would never see a fire again. Her own aspect—he could scarce have said why—intensified this note. Almost as white as wax, with the marks and signs in her face as numerous and as fine as if they had been etched by a needle, with soft white draperies relieved by a faded green scarf on the delicate tone of which the years had

further refined, she was the picture of a serene and exquisite but impenetrable sphinx, whose head, or indeed all whose person, might have been powdered with silver. She was a sphinx, yet with her white petals and green fronds she might have been a lily too—only an artificial lily, wonderfully imitated and constantly kept, without dust or stain, though not exempt from a slight droop and a complexity of faint creases, under some clear glass bell. The perfection of household care, of high polish and finish, always reigned in her rooms, but they now looked most as if everything had been wound up, tucked in, put away, so that she might sit with folded hands and with nothing more to do. She was “out of it,” to Marcher’s vision; her work was over; she communicated with him as across some gulf or from some island of rest that she had already reached, and it made him feel strangely abandoned. Was it—or rather wasn’t it—that if for so long she had been watching with him the answer to their question must have swum into her ken and taken on its name, so that her occupation was verily gone? He had as much as charged her with this in saying to her, many months before, that she even then knew something she was keeping from him. It was a point he had never since ventured to press, vaguely fearing as he did that it might become a difference, perhaps a disagreement, between them. He had in this later time turned nervous, which was what he in all the other years had never been; and the oddity was that his nervousness should have waited till he had begun to doubt, should have held off so long as he was sure. There was something, it seemed to him, that the wrong word would bring down on his head, something that would so at least ease off his tension. But he wanted not to speak the wrong word; that would make everything ugly. He wanted the knowledge he lacked to drop on him, if drop it could, by its own august weight. If she was to forsake him it was surely for her to take leave. This was why he didn’t directly ask her again what she knew; but it was also why, approaching the matter from another side, he said to her in the course of his visit: “What do you regard as the very worst that at this time of day *can* happen to me?”

He had asked her that in the past often enough; they had, with the odd irregular rhythm of their intensities and avoidances, exchanged ideas about it and then had seen the ideas washed away by cool intervals, washed like figures traced in sea-sand. It had ever been the mark of their talk that the oldest allusions in it required but a little dismissal and reaction to come out again, sounding for the hour as new. She could thus at present meet his enquiry quite freshly and patiently. “Oh yes, I’ve repeatedly thought, only it always seemed to me of old that I couldn’t quite make up my mind. I thought of dreadful things, between which it was difficult to choose; and so must you have done.”

“Rather! I feel now as if I had scarce done anything else. I appear to myself to have spent my life in thinking of nothing but dreadful things. A great many of them I’ve at different times named to you, but there were others I couldn’t name.”

“They were too, too dreadful?”

“Too, too dreadful—some of them.”

She looked at him a minute, and there came to him as he met it, an inconsequent sense that her eyes, when one got their full clearness, were still as beautiful as they had been in youth, only beautiful with a strange cold light—a light that somehow was a part of the effect, if it wasn’t rather a part of the cause, of the pale hard sweetness of the season and the hour. “And yet,” she said at last, “there are horrors we’ve mentioned.”

It deepened the strangeness to see her, as such a figure in such a picture, talk of “horrors,” but she was to do in a few minutes something stranger yet—though even of this he was to take the full measure but afterwards—and the note of it already trembled. It was, for the matter of that, one of the signs that her eyes were having again the high flicker of their prime. He had

to admit, however, what she said. “Oh yes, there were times when we did go far.” He caught himself in the act of speaking as if it all were over. Well, he wished it were; and the consummation depended for him clearly more and more on his friend.

But she had now a soft smile. “Oh far—!”

It was oddly ironic. “Do you mean you’re prepared to go further?”

She was frail and ancient and charming as she continued to look at him, yet it was rather as if she had lost the thread. “Do you consider that we went far?”

“Why I thought it the point you were just making—that we *had* looked most things in the face.”

“Including each other?” She still smiled. “But you’re quite right. We’ve had together great imaginations, often great fears; but some of them have been unspoken.”

“Then the worst—we haven’t faced that. I *could* face it, I believe, if I knew what you think it. I feel,” he explained, “as if I had lost my power to conceive such things.” And he wondered if he looked as blank as he sounded. “It’s spent.”

“Then why do you assume,” she asked, “that mine isn’t?”

“Because you’ve given me signs to the contrary. It isn’t a question for you of conceiving, imagining, comparing. It isn’t a question now of choosing.” At last he came out with it. “You know something I don’t. You’ve shown me that before.”

These last words had affected her, he made out in a moment, exceedingly, and she spoke with firmness. “I’ve shown you, my dear, nothing.”

He shook his head. “You can’t hide it.”

“Oh, oh!” May Bartram sounded over what she couldn’t hide. It was almost a smothered groan.

“You admitted it months ago, when I spoke of it to you as of something you were afraid I should find out. Your answer was that I couldn’t, that I wouldn’t, and I don’t pretend I have. But you had something therefore in mind, and I see now how it must have been, how it still is, the possibility that, of all possibilities, has settled itself for you as the worst. This,” he went on, “is why I appeal to you. I’m only afraid of ignorance to-day—I’m not afraid of knowledge.” And then as for a while she said nothing: “What makes me sure is that I see in your face and feel here, in this air and amid these appearances, that you’re out of it. You’ve done. You’ve had your experience. You leave me to my fate.”

Well, she listened, motionless and white in her chair, as on a decision to be made, so that her manner was fairly an avowal, though still, with a small fine inner stiffness, an imperfect surrender. “It *would* be the worst,” she finally let herself say. “I mean the thing I’ve never said.”

It hushed him a moment. “More monstrous than all the monstrosities we’ve named?”

“More monstrous. Isn’t that what you sufficiently express,” she asked, “in calling it the worst?”

Marcher thought. “Assuredly—if you mean, as I do, something that includes all the loss and all the shame that are thinkable.”

“It would if it *should* happen,” said May Bartram. “What we’re speaking of, remember, is only my idea.”

“It’s your belief,” Marcher returned. “That’s enough for me. I feel your beliefs are right. Therefore if, having this one, you give me no more light on it, you abandon me.”

“No, no!” she repeated. “I’m with you—don’t you see?—still.” And as to make it more vivid to him she rose from her chair—a movement she seldom risked in these days—and showed herself, all draped and all soft, in her fairness and slimmness. “I haven’t forsaken you.”

It was really, in its effort against weakness, a generous assurance, and had the success of the impulse not, happily, been great, it would have touched him to pain more than to pleasure. But the cold charm in her eyes had spread, as she hovered before him, to all the rest of her person, so that it was for the minute almost a recovery of youth. He couldn’t pity her for that; he could only take her as she showed—as capable even yet of helping him. It was as if, at the same time, her light might at any instant go out; wherefore he must make the most of it. There passed before him with intensity the three or four things he wanted most to know; but the question that came of itself to his lips really covered the others. “Then tell me if I shall consciously suffer.”

She promptly shook her head. “Never!”

It confirmed the authority he imputed to her, and it produced on him an extraordinary effect. “Well, what’s better than that? Do you call that the worst?”

“You think nothing is better?” she asked.

She seemed to mean something so special that he again sharply wondered, though still with the dawn of a prospect of relief. “Why not, if one doesn’t *know*?” After which, as their eyes, over his question, met in a silence, the dawn deepened, and something to his purpose came prodigiously out of her very face. His own, as he took it in, suddenly flushed to the forehead, and he gasped with the force of a perception to which, on the instant, everything fitted. The sound of his gasp filled the air; then he became articulate. “I see—if I don’t suffer!”

In her own look, however, was doubt. “You see what?”

“Why what you mean—what you’ve always meant.”

She again shook her head. “What I mean isn’t what I’ve always meant. It’s different.”

“It’s something new?”

She hung back from it a little. “Something new. It’s not what you think. I see what you think.”

His divination drew breath then; only her correction might be wrong. “It isn’t that I *am* a blockhead?” he asked between faintness and grimness. “It isn’t that it’s all a mistake?”

“A mistake?” she pityingly echoed. *That* possibility, for her, he saw, would be monstrous; and if she guaranteed him the immunity from pain it would accordingly not be what she had in mind. “Oh no,” she declared; “it’s nothing of that sort. You’ve been right.”

Yet he couldn’t help asking himself if she weren’t, thus pressed, speaking but to save him. It seemed to him he should be most in a hole if his history should prove all a platitude. “Are you telling me the truth, so that I shan’t have been a bigger idiot than I can bear to know? I *haven’t* lived with a vain imagination, in the most besotted illusion? I haven’t waited but to see the door shut in my face?”

She shook her head again. “However the case stands *that* isn’t the truth. Whatever the reality, it *is* a reality. The door isn’t shut. The door’s open,” said May Bartram.

“Then something’s to come?”

She waited once again, always with her cold sweet eyes on him. “It’s never too late.” She had, with her gliding step, diminished the distance between them, and she stood nearer to him, close to him, a minute, as if still charged with the unspoken. Her movement might have been for some finer emphasis of what she was at once hesitating and deciding to say. He had been standing by the chimney-piece, fireless and sparsely adorned, a small perfect old French clock and two morsels of rosy Dresden constituting all its furniture; and her hand grasped the shelf while she kept him waiting, grasped it a little as for support and encouragement. She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only waited. It had become suddenly, from her movement and attitude, beautiful and vivid to him that she had something more to give him; her wasted face delicately shone with it—it glittered almost as with the white lustre of silver in her expression. She was right, incontestably, for what he saw in her face was the truth, and strangely, without consequence, while their talk of it as dreadful was still in the air, she appeared to present it as inordinately soft. This, prompting bewilderment, made him but gape the more gratefully for her revelation, so that they continued for some minutes silent, her face shining at him, her contact imponderably pressing, and his stare all kind but all expectant. The end, none the less, was that what he had expected failed to come to him. Something else took place instead, which seemed to consist at first in the mere closing of her eyes. She gave way at the same instant to a slow fine shudder, and though he remained staring—though he stared in fact but the harder—turned off and regained her chair. It was the end of what she had been intending, but it left him thinking only of that.

“Well, you don’t say—?”

She had touched in her passage a bell near the chimney and had sunk back strangely pale. “I’m afraid I’m too ill.”

“Too ill to tell me?” it sprang up sharp to him, and almost to his lips, the fear she might die without giving him light. He checked himself in time from so expressing his question, but she answered as if she had heard the words.

“Don’t you know—now?”

“Now’—?” She had spoken as if some difference had been made within the moment. But her maid, quickly obedient to her bell, was already with them. “I know nothing.” And he was afterwards to say to himself that he must have spoken with odious impatience, such an impatience as to show that, supremely disconcerted, he washed his hands of the whole question.

“Oh!” said May Bartram.

“Are you in pain?” he asked as the woman went to her.

“No,” said May Bartram.

Her maid, who had put an arm round her as if to take her to her room, fixed on him eyes that appealingly contradicted her; in spite of which, however, he showed once more his mystification.

“What then has happened?”

She was once more, with her companion’s help, on her feet, and, feeling withdrawal imposed on him, he had blankly found his hat and gloves and had reached the door. Yet he waited for her answer. “What *was* to,” she said.

CHAPTER V

He came back the next day, but she was then unable to see him, and as it was literally the first time this had occurred in the long stretch of their acquaintance he turned away, defeated and sore, almost angry—or feeling at least that such a break in their custom was really the beginning of the end—and wandered alone with his thoughts, especially with the one he was least able to keep down. She was dying and he would lose her; she was dying and his life would end. He stopped in the Park, into which he had passed, and stared before him at his recurrent doubt. Away from her the doubt pressed again; in her presence he had believed her, but as he felt his forlornness he threw himself into the explanation that, nearest at hand, had most of a miserable warmth for him and least of a cold torment. She had deceived him to save him—to put him off with something in which he should be able to rest. What could the thing that was to happen to him be, after all, but just this thing that had begun to happen? Her dying, her death, his consequent solitude—that was what he had figured as the Beast in the Jungle, that was what had been in the lap of the gods. He had had her word for it as he left her—what else on earth could she have meant? It wasn't a thing of a monstrous order; not a fate rare and distinguished; not a stroke of fortune that overwhelmed and immortalised; it had only the stamp of the common doom. But poor Marcher at this hour judged the common doom sufficient. It would serve his turn, and even as the consummation of infinite waiting he would bend his pride to accept it. He sat down on a bench in the twilight. He hadn't been a fool. Something had *been*, as she had said, to come. Before he rose indeed it had quite struck him that the final fact really matched with the long avenue through which he had had to reach it. As sharing his suspense and as giving herself all, giving her life, to bring it to an end, she had come with him every step of the way. He had lived by her aid, and to leave her behind would be cruelly, damnably to miss her. What could be more overwhelming than that?

Well, he was to know within the week, for though she kept him a while at bay, left him restless and wretched during a series of days on each of which he asked about her only again to have to turn away, she ended his trial by receiving him where she had always received him. Yet she had been brought out at some hazard into the presence of so many of the things that were, consciously, vainly, half their past, and there was scant service left in the gentleness of her mere desire, all too visible, to check his obsession and wind up his long trouble. That was clearly what she wanted; the one thing more for her own peace while she could still put out her hand. He was so affected by her state that, once seated by her chair, he was moved to let everything go; it was she herself therefore who brought him back, took up again, before she dismissed him, her last word of the other time. She showed how she wished to leave their business in order. "I'm not sure you understood. You've nothing to wait for more. It *has* come."

Oh how he looked at her! "Really?"

"Really."

"The thing that, as you said, *was* to?"

"The thing that we began in our youth to watch for."

Face to face with her once more he believed her; it was a claim to which he had so abjectly little to oppose. "You mean that it has come as a positive definite occurrence, with a name and a date?"

"Positive. Definite. I don't know about the 'name,' but, oh with a date!"

He found himself again too helplessly at sea. "But come in the night—come and passed me by?"

May Bartram had her strange faint smile. “Oh no, it hasn’t passed you by!”

“But if I haven’t been aware of it and it hasn’t touched me—?”

“Ah your not being aware of it”—and she seemed to hesitate an instant to deal with this—
 ”your not being aware of it is the strangeness in the strangeness. It’s the wonder *of* the wonder.” She spoke as with the softness almost of a sick child, yet now at last, at the end of all, with the perfect straightness of a sibyl. She visibly knew that she knew, and the effect on him was of something co-ordinate, in its high character, with the law that had ruled him. It was the true voice of the law; so on her lips would the law itself have sounded. “It *has* touched you,” she went on. “It has done its office. It has made you all its own.”

“So utterly without my knowing it?”

“So utterly without your knowing it.” His hand, as he leaned to her, was on the arm of her chair, and, dimly smiling always now, she placed her own on it. “It’s enough if *I* know it.”

“Oh!” he confusedly breathed, as she herself of late so often had done.

“What I long ago said is true. You’ll never know now, and I think you ought to be content. You’ve *had* it,” said May Bartram.

“But had what?”

“Why what was to have marked you out. The proof of your law. It has acted. I’m too glad,” she then bravely added, “to have been able to see what it’s *not*.”

He continued to attach his eyes to her, and with the sense that it was all beyond him, and that *she* was too, he would still have sharply challenged her hadn’t he so felt it an abuse of her weakness to do more than take devoutly what she gave him, take it hushed as to a revelation. If he did speak, it was out of the foreknowledge of his loneliness to come. “If you’re glad of what it’s ‘not’ it might then have been worse?”

She turned her eyes away, she looked straight before her; with which after a moment: “Well, you know our fears.”

He wondered. “It’s something then we never feared?”

On this slowly she turned to him. “Did we ever dream, with all our dreams, that we should sit and talk of it thus?”

He tried for a little to make out that they had; but it was as if their dreams, numberless enough, were in solution in some thick cold mist through which thought lost itself. “It might have been that we couldn’t talk.”

“Well”—she did her best for him—”not from this side. This, you see,” she said, “is the *other* side.”

“I think,” poor Marcher returned, “that all sides are the same to me.” Then, however, as she gently shook her head in correction: “We mightn’t, as it were, have got across—?”

“To where we are—no. We’re *here*”—she made her weak emphasis.

“And much good does it do us!” was her friend’s frank comment.

“It does us the good it can. It does us the good that *it* isn’t here. It’s past. It’s behind,” said May Bartram. “Before—” but her voice dropped.

He had got up, not to tire her, but it was hard to combat his yearning. She after all told him nothing but that his light had failed—which he knew well enough without her. “Before—?” he blankly echoed.

“Before you see, it was always to *come*. That kept it present.”

“Oh I don’t care what comes now! Besides,” Marcher added, “it seems to me I liked it better present, as you say, than I can like it absent with *your* absence.”

“Oh mine!”—and her pale hands made light of it.

“With the absence of everything.” He had a dreadful sense of standing there before her—so far as anything but this proved, this bottomless drop was concerned—the last time of their life. It rested on him with a weight he felt he could scarce bear, and this weight it apparently was that still pressed out what remained in him of speakable protest. “I believe you; but I can’t begin to pretend I understand. *Nothing*, for me, is past; nothing *will* pass till I pass myself, which I pray my stars may be as soon as possible. Say, however,” he added, “that I’ve eaten my cake, as you contend, to the last crumb—how can the thing I’ve never felt at all be the thing I was marked out to feel?”

She met him perhaps less directly, but she met him unperturbed. “You take your ‘feelings’ for granted. You were to suffer your fate. That was not necessarily to know it.”

“How in the world—when what is such knowledge but suffering?”

She looked up at him a while in silence. “No—you don’t understand.”

“I suffer,” said John Marcher.

“Don’t, don’t!”

“How can I help at least *that*?”

“*Don’t!*” May Bartram repeated.

She spoke it in a tone so special, in spite of her weakness, that he stared an instant—stared as if some light, hitherto hidden, had shimmered across his vision. Darkness again closed over it, but the gleam had already become for him an idea. “Because I haven’t the right—?”

“Don’t *know*—when you needn’t,” she mercifully urged. “You needn’t—for we shouldn’t.”

“Shouldn’t?” If he could but know what she meant!

“No—it’s too much.”

“Too much?” he still asked but with a mystification that was the next moment of a sudden to give way. Her words, if they meant something, affected him in this light—the light also of her wasted face—as meaning *all*, and the sense of what knowledge had been for herself came over him with a rush which broke through into a question. “Is it of that then you’re dying?”

She but watched him, gravely at first, as to see, with this, where he was, and she might have seen something or feared something that moved her sympathy. “I would live for you still—if I could.” Her eyes closed for a little, as if, withdrawn into herself, she were for a last time trying. “But I can’t!” she said as she raised them again to take leave of him.

She couldn’t indeed, as but too promptly and sharply appeared, and he had no vision of her after this that was anything but darkness and doom. They had parted for ever in that strange talk; access to her chamber of pain, rigidly guarded, was almost wholly forbidden him; he was feeling now moreover, in the face of doctors, nurses, the two or three relatives attracted doubtless by the presumption of what she had to “leave,” how few were the rights, as they

were called in such cases, that he had to put forward, and how odd it might even seem that their intimacy shouldn't have given him more of them. The stupidest fourth cousin had more, even though she had been nothing in such a person's life. She had been a feature of features in *his*, for what else was it to have been so indispensable? Strange beyond saying were the ways of existence, baffling for him the anomaly of his lack, as he felt it to be, of producible claim. A woman might have been, as it were, everything to him, and it might yet present him, in no connexion that any one seemed held to recognise. If this was the case in these closing weeks it was the case more sharply on the occasion of the last offices rendered, in the great grey London cemetery, to what had been mortal, to what had been precious, in his friend. The concourse at her grave was not numerous, but he saw himself treated as scarce more nearly concerned with it than if there had been a thousand others. He was in short from this moment face to face with the fact that he was to profit extraordinarily little by the interest May Bartram had taken in him. He couldn't quite have said what he expected, but he hadn't surely expected this approach to a double privation. Not only had her interest failed him, but he seemed to feel himself unattended—and for a reason he couldn't seize—by the distinction, the dignity, the propriety, if nothing else, of the man markedly bereaved. It was as if, in the view of society he had not *been* markedly bereaved, as if there still failed some sign or proof of it, and as if none the less his character could never be affirmed nor the deficiency ever made up. There were moments as the weeks went by when he would have liked, by some almost aggressive act, to take his stand on the intimacy of his loss, in order that it *might* be questioned and his retort, to the relief of his spirit, so recorded; but the moments of an irritation more helpless followed fast on these, the moments during which, turning things over with a good conscience but with a bare horizon, he found himself wondering if he oughtn't to have begun, so to speak, further back.

He found himself wondering indeed at many things, and this last speculation had others to keep it company. What could he have done, after all, in her lifetime, without giving them both, as it were, away? He couldn't have made known she was watching him, for that would have published the superstition of the Beast. This was what closed his mouth now—now that the Jungle had been thrashed to vacancy and that the Beast had stolen away. It sounded too foolish and too flat; the difference for him in this particular, the extinction in his life of the element of suspense, was such as in fact to surprise him. He could scarce have said what the effect resembled; the abrupt cessation, the positive prohibition, of music perhaps, more than anything else, in some place all adjusted and all accustomed to sonority and to attention. If he could at any rate have conceived lifting the veil from his image at some moment of the past (what had he done, after all, if not lift it to *her*?) so to do this to-day, to talk to people at large of the Jungle cleared and confide to them that he now felt it as safe, would have been not only to see them listen as to a goodwife's tale, but really to hear himself tell one. What it presently came to in truth was that poor Marcher waded through his beaten grass, where no life stirred, where no breath sounded, where no evil eye seemed to gleam from a possible lair, very much as if vaguely looking for the Beast, and still more as if acutely missing it. He walked about in an existence that had grown strangely more spacious, and, stopping fitfully in places where the undergrowth of life struck him as closer, asked himself yearningly, wondered secretly and sorely, if it would have lurked here or there. It would have at all events sprung; what was at least complete was his belief in the truth itself of the assurance given him. The change from his old sense to his new was absolute and final: what was to happen had so absolutely and finally happened that he was as little able to know a fear for his future as to know a hope; so absent in short was any question of anything still to come. He was to live entirely with the other question, that of his unidentified past, that of his having to see his fortune impenetrably muffled and masked.

The torment of this vision became then his occupation; he couldn't perhaps have consented to live but for the possibility of guessing. She had told him, his friend, not to guess; she had forbidden him, so far as he might, to know, and she had even in a sort denied the power in him to learn: which were so many things, precisely, to deprive him of rest. It wasn't that he wanted, he argued for fairness, that anything past and done should repeat itself; it was only that he shouldn't, as an anticlimax, have been taken sleeping so sound as not to be able to win back by an effort of thought the lost stuff of consciousness. He declared to himself at moments that he would either win it back or have done with consciousness for ever; he made this idea his one motive in fine, made it so much his passion that none other, to compare with it, seemed ever to have touched him. The lost stuff of consciousness became thus for him as a strayed or stolen child to an unappeasable father; he hunted it up and down very much as if he were knocking at doors and enquiring of the police. This was the spirit in which, inevitably, he set himself to travel; he started on a journey that was to be as long as he could make it; it danced before him that, as the other side of the globe couldn't possibly have less to say to him, it might, by a possibility of suggestion, have more. Before he quitted London, however, he made a pilgrimage to May Bartram's grave, took his way to it through the endless avenues of the grim suburban necropolis, sought it out in the wilderness of tombs, and, though he had come but for the renewal of the act of farewell, found himself, when he had at last stood by it, beguiled into long intensities. He stood for an hour, powerless to turn away and yet powerless to penetrate the darkness of death; fixing with his eyes her inscribed name and date, beating his forehead against the fact of the secret they kept, drawing his breath, while he waited, as if some sense would in pity of him rise from the stones. He kneeled on the stones, however, in vain; they kept what they concealed; and if the face of the tomb did become a face for him it was because her two names became a pair of eyes that didn't know him. He gave them a last long look, but no palest light broke.

CHAPTER VI

He stayed away, after this, for a year; he visited the depths of Asia, spending himself on scenes of romantic interest, of superlative sanctity; but what was present to him everywhere was that for a man who had known what *he* had known the world was vulgar and vain. The state of mind in which he had lived for so many years shone out to him, in reflexion, as a light that coloured and refined, a light beside which the glow of the East was garish cheap and thin. The terrible truth was that he had lost—with everything else—a distinction as well; the things he saw couldn't help being common when he had become common to look at them. He was simply now one of them himself—he was in the dust, without a peg for the sense of difference; and there were hours when, before the temples of gods and the sepulchres of kings, his spirit turned for nobleness of association to the barely discriminated slab in the London suburb. That had become for him, and more intensely with time and distance, his one witness of a past glory. It was all that was left to him for proof or pride, yet the past glories of Pharaohs were nothing to him as he thought of it. Small wonder then that he came back to it on the morrow of his return. He was drawn there this time as irresistibly as the other, yet with a confidence, almost, that was doubtless the effect of the many months that had elapsed. He had lived, in spite of himself, into his change of feeling, and in wandering over the earth had wandered, as might be said, from the circumference to the centre of his desert. He had settled to his safety and accepted perforce his extinction; figuring to himself, with some colour, in the likeness of certain little old men he remembered to have seen, of whom, all meagre and wizened as they might look, it was related that they had in their time fought twenty duels or been loved by ten princesses. They indeed had been wondrous for others while he was but wondrous for himself; which, however, was exactly the cause of his haste to renew the wonder by getting back, as he might put it, into his own presence. That

had quickened his steps and checked his delay. If his visit was prompt it was because he had been separated so long from the part of himself that alone he now valued.

It's accordingly not false to say that he reached his goal with a certain elation and stood there again with a certain assurance. The creature beneath the sod knew of his rare experience, so that, strangely now, the place had lost for him its mere blankness of expression. It met him in mildness—not, as before, in mockery; it wore for him the air of conscious greeting that we find, after absence, in things that have closely belonged to us and which seem to confess of themselves to the connexion. The plot of ground, the graven tablet, the tended flowers affected him so as belonging to him that he resembled for the hour a contented landlord reviewing a piece of property. Whatever had happened—well, had happened. He had not come back this time with the vanity of that question, his former worrying “What, *what?*” now practically so spent. Yet he would none the less never again so cut himself off from the spot; he would come back to it every month, for if he did nothing else by its aid he at least held up his head. It thus grew for him, in the oddest way, a positive resource; he carried out his idea of periodical returns, which took their place at last among the most inveterate of his habits. What it all amounted to, oddly enough, was that in his finally so simplified world this garden of death gave him the few square feet of earth on which he could still most live. It was as if, being nothing anywhere else for any one, nothing even for himself, he were just everything here, and if not for a crowd of witnesses or indeed for any witness but John Marcher, then by clear right of the register that he could scan like an open page. The open page was the tomb of his friend, and there were the facts of the past, there the truth of his life, there the backward reaches in which he could lose himself. He did this from time to time with such effect that he seemed to wander through the old years with his hand in the arm of a companion who was, in the most extraordinary manner, his other, his younger self; and to wander, which was more extraordinary yet, round and round a third presence—not wandering she, but stationary, still, whose eyes, turning with his revolution, never ceased to follow him, and whose seat was his point, so to speak, of orientation. Thus in short he settled to live—feeding all on the sense that he once *had* lived, and dependent on it not alone for a support but for an identity.

It sufficed him in its way for months and the year elapsed; it would doubtless even have carried him further but for an accident, superficially slight, which moved him, quite in another direction, with a force beyond any of his impressions of Egypt or of India. It was a thing of the merest chance—the turn, as he afterwards felt, of a hair, though he was indeed to live to believe that if light hadn't come to him in this particular fashion it would still have come in another. He was to live to believe this, I say, though he was not to live, I may not less definitely mention, to do much else. We allow him at any rate the benefit of the conviction, struggling up for him at the end, that, whatever might have happened or not happened, he would have come round of himself to the light. The incident of an autumn day had put the match to the train laid from of old by his misery. With the light before him he knew that even of late his ache had only been smothered. It was strangely drugged, but it throbbed; at the touch it began to bleed. And the touch, in the event, was the face of a fellow-mortal. This face, one grey afternoon when the leaves were thick in the alleys, looked into Marcher's own, at the cemetery, with an expression like the cut of a blade. He felt it, that is, so deep down that he winced at the steady thrust. The person who so mutely assaulted him was a figure he had noticed, on reaching his own goal, absorbed by a grave a short distance away, a grave apparently fresh, so that the emotion of the visitor would probably match it for frankness. This fact alone forbade further attention, though during the time he stayed he remained vaguely conscious of his neighbour, a middle-aged man apparently, in mourning, whose bowed back, among the clustered monuments and mortuary yews, was constantly

presented. Marcher's theory that these were elements in contact with which he himself revived, had suffered, on this occasion, it may be granted, a marked, an excessive check. The autumn day was dire for him as none had recently been, and he rested with a heaviness he had not yet known on the low stone table that bore May Bartram's name. He rested without power to move, as if some spring in him, some spell vouchsafed, had suddenly been broken for ever. If he could have done that moment as he wanted he would simply have stretched himself on the slab that was ready to take him, treating it as a place prepared to receive his last sleep. What in all the wide world had he now to keep awake for? He stared before him with the question, and it was then that, as one of the cemetery walks passed near him, he caught the shock of the face.

His neighbour at the other grave had withdrawn, as he himself, with force enough in him, would have done by now, and was advancing along the path on his way to one of the gates. This brought him close, and his pace, was slow, so that—and all the more as there was a kind of hunger in his look—the two men were for a minute directly confronted. Marcher knew him at once for one of the deeply stricken—a perception so sharp that nothing else in the picture comparatively lived, neither his dress, his age, nor his presumable character and class; nothing lived but the deep ravage of the features that he showed. He *showed* them—that was the point; he was moved, as he passed, by some impulse that was either a signal for sympathy or, more possibly, a challenge to an opposed sorrow. He might already have been aware of our friend, might at some previous hour have noticed in him the smooth habit of the scene, with which the state of his own senses so scantily consorted, and might thereby have been stirred as by an overt discord. What Marcher was at all events conscious of was in the first place that the image of scarred passion presented to him was conscious too—of something that profaned the air; and in the second that, roused, startled, shocked, he was yet the next moment looking after it, as it went, with envy. The most extraordinary thing that had happened to him—though he had given that name to other matters as well—took place, after his immediate vague stare, as a consequence of this impression. The stranger passed, but the raw glare of his grief remained, making our friend wonder in pity what wrong, what wound it expressed, what injury not to be healed. What had the man *had*, to make him by the loss of it so bleed and yet live?

Something—and this reached him with a pang—that *he*, John Marcher, hadn't; the proof of which was precisely John Marcher's arid end. No passion had ever touched him, for this was what passion meant; he had survived and maundered and pined, but where had been *his* deep ravage? The extraordinary thing we speak of was the sudden rush of the result of this question. The sight that had just met his eyes named to him, as in letters of quick flame, something he had utterly, insanely missed, and what he had missed made these things a train of fire, made them mark themselves in an anguish of inward throbs. He had seen *outside* of his life, not learned it within, the way a woman was mourned when she had been loved for herself: such was the force of his conviction of the meaning of the stranger's face, which still flared for him as a smoky torch. It hadn't come to him, the knowledge, on the wings of experience; it had brushed him, jostled him, upset him, with the disrespect of chance, the insolence of accident. Now that the illumination had begun, however, it blazed to the zenith, and what he presently stood there gazing at was the sounded void of his life. He gazed, he drew breath, in pain; he turned in his dismay, and, turning, he had before him in sharper incision than ever the open page of his story. The name on the table smote him as the passage of his neighbour had done, and what it said to him, full in the face, was that she was what he had missed. This was the awful thought, the answer to all the past, the vision at the dread clearness of which he turned as cold as the stone beneath him. Everything fell together, confessed, explained, overwhelmed; leaving him most of all stupefied at the blindness he had

cherished. The fate he had been marked for he had met with a vengeance—he had emptied the cup to the lees; he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened. That was the rare stroke—that was his visitation. So he saw it, as we say, in pale horror, while the pieces fitted and fitted. So *she* had seen it while he didn't, and so she served at this hour to drive the truth home. It was the truth, vivid and monstrous, that all the while he had waited the wait was itself his portion. This the companion of his vigil had at a given moment made out, and she had then offered him the chance to baffle his doom. One's doom, however, was never baffled, and on the day she told him his own had come down she had seen him but stupidly stare at the escape she offered him.

The escape would have been to love her; then, *then* he would have lived. *She* had lived—who could say now with what passion?—since she had loved him for himself; whereas he had never thought of her (ah how it hugely glared at him!) but in the chill of his egotism and the light of her use. Her spoken words came back to him—the chain stretched and stretched. The Beast had lurked indeed, and the Beast, at its hour, had sprung; it had sprung in that twilight of the cold April when, pale, ill, wasted, but all beautiful, and perhaps even then recoverable, she had risen from her chair to stand before him and let him imaginably guess. It had sprung as he didn't guess; it had sprung as she hopelessly turned from him, and the mark, by the time he left her, had fallen where it *was* to fall. He had justified his fear and achieved his fate; he had failed, with the last exactitude, of all he was to fail of; and a moan now rose to his lips as he remembered she had prayed he mightn't know. This horror of waking—*this* was knowledge, knowledge under the breath of which the very tears in his eyes seemed to freeze. Through them, none the less, he tried to fix it and hold it; he kept it there before him so that he might feel the pain. That at least, belated and bitter, had something of the taste of life. But the bitterness suddenly sickened him, and it was as if, horribly, he saw, in the truth, in the cruelty of his image, what had been appointed and done. He saw the Jungle of his life and saw the lurking Beast; then, while he looked, perceived it, as by a stir of the air, rise, huge and hideous, for the leap that was to settle him. His eyes darkened—it was close; and, instinctively turning, in his hallucination, to avoid it, he flung himself, face down, on the tomb.

Julia Bride

I

She had walked with her friend to the top of the wide steps of the Museum, those that descended from the galleries of painting, and then, after the young man had left her, smiling, looking back, waving all gayly and expressively his hat and stick, had watched him, smiling too, but with a different intensity—had kept him in sight till he passed out of the great door. She might have been waiting to see if he would turn there for a last demonstration; which was exactly what he did, renewing his cordial gesture and with his look of glad devotion, the radiance of his young face, reaching her across the great space, as she felt, in undiminished truth. Yes, so she could feel, and she remained a minute even after he was gone; she gazed at the empty air as if he had filled it still, asking herself what more she wanted and what, if it didn't signify glad devotion, his whole air could have represented.

She was at present so anxious that she could wonder if he stepped and smiled like that for mere relief at separation; yet if he desired in that degree to break the spell and escape the danger why did he keep coming back to her, and why, for that matter, had she felt safe a moment before in letting him go? She felt safe, felt almost reckless—that was the proof—so long as he was with her; but the chill came as soon as he had gone, when she took the measure, instantly, of all she yet missed. She might now have been taking it afresh, by the testimony of her charming clouded eyes and of the rigor that had already replaced her beautiful play of expression. Her radiance, for the minute, had “carried” as far as his, travelling on the light wings of her brilliant prettiness—he, on his side, not being facially handsome, but only sensitive, clean and eager. Then, with its extinction, the sustaining wings dropped and hung.

She wheeled about, however, full of a purpose; she passed back through the pictured rooms, for it pleased her, this idea of a talk with Mr. Pitman—as much, that is, as anything could please a young person so troubled. It happened indeed that when she saw him rise at sight of her from the settee where he had told her five minutes before that she would find him, it was just with her nervousness that his presence seemed, as through an odd suggestion of help, to connect itself. Nothing truly would be quite so odd for her case as aid proceeding from Mr. Pitman; unless perhaps the oddity would be even greater for himself—the oddity of her having taken into her head an appeal to him.

She had had to feel alone with a vengeance—inwardly alone and miserably alarmed—to be ready to “meet,” that way, at the first sign from him, the successor to her dim father in her dim father's lifetime, the second of her mother's two divorced husbands. It made a queer relation for her; a relation that struck her at this moment as less edifying, less natural and graceful than it would have been even for her remarkable mother—and still in spite of this parent's third marriage, her union with Mr. Connery, from whom she was informally separated. It was at the back of Julia's head as she approached Mr. Pitman, or it was at least somewhere deep within her soul, that if this last of Mrs. Connery's withdrawals from the matrimonial yoke had received the sanction of the court (Julia had always heard, from far back, so much about the “Court”) she herself, as after a fashion, in that event, a party to it, would not have had the cheek to make up—which was how she inwardly phrased what she was doing—to the long, lean, loose, slightly cadaverous gentleman who was a memory, for her, of the period from her twelfth to her seventeenth year. She had got on with him, perversely, much better than her mother had, and the bulging misfit of his duck waistcoat,

with his trick of swinging his eye-glass, at the end of an extraordinarily long string, far over the scene, came back to her as positive features of the image of her remoter youth. Her present age—for her later time had seen so many things happen—gave her a perspective.

Fifty things came up as she stood there before him, some of them floating in from the past, others hovering with freshness: how she used to dodge the rotary movement made by his pince-nez while he always awkwardly, and kindly, and often funnily, talked—it had once hit her rather badly in the eye; how she used to pull down and straighten his waistcoat, making it set a little better, a thing of a sort her mother never did; how friendly and familiar she must have been with him for that, or else a forward little minx; how she felt almost capable of doing it again now, just to sound the right note, and how sure she was of the way he would take it if she did; how much nicer he had clearly been, all the while, poor dear man, than his wife and the court had made it possible for him publicly to appear; how much younger, too, he now looked, in spite of his rather melancholy, his mildly jaundiced, humorously determined sallowness and his careless assumption, everywhere, from his forehead to his exposed and relaxed blue socks, almost sky-blue, as in past days, of creases and folds and furrows that would have been perhaps tragic if they hadn't seemed rather to show, like his whimsical black eyebrows, the vague, interrogative arch.

Of course he wasn't wretched if he wasn't more sure of his wretchedness than that! Julia Bride would have been sure—had she been through what she supposed *he* had! With his thick, loose black hair, in any case, untouched by a thread of gray, and his kept gift of a certain big-boyish awkwardness—that of his taking their encounter, for instance, so amusedly, so crudely, though, as she was not unaware, so eagerly too—he could by no means have been so little his wife's junior as it had been that lady's habit, after the divorce, to represent him. Julia had remembered him as old, since she had so constantly thought of her mother as old; which Mrs. Connery was indeed now—for her daughter—with her dozen years of actual seniority to Mr. Pitman and her exquisite hair, the densest, the finest tangle of arranged silver tendrils that had ever enhanced the effect of a preserved complexion.

Something in the girl's vision of her quondam stepfather as still comparatively young—with the confusion, the immense element of rectification, not to say of rank disproof, that it introduced into Mrs. Connery's favorite picture of her own injured past—all this worked, even at the moment, to quicken once more the clearness and harshness of judgment, the retrospective disgust, as she might have called it, that had of late grown up in her, the sense of all the folly and vanity and vulgarity, the lies, the perversities, the falsification of all life in the interest of who could say what wretched frivolity, what preposterous policy; amid which she had been condemned so ignorantly, so pitifully to sit, to walk, to grope, to flounder, from the very dawn of her consciousness. Didn't poor Mr. Pitman just touch the sensitive nerve of it when, taking her in with his facetious, cautious eyes, he spoke to her, right out, of the old, old story, the everlasting little wonder of her beauty?

“Why, you know, you've grown up so lovely—you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen!” Of course she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen; she was the prettiest girl people much more privileged than he had ever seen; since when hadn't she been passing for the prettiest girl any one had ever seen? She had lived in that, from far back, from year to year, from day to day and from hour to hour—she had lived for it and literally *by* it, as who should say; but Mr. Pitman was somehow more illuminating than he knew, with the present lurid light that he cast upon old dates, old pleas, old values, and old mysteries, not to call them old abysses: it had rolled over her in a swift wave, with the very sight of him, that her mother couldn't possibly have been right about him—as about what in the world had she ever been right?—so that in fact he was simply offered her there as one more of Mrs. Connery's lies. She might have

thought she knew them all by this time; but he represented for her, coming in just as he did, a fresh discovery, and it was this contribution of freshness that made her somehow feel she liked him. It was she herself who, for so long, with her retained impression, had been right about him; and the rectification he represented had *all* shone out of him, ten minutes before, on his catching her eye while she moved through the room with Mr. French. She had never doubted of his probable faults—which her mother had vividly depicted as the basest of vices; since some of them, and the most obvious (not the vices, but the faults) were written on him as he stood there: notably, for instance, the exasperating “business slackness” of which Mrs. Connery had, before the tribunal, made so pathetically much. It might have been, for that matter, the very business slackness that affected Julia as presenting its friendly breast, in the form of a cool loose sociability, to her own actual tension; though it was also true for her, after they had exchanged fifty words, that he had as well his inward fever and that, if he was perhaps wondering what was so particularly the matter with her, she could make out not less that something was the matter with *him*. It had been vague, yet it had been intense, the mute reflection, “Yes, I’m going to like him, and he’s going somehow to help me!” that had directed her steps so straight to him. She was sure even then of this, that he wouldn’t put to her a query about his former wife, that he took to-day no grain of interest in Mrs. Connery; that his interest, such as it was—and he couldn’t look *quite* like that, to Julia Bride’s expert perception, without something in the nature of a new one—would be a thousand times different.

It was as a value of *disproof* that his worth meanwhile so rapidly grew: the good sight of him, the good sound and sense of him, such as they were, demolished at a stroke so blessedly much of the horrid inconvenience of the past that she thought of him; she clutched at him, for a *general* saving use, an application as sanative, as redemptive as some universal healing wash, precious even to the point of perjury if perjury should be required. That was the terrible thing, that had been the inward pang with which she watched Basil French recede: perjury would have to come in somehow and somewhere—oh so quite certainly!—before the so strange, so rare young man, truly smitten though she believed him, could be made to rise to the occasion, before her measureless prize could be assured. It was present to her, it had been present a hundred times, that if there had only been some one to (as it were) “deny everything” the situation might yet be saved. She so needed some one to lie for her—ah, she so need some one to lie! Her mother’s version of everything, her mother’s version of anything, had been at the best, as they said, discounted; and she herself could but show, of course, for an interested party, however much she might claim to be none the less a decent girl—to whatever point, that is, after all that had both remotely and recently happened, presumptions of anything to be called decency could come in.

After what had recently happened—the two or three indirect but so worrying questions Mr. French had put to her—it would only be some thoroughly detached friend or witness who might effectively testify. An odd form of detachment certainly would reside, for Mr. Pitman’s evidential character, in her mother’s having so publicly and so brilliantly—though, thank the powers, all off in North Dakota!—severed their connection with him; and yet mightn’t it do *her* some good, even if the harm it might do her mother were so little ambiguous? The more her mother had got divorced—with her dreadful cheap-and-easy second performance in that line and her present extremity of alienation from Mr. Connery, which enfolded beyond doubt the germ of a third petition on one side or the other—the more her mother had distinguished herself in the field of folly the worse for her own prospect with the Frenches, whose minds she had guessed to be accessible, and with such an effect of dissimulated suddenness, to some insidious poison.

It was very unmistakable, in other words, that the more dismissed and detached Mr. Pitman should have come to appear, the more as divorced, or at least as divorcing, his before-time wife would by the same stroke figure—so that it was here poor Julia could but lose herself. The crazy divorces only, or the half-dozen successive and still crazier engagements only—gathered fruit, bitter fruit, of her own incredibly allowed, her own insanely fostered frivolity—either of these two groups of skeletons at the banquet might singly be dealt with; but the combination, the fact of each party's having been so mixed-up with whatever was least presentable for the other, the fact of their having so shockingly amused themselves together, made all present steering resemble the classic middle course between Scylla and Charybdis.

It was not, however, that she felt wholly a fool in having obeyed this impulse to pick up again her kind old friend. *She* at least had never divorced him, and her horrid little filial evidence in court had been but the chatter of a parrakeet, of precocious plumage and croak, repeating words earnestly taught her, and that she could scarce even pronounce. Therefore, as far as steering went, he *must* for the hour take a hand. She might actually have wished in fact that he shouldn't now have seemed so tremendously struck with her; since it was an extraordinary situation for a girl, this crisis of her fortune, this positive wrong that the flagrancy, what she would have been ready to call the very vulgarity, of her good looks might do her at a moment when it was vital she should hang as straight as a picture on the wall. Had it ever yet befallen any young woman in the world to wish with secret intensity that she might have been, for her convenience, a shade less inordinately pretty? She had come to that, to this view of the bane, the primal curse, of their lavish physical outfit, which had included everything and as to which she lumped herself resentfully with her mother. The only thing was that her mother was, thank goodness, still so much prettier, still so assertively, so publicly, so trashily, so ruinously pretty. Wonderful the small grimness with which Julia Bride put off on this parent the middle-aged maximum of their case and the responsibility of their defect. It cost her so little to recognize in Mrs. Connery at forty-seven, and in spite, or perhaps indeed just by reason, of the arranged silver tendrils which were so like some rare bird's-nest in a morning frost, a facile supremacy for the dazzling effect—it cost her so little that her view even rather exaggerated the lustre of the different maternal items. She would have put it *all* off if possible, all off on other shoulders and on other graces and other morals than her own, the burden of physical charm that had made so easy a ground, such a native favoring air, for the aberrations which, apparently inevitable and without far consequences at the time, had yet at this juncture so much better not have been.

She could have worked it out at her leisure, to the last link of the chain, the way their prettiness had set them trap after trap, all along—had foredoomed them to awful ineptitude. When you were as pretty as that you could, by the whole idiotic consensus, be nothing *but* pretty; and when you were nothing “but” pretty you could get into nothing but tight places, out of which you could then scramble by nothing but masses of fibs. And there was no one, all the while, who wasn't eager to egg you on, eager to make you pay to the last cent the price of your beauty. What creature would ever for a moment help you to behave as if something that dragged in its wake a bit less of a lumbering train would, on the whole, have been better for you? The consequences of being plain were only negative—you failed of this and that; but the consequences of being as *they* were, what were these but endless? though indeed, as far as failing went, your beauty too could let you in for enough of it. Who, at all events, would ever for a moment credit you, in the luxuriance of that beauty, with the study, on your own side, of such truths as these? Julia Bride could, at the point she had reached, positively ask herself this even while lucidly conscious of the inimitable, the triumphant and attested projection, all round her, of her exquisite image. It was only Basil French who had at

last, in his doubtless dry, but all distinguished way—the way surely, as it was borne in upon her, of all the blood of all the Frenches—stepped out of the vulgar rank. It was only he who, by the trouble she discerned in him, had made her see certain things. It was only for him—and not a bit ridiculously, but just beautifully, almost sublimely—that their being “nice,” her mother and she between them, had *not* seemed to profit by their being so furiously handsome.

This had, ever so grossly and ever so tiresomely, satisfied every one else; since every one had thrust upon them, had imposed upon them, as by a great cruel conspiracy, their silliest possibilities; fencing them in to these, and so not only shutting them out from others, but mounting guard at the fence, walking round and round outside it, to see they didn’t escape, and admiring them, talking to them, through the rails, in mere terms of chaff, terms of chucked cakes and apples—as if they had been antelopes or zebras, or even some superior sort of performing, of dancing, bear. It had been reserved for Basil French to strike her as willing to let go, so to speak, a pound or two of this fatal treasure if he might only have got in exchange for it an ounce or so more of their so much less obvious and Jess published personal history. Yes, it described him to say that, in addition to all the rest of him, and of *his* personal history, and of his family, and of theirs, in addition to their social posture, as that of a serried phalanx, and to their notoriously enormous wealth and crushing respectability, she might have been ever so much less lovely for him if she had been only—well, a little prepared to answer questions. And it wasn’t as if quiet, cultivated, earnest, public-spirited, brought up in Germany, infinitely travelled, awfully like a high-caste Englishman, and all the other pleasant things, it wasn’t as if he didn’t love to be with her, to look at her, just as she was; for he loved it exactly as much, so far as that footing simply went, as any free and foolish youth who had ever made the last demonstration of it. It was that marriage was, for him—and for them all, the serried Frenches—a great matter, a goal to which a man of intelligence, a real shy, beautiful man of the world, didn’t hop on one foot, didn’t skip and jump, as if he were playing an urchins’ game, but toward which he proceeded with a deep and anxious, a noble and highly just deliberation.

For it was one thing to stare at a girl till she was bored with it, it was one thing to take her to the Horse Show and the Opera, and to send her flowers by the stack, and chocolates by the ton, and “great” novels, the very latest and greatest, by the dozen; but something quite other to hold open for her, with eyes attached to eyes, the gate, moving on such stiff silver hinges, of the grand square forecourt of the palace of wedlock. The state of being “engaged” represented to him the introduction to this precinct of some young woman with whom his outside parley would have had the duration, distinctly, of his own convenience. That might be cold-blooded if one chose to think so; but nothing of another sort would equal the high ceremony and dignity and decency, above all the grand gallantry and finality, of their then passing in. Poor Julia could have blushed red, before that view, with the memory of the way the forecourt, as she now imagined it, had been dishonored by her younger romps. She had tumbled over the wall with this, that, and the other raw playmate, and had played “tag” and leap-frog, as she might say, from corner to corner. That would be the “history” with which, in case of definite demand, she should be able to supply Mr. French: that she had already, again and again, any occasion offering, chattered and scuffled over ground provided, according to his idea, for walking the gravest of minuets. If that then had been all their *kind* of history, hers and her mother’s, at least there was plenty of it: it was the superstructure raised on the other group of facts, those of the order of their having been always so perfectly pink and white, so perfectly possessed of clothes, so perfectly splendid, so perfectly idiotic. These things had been the “points” of antelope and zebra; putting Mrs. Connery for the zebra, as the more remarkably striped or spotted. Such were the *data* Basil French’s inquiry would elicit:

her own six engagements and her mother's three nullified marriages—nine nice distinct little horrors in all. What on earth was to be done about them?

It was notable, she was afterward to recognize, that there had been nothing of the famous business slackness in the positive pounce with which Mr. Pitman put it to her that, as soon as he had made her out “for sure,” identified her there as old Julia grown-up and gallivanting with a new admirer, a smarter young fellow than ever yet, he had had the inspiration of her being exactly the good girl to help him. She certainly found him strike the hour again, with these vulgarities of tone—forms of speech that her mother had anciently described as by themselves, once he had opened the whole battery, sufficient ground for putting him away. Full, however, of the use she should have for him, she wasn't going to mind trifles. What she really gasped at was that, so oddly, he was ahead of her at the start. “Yes, I want something of you, Julia, and I want it right now: you can do me a turn, and I'm blest if my luck—which has once or twice been pretty good, you know—hasn't sent you to me.” She knew the luck he meant—that of her mother's having so enabled him to get rid of her; but it was the nearest allusion of the merely invidious kind that he would make. It had thus come to our young woman on the spot and by divination: the service he desired of her matched with remarkable closeness what she had so promptly taken into her head to name to himself—to name in her own interest, though deterred as yet from having brought it right out. She had been prevented by his speaking, the first thing, in that way, as if he had known Mr. French—which surprised her till he explained that every one in New York knew by appearance a young man of his so-quoted wealth (“What did she take them all in New York then *for*?”) and of whose marked attention to her he had moreover, for himself, round at clubs and places, lately heard. This had accompanied the inevitable free question “Was she engaged to *him* now?”—which she had in fact almost welcomed as holding out to her the perch of opportunity. She was waiting to deal with it properly, but meanwhile he had gone on, and to such effect that it took them but three minutes to turn out, on either side, like a pair of pickpockets comparing, under shelter, their day's booty, the treasures of design concealed about their persons.

“I want you to tell the truth for me—as you only can. I want you to say that I was really all right—as right as you know; and that I simply acted like an angel in a story-book, gave myself away to have it over.”

“Why, my dear man,” Julia cried, “you take the wind straight out of my sails! What I'm here to ask of *you* is that you'll confess to having been even a worse fiend than you were shown up for; to having made it impossible mother should *not* take proceedings.” There!—she had brought it out, and with the sense of their situation turning to high excitement for her in the teeth of his droll stare, his strange grin, his characteristic “Lordy, lordy! What good will that do you?” She was prepared with her clear statement of reasons for her appeal, and feared so he might have better ones for his own that all her story came in a flash. “Well, Mr. Pitman, I want to get married this time, by way of a change; but you see we've been such fools that, when something really good at last comes up, it's too dreadfully awkward. The fools we were capable of being—well, you know better than any one: unless perhaps not quite so well as Mr. Connery. It has got to be denied,” said Julia ardently—“it has got to be denied flat. But I can't get hold of Mr. Connery—Mr. Connery has gone to China. Besides, if he were here,” she had ruefully to confess, “he'd be no good—on the contrary. He wouldn't deny anything—he'd only tell more. So thank heaven he's away—there's *that* amount of good! I'm not engaged yet,” she went on—but he had already taken her up.

“You're not engaged to Mr. French?” It was all, clearly, a wondrous show for him, but his immediate surprise, oddly, might have been greatest for that.

“No, not to any one—for the seventh time!” She spoke as with her head held well up both over the shame and the pride. “Yes, the next time I’m engaged I want something to happen. But he’s afraid; he’s afraid of what may be told him. He’s dying to find out, and yet he’d die if he did! He wants to be talked to, but he has got to be talked to right. You could talk to him right, Mr. Pitman—if you only *would*! He can’t get over mother—that I feel: he loathes and scorns divorces, and we’ve had first and last too many. So if he could hear from you that you just made her life a hell—why,” Julia concluded, “it would be too lovely. If she *had* to go in for another—after having already, when I was little, divorced father—it would ‘sort of’ make, don’t you see? one less. You’d do the high-toned thing by her: you’d say what a wretch you then were, and that she had had to save her life. In that way he mayn’t mind it. Don’t you see, you sweet man?” poor Julia pleaded. “Oh,” she wound up as if his fancy lagged or his scruple looked out, “of course I want you to *lie* for me!”

It did indeed sufficiently stagger him. “It’s a lovely idea for the moment when I was just saying to myself—as soon as I saw you—that you’d speak the truth for *me*!”

“Ah, what’s the matter with ‘you’?” Julia sighed with an impatience not sensibly less sharp for her having so quickly scented some lion in her path.

“Why, do you think there’s no one in the world but you who has seen the cup of promised affection, of something really to be depended on, only, at the last moment, by the horrid jostle of your elbow, spilled all over you? I want to provide for my future too as it happens; and my good friend who’s to help me to that—the most charming of women this time—disapproves of divorce quite as much as Mr. French. Don’t you see,” Mr. Pitman candidly asked, “what that by itself must have done toward attaching me to her? *She* has got to be talked to—to be told how little I could help it.”

“Oh, lordy, lordy!” the girl emulously groaned. It was such a relieving cry. “Well, *I* won’t talk to her!” she declared.

“You *won’t*, Julia?” he pitifully echoed. “And yet you ask of *me*—!”

His pang, she felt, was sincere; and even more than she had guessed, for the previous quarter of an hour he had been building up his hope, building it with her aid for a foundation. Yet was he going to see how their testimony, on each side, would, if offered, *have* to conflict? If he was to prove himself for her sake—or, more queerly still, for that of Basil French’s high conservatism—a person whom there had been no other way of dealing with, how could she prove him, in this other and so different interest, a mere gentle sacrifice to his wife’s perversity? She had, before him there, on the instant, all acutely, a sense of rising sickness—a wan glimmer of foresight as to the end of the fond dream. Everything else was against her, everything in her dreadful past—just as if she had been a person represented by some “emotional actress,” some desperate erring lady “hunted down” in a play; but was that going to be the case too with her own very decency, the fierce little residuum deep within her, for which she was counting, when she came to think, on so little glory or even credit? Was this also going to turn against her and trip her up—just to show she was really, under the touch and the test, as decent as any one; and with no one but herself the wiser for it meanwhile, and no proof to show but that, as a consequence, she should be unmarried to the end? She put it to Mr. Pitman quite with resentment: “Do you mean to say you’re going to be married—?”

“Oh, my dear, I too must get engaged first!”—he spoke with his inimitable grin. “But that, you see, is where you come in. I’ve told her about you. She wants awfully to meet you. The way it happens is too lovely—that I find you just in this place. She’s coming,” said Mr. Pitman—and as in all the good faith of his eagerness now; “she’s coming in about three minutes.”

“Coming here?”

“Yes, Julia—right here. It’s where we usually meet”; and he was wreathed again, this time as if for life, in his large slow smile. “She loves this place—she’s awfully keen on art. Like *you*, Julia, if you haven’t changed—I remember how you did love art.” He looked at her quite tenderly, as to keep her up to it. “You must still of course—from the way you’re here. Just let her *feel* that,” the poor man fantastically urged. And then with his kind eyes on her and his good ugly mouth stretched as for delicate emphasis from ear to ear: “Every little helps!”

He made her wonder for him, ask herself, and with a certain intensity, questions she yet hated the trouble of; as whether he were still as moneyless as in the other time—which was certain indeed, for any fortune he ever would have made. His slackness, on that ground, stuck out of him almost as much as if he had been of rusty or “seedy” aspect—which, luckily for him, he wasn’t at all: he looked, in his way, like some pleasant eccentric, ridiculous, but real gentleman, whose taste might be of the queerest, but his credit with his tailor none the less of the best. She wouldn’t have been the least ashamed, had their connection lasted, of going about with him: so that what a fool, again, her mother had been—since Mr. Connery, sorry as one might be for him, was irrepressibly vulgar. Julia’s quickness was, for the minute, charged with all this; but she had none the less her feeling of the right thing to say and the right way to say it. If he was after a future financially assured, even as she herself so frantically was, she wouldn’t cast the stone. But if he had talked about her to strange women she couldn’t be less than a little majestic. “Who then is the person in question for you—?”

“Why, such a dear thing, Julia—Mrs. David E. Drack. Have you heard of her?” he almost fluted.

New York was vast, and she had not had that advantage. “She’s a widow—?”

“Oh yes: she’s not—” He caught himself up in time. “She’s a real one.” It was as near as he came. But it was as if he had been looking at her now so pathetically hard. “Julia, she has millions.”

Hard, at any rate—whether pathetic or not—was the look she gave him back. “Well, so has—or so *will* have—Basil French. And more of them than Mrs. Drack, I guess,” Julia quavered.

“Oh, I know what *they’ve* got!” He took it from her—with the effect of a vague stir, in his long person, of unwelcome embarrassment. But was she going to give up because he was embarrassed? He should know at least what he was costing her. It came home to her own spirit more than ever, but meanwhile he had found his footing. “I don’t see how your mother matters. It isn’t a question of his marrying *her*.”

“No; but, constantly together as we’ve always been, it’s a question of there being so disgustingly much to get over. If we had, for people like them, but the one ugly spot and the one weak side; if we had made, between us, but the one vulgar *kind* of mistake: well, I don’t say!” She reflected with a wistfulness of note that was in itself a touching eloquence. “To have our reward in this world we’ve had too sweet a time. We’ve had it all right down here!” said Julia Bride. “I should have taken the precaution to have about a dozen fewer lovers.”

“Ah, my dear, ‘lovers’—!” He ever so comically attenuated.

“Well they *were*!” She quite flared up. “When you’ve had a ring from each (three diamonds, two pearls, and a rather bad sapphire: I’ve kept them all, and they tell my story!) what are you to call them?”

“Oh, rings—!” Mr. Pitman didn’t call rings anything. “I’ve given Mrs. Drack a ring.”

Julia stared. "Then aren't you her lover?"

"That, dear child," he humorously wailed, "is what I want you to find out! But I'll handle your rings all right," he more lucidly added.

"You'll 'handle' them?"

"I'll fix your lovers. I'll lie about *them*, if that's all you want."

"Oh, about 'them'—!" She turned away with a sombre drop, seeing so little in it. "That wouldn't count—from *you*!" She saw the great shining room, with its mockery of art and "style" and security, all the things she was vainly after, and its few scattered visitors who had left them, Mr. Pitman and herself, in their ample corner, so conveniently at ease. There was only a lady in one of the far doorways, of whom she took vague note and who seemed to be looking at them. "They'd have to lie for themselves!"

"Do you mean he's capable of putting it to them?"

Mr. Pitman's tone threw discredit on that possibility, but she knew perfectly well what she meant. "Not of getting at them directly, not, as mother says, of nosing round himself; but of listening—and small blame to him!—to the horrible things other people say of me."

"But what other people?"

"Why, Mrs. George Maule, to begin with—who intensely loathes us, and who talks to his sisters, so that they may talk to *him*: which they do, all the while, I'm morally sure (hating me as they also must). But it's she who's the real reason—I mean of his holding off. She poisons the air he breathes."

"Oh well," said Mr. Pitman, with easy optimism, "if Mrs. George Maule's a cat—!"

"If she's a cat she has kittens—four little spotlessly white ones, among whom she'd give her head that Mr. French should make his pick. He could do it with his eyes shut—you can't tell them apart. But she has every name, every date, as you may say, for my dark 'record'—as of course they all call it: she'll be able to give him, if he brings himself to ask her, every fact in its order. And all the while, don't you see? there's no one to speak *for* me."

It would have touched a harder heart than her loose friend's to note the final flush of clairvoyance witnessing this assertion and under which her eyes shone as with the rush of quick tears. He stared at her, and at what this did for the deep charm of her prettiness, as in almost witless admiration. "But can't you—lovely as you are, you beautiful thing!—speak for yourself?"

"Do you mean can't I tell the lies? No, then, I can't—and I wouldn't if I could. I don't lie myself, you know—as it happens; and it could represent to him then about the only thing, the only bad one, I don't do. I *did*—'lovely as I am'!—have my regular time; I wasn't so hideous that I couldn't! Besides, do you imagine he'd come and ask me?"

"Gad, I wish he would, Julia!" said Mr. Pitman, with his kind eyes on her.

"Well then, I'd tell him!" And she held her head again high. "But he won't."

It fairly distressed her companion. "Doesn't he want, then, to know—?"

"He wants *not* to know. He wants to be told without asking—told, I mean, that each of the stories, those that have come to him, is a fraud and a libel. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse*, don't they say?—so that do you see me breaking out to him, unprovoked, with four or five what-do-you-call-'ems, the things mother used to have to prove in court, a set of neat little 'alibis' in a

row? How can I get hold of so *many* precious gentlemen, to turn them on? How can *they* want everything fished up?"

She paused for her climax, in the intensity of these considerations; which gave Mr. Pitman a chance to express his honest faith. "Why, my sweet child, they'd be just glad—!"

It determined in her loveliness almost a sudden glare. "Glad to swear they never had anything to do with such a creature? Then *I'd* be glad to swear they had lots!"

His persuasive smile, though confessing to bewilderment, insisted. "Why, my love, they've got to swear either one thing or the other."

"They've got to keep out of the way—that's *their* view of it, I guess," said Julia.

"Where *are* they, please—now that they *may* be wanted? If you'd like to hunt them up for me you're very welcome." With which, for the moment, over the difficult case, they faced each other helplessly enough. And she added to it now the sharpest ache of her despair. "He knows about Murray Brush. The others"—and her pretty white-gloved hands and charming pink shoulders gave them up—"may go hang!"

"Murray Brush—?" It had opened Mr. Pitman's eyes.

"Yes—yes; I do mind *him*."

"Then what's the matter with his at least rallying—?"

"The matter is that, being ashamed of himself, as he well might, he left the country as soon as he could and has stayed away. The matter is that he's in Paris or somewhere, and that if you expect him to come home for me—!" She had already dropped, however, as at Mr. Pitman's look.

"Why, you foolish thing, Murray Brush is in New York!" It had quite brightened him up.

"He has come back—?"

"Why, sure! I saw him—when was it? Tuesday!—on the Jersey boat." Mr. Pitman rejoiced in his news. "*He's* your man!"

Julia too had been affected by it; it had brought, in a rich wave, her hot color back. But she gave the strangest dim smile. "He *was*!"

"Then get hold of him, and—if he's a gentleman—he'll prove for you, to the hilt, that he wasn't."

It lighted in her face, the kindled train of this particular sudden suggestion, a glow, a sharpness of interest, that had deepened the next moment, while she gave a slow and sad head-shake, to a greater strangeness yet. "He isn't a gentleman."

"Ah, lordy, lordy!" Mr. Pitman again sighed. He struggled out of it but only into the vague. "Oh, then, if he's a pig—!"

"You see there are only a few gentlemen—not enough to go round—and that makes them count so!" It had thrust the girl herself, for that matter, into depths; but whether most of memory or of roused purpose he had no time to judge—aware as he suddenly was of a shadow (since he mightn't perhaps too quickly call it a light) across the heaving surface of their question. It fell upon Julia's face, fell with the sound of the voice he so well knew, but which could only be odd to her for all it immediately assumed.

"There are indeed very few—and one mustn't try *them* too much!" Mrs. Drack, who had supervened while they talked, stood, in monstrous magnitude—at least to Julia's reimpressed eyes—between them: she was the lady our young woman had descried across the room, and

she had drawn near while the interest of their issue so held them. We have seen the act of observation and that of reflection alike swift in Julia—once her subject was within range—and she had now, with all her perceptions at the acutest, taken in, by a single stare, the strange presence to a happy connection with which Mr. Pitman aspired and which had thus sailed, with placid majesty, into their troubled waters. She was clearly not shy, Mrs. David E. Drack, yet neither was she ominously bold; she was bland and “good,” Julia made sure at a glance, and of a large complacency, as the good and the bland are apt to be—a large complacency, a large sentimentality, a large innocent, elephantine archness: she fairly rioted in that dimension of size. Habited in an extraordinary quantity of stiff and lustrous black brocade, with enhancements, of every description, that twinkled and tinkled, that rustled and rumbled with her least movement, she presented a huge, hideous, pleasant face, a featureless desert in a remote quarter of which the disproportionately small eyes might have figured a pair of rash adventurers all but buried in the sand. They reduced themselves when she smiled to barely discernible points—a couple of mere tiny emergent heads—though the foreground of the scene, as if to make up for it, gaped with a vast benevolence. In a word Julia saw—and as if she had needed nothing more; saw Mr. Pitman’s opportunity, saw her own, saw the exact nature both of Mrs. Drack’s circumspection and of Mrs. Drack’s sensibility, saw even, glittering there in letters of gold and as a part of the whole metallic coruscation, the large figure of her income, largest of all her attributes, and (though perhaps a little more as a luminous blur beside all this) the mingled ecstasy and agony of Mr. Pitman’s hope and Mr. Pitman’s fear.

He was introducing them, with his pathetic belief in the virtue for every occasion, in the solvent for every trouble, of an extravagant, genial, professional humor; he was naming her to Mrs. Drack as the charming young friend he had told her so much about and who had been as an angel to him in a weary time; he was saying that the loveliest chance in the world, this accident of a meeting in those promiscuous halls, had placed within his reach the pleasure of bringing them together. It didn’t indeed matter, Julia felt, what he was saying: he conveyed everything, as far as she was concerned, by a moral pressure as unmistakable as if, for a symbol of it, he had thrown himself on her neck. Above all, meanwhile, this high consciousness prevailed—that the good lady herself, however huge she loomed, had entered, by the end of a minute, into a condition as of suspended weight and arrested mass, stilled to artless awe by the fact of her vision. Julia had practised almost to lassitude the art of tracing in the people who looked at her the impression promptly sequent; but it was a striking point that if, in irritation, in depression, she felt that the lightest eyes of men, stupid at their clearest, had given her pretty well all she should ever care for, she could still gather a freshness from the tribute of her own sex, still care to see her reflection in the faces of women. Never, probably, never would that sweet be tasteless—with such a straight grim spoon was it mostly administered, and so flavored and strengthened by the competence of their eyes. Women knew so much best *how* a woman surpassed—how and where and why, with no touch or torment of it lost on them; so that as it produced mainly and primarily the instinct of aversion, the sense of extracting the recognition, of gouging out the homage, was on the whole the highest crown one’s felicity could wear. Once in a way, however, the grimness beautifully dropped, the jealousy failed: the admiration was all there and the poor plain sister handsomely paid it. It had never been so paid, she was presently certain, as by this great generous object of Mr., Pitman’s flame, who without optical aid, it well might have seemed, nevertheless entirely grasped her—might in fact, all benevolently, have been groping her over as by some huge mild proboscis. She gave Mrs. Brack pleasure in short; and who could say of what other pleasures the poor lady hadn’t been cheated?

It was somehow a muddled world in which one of her conceivable joys, at this time of day, would be to marry Mr. Pitman—to say nothing of a state of things in which this gentleman's own fancy could invest such a union with rapture. That, however, was their own mystery, and Julia, with each instant, was more and more clear about hers: so remarkably primed in fact, at the end of three minutes, that though her friend, and though *his* friend, were both saying things, many things and perhaps quite wonderful things, she had no free attention for them and was only rising and soaring. She was rising to her value, she was soaring *with* it—the value Mr. Pitman almost convulsively imputed to her, the value that consisted for her of being so unmistakably the most dazzling image Mrs. Brack had ever beheld. These were the uses, for Julia, in fine, of adversity; the range of Mrs. Brack's experience might have been as small as the measure of her presence was large: Julia was at any rate herself in face of the occasion of her life, and, after all her late repudiations and reactions, had perhaps never yet known the quality of this moment's success. She hadn't an idea of what, on either side, had been uttered—beyond Mr. Pitman's allusion to her having befriended him of old: she simply held his companion with her radiance and knew she might be, for her effect, as irrelevant as she chose. It was relevant to do what he wanted—it was relevant to dish herself. She did it now with a kind of passion, to say nothing of her knowing, with it, that every word of it added to her beauty. She gave him away in short, up to the hilt, for any use of her own, and should have nothing to clutch at now but the possibility of Murray Brush.

“He says I was good to him, Mrs. Drack; and I'm sure I hope I was, since I should be ashamed to be anything else. If I could be good to him now I should be glad—that's just what, a while ago, I rushed up to him here, after so long, to give myself the pleasure of saying. I saw him years ago very particularly, very miserably tried—and I saw the way he took it. I did see it, you dear man,” she sublimely went on—“I saw it for all you may protest, for all you may hate me to talk about you! I saw you behave like a gentleman—since Mrs. Drack agrees with me, so charmingly, that there are not many to be met. I don't know whether you care, Mrs. Drack”—she abounded, she revelled in the name—“but I've always remembered it of him: that under the most extraordinary provocation he was decent and patient and brave. No appearance of anything different matters, for I speak of what I *know*. Of course I'm nothing and nobody; I'm only a poor frivolous girl, but I was very close to him at the time. That's all my little story—if it *should* interest you at all.” She measured every beat of her wing, she knew how high she was going and paused only when it was quite vertiginous. Here she hung a moment as in the glare of the upper blue; which was but the glare—what else could it be?—of the vast and magnificent attention of both her auditors, hushed, on their side, in the splendor she emitted. She had at last to steady herself, and she scarce knew afterward at what rate or in what way she had still inimitably come down—her own eyes fixed all the while on the very figure of her achievement. She had sacrificed her mother on the altar—proclaimed her as false and cruel: and if that didn't “fix” Mr. Pitman, as he would have said—well, it was all she could do. But the cost of her action already somehow came back to her with increase; the dear gaunt man fairly wavered, to her sight, in the glory of it, as if signalling at her, with wild gleeful arms, from some mount of safety, while the massive lady just spread and spread like a rich fluid a bit helplessly spilt. It was really the outflow of the poor woman's honest response, into which she seemed to melt, and Julia scarce distinguished the two apart even for her taking gracious leave of each. “Good-bye, Mrs. Drack; I'm awfully happy to have met you”—like as not it was for this she had grasped Mr. Pitman's hand. And then to him or to her, it didn't matter which, “Good-bye, dear good Mr. Pitman—hasn't it been nice after so long?”

II

Julia floated even to her own sense swan-like away—she left in her wake their fairly stupefied submission: it was as if she had, by an exquisite authority, now *placed* them, each for each, and they would have nothing to do but be happy together. Never had she so exulted as on this ridiculous occasion in the noted items of her beauty. *Le compte y était*, as they used to say in Paris—every one of them, for her immediate employment, was there; and there was something in it after all. It didn't necessarily, this sum of thumping little figures, imply charm—especially for “refined” people: nobody knew better than Julia that inexpressible charm and quotable “charms” (quotable like prices, rates, shares, or whatever, the things they dealt in down-town) are two distinct categories; the safest thing for the latter being, on the whole, that it might include the former, and the great strength of the former being that it might perfectly dispense with the latter. Mrs. Drack was not refined, not the least little bit; but what would be the case with Murray Brush now—after his three years of Europe? He had done so what he liked with her—which had seemed so then just the meaning, hadn't it? of their being “engaged”—that he had made her not see, while the absurdity lasted (the absurdity of their pretending to believe they could marry without a cent), how little he was of metal without alloy: this had come up for her, remarkably, but afterward—come up for her as she looked back. Then she had drawn her conclusion, which was one of the many that Basil French had made her draw. It was a queer service Basil was going to have rendered her, this having made everything she had ever done impossible, if he wasn't going to give her a new chance. If he was it was doubtless right enough. On the other hand, Murray might have improved, if such a quantity of alloy, as she called it, *were*, in any man, reducible, and if Paris were the place all happily to reduce it. She had her doubts—anxious and aching on the spot, and had expressed them to Mr. Pitman: certainly, of old, he had been more open to the quotable than to the inexpressible, to charms than to charm. If she could try the quotable, however, and with such a grand result, on Mrs. Drack, she couldn't now on Murray—in respect to whom everything had changed. So that if he hadn't a sense for the subtler appeal, the appeal appreciable by people *not* vulgar, on which alone she could depend, what on earth would become of her? She could but yearningly hope, at any rate, as she made up her mind to write to him immediately at his club. It was a question of the right sensibility in him. Perhaps he would have acquired it in Europe.

Two days later indeed—for he had promptly and charmingly replied, keeping with alacrity the appointment she had judged best to propose for a morning hour in a sequestered alley of the Park—two days later she was to be struck well-nigh to alarm by everything he had acquired: so much it seemed to make that it threatened somehow a complication, and her plan, so far as she had arrived at one, dwelt in the desire above all to simplify. She wanted no grain more of extravagance or excess of anything—risking as she had done, none the less, a recall of ancient license in proposing to Murray such a place of meeting. She had her reasons—she wished intensely to discriminate: Basil French had several times waited on her at her mother's habitation, their horrible flat which was so much too far up and too near the East Side; he had dined there and lunched there and gone with her thence to other places, notably to see pictures, and had in particular adjourned with her twice to the Metropolitan Museum, in which he took a great interest, in which she professed a delight, and their second visit to which had wound up in her encounter with Mr. Pitman, after her companion had yielded, at her urgent instance, to an exceptional need of keeping a business engagement. She mightn't, in delicacy, in decency, entertain Murray Brush where she had entertained Mr. French—she was given over now to these exquisite perceptions and proprieties and bent on devoutly observing them; and Mr. French, by good-luck, had never been with her in the Park: partly because he had never pressed it, and partly because she would have held off if he had, so haunted were those devious paths and favoring shades by the general echo of her untrammelled past. If he had never suggested their taking a turn there this was because, quite

divinably, he held it would commit him further than he had yet gone; and if she on her side had practised a like reserve it was because the place reeked for her, as she inwardly said, with old associations. It reeked with nothing so much perhaps as with the memories evoked by the young man who now awaited her in the nook she had been so competent to indicate; but in what corner of the town, should she look for them, wouldn't those footsteps creak back into muffled life, and to what expedient would she be reduced should she attempt to avoid all such tracks? The Museum was full of tracks, tracks by the hundred—the way really she had knocked about!—but she had to see people somewhere, and she couldn't pretend to dodge every ghost.

All she could do was not to make confusion, make mixtures, of the living; though she asked herself enough what mixture she mightn't find herself to have prepared if Mr. French should, not so very impossibly, for a restless, roaming man—*her* effect on him!—happen to pass while she sat there with the mustachioed personage round whose name Mrs. Maule would probably have caused detrimental anecdote most thickly to cluster. There existed, she was sure, a mass of luxuriant legend about the “lengths” her engagement with Murray Brush had gone; she could herself fairly feel them in the air, these streamers of evil, black flags flown as in warning, the vast redundancy of so cheap and so dingy social bunting, in fine, that flapped over the stations she had successively moved away from and which were empty now, for such an ado, even to grotesqueness. The vivacity of that conviction was what had at present determined her, while it was the way he listened after she had quickly broken ground, while it was the special character of the interested look in his handsome face, handsomer than ever yet, that represented for her the civilization he had somehow taken on. Just so it was the quantity of that gain, in its turn, that had at the end of ten minutes begun to affect her as holding up a light to the wide reach of her step. “There was never anything the least serious between us, not a sign or a scrap, do you mind? of anything beyond the merest pleasant friendly acquaintance; and if you're not ready to go to the stake on it for me you may as well know in time what it is you'll probably cost me.”

She had immediately plunged, measuring her effect and having thought it well over; and what corresponded to her question of his having become a better person to appeal to was the appearance of interest she had so easily created in him. She felt on the spot the difference that made—it was indeed his form of being more civilized: it was the sense in which Europe in general and Paris in particular had made him develop. By every calculation—and her calculations, based on the intimacy of her knowledge, had been many and deep—he would help her the better the more intelligent he should have become; yet she was to recognize later on that the first chill of foreseen disaster had been caught by her as, at a given moment, this greater refinement of his attention seemed to exhale it. It was just what she had wanted—“if I can only get him interested—!” so that, this proving quite vividly possible, why did the light it lifted strike her as lurid? Was it partly by reason of his inordinate romantic good looks, those of a gallant, genial conqueror, but which, involving so glossy a brownness of eye, so manly a crispness of curl, so red-lipped a radiance of smile, so natural a bravery of port, prescribed to any response he might facially, might expressively, make a sort of florid, disproportionate amplitude? The explanation, in any case, didn't matter; he was going to mean well—that she could feel, and also that he had meant better in the past, presumably, than he had managed to convince her of his doing at the time: the oddity she hadn't now reckoned with was this fact that from the moment he did advertise an interest it should show almost as what she would have called weird. It made a change in him that didn't go with the rest—as if he had broken his nose or put on spectacles, lost his handsome hair or sacrificed his splendid mustache: her conception, her necessity, as she saw, had been that something should be added to him for her use, but nothing for his own alteration.

He had affirmed himself, and his character, and his temper, and his health, and his appetite, and his ignorance, and his obstinacy, and his whole charming, coarse, heartless personality, during their engagement, by twenty forms of natural emphasis, but never by emphasis of interest. How in fact could you feel interest unless you should know, within you, some dim stir of imagination? There was nothing in the world of which Murray Brush was less capable than of such a dim stir, because you only began to imagine when you felt some approach to a need to understand. *He* had never felt it; for hadn't he been born, to his personal vision, with that perfect intuition of everything which reduces all the suggested preliminaries of judgment to the impertinence—when it's a question of your entering your house—of a dumpage of bricks at your door? He had had, in short, neither to imagine nor to perceive, because he had, from the first pulse of his intelligence, simply and supremely known: so that, at this hour, face to face with him, it came over her that she had, in their old relation, dispensed with any such convenience of comprehension on his part even to a degree she had not measured at the time. What therefore must he not have seemed to her as a form of life, a form of avidity and activity, blatantly successful in its own conceit, that he could have dazzled her so against the interest of her very faculties and functions? Strangely and richly historic all that backward mystery, and only leaving for her mind the wonder of such a mixture of possession and detachment as they would clearly to-day both know. For each to be so little at last to the other when, during months together, the idea of all abundance, all quantity, had been, for each, drawn from the other and addressed to the other—what was it monstrously like but some fantastic act of getting rid of a person by going to lock yourself up in the *sanctum sanctorum* of that person's house, amid every evidence of that person's habits and nature? What was going to happen, at any rate, was that Murray would show himself as beautifully and consciously understanding—and it would be prodigious that Europe should have inoculated him with that delicacy. Yes, he wouldn't claim to know now till she had told him—an aid to performance he had surely never before waited for, or been indebted to, from any one; and then, so knowing, he would charmingly endeavor to “meet,” to oblige and to gratify. He would find it, her case, ever so worthy of his benevolence, and would be literally inspired to reflect that he must hear about it first.

She let him hear then everything, in spite of feeling herself slip, while she did so, to some doom as yet incalculable; she went on very much as she had done for Mr. Pitman and Mrs. Drack, with the rage of desperation and, as she was afterward to call it to herself, the fascination of the abyss. She didn't know, couldn't have said at the time, *why* his projected benevolence should have had most so the virtue to scare her: he would patronize her, as an effect of her vividness, if not of her charm, and would do this with all high intention, finding her case, or rather *their* case, their funny old case, taking on of a sudden such refreshing and edifying life, to the last degree curious and even important; but there were gaps of connection between this and the intensity of the perception here overtaking her that she shouldn't be able to move in *any* direction without dishing herself. That she couldn't afford it where she had got to—couldn't afford the deplorable vulgarity of having been so many times informally affianced and contracted (putting it only at that, at its being by the new lights and fashions so unpardonably vulgar): he took this from her without turning, as she might have said, a hair; except just to indicate, with his new superiority, that he felt the distinguished appeal and notably the pathos of it. He still took it from her that she hoped nothing, as it were, from any other *alibi*—the people to drag into court being too many and too scattered; but that, as it was with him, Murray Brush, she had been *most* vulgar, most everything she had better not have been, so she depended on him for the innocence it was actually vital she should establish. He flushed or frowned or winced no more at that than he did when she once more fairly emptied her satchel and, quite as if they had been Nancy and the Artful Dodger, or some nefarious pair of that sort, talking things over in the manner of *Oliver Twist*, revealed to him the

fondness of her view that, could she but have produced a cleaner slate, she might by this time have pulled it off with Mr. French. Yes, he let her in that way sacrifice her honorable connection with him—all the more honorable for being so completely at an end—to the crudity of her plan for not missing another connection, so much more brilliant than what he offered, and for bringing another man, with whom she so invidiously and unflatteringly compared him, into her greedy life.

There was only a moment during which, by a particular lustrous look she had never had from him before, he just made her wonder which turn he was going to take; she felt, however, as safe as was consistent with her sense of having probably but added to her danger, when he brought out, the next instant: “Don’t you seem to take the ground that we were guilty—that *you* were ever guilty—of something we shouldn’t have been? What did we ever do that was secret, or underhand, or any way not to be acknowledged? What did we do but exchange our young vows with the best faith in the world—publicly, rejoicingly, with the full assent of every one connected with us? I mean of course,” he said with his grave kind smile, “till we broke off so completely because we found that—practically, financially, on the hard worldly basis—we couldn’t work it. What harm, in the sight of God or man, Julia,” he asked in his fine rich way, “did we ever do?”

She gave him back his look, turning pale. “Am I talking of *that*? Am I talking of what *we* know? I’m talking of what others feel—of what they *have* to feel; of what it’s just enough for them to know not to be able to get over it, once they do really know it. How do they know what *didn’t* pass between us, with all the opportunities we had? That’s none of their business—if we were idiots enough, on the top of everything! What you may or mayn’t have done doesn’t count, for *you*; but there are people for whom it’s loathsome that a girl should have gone on like that from one person to another and still pretend to be—well, all that a nice girl is supposed to be. It’s as if we had but just waked up, mother and I, to such a remarkable prejudice; and now we have it—when we could do so well without it!—staring us in the face. That mother should have insanely *let* me, should so vulgarly have taken it for my natural, my social career—*that’s* the disgusting, humiliating thing: with the lovely account it gives of both of us! But mother’s view of a delicacy in things!” she went on with scathing grimness; “mother’s measure of anything, with her grand ‘gained cases’ (there’ll be another yet, she finds them so easy!) of which she’s so publicly proud! You see I’ve no margin,” said Julia; letting him take it from her flushed face as much as he would that her mother hadn’t left her an inch. It was that he should make use of the spade with her for the restoration of a bit of a margin just wide enough to perch on till the tide of peril should have ebbed a little, it was that he should give her *that* lift—!

Well, it was all there from him after these last words; it was before her that he really took hold. “Oh, my dear child, I can see! Of course there are people—ideas change in our society so fast!—who are not in sympathy with the old American freedom and who read, I dare say, all sorts of uncanny things into it. Naturally you must take them as they are—from the moment,” said Murray Brush, who had lighted, by her leave, a cigarette, “your life-path does, for weal or for woe, cross with theirs.” He had every now and then such an elegant phrase. “Awfully interesting, certainly, your case. It’s enough for me that it *is* yours—I make it my own. I put myself absolutely in your place; you’ll understand from me, without professions, won’t you? that I do. Command me in every way! What I do like is the sympathy with which you’ve inspired *him*. I don’t, I’m sorry to say, happen to know him personally,”—he smoked away, looking off; “but of course one knows all about him generally, and I’m sure he’s right for you, I’m sure it would be charming, if you yourself think so. Therefore trust me and even—what shall I say?—leave it to me a little, won’t you?” He had been watching, as in his

fumes, the fine growth of his possibilities; and with this he turned on her the large warmth of his charity. It was like a subscription of a half-a-million. "I'll take care of you."

She found herself for a moment looking up at him from as far below as the point from which the school-child, with round eyes raised to the wall, gazes at the parti-colored map of the world. Yes, it was a warmth, it was a special benignity, that had never yet dropped on her from any one; and she wouldn't for the first few moments have known how to describe it or even quite what to do with it. Then, as it still rested, his fine improved expression aiding, the sense of what had happened came over her with a rush. She was being, yes, patronized; and that was really as new to her—the freeborn American girl who might, if she had wished, have got engaged and disengaged not six times but sixty—as it would have been to be crowned or crucified. The Frenches themselves didn't do it—the Frenches themselves didn't dare it. It was as strange as one would: she recognized it when it came, but anything might have come rather—and it was coming by (of all people in the world) Murray Brush! It overwhelmed her; still she could speak, with however faint a quaver and however sick a smile. "You'll lie for me like a gentleman?"

"As far as that goes till I'm black in the face!" And then while he glowed at her and she wondered if he would pointedly look his lies that way, and if, in fine, his florid, gallant, knowing, almost winking intelligence, *common* as she had never seen the common vivified, would represent his notion of "blackness": "See here, Julia; I'll do more."

"More'—?"

"Everything. I'll take it right in hand. I'll fling over you—"

"Fling over me—?" she continued to echo as he fascinatingly fixed her.

"Well, the biggest *kind* of rose-colored mantle!" And this time, oh, he did wink: it *would* be the way he was going to wink (and in the grandest good faith in the world) when indignantly denying, under inquisition, that there had been "a sign or a scrap" between them. But there was more to come; he decided she should have it all. "Julia, you've got to know now." He hung fire but an instant more. "Julia, I'm going to be married." His "Julias" were somehow death to her; she could feel that even *through* all the rest. "Julia, I announce my engagement."

"Oh, lordy, lordy!" she wailed: it might have been addressed to Mr. Pitman.

The force of it had brought her to her feet, but he sat there smiling up as at the natural tribute of her interest. "I tell you before any one else; it's not to be 'out' for a day or two yet. But we want you to know; *she* said that as soon as I mentioned to her that I had heard from you. I mention to her everything, you see!"—and he almost simpered while, still in his seat, he held the end of his cigarette, all delicately and as for a form of gentle emphasis, with the tips of his fine fingers. "You've not met her, Mary Lindeck, I think: she tells me she hasn't the pleasure of knowing you, but she desires it so much—particularly longs for it. She'll take an interest too," he went on; "you must let me immediately bring her to you. She has heard so much about you and she really wants to see you."

"Oh mercy *me!*" poor Julia gasped again—so strangely did history repeat itself and so did this appear the echo, on Murray Brush's lips, and quite to drollery, of that sympathetic curiosity of Mrs. Drack's which Mr. Pitman had, as they said, voiced. Well, there had played before her the vision of a ledge of safety in face of a rising tide; but this deepened quickly to a sense more forlorn, the cold swish of waters already up to her waist and that would soon be up to her chin. It came really but from the air of her friend, from the perfect benevolence and high unconsciousness with which he kept his posture—as if to show he could patronize her

from below upward quite as well as from above down. And as she took it all in, as it spread to a flood, with the great lumps and masses of truth it was floating, she knew inevitable submission, not to say submersion, as she had never known it in her life; going down and down before it, not even putting out her hands to resist or cling by the way, only reading into the young man's very face an immense fatality and, for all his bright nobleness his absence of rancor or of protesting pride, the great gray blankness of her doom. It was as if the earnest Miss Lindeck, tall and mild, high and lean, with eye-glasses and a big nose, but "marked" in a noticeable way, elegant and distinguished and refined, as you could see from a mile off, and as graceful, for common despair of imitation, as the curves of the "copy" set of old by one's writing-master—it was as if this stately well-wisher, whom indeed she had never exchanged a word with, but whom she had recognized and placed and winced at as soon as he spoke of her, figured there beside him now as also in portentous charge of her case.

He had ushered her into it in that way as if his mere right word sufficed; and Julia could see them throne together, beautifully at one in all the interests they now shared, and regard her as an object of almost tender solicitude. It was positively as if they had become engaged for her good—in such a happy light as it shed. That was the way people you had known, known a bit intimately, looked at you as soon as they took on the high matrimonial propriety that sponged over the more or less wild past to which you belonged, and of which, all of a sudden, they were aware only through some suggestion it made them for reminding you definitely that you still had a place. On her having had a day or two before to meet Mrs. Drack and to rise to her expectation she had seen and felt herself act, had above all admired herself, and had at any rate known what she said, even though losing, at her altitude, any distinctness in the others. She could have repeated later on the detail of her performance—if she hadn't preferred to keep it with her as a mere locked-up, a mere unhandled treasure. At present, however, as everything was for her at first deadened and vague, true to the general effect of sounds and motions in water, she couldn't have said afterward what words she spoke, what face she showed, what impression she made—at least till she had pulled herself round to precautions. She only knew she had turned away, and that this movement must have sooner or later determined his rising to join her, his deciding to accept it, gracefully and condoningly—condoningly in respect to her natural emotion, her inevitable little pang—for an intimation that they would be better on their feet.

They trod then afresh their ancient paths; and though it pressed upon her hatefully that he must have taken her abruptness for a smothered shock, the flare-up of her old feeling at the breath of his news, she had still to see herself condemned to allow him this, condemned really to encourage him in the mistake of believing her suspicious of feminine spite and doubtful of Miss Lindeck's zeal. She was so far from doubtful that she was but too appalled at it and at the officious mass in which it loomed, and this instinct of dread, before their walk was over, before she had guided him round to one of the smaller gates, there to slip off again by herself, was positively to find on the bosom of her flood a plank by the aid of which she kept in a manner and for the time afloat. She took ten minutes to pant, to blow gently, to paddle disguisedly, to accommodate herself, in a word, to the elements she had let loose; but as a reward of her effort at least she then saw how her determined vision accounted for everything. Beside her friend on the bench she had truly felt all his cables cut, truly swallowed down the fact that if he still perceived she was pretty—and *how* pretty!—it had ceased appreciably to matter to him. It had lighted the folly of her preliminary fear, the fear of his even yet to some effect of confusion or other inconvenience for her, proving more alive to the quotable in her, as she had called it, than to the inexpressible. She had reckoned with the awkwardness of that possible failure of his measure of her charm, by which his renewed apprehension of her grosser ornaments, those with which he had most affinity, might too

much profit; but she need have concerned herself as little for his sensibility on one head as on the other. She had ceased personally, ceased materially—in respect, as who should say, to any optical or tactile advantage—to exist for him, and the whole office of his manner had been the more piously and gallantly to dress the dead presence with flowers. This was all to his credit and his honor, but what it clearly certified was that their case was at last not even one of spirit reaching out to spirit. *He* had plenty of spirit—had all the spirit required for his having engaged himself to Miss Lindeck, into which result, once she had got her head well up again, she read, as they proceeded, one sharp meaning after another. It was therefore toward the subtler essence of that mature young woman alone that he was occupied in stretching; what was definite to him about Julia Bride being merely, being entirely—which was indeed thereby quite enough—that she *might* end by scaling her worldly height. They would push, they would shove, they would “boost,” they would arch both their straight backs as pedestals for her tiptoe; and at the same time, by some sweet prodigy of mechanics, she would pull them up and up with her.

Wondrous things hovered before her in the course of this walk; her consciousness had become, by an extraordinary turn, a music-box in which, its lid well down, the most remarkable tunes were sounding. It played for her ear alone, and the lid, as she might have figured, was her firm plan of holding out till she got home, of not betraying—to her companion at least—the extent to which she was demoralized. To see him think her demoralized by mistrust of the sincerity of the service to be meddlesomely rendered her by his future wife—she would have hurled herself publicly into the lake there at their side, would have splashed, in her beautiful clothes, among the frightened swans, rather than invite him to that ineptitude. Oh, her sincerity, Mary Lindeck’s—she would be drenched with her sincerity, and she would be drenched, yes, with *his*; so that, from inward convulsion to convulsion, she had, before they reached their gate, pulled up in the path. There was something her head had been full of these three or four minutes, the intensest little tune of the music-box, and it made its way to her lips now; belonging—for all the good it could do her!—to the two or three sorts of solicitude she might properly express.

“I hope *she* has a fortune, if you don’t mind my speaking of it: I mean some of the money we didn’t in *our* time have—and that we missed, after all, in our poor way and for what we then wanted of it, so quite dreadfully.”

She had been able to wreathe it in a grace quite equal to any he himself had employed; and it was to be said for him also that he kept up, on this, the standard. “Oh, she’s not, thank goodness, at all badly off, poor dear. We shall do very well. How sweet of you to have thought of it! May I tell her that too?” he splendidly glared. Yes, he glared—how couldn’t he, with what his mind was really full of? But, all the same, he came just here, by her vision, nearer than at any other point to being a gentleman. He came quite within an ace of it—with his taking from her thus the prescription of humility of service, his consenting to act in the interest of her avidity, his letting her mount that way, on his bowed shoulders, to the success in which he could suppose she still believed. He couldn’t know, he would never know, that she had then and there ceased to believe in it—that she saw as clear as the sun in the sky the exact manner in which, between them, before they had done, the Murray Brushes, all zeal and sincerity, all interest in her interesting case, would dish, would ruin, would utterly destroy her. He wouldn’t have needed to go on, for the force and truth of this; but he did go on—he was as crashingly consistent as a motorcar without a brake. He was visibly in love with the idea of what they might do for her and of the rare “social” opportunity that they would, by the same stroke, embrace. How he had been offhand with it, how he had made it parenthetical, that he didn’t happen “personally” to know Basil French—as if it would have been at all likely he *should* know him, even *im* personally, and as if he could conceal from her the fact that,

since she had made him her overture, this gentleman's name supremely baited her hook! Oh, they would help Julia Bride if they could—they would do their remarkable best; but they would at any rate have made his acquaintance over it, and she might indeed leave the rest to their thoroughness. He would already have known, he would already have heard; her appeal, she was more and more sure, wouldn't have come to him as a revelation. He had already talked it over with *her*, with Miss Lindeck, to whom the Frenches, in their fortress, had never been accessible, and his whole attitude bristled, to Julia's eyes, with the betrayal of her hand, her voice, her pressure, her calculation. His tone, in fact, as he talked, fairly thrust these things into her face. "But you must see her for yourself. You'll judge her. You'll love her. My dear child"—he brought it all out, and if he spoke of children he might, in his candor, have been himself infantine—"my dear child, she's the person to do it for you. Make it over to her; but," he laughed, "of course see her first! Couldn't you," he wound up—for they were now near their gate, where she was to leave him—"couldn't you just simply make us meet him, at tea say, informally; just *us* alone, as pleasant old friends of whom you'd have so naturally and frankly spoken to him: and then see what we'd *make* of that?"

It was all in his expression; he couldn't keep it out of that, and his shining good looks couldn't: ah, he was so fatally much too handsome for her! So the gap showed just there, in his admirable mask and his admirable eagerness; the yawning little chasm showed where the gentleman fell short. But she took this in, she took everything in, she felt herself do it, she heard herself say, while they paused before separation, that she quite saw the point of the meeting, as he suggested, at her tea. She would propose it to Mr. French and would let them know; and he must assuredly bring Miss Lindeck, bring her "right away," bring her soon, bring *them*, his fiancée and her, together somehow, and as quickly as possible—so that they *should* be old friends before the tea. She would propose it to Mr. French, propose it to Mr. French: that hummed in her ears as she went—after she had really got away; hummed as if she were repeating it over, giving it out to the passers, to the pavement, to the sky, and all as in wild discord with the intense little concert of her music-box. The extraordinary thing too was that she quite believed she should do it, and fully meant to; desperately, fantastically passive—since she almost reeled with it as she proceeded—she was capable of proposing anything to any one: capable too of thinking it likely Mr. French would come, for he had never on her previous proposals declined anything. Yes, she would keep it up to the end, this pretence of owing them salvation, and might even live to take comfort in having done for them what they wanted. What they wanted *couldn't* but be to get at the Frenches, and what Miss Lindeck above all wanted, baffled of it otherwise, with so many others of the baffled, was to get at Mr. French—for all Mr. French would want of either of them!—still more than Murray did. It was not till after she had got home, got straight into her own room and flung herself on her face, that she yielded to the full taste of the bitterness of missing a connection, missing the man himself, with power to create such a social appetite, such a grab at what might be gained by them. He could make people, even people like these two and whom there were still other people to envy, he could make them push and snatch and scramble like that—and then remain as incapable of taking her from the hands of such patrons as of receiving her straight, say, from those of Mrs. Drack. It was a high note, too, of Julia's wonderful composition that, even in the long, lonely moan of her conviction of her now certain ruin, all this grim lucidity, the perfect clearance of passion, but made her supremely proud of him.

The Jolly Corner

CHAPTER I

“Every one asks me what I ‘think’ of everything,” said Spencer Brydon; “and I make answer as I can—begging or dodging the question, putting them off with any nonsense. It wouldn’t matter to any of them really,” he went on, “for, even were it possible to meet in that stand-and-deliver way so silly a demand on so big a subject, my ‘thoughts’ would still be almost altogether about something that concerns only myself.” He was talking to Miss Staverton, with whom for a couple of months now he had availed himself of every possible occasion to talk; this disposition and this resource, this comfort and support, as the situation in fact presented itself, having promptly enough taken the first place in the considerable array of rather unattenuated surprises attending his so strangely belated return to America. Everything was somehow a surprise; and that might be natural when one had so long and so consistently neglected everything, taken pains to give surprises so much margin for play. He had given them more than thirty years—thirty-three, to be exact; and they now seemed to him to have organised their performance quite on the scale of that licence. He had been twenty-three on leaving New York—he was fifty-six to-day; unless indeed he were to reckon as he had sometimes, since his repatriation, found himself feeling; in which case he would have lived longer than is often allotted to man. It would have taken a century, he repeatedly said to himself, and said also to Alice Staverton, it would have taken a longer absence and a more averted mind than those even of which he had been guilty, to pile up the differences, the newnesses, the queernesses, above all the bignesses, for the better or the worse, that at present assaulted his vision wherever he looked.

The great fact all the while, however, had been the incalculability; since he *had* supposed himself, from decade to decade, to be allowing, and in the most liberal and intelligent manner, for brilliancy of change. He actually saw that he had allowed for nothing; he missed what he would have been sure of finding, he found what he would never have imagined. Proportions and values were upside-down; the ugly things he had expected, the ugly things of his far-away youth, when he had too promptly waked up to a sense of the ugly—these uncanny phenomena placed him rather, as it happened, under the charm; whereas the “swagger” things, the modern, the monstrous, the famous things, those he had more particularly, like thousands of ingenuous enquirers every year, come over to see, were exactly his sources of dismay. They were as so many set traps for displeasure, above all for reaction, of which his restless tread was constantly pressing the spring. It was interesting, doubtless, the whole show, but it would have been too disconcerting hadn’t a certain finer truth saved the situation. He had distinctly not, in this steadier light, come over *all* for the monstrosities; he had come, not only in the last analysis but quite on the face of the act, under an impulse with which they had nothing to do. He had come—putting the thing pompously—to look at his “property,” which he had thus for a third of a century not been within four thousand miles of; or, expressing it less sordidly, he had yielded to the humour of seeing again his house on the jolly corner, as he usually, and quite fondly, described it—the one in which he had first seen the light, in which various members of his family had lived and had died, in which the holidays of his overschooled boyhood had been passed and the few social flowers of his chilled adolescence gathered, and which, alienated then for so long a period, had, through the successive deaths of his two brothers and the termination of old arrangements, come wholly into his hands. He was the owner of another, not quite so “good”—the jolly corner having been, from far back, superlatively extended and consecrated; and the value of the pair

represented his main capital, with an income consisting, in these later years, of their respective rents which (thanks precisely to their original excellent type) had never been depressingly low. He could live in "Europe," as he had been in the habit of living, on the product of these flourishing New York leases, and all the better since, that of the second structure, the mere number in its long row, having within a twelvemonth fallen in, renovation at a high advance had proved beautifully possible.

These were items of property indeed, but he had found himself since his arrival distinguishing more than ever between them. The house within the street, two bristling blocks westward, was already in course of reconstruction as a tall mass of flats; he had acceded, some time before, to overtures for this conversion—in which, now that it was going forward, it had been not the least of his astonishments to find himself able, on the spot, and though without a previous ounce of such experience, to participate with a certain intelligence, almost with a certain authority. He had lived his life with his back so turned to such concerns and his face addressed to those of so different an order that he scarce knew what to make of this lively stir, in a compartment of his mind never yet penetrated, of a capacity for business and a sense for construction. These virtues, so common all round him now, had been dormant in his own organism—where it might be said of them perhaps that they had slept the sleep of the just. At present, in the splendid autumn weather—the autumn at least was a pure boon in the terrible place—he loafed about his "work" undeterred, secretly agitated; not in the least "minding" that the whole proposition, as they said, was vulgar and sordid, and ready to climb ladders, to walk the plank, to handle materials and look wise about them, to ask questions, in fine, and challenge explanations and really "go into" figures.

It amused, it verily quite charmed him; and, by the same stroke, it amused, and even more, Alice Staverton, though perhaps charming her perceptibly less. She wasn't, however, going to be better-off for it, as *he* was—and so astonishingly much: nothing was now likely, he knew, ever to make her better-off than she found herself, in the afternoon of life, as the delicately frugal possessor and tenant of the small house in Irving Place to which she had subtly managed to cling through her almost unbroken New York career. If he knew the way to it now better than to any other address among the dreadful multiplied numberings which seemed to him to reduce the whole place to some vast ledger-page, overgrown, fantastic, of ruled and criss-crossed lines and figures—if he had formed, for his consolation, that habit, it was really not a little because of the charm of his having encountered and recognised, in the vast wilderness of the wholesale, breaking through the mere gross generalisation of wealth and force and success, a small still scene where items and shades, all delicate things, kept the sharpness of the notes of a high voice perfectly trained, and where economy hung about like the scent of a garden. His old friend lived with one maid and herself dusted her relics and trimmed her lamps and polished her silver; she stood oft, in the awful modern crush, when she could, but she sallied forth and did battle when the challenge was really to "spirit," the spirit she after all confessed to, proudly and a little shyly, as to that of the better time, that of *their* common, their quite far-away and antediluvian social period and order. She made use of the street-cars when need be, the terrible things that people scrambled for as the panic-stricken at sea scramble for the boats; she affronted, inscrutably, under stress, all the public concussions and ordeals; and yet, with that slim mystifying grace of her appearance, which defied you to say if she were a fair young woman who looked older through trouble, or a fine smooth older one who looked young through successful indifference with her precious reference, above all, to memories and histories into which he could enter, she was as exquisite for him as some pale pressed flower (a rarity to begin with), and, failing other sweetnesses, she was a sufficient reward of his effort. They had communities of knowledge, "their" knowledge (this discriminating possessive was always on her lips) of presences of the

other age, presences all overlaid, in his case, by the experience of a man and the freedom of a wanderer, overlaid by pleasure, by infidelity, by passages of life that were strange and dim to her, just by “Europe” in short, but still unobscured, still exposed and cherished, under that pious visitation of the spirit from which she had never been diverted.

She had come with him one day to see how his “apartment-house” was rising; he had helped her over gaps and explained to her plans, and while they were there had happened to have, before her, a brief but lively discussion with the man in charge, the representative of the building firm that had undertaken his work. He had found himself quite “standing up” to this personage over a failure on the latter’s part to observe some detail of one of their noted conditions, and had so lucidly argued his case that, besides ever so prettily flushing, at the time, for sympathy in his triumph, she had afterwards said to him (though to a slightly greater effect of irony) that he had clearly for too many years neglected a real gift. If he had but stayed at home he would have anticipated the inventor of the sky-scraper. If he had but stayed at home he would have discovered his genius in time really to start some new variety of awful architectural hare and run it till it burrowed in a gold mine. He was to remember these words, while the weeks elapsed, for the small silver ring they had sounded over the queerest and deepest of his own lately most disguised and most muffled vibrations.

It had begun to be present to him after the first fortnight, it had broken out with the oddest abruptness, this particular wanton wonderment: it met him there—and this was the image under which he himself judged the matter, or at least, not a little, thrilled and flushed with it—very much as he might have been met by some strange figure, some unexpected occupant, at a turn of one of the dim passages of an empty house. The quaint analogy quite hauntingly remained with him, when he didn’t indeed rather improve it by a still intenser form: that of his opening a door behind which he would have made sure of finding nothing, a door into a room shuttered and void, and yet so coming, with a great suppressed start, on some quite erect confronting presence, something planted in the middle of the place and facing him through the dusk. After that visit to the house in construction he walked with his companion to see the other and always so much the better one, which in the eastward direction formed one of the corners,—the “jolly” one precisely, of the street now so generally dishonoured and disfigured in its westward reaches, and of the comparatively conservative Avenue. The Avenue still had pretensions, as Miss Staverton said, to decency; the old people had mostly gone, the old names were unknown, and here and there an old association seemed to stray, all vaguely, like some very aged person, out too late, whom you might meet and feel the impulse to watch or follow, in kindness, for safe restoration to shelter.

They went in together, our friends; he admitted himself with his key, as he kept no one there, he explained, preferring, for his reasons, to leave the place empty, under a simple arrangement with a good woman living in the neighbourhood and who came for a daily hour to open windows and dust and sweep. Spencer Brydon had his reasons and was growingly aware of them; they seemed to him better each time he was there, though he didn’t name them all to his companion, any more than he told her as yet how often, how quite absurdly often, he himself came. He only let her see for the present, while they walked through the great blank rooms, that absolute vacancy reigned and that, from top to bottom, there was nothing but Mrs. Muldoon’s broomstick, in a corner, to tempt the burglar. Mrs. Muldoon was then on the premises, and she loquaciously attended the visitors, preceding them from room to room and pushing back shutters and throwing up sashes—all to show them, as she remarked, how little there was to see. There was little indeed to see in the great gaunt shell where the main dispositions and the general apportionment of space, the style of an age of ampler allowances, had nevertheless for its master their honest pleading message, affecting him as some good old servant’s, some lifelong retainer’s appeal for a character, or even for a

retiring-pension; yet it was also a remark of Mrs. Muldoon's that, glad as she was to oblige him by her noonday round, there was a request she greatly hoped he would never make of her. If he should wish her for any reason to come in after dark she would just tell him, if he "plased," that he must ask it of somebody else.

The fact that there was nothing to see didn't militate for the worthy woman against what one *might* see, and she put it frankly to Miss Staverton that no lady could be expected to like, could she? "craping up to thim top storeys in the ayvil hours." The gas and the electric light were off the house, and she fairly evoked a gruesome vision of her march through the great grey rooms—so many of them as there were too!—with her glimmering taper. Miss Staverton met her honest glare with a smile and the profession that she herself certainly would recoil from such an adventure. Spencer Brydon meanwhile held his peace—for the moment; the question of the "evil" hours in his old home had already become too grave for him. He had begun some time since to "crape," and he knew just why a packet of candles addressed to that pursuit had been stowed by his own hand, three weeks before, at the back of a drawer of the fine old sideboard that occupied, as a "fixture," the deep recess in the dining-room. Just now he laughed at his companions—quickly however changing the subject; for the reason that, in the first place, his laugh struck him even at that moment as starting the odd echo, the conscious human resonance (he scarce knew how to qualify it) that sounds made while he was there alone sent back to his ear or his fancy; and that, in the second, he imagined Alice Staverton for the instant on the point of asking him, with a divination, if he ever so prowled. There were divinations he was unprepared for, and he had at all events averted enquiry by the time Mrs. Muldoon had left them, passing on to other parts.

There was happily enough to say, on so consecrated a spot, that could be said freely and fairly; so that a whole train of declarations was precipitated by his friend's having herself broken out, after a yearning look round: "But I hope you don't mean they want you to pull *this* to pieces!" His answer came, promptly, with his re-awakened wrath: it was of course exactly what they wanted, and what they were "at" him for, daily, with the iteration of people who couldn't for their life understand a man's liability to decent feelings. He had found the place, just as it stood and beyond what he could express, an interest and a joy. There were values other than the beastly rent-values, and in short, in short—! But it was thus Miss Staverton took him up. "In short you're to make so good a thing of your skyscraper that, living in luxury on *those* ill-gotten gains, you can afford for a while to be sentimental here!" Her smile had for him, with the words, the particular mild irony with which he found half her talk suffused; an irony without bitterness and that came, exactly, from her having so much imagination—not, like the cheap sarcasms with which one heard most people, about the world of "society," bid for the reputation of cleverness, from nobody's really having any. It was agreeable to him at this very moment to be sure that when he had answered, after a brief demur, "Well, yes; so, precisely, you may put it!" her imagination would still do him justice. He explained that even if never a dollar were to come to him from the other house he would nevertheless cherish this one; and he dwelt, further, while they lingered and wandered, on the fact of the stupefaction he was already exciting, the positive mystification he felt himself create.

He spoke of the value of all he read into it, into the mere sight of the walls, mere shapes of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead the seventy years of the past in fine that these things represented, the annals of nearly three generations, counting his grandfather's, the one that had ended there, and the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth, afloat in the very air like microscopic motes. She listened to everything; she was a woman who answered intimately but who utterly didn't chatter. She

scattered abroad therefore no cloud of words; she could assent, she could agree, above all she could encourage, without doing that. Only at the last she went a little further than he had done himself. "And then how do you know? You may still, after all, want to live here." It rather indeed pulled him up, for it wasn't what he had been thinking, at least in her sense of the words, "You mean I may decide to stay on for the sake of it?"

"Well, *with* such a home—!" But, quite beautifully, she had too much tact to dot so monstrous an *i*, and it was precisely an illustration of the way she didn't rattle. How could any one—of any wit—insist on any one else's "wanting" to live in New York?

"Oh," he said, "I *might* have lived here (since I had my opportunity early in life); I might have put in here all these years. Then everything would have been different enough—and, I dare say, 'funny' enough. But that's another matter. And then the beauty of it—I mean of my perversity, of my refusal to agree to a 'deal'—is just in the total absence of a reason. Don't you see that if I had a reason about the matter at all it would *have* to be the other way, and would then be inevitably a reason of dollars? There are no reasons here *but* of dollars. Let us therefore have none whatever—not the ghost of one."

They were back in the hall then for departure, but from where they stood the vista was large, through an open door, into the great square main saloon, with its almost antique felicity of brave spaces between windows. Her eyes came back from that reach and met his own a moment. "Are you very sure the 'ghost' of one doesn't, much rather, serve—?"

He had a positive sense of turning pale. But it was as near as they were then to come. For he made answer, he believed, between a glare and a grin: "Oh ghosts—of course the place must swarm with them! I should be ashamed of it if it didn't. Poor Mrs. Muldoon's right, and it's why I haven't asked her to do more than look in."

Miss Staverton's gaze again lost itself, and things she didn't utter, it was clear, came and went in her mind. She might even for the minute, off there in the fine room, have imagined some element dimly gathering. Simplified like the death-mask of a handsome face, it perhaps produced for her just then an effect akin to the stir of an expression in the "set" commemorative plaster. Yet whatever her impression may have been she produced instead a vague platitude. "Well, if it were only furnished and lived in—!"

She appeared to imply that in case of its being still furnished he might have been a little less opposed to the idea of a return. But she passed straight into the vestibule, as if to leave her words behind her, and the next moment he had opened the house-door and was standing with her on the steps. He closed the door and, while he re-pocketed his key, looking up and down, they took in the comparatively harsh actuality of the Avenue, which reminded him of the assault of the outer light of the Desert on the traveller emerging from an Egyptian tomb. But he risked before they stepped into the street his gathered answer to her speech. "For me it *is* lived in. For me it is furnished." At which it was easy for her to sigh "Ah yes!" all vaguely and discreetly; since his parents and his favourite sister, to say nothing of other kin, in numbers, had run their course and met their end there. That represented, within the walls, ineffaceable life.

It was a few days after this that, during an hour passed with her again, he had expressed his impatience of the too flattering curiosity—among the people he met—about his appreciation of New York. He had arrived at none at all that was socially producible, and as for that matter of his "thinking" (thinking the better or the worse of anything there) he was wholly taken up with one subject of thought. It was mere vain egoism, and it was moreover, if she liked, a morbid obsession. He found all things come back to the question of what he personally might have been, how he might have led his life and "turned out," if he had not so,

at the outset, given it up. And confessing for the first time to the intensity within him of this absurd speculation—which but proved also, no doubt, the habit of too selfishly thinking—he affirmed the impotence there of any other source of interest, any other native appeal. “What would it have made of me, what would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know! I see what it has made of dozens of others, those I meet, and it positively aches within me, to the point of exasperation, that it would have made something of me as well. Only I can’t make out what, and the worry of it, the small rage of curiosity never to be satisfied, brings back what I remember to have felt, once or twice, after judging best, for reasons, to burn some important letter unopened. I’ve been sorry, I’ve hated it—I’ve never known what was in the letter. You may, of course, say it’s a trifle—!”

“I don’t say it’s a trifle,” Miss Staverton gravely interrupted.

She was seated by her fire, and before her, on his feet and restless, he turned to and fro between this intensity of his idea and a fitful and unseeing inspection, through his single eye-glass, of the dear little old objects on her chimney-piece. Her interruption made him for an instant look at her harder. “I shouldn’t care if you did!” he laughed, however; “and it’s only a figure, at any rate, for the way I now feel. *Not* to have followed my perverse young course—and almost in the teeth of my father’s curse, as I may say; not to have kept it up, so, ‘over there,’ from that day to this, without a doubt or a pang; not, above all, to have liked it, to have loved it, so much, loved it, no doubt, with such an abysmal conceit of my own preference; some variation from *that*, I say, must have produced some different effect for my life and for my ‘form.’ I should have stuck here—if it had been possible; and I was too young, at twenty-three, to judge, *pour deux sous*, whether it *were* possible. If I had waited I might have seen it was, and then I might have been, by staying here, something nearer to one of these types who have been hammered so hard and made so keen by their conditions. It isn’t that I admire them so much—the question of any charm in them, or of any charm, beyond that of the rank money-passion, exerted by their conditions *for* them, has nothing to do with the matter: it’s only a question of what fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of my own nature I mayn’t have missed. It comes over me that I had then a strange *alter ego* deep down somewhere within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud, and that I just took the course, I just transferred him to the climate, that blighted him for once and for ever.”

“And you wonder about the flower,” Miss Staverton said. “So do I, if you want to know; and so I’ve been wondering these several weeks. I believe in the flower,” she continued, “I feel it would have been quite splendid, quite huge and monstrous.”

“Monstrous above all!” her visitor echoed; “and I imagine, by the same stroke, quite hideous and offensive.”

“You don’t believe that,” she returned; “if you did you wouldn’t wonder. You’d know, and that would be enough for you. What you feel—and what I feel *for* you—is that you’d have had power.”

“You’d have liked me that way?” he asked.

She barely hung fire. “How should I not have liked you?”

“I see. You’d have liked me, have preferred me, a billionaire!”

“How should I not have liked you?” she simply again asked.

He stood before her still—her question kept him motionless. He took it in, so much there was of it; and indeed his not otherwise meeting it testified to that. “I know at least what I am,” he simply went on; “the other side of the medal’s clear enough. I’ve not been edifying—I believe I’m thought in a hundred quarters to have been barely decent. I’ve

followed strange paths and worshipped strange gods; it must have come to you again and again—in fact you’ve admitted to me as much—that I was leading, at any time these thirty years, a selfish frivolous scandalous life. And you see what it has made of me.”

She just waited, smiling at him. “You see what it has made of *me*.”

“Oh you’re a person whom nothing can have altered. You were born to be what you are, anywhere, anyway: you’ve the perfection nothing else could have blighted. And don’t you see how, without my exile, I shouldn’t have been waiting till now—?” But he pulled up for the strange pang.

“The great thing to see,” she presently said, “seems to me to be that it has spoiled nothing. It hasn’t spoiled your being here at last. It hasn’t spoiled this. It hasn’t spoiled your speaking—” She also however faltered.

He wondered at everything her controlled emotion might mean. “Do you believe then—too dreadfully!—that I *am* as good as I might ever have been?”

“Oh no! Far from it!” With which she got up from her chair and was nearer to him. “But I don’t care,” she smiled.

“You mean I’m good enough?”

She considered a little. “Will you believe it if I say so? I mean will you let that settle your question for you?” And then as if making out in his face that he drew back from this, that he had some idea which, however absurd, he couldn’t yet bargain away: “Oh you don’t care either—but very differently: you don’t care for anything but yourself.”

Spencer Brydon recognised it—it was in fact what he had absolutely professed. Yet he importantly qualified. “*He* isn’t myself. He’s the just so totally other person. But I do want to see him,” he added. “And I can. And I shall.”

Their eyes met for a minute while he guessed from something in hers that she divined his strange sense. But neither of them otherwise expressed it, and her apparent understanding, with no protesting shock, no easy derision, touched him more deeply than anything yet, constituting for his stifled perversity, on the spot, an element that was like breatheable air. What she said however was unexpected. “Well, *I’ve* seen him.”

“You—?”

“I’ve seen him in a dream.”

“Oh a ‘dream’—!” It let him down.

“But twice over,” she continued. “I saw him as I see you now.”

“You’ve dreamed the same dream—?”

“Twice over,” she repeated. “The very same.”

This did somehow a little speak to him, as it also gratified him. “You dream about me at that rate?”

“Ah about *him*!” she smiled.

His eyes again sounded her. “Then you know all about him.” And as she said nothing more: “What’s the wretch like?”

She hesitated, and it was as if he were pressing her so hard that, resisting for reasons of her own, she had to turn away. “I’ll tell you some other time!”

CHAPTER II

It was after this that there was most of a virtue for him, most of a cultivated charm, most of a preposterous secret thrill, in the particular form of surrender to his obsession and of address to what he more and more believed to be his privilege. It was what in these weeks he was living for—since he really felt life to begin but after Mrs. Muldoon had retired from the scene and, visiting the ample house from attic to cellar, making sure he was alone, he knew himself in safe possession and, as he tacitly expressed it, let himself go. He sometimes came twice in the twenty-four hours; the moments he liked best were those of gathering dusk, of the short autumn twilight; this was the time of which, again and again, he found himself hoping most. Then he could, as seemed to him, most intimately wander and wait, linger and listen, feel his fine attention, never in his life before so fine, on the pulse of the great vague place: he preferred the lampless hour and only wished he might have prolonged each day the deep crepuscular spell. Later—rarely much before midnight, but then for a considerable vigil—he watched with his glimmering light; moving slowly, holding it high, playing it far, rejoicing above all, as much as he might, in open vistas, reaches of communication between rooms and by passages; the long straight chance or show, as he would have called it, for the revelation he pretended to invite. It was a practice he found he could perfectly “work” without exciting remark; no one was in the least the wiser for it; even Alice Staverton, who was moreover a well of discretion, didn’t quite fully imagine.

He let himself in and let himself out with the assurance of calm proprietorship; and accident so far favoured him that, if a fat Avenue “officer” had happened on occasion to see him entering at eleven-thirty, he had never yet, to the best of his belief, been noticed as emerging at two. He walked there on the crisp November nights, arrived regularly at the evening’s end; it was as easy to do this after dining out as to take his way to a club or to his hotel. When he left his club, if he hadn’t been dining out, it was ostensibly to go to his hotel; and when he left his hotel, if he had spent a part of the evening there, it was ostensibly to go to his club. Everything was easy in fine; everything conspired and promoted: there was truly even in the strain of his experience something that glossed over, something that salved and simplified, all the rest of consciousness. He circulated, talked, renewed, loosely and pleasantly, old relations—met indeed, so far as he could, new expectations and seemed to make out on the whole that in spite of the career, of such different contacts, which he had spoken of to Miss Staverton as ministering so little, for those who might have watched it, to edification, he was positively rather liked than not. He was a dim secondary social success—and all with people who had truly not an idea of him. It was all mere surface sound, this murmur of their welcome, this popping of their corks—just as his gestures of response were the extravagant shadows, emphatic in proportion as they meant little, of some game of *ombres chinoises*. He projected himself all day, in thought, straight over the bristling line of hard unconscious heads and into the other, the real, the waiting life; the life that, as soon as he had heard behind him the click of his great house-door, began for him, on the jolly corner, as beguilingly as the slow opening bars of some rich music follows the tap of the conductor’s wand.

He always caught the first effect of the steel point of his stick on the old marble of the hall pavement, large black-and-white squares that he remembered as the admiration of his childhood and that had then made in him, as he now saw, for the growth of an early conception of style. This effect was the dim reverberating tinkle as of some far-off bell hung who should say where?—in the depths of the house, of the past, of that mystical other world that might have flourished for him had he not, for weal or woe, abandoned it. On this impression he did ever the same thing; he put his stick noiselessly away in a corner—feeling the place once more in the likeness of some great glass bowl, all precious concave crystal, set

delicately humming by the play of a moist finger round its edge. The concave crystal held, as it were, this mystical other world, and the indescribably fine murmur of its rim was the sigh there, the scarce audible pathetic wail to his strained ear, of all the old baffled forsworn possibilities. What he did therefore by this appeal of his hushed presence was to wake them into such measure of ghostly life as they might still enjoy. They were shy, all but unappeasably shy, but they weren't really sinister; at least they weren't as he had hitherto felt them—before they had taken the Form he so yearned to make them take, the Form he at moments saw himself in the light of fairly hunting on tiptoe, the points of his evening shoes, from room to room and from storey to storey.

That was the essence of his vision—which was all rank folly, if one would, while he was out of the house and otherwise occupied, but which took on the last verisimilitude as soon as he was placed and posted. He knew what he meant and what he wanted; it was as clear as the figure on a cheque presented in demand for cash. His *alter ego* "walked"—that was the note of his image of him, while his image of his motive for his own odd pastime was the desire to waylay him and meet him. He roamed, slowly, warily, but all restlessly, he himself did—Mrs. Muldoon had been right, absolutely, with her figure of their "craping"; and the presence he watched for would roam restlessly too. But it would be as cautious and as shifty; the conviction of its probable, in fact its already quite sensible, quite audible evasion of pursuit grew for him from night to night, laying on him finally a rigour to which nothing in his life had been comparable. It had been the theory of many superficially-judging persons, he knew, that he was wasting that life in a surrender to sensations, but he had tasted of no pleasure so fine as his actual tension, had been introduced to no sport that demanded at once the patience and the nerve of this stalking of a creature more subtle, yet at bay perhaps more formidable, than any beast of the forest. The terms, the comparisons, the very practices of the chase positively came again into play; there were even moments when passages of his occasional experience as a sportsman, stirred memories, from his younger time, of moor and mountain and desert, revived for him—and to the increase of his keenness—by the tremendous force of analogy. He found himself at moments—once he had placed his single light on some mantel-shelf or in some recess—stepping back into shelter or shade, effacing himself behind a door or in an embrasure, as he had sought of old the vantage of rock and tree; he found himself holding his breath and living in the joy of the instant, the supreme suspense created by big game alone.

He wasn't afraid (though putting himself the question as he believed gentlemen on Bengal tiger-shoots or in close quarters with the great bear of the Rockies had been known to confess to having put it); and this indeed—since here at least he might be frank!—because of the impression, so intimate and so strange, that he himself produced as yet a dread, produced certainly a strain, beyond the liveliest he was likely to feel. They fell for him into categories, they fairly became familiar, the signs, for his own perception, of the alarm his presence and his vigilance created; though leaving him always to remark, portentously, on his probably having formed a relation, his probably enjoying a consciousness, unique in the experience of man. People enough, first and last, had been in terror of apparitions, but who had ever before so turned the tables and become himself, in the apparitional world, an incalculable terror? He might have found this sublime had he quite dared to think of it; but he didn't too much insist, truly, on that side of his privilege. With habit and repetition he gained to an extraordinary degree the power to penetrate the dusk of distances and the darkness of corners, to resolve back into their innocence the treacheries of uncertain light, the evil-looking forms taken in the gloom by mere shadows, by accidents of the air, by shifting effects of perspective; putting down his dim luminary he could still wander on without it, pass into other rooms and, only knowing it was there behind him in case of need, see his way about, visually project for his

purpose a comparative clearness. It made him feel, this acquired faculty, like some monstrous stealthy cat; he wondered if he would have glared at these moments with large shining yellow eyes, and what it mightn't verily be, for the poor hard-pressed *alter ego*, to be confronted with such a type.

He liked however the open shutters; he opened everywhere those Mrs. Muldoon had closed, closing them as carefully afterwards, so that she shouldn't notice: he liked—oh this he did like, and above all in the upper rooms!—the sense of the hard silver of the autumn stars through the window-panes, and scarcely less the flare of the street-lamps below, the white electric lustre which it would have taken curtains to keep out. This was human actual social; this was of the world he had lived in, and he was more at his ease certainly for the countenance, coldly general and impersonal, that all the while and in spite of his detachment it seemed to give him. He had support of course mostly in the rooms at the wide front and the prolonged side; it failed him considerably in the central shades and the parts at the back. But if he sometimes, on his rounds, was glad of his optical reach, so none the less often the rear of the house affected him as the very jungle of his prey. The place was there more subdivided; a large “extension” in particular, where small rooms for servants had been multiplied, abounded in nooks and corners, in closets and passages, in the ramifications especially of an ample back staircase over which he leaned, many a time, to look far down—not deterred from his gravity even while aware that he might, for a spectator, have figured some solemn simpleton playing at hide-and-seek. Outside in fact he might himself make that ironic *rapprochement*; but within the walls, and in spite of the clear windows, his consistency was proof against the cynical light of New York.

It had belonged to that idea of the exasperated consciousness of his victim to become a real test for him; since he had quite put it to himself from the first that, oh distinctly! he could “cultivate” his whole perception. He had felt it as above all open to cultivation—which indeed was but another name for his manner of spending his time. He was bringing it on, bringing it to perfection, by practice; in consequence of which it had grown so fine that he was now aware of impressions, attestations of his general postulate, that couldn't have broken upon him at once. This was the case more specifically with a phenomenon at last quite frequent for him in the upper rooms, the recognition—absolutely unmistakable, and by a turn dating from a particular hour, his resumption of his campaign after a diplomatic drop, a calculated absence of three nights—of his being definitely followed, tracked at a distance carefully taken and to the express end that he should the less confidently, less arrogantly, appear to himself merely to pursue. It worried, it finally quite broke him up, for it proved, of all the conceivable impressions, the one least suited to his book. He was kept in sight while remaining himself—as regards the essence of his position—sightless, and his only recourse then was in abrupt turns, rapid recoveries of ground. He wheeled about, retracing his steps, as if he might so catch in his face at least the stirred air of some other quick revolution. It was indeed true that his fully dislocalised thought of these manoeuvres recalled to him Pantaloon, at the Christmas farce, buffeted and tricked from behind by ubiquitous Harlequin; but it left intact the influence of the conditions themselves each time he was re-exposed to them, so that in fact this association, had he suffered it to become constant, would on a certain side have but ministered to his intenser gravity. He had made, as I have said, to create on the premises the baseless sense of a reprieve, his three absences; and the result of the third was to confirm the after-effect of the second.

On his return that night—the night succeeding his last intermission—he stood in the hall and looked up the staircase with a certainty more intimate than any he had yet known. “He's *there*, at the top, and waiting—not, as in general, falling back for disappearance. He's holding his ground, and it's the first time—which is a proof, isn't it?”

that something has happened for him.” So Brydon argued with his hand on the banister and his foot on the lowest stair; in which position he felt as never before the air chilled by his logic. He himself turned cold in it, for he seemed of a sudden to know what now was involved. “Harder pressed?—yes, he takes it in, with its thus making clear to him that I’ve come, as they say, ‘to stay.’ He finally doesn’t like and can’t bear it, in the sense, I mean, that his wrath, his menaced interest, now balances with his dread. I’ve hunted him till he has ‘turned’; that, up there, is what has happened—he’s the fanged or the antlered animal brought at last to bay.” There came to him, as I say—but determined by an influence beyond my notation!—the acuteness of this certainty; under which however the next moment he had broken into a sweat that he would as little have consented to attribute to fear as he would have dared immediately to act upon it for enterprise. It marked none the less a prodigious thrill, a thrill that represented sudden dismay, no doubt, but also represented, and with the selfsame throb, the strangest, the most joyous, possibly the next minute almost the proudest, duplication of consciousness.

“He has been dodging, retreating, hiding, but now, worked up to anger, he’ll fight!”—this intense impression made a single mouthful, as it were, of terror and applause. But what was wondrous was that the applause, for the felt fact, was so eager, since, if it was his other self he was running to earth, this ineffable identity was thus in the last resort not unworthy of him. It bristled there—somewhere near at hand, however unseen still—as the hunted thing, even as the trodden worm of the adage must at last bristle; and Brydon at this instant tasted probably of a sensation more complex than had ever before found itself consistent with sanity. It was as if it would have shamed him that a character so associated with his own should triumphantly succeed in just skulking, should to the end not risk the open; so that the drop of this danger was, on the spot, a great lift of the whole situation. Yet with another rare shift of the same subtlety he was already trying to measure by how much more he himself might now be in peril of fear; so rejoicing that he could, in another form, actively inspire that fear, and simultaneously quaking for the form in which he might passively know it.

The apprehension of knowing it must after a little have grown in him, and the strangest moment of his adventure perhaps, the most memorable or really most interesting, afterwards, of his crisis, was the lapse of certain instants of concentrated conscious *combat*, the sense of a need to hold on to something, even after the manner of a man slipping and slipping on some awful incline; the vivid impulse, above all, to move, to act, to charge, somehow and upon something—to show himself, in a word, that he wasn’t afraid. The state of “holding on” was thus the state to which he was momentarily reduced; if there had been anything, in the great vacancy, to seize, he would presently have been aware of having clutched it as he might under a shock at home have clutched the nearest chair-back. He had been surprised at any rate—of this he *was* aware—into something unprecedented since his original appropriation of the place; he had closed his eyes, held them tight, for a long minute, as with that instinct of dismay and that terror of vision. When he opened them the room, the other contiguous rooms, extraordinarily, seemed lighter—so light, almost, that at first he took the change for day. He stood firm, however that might be, just where he had paused; his resistance had helped him—it was as if there were something he had tided over. He knew after a little what this was—it had been in the imminent danger of flight. He had stiffened his will against going; without this he would have made for the stairs, and it seemed to him that, still with his eyes closed, he would have descended them, would have known how, straight and swiftly, to the bottom.

Well, as he had held out, here he was—still at the top, among the more intricate upper rooms and with the gauntlet of the others, of all the rest of the house, still to run when it should be his time to go. He would go at his time—only at his time: didn’t he go every night very

much at the same hour? He took out his watch—there was light for that: it was scarcely a quarter past one, and he had never withdrawn so soon. He reached his lodgings for the most part at two—with his walk of a quarter of an hour. He would wait for the last quarter—he wouldn't stir till then; and he kept his watch there with his eyes on it, reflecting while he held it that this deliberate wait, a wait with an effort, which he recognised, would serve perfectly for the attestation he desired to make. It would prove his courage—unless indeed the latter might most be proved by his budging at last from his place. What he mainly felt now was that, since he hadn't originally scuttled, he had his dignities—which had never in his life seemed so many—all to preserve and to carry aloft. This was before him in truth as a physical image, an image almost worthy of an age of greater romance. That remark indeed glimmered for him only to glow the next instant with a finer light; since what age of romance, after all, could have matched either the state of his mind or, “objectively,” as they said, the wonder of his situation? The only difference would have been that, brandishing his dignities over his head as in a parchment scroll, he might then—that is in the heroic time—have proceeded downstairs with a drawn sword in his other grasp.

At present, really, the light he had set down on the mantel of the next room would have to figure his sword; which utensil, in the course of a minute, he had taken the requisite number of steps to possess himself of. The door between the rooms was open, and from the second another door opened to a third. These rooms, as he remembered, gave all three upon a common corridor as well, but there was a fourth, beyond them, without issue save through the preceding. To have moved, to have heard his step again, was appreciably a help; though even in recognising this he lingered once more a little by the chimney-piece on which his light had rested. When he next moved, just hesitating where to turn, he found himself considering a circumstance that, after his first and comparatively vague apprehension of it, produced in him the start that often attends some pang of recollection, the violent shock of having ceased happily to forget. He had come into sight of the door in which the brief chain of communication ended and which he now surveyed from the nearer threshold, the one not directly facing it. Placed at some distance to the left of this point, it would have admitted him to the last room of the four, the room without other approach or egress, had it not, to his intimate conviction, been closed *since* his former visitation, the matter probably of a quarter of an hour before. He stared with all his eyes at the wonder of the fact, arrested again where he stood and again holding his breath while he sounded his sense. Surely it had been *subsequently* closed—that is it had been on his previous passage indubitably open!

He took it full in the face that something had happened between—that he couldn't have noticed before (by which he meant on his original tour of all the rooms that evening) that such a barrier had exceptionally presented itself. He had indeed since that moment undergone an agitation so extraordinary that it might have muddled for him any earlier view; and he tried to convince himself that he might perhaps then have gone into the room and, inadvertently, automatically, on coming out, have drawn the door after him. The difficulty was that this exactly was what he never did; it was against his whole policy, as he might have said, the essence of which was to keep vistas clear. He had them from the first, as he was well aware, quite on the brain: the strange apparition, at the far end of one of them, of his baffled “prey” (which had become by so sharp an irony so little the term now to apply!) was the form of success his imagination had most cherished, projecting into it always a refinement of beauty. He had known fifty times the start of perception that had afterwards dropped; had fifty times gasped to himself. “There!” under some fond brief hallucination. The house, as the case stood, admirably lent itself; he might wonder at the taste, the native architecture of the particular time, which could rejoice so in the multiplication of doors—the opposite extreme to the modern, the actual almost complete

proscription of them; but it had fairly contributed to provoke this obsession of the presence encountered telescopically, as he might say, focused and studied in diminishing perspective and as by a rest for the elbow.

It was with these considerations that his present attention was charged—they perfectly availed to make what he saw portentous. He *couldn't*, by any lapse, have blocked that aperture; and if he hadn't, if it was unthinkable, why what else was clear but that there had been another agent? Another agent?—he had been catching, as he felt, a moment back, the very breath of him; but when had he been so close as in this simple, this logical, this completely personal act? It was so logical, that is, that one might have *taken* it for personal; yet for what did Brydon take it, he asked himself, while, softly panting, he felt his eyes almost leave their sockets. Ah this time at last they *were*, the two, the opposed projections of him, in presence; and this time, as much as one would, the question of danger loomed. With it rose, as not before, the question of courage—for what he knew the blank face of the door to say to him was “Show us how much you have!” It stared, it glared back at him with that challenge; it put to him the two alternatives: should he just push it open or not? Oh to have this consciousness was to *think*—and to think, Brydon knew, as he stood there, was, with the lapsing moments, not to have acted! Not to have acted—that was the misery and the pang—was even still not to act; was in fact *all* to feel the thing in another, in a new and terrible way. How long did he pause and how long did he debate? There was presently nothing to measure it; for his vibration had already changed—as just by the effect of its intensity. Shut up there, at bay, defiant, and with the prodigy of the thing palpably proveably *done*, thus giving notice like some stark signboard—under that accession of accent the situation itself had turned; and Brydon at last remarkably made up his mind on what it had turned to.

It had turned altogether to a different admonition; to a supreme hint, for him, of the value of Discretion! This slowly dawned, no doubt—for it could take its time; so perfectly, on his threshold, had he been stayed, so little as yet had he either advanced or retreated. It was the strangest of all things that now when, by his taking ten steps and applying his hand to a latch, or even his shoulder and his knee, if necessary, to a panel, all the hunger of his prime need might have been met, his high curiosity crowned, his unrest assuaged—it was amazing, but it was also exquisite and rare, that insistence should have, at a touch, quite dropped from him. Discretion—he jumped at that; and yet not, verily, at such a pitch, because it saved his nerves or his skin, but because, much more valuably, it saved the situation. When I say he “jumped” at it I feel the consonance of this term with the fact that—at the end indeed of I know not how long—he did move again, he crossed straight to the door. He wouldn't touch it—it seemed now that he might if he would: he would only just wait there a little, to show, to prove, that he wouldn't. He had thus another station, close to the thin partition by which revelation was denied him; but with his eyes bent and his hands held off in a mere intensity of stillness. He listened as if there had been something to hear, but this attitude, while it lasted, was his own communication. “If you won't then—good: I spare you and I give up. You affect me as by the appeal positively for pity: you convince me that for reasons rigid and sublime—what do I know?—we both of us should have suffered. I respect them then, and, though moved and privileged as, I believe, it has never been given to man, I retire, I renounce—never, on my honour, to try again. So rest for ever—and let *me!*”

That, for Brydon, was the deep sense of this last demonstration—solemn, measured, directed, as he felt it to be. He brought it to a close, he turned away; and now verily he knew how deeply he had been stirred. He retraced his steps, taking up his candle, burnt, he observed, well-nigh to the socket, and marking again, lighten it as he would, the distinctness of his footfall; after which, in a moment, he knew himself at the other side of the house. He did here what he had not yet done at these hours—he opened half a casement, one of those in the

front, and let in the air of the night; a thing he would have taken at any time previous for a sharp rupture of his spell. His spell was broken now, and it didn't matter—broken by his concession and his surrender, which made it idle henceforth that he should ever come back. The empty street—its other life so marked even by great lamp-lit vacancy—was within call, within touch; he stayed there as to be in it again, high above it though he was still perched; he watched as for some comforting common fact, some vulgar human note, the passage of a scavenger or a thief, some night-bird however base. He would have blessed that sign of life; he would have welcomed positively the slow approach of his friend the policeman, whom he had hitherto only sought to avoid, and was not sure that if the patrol had come into sight he mightn't have felt the impulse to get into relation with it, to hail it, on some pretext, from his fourth floor.

The pretext that wouldn't have been too silly or too compromising, the explanation that would have saved his dignity and kept his name, in such a case, out of the papers, was not definite to him: he was so occupied with the thought of recording his Discretion—as an effect of the vow he had just uttered to his intimate adversary—that the importance of this loomed large and something had overtaken all ironically his sense of proportion. If there had been a ladder applied to the front of the house, even one of the vertiginous perpendiculars employed by painters and roofers and sometimes left standing overnight, he would have managed somehow, astride of the window-sill, to compass by outstretched leg and arm that mode of descent. If there had been some such uncanny thing as he had found in his room at hotels, a workable fire-escape in the form of notched cable or a canvas shoot, he would have availed himself of it as a proof—well, of his present delicacy. He nursed that sentiment, as the question stood, a little in vain, and even—at the end of he scarce knew, once more, how long—found it, as by the action on his mind of the failure of response of the outer world, sinking back to vague anguish. It seemed to him he had waited an age for some stir of the great grim hush; the life of the town was itself under a spell—so unnaturally, up and down the whole prospect of known and rather ugly objects, the blankness and the silence lasted. Had they ever, he asked himself, the hard-faced houses, which had begun to look livid in the dim dawn, had they ever spoken so little to any need of his spirit? Great builded voids, great crowded stillnesses put on, often, in the heart of cities, for the small hours, a sort of sinister mask, and it was of this large collective negation that Brydon presently became conscious—all the more that the break of day was, almost incredibly, now at hand, proving to him what a night he had made of it.

He looked again at his watch, saw what had become of his time-values (he had taken hours for minutes—not, as in other tense situations, minutes for hours) and the strange air of the streets was but the weak, the sullen flush of a dawn in which everything was still locked up. His choked appeal from his own open window had been the sole note of life, and he could but break off at last as for a worse despair. Yet while so deeply demoralised he was capable again of an impulse denoting—at least by his present measure—extraordinary resolution; of retracing his steps to the spot where he had turned cold with the extinction of his last pulse of doubt as to there being in the place another presence than his own. This required an effort strong enough to sicken him; but he had his reason, which over-mastered for the moment everything else. There was the whole of the rest of the house to traverse, and how should he screw himself to that if the door he had seen closed were at present open? He could hold to the idea that the closing had practically been for him an act of mercy, a chance offered him to descend, depart, get off the ground and never again profane it. This conception held together, it worked; but what it meant for him depended now clearly on the amount of forbearance his recent action, or rather his recent inaction, had engendered. The image of the “presence” whatever it was, waiting there for him to go—this image had not yet

been so concrete for his nerves as when he stopped short of the point at which certainty would have come to him. For, with all his resolution, or more exactly with all his dread, he did stop short—he hung back from really seeing. The risk was too great and his fear too definite: it took at this moment an awful specific form.

He knew—yes, as he had never known anything—that, *should* he see the door open, it would all too abjectly be the end of him. It would mean that the agent of his shame—for his shame was the deep abjection—was once more at large and in general possession; and what glared him thus in the face was the act that this would determine for him. It would send him straight about to the window he had left open, and by that window, be long ladder and dangling rope as absent as they would, he saw himself uncontrollably insanely fatally take his way to the street. The hideous chance of this he at least could avert; but he could only avert it by recoiling in time from assurance. He had the whole house to deal with, this fact was still there; only he now knew that uncertainty alone could start him. He stole back from where he had checked himself—merely to do so was suddenly like safety—and, making blindly for the greater staircase, left gaping rooms and sounding passages behind. Here was the top of the stairs, with a fine large dim descent and three spacious landings to mark off. His instinct was all for mildness, but his feet were harsh on the floors, and, strangely, when he had in a couple of minutes become aware of this, it counted somehow for help. He couldn't have spoken, the tone of his voice would have scared him, and the common conceit or resource of “whistling in the dark” (whether literally or figuratively) have appeared basely vulgar; yet he liked none the less to hear himself go, and when he had reached his first landing—taking it all with no rush, but quite steadily—that stage of success drew from him a gasp of relief.

The house, withal, seemed immense, the scale of space again inordinate; the open rooms, to no one of which his eyes deflected, gloomed in their shuttered state like mouths of caverns; only the high skylight that formed the crown of the deep well created for him a medium in which he could advance, but which might have been, for queerness of colour, some watery under-world. He tried to think of something noble, as that his property was really grand, a splendid possession; but this nobleness took the form too of the clear delight with which he was finally to sacrifice it. They might come in now, the builders, the destroyers—they might come as soon as they would. At the end of two flights he had dropped to another zone, and from the middle of the third, with only one more left, he recognised the influence of the lower windows, of half-drawn blinds, of the occasional gleam of street-lamps, of the glazed spaces of the vestibule. This was the bottom of the sea, which showed an illumination of its own and which he even saw paved—when at a given moment he drew up to sink a long look over the banisters—with the marble squares of his childhood. By that time indubitably he felt, as he might have said in a commoner cause, better; it had allowed him to stop and draw breath, and the case increased with the sight of the old black-and-white slabs. But what he most felt was that now surely, with the element of impunity pulling him as by hard firm hands, the case was settled for what he might have seen above had he dared that last look. The closed door, blessedly remote now, was still closed—and he had only in short to reach that of the house.

He came down further, he crossed the passage forming the access to the last flight and if here again he stopped an instant it was almost for the sharpness of the thrill of assured escape. It made him shut his eyes—which opened again to the straight slope of the remainder of the stairs. Here was impunity still, but impunity almost excessive; inasmuch as the side-lights and the high fantracery of the entrance were glimmering straight into the hall; an appearance produced, he the next instant saw, by the fact that the vestibule gaped wide, that the hinged halves of the inner door had been thrown far back. Out of that again the *question* sprang at him, making his eyes, as he felt, half-start from his head, as they had done, at the top of the house, before the sign of the other door. If he had left that one open, hadn't he left this one

closed, and wasn't he now in *most* immediate presence of some inconceivable occult activity? It was as sharp, the question, as a knife in his side, but the answer hung fire still and seemed to lose itself in the vague darkness to which the thin admitted dawn, glimmering archwise over the whole outer door, made a semicircular margin, a cold silvery nimbus that seemed to play a little as he looked—to shift and expand and contract.

It was as if there had been something within it, protected by indistinctness and corresponding in extent with the opaque surface behind, the painted panels of the last barrier to his escape, of which the key was in his pocket. The indistinctness mocked him even while he stared, affected him as somehow shrouding or challenging certitude, so that after faltering an instant on his step he let himself go with the sense that here *was* at last something to meet, to touch, to take, to know—something all unnatural and dreadful, but to advance upon which was the condition for him either of liberation or of supreme defeat. The penumbra, dense and dark, was the virtual screen of a figure which stood in it as still as some image erect in a niche or as some black-vizored sentinel guarding a treasure. Brydon was to know afterwards, was to recall and make out, the particular thing he had believed during the rest of his descent. He saw, in its great grey glimmering margin, the central vagueness diminish, and he felt it to be taking the very form toward which, for so many days, the passion of his curiosity had yearned. It gloomed, it loomed, it was something, it was somebody, the prodigy of a personal presence.

Rigid and conscious, spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature waited there to measure himself with his power to dismay. This only could it be—this only till he recognised, with his advance, that what made the face dim was the pair of raised hands that covered it and in which, so far from being offered in defiance, it was buried, as for dark deprecation. So Brydon, before him, took him in; with every fact of him now, in the higher light, hard and acute—his planted stillness, his vivid truth, his grizzled bent head and white masking hands, his queer actuality of evening-dress, of dangling double eye-glass, of gleaming silk lappet and white linen, of pearl button and gold watch-guard and polished shoe. No portrait by a great modern master could have presented him with more intensity, thrust him out of his frame with more art, as if there had been “treatment,” of the consummate sort, in his every shade and salience. The revulsion, for our friend, had become, before he knew it, immense—this drop, in the act of apprehension, to the sense of his adversary's inscrutable manoeuvre. That meaning at least, while he gaped, it offered him; for he could but gape at his other self in this other anguish, gape as a proof that *he*, standing there for the achieved, the enjoyed, the triumphant life, couldn't be faced in his triumph. Wasn't the proof in the splendid covering hands, strong and completely spread?—so spread and so intentional that, in spite of a special verity that surpassed every other, the fact that one of these hands had lost two fingers, which were reduced to stumps, as if accidentally shot away, the face was effectually guarded and saved.

“Saved,” though, *would* it be?—Brydon breathed his wonder till the very impunity of his attitude and the very insistence of his eyes produced, as he felt, a sudden stir which showed the next instant as a deeper portent, while the head raised itself, the betrayal of a braver purpose. The hands, as he looked, began to move, to open; then, as if deciding in a flash, dropped from the face and left it uncovered and presented. Horror, with the sight, had leaped into Brydon's throat, gasping there in a sound he couldn't utter; for the bared identity was too hideous as *his*, and his glare was the passion of his protest. The face, *that* face, Spencer Brydon's?—he searched it still, but looking away from it in dismay and denial, falling straight from his height of sublimity. It was unknown, inconceivable, awful, disconnected from any possibility!—He had been “sold,” he inwardly moaned, stalking such game as this: the presence before him was a presence, the horror within him a horror, but the waste of his

nights had been only grotesque and the success of his adventure an irony. Such an identity fitted his at *no* point, made its alternative monstrous. A thousand times yes, as it came upon him nearer now, the face was the face of a stranger. It came upon him nearer now, quite as one of those expanding fantastic images projected by the magic lantern of childhood; for the stranger, whoever he might be, evil, odious, blatant, vulgar, had advanced as for aggression, and he knew himself give ground. Then harder pressed still, sick with the force of his shock, and falling back as under the hot breath and the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed, he felt the whole vision turn to darkness and his very feet give way. His head went round; he was going; he had gone.

CHAPTER III

What had next brought him back, clearly—though after how long?—was Mrs. Muldoon's voice, coming to him from quite near, from so near that he seemed presently to see her as kneeling on the ground before him while he lay looking up at her; himself not wholly on the ground, but half-raised and upheld—conscious, yes, of tenderness of support and, more particularly, of a head pillowed in extraordinary softness and faintly refreshing fragrance. He considered, he wondered, his wit but half at his service; then another face intervened, bending more directly over him, and he finally knew that Alice Staverton had made her lap an ample and perfect cushion to him, and that she had to this end seated herself on the lowest degree of the staircase, the rest of his long person remaining stretched on his old black-and-white slabs. They were cold, these marble squares of his youth; but *he* somehow was not, in this rich return of consciousness—the most wonderful hour, little by little, that he had ever known, leaving him, as it did, so gratefully, so abysmally passive, and yet as with a treasure of intelligence waiting all round him for quiet appropriation; dissolved, he might call it, in the air of the place and producing the golden glow of a late autumn afternoon. He had come back, yes—come back from further away than any man but himself had ever travelled; but it was strange how with this sense what he had come back *to* seemed really the great thing, and as if his prodigious journey had been all for the sake of it. Slowly but surely his consciousness grew, his vision of his state thus completing itself; he had been miraculously *carried* back—lifted and carefully borne as from where he had been picked up, the uttermost end of an interminable grey passage. Even with this he was suffered to rest, and what had now brought him to knowledge was the break in the long mild motion.

It had brought him to knowledge, to knowledge—yes, this was the beauty of his state; which came to resemble more and more that of a man who has gone to sleep on some news of a great inheritance, and then, after dreaming it away, after profaning it with matters strange to it, has waked up again to serenity of certitude and has only to lie and watch it grow. This was the drift of his patience—that he had only to let it shine on him. He must moreover, with intermissions, still have been lifted and borne; since why and how else should he have known himself, later on, with the afternoon glow intenser, no longer at the foot of his stairs—situated as these now seemed at that dark other end of his tunnel—but on a deep window-bench of his high saloon, over which had been spread, couch-fashion, a mantle of soft stuff lined with grey fur that was familiar to his eyes and that one of his hands kept fondly feeling as for its pledge of truth. Mrs. Muldoon's face had gone, but the other, the second he had recognised, hung over him in a way that showed how he was still propped and pillowed. He took it all in, and the more he took it the more it seemed to suffice: he was as much at peace as if he had had food and drink. It was the two women who had found him, on Mrs. Muldoon's having plied, at her usual hour, her latch-key—and on her having above all arrived while Miss Staverton still lingered near the house. She had been turning away, all anxiety, from worrying the vain bell-handle—her calculation having been of the hour of the good woman's visit; but the latter, blessedly, had come up while she was still there, and they had entered together. He

had then lain, beyond the vestibule, very much as he was lying now—quite, that is, as he appeared to have fallen, but all so wondrously without bruise or gash; only in a depth of stupor. What he most took in, however, at present, with the steadier clearance, was that Alice Staverton had for a long unspeakable moment not doubted he was dead.

“It must have been that I *was*.” He made it out as she held him. “Yes—I can only have died. You brought me literally to life. Only,” he wondered, his eyes rising to her, “only, in the name of all the benedictions, how?”

It took her but an instant to bend her face and kiss him, and something in the manner of it, and in the way her hands clasped and locked his head while he felt the cool charity and virtue of her lips, something in all this beatitude somehow answered everything.

“And now I keep you,” she said.

“Oh keep me, keep me!” he pleaded while her face still hung over him: in response to which it dropped again and stayed close, clingly close. It was the seal of their situation—of which he tasted the impress for a long blissful moment in silence. But he came back. “Yet how did you know—?”

“I was uneasy. You were to have come, you remember—and you had sent no word.”

“Yes, I remember—I was to have gone to you at one to-day.” It caught on to their “old” life and relation—which were so near and so far. “I was still out there in my strange darkness—where was it, what was it? I must have stayed there so long.” He could but wonder at the depth and the duration of his swoon.

“Since last night?” she asked with a shade of fear for her possible indiscretion.

“Since this morning—it must have been: the cold dim dawn of to-day. Where have I been,” he vaguely wailed, “where have I been?” He felt her hold him close, and it was as if this helped him now to make in all security his mild moan. “What a long dark day!”

All in her tenderness she had waited a moment. “In the cold dim dawn?” she quavered.

But he had already gone on piecing together the parts of the whole prodigy. “As I didn’t turn up you came straight—?”

She barely cast about. “I went first to your hotel—where they told me of your absence. You had dined out last evening and hadn’t been back since. But they appeared to know you had been at your club.”

“So you had the idea of *this*—?”

“Of what?” she asked in a moment.

“Well—of what has happened.”

“I believed at least you’d have been here. I’ve known, all along,” she said, “that you’ve been coming.”

“‘Known’ it—?”

“Well, I’ve believed it. I said nothing to you after that talk we had a month ago—but I felt sure. I knew you *would*,” she declared.

“That I’d persist, you mean?”

“That you’d see him.”

“Ah but I didn’t!” cried Brydon with his long wail. “There’s somebody—an awful beast; whom I brought, too horribly, to bay. But it’s not me.”

At this she bent over him again, and her eyes were in his eyes. “No—it’s not you.” And it was as if, while her face hovered, he might have made out in it, hadn’t it been so near, some particular meaning blurred by a smile. “No, thank heaven,” she repeated, “it’s not you! Of course it wasn’t to have been.”

“Ah but it *was*,” he gently insisted. And he stared before him now as he had been staring for so many weeks. “I was to have known myself.”

“You couldn’t!” she returned consolingly. And then reverting, and as if to account further for what she had herself done, “But it wasn’t only *that*, that you hadn’t been at home,” she went on. “I waited till the hour at which we had found Mrs. Muldoon that day of my going with you; and she arrived, as I’ve told you, while, failing to bring any one to the door, I lingered in my despair on the steps. After a little, if she hadn’t come, by such a mercy, I should have found means to hunt her up. But it wasn’t,” said Alice Staverton, as if once more with her fine intentions—“it wasn’t only that.”

His eyes, as he lay, turned back to her. “What more then?”

She met it, the wonder she had stirred. “In the cold dim dawn, you say? Well, in the cold dim dawn of this morning I too saw you.”

“Saw *me*—?”

“Saw *him*,” said Alice Staverton. “It must have been at the same moment.”

He lay an instant taking it in—as if he wished to be quite reasonable. “At the same moment?”

“Yes—in my dream again, the same one I’ve named to you. He came back to me. Then I knew it for a sign. He had come to you.”

At this Brydon raised himself; he had to see her better. She helped him when she understood his movement, and he sat up, steadying himself beside her there on the window-bench and with his right hand grasping her left. “*He* didn’t come to me.”

“You came to yourself,” she beautifully smiled.

“Ah I’ve come to myself now—thanks to you, dearest. But this brute, with his awful face—this brute’s a black stranger. He’s none of *me*, even as I *might* have been,” Brydon sturdily declared.

But she kept the clearness that was like the breath of infallibility. “Isn’t the whole point that you’d have been different?”

He almost scowled for it. “As different as *that*—?”

Her look again was more beautiful to him than the things of this world. “Haven’t you exactly wanted to know *how* different? So this morning,” she said, “you appeared to me.”

“Like *him*?”

“A black stranger!”

“Then how did you know it was I?”

“Because, as I told you weeks ago, my mind, my imagination, has worked so over what you might, what you mightn’t have been—to show you, you see, how I’ve thought of you. In the midst of that you came to me—that my wonder might be answered. So I knew,” she went on;

“and believed that, since the question held you too so fast, as you told me that day, you too would see for yourself. And when this morning I again saw I knew it would be because you had—and also then, from the first moment, because you somehow wanted me. *He* seemed to tell me of that. So why,” she strangely smiled, “shouldn’t I like him?”

It brought Spencer Brydon to his feet. “You ‘like’ that horror—?”

“I *could* have liked him. And to me,” she said, “he was no horror. I had accepted him.”

“‘Accepted’—?” Brydon oddly sounded.

“Before, for the interest of his difference—yes. And as *I* didn’t disown him, as *I* knew him—which you at last, confronted with him in his difference, so cruelly didn’t, my dear,—well, he must have been, you see, less dreadful to me. And it may have pleased him that I pitied him.”

She was beside him on her feet, but still holding his hand—still with her arm supporting him. But though it all brought for him thus a dim light, “You ‘pitied’ him?” he grudgingly, resentfully asked.

“He has been unhappy, he has been ravaged,” she said.

“And haven’t I been unhappy? Am not I—you’ve only to look at me!—ravaged?”

“Ah I don’t say I like him *better*,” she granted after a thought. “But he’s grim, he’s worn—and things have happened to him. He doesn’t make shift, for sight, with your charming monocle.”

“No”—it struck Brydon; “I couldn’t have sported mine ‘down-town.’ They’d have guyed me there.”

“His great convex pince-nez—I saw it, I recognised the kind—is for his poor ruined sight. And his poor right hand—!”

“Ah!” Brydon winced—whether for his proved identity or for his lost fingers. Then, “He has a million a year,” he lucidly added. “But he hasn’t you.”

“And he isn’t—no, he isn’t—*you!*” she murmured, as he drew her to his breast.

The Velvet Glove

I

HE thought he had already, poor John Berridge, tasted in their fulness the sweets of success; but nothing yet had been more charming to him than when the young Lord, as he irresistibly and, for greater certitude, quite correctly figured him, fairly sought out, in Paris, the new literary star that had begun to hang, with a fresh red light, over the vast, even though rather confused, Anglo-Saxon horizon; positively approaching that celebrity with a shy and artless appeal. The young Lord invoked on this occasion the celebrity's prized judgment of a special literary case; and Berridge could take the whole manner of it for one of the "quaintest" little acts displayed to his amused eyes, up to now, on the stage of European society—albeit these eyes were quite aware, in general, of missing everywhere no more of the human scene than possible, and of having of late been particularly awake to the large extensions of it spread before him (since so he could but fondly read his fate) under the omen of his prodigious "hit." It was because of his hit that he was having rare opportunities—of which he was so honestly and humbly proposing, as he would have said, to make the most: it was because every one in the world (so far had the thing gone) was reading "The Heart of Gold" as just a slightly too fat volume, or sitting out the same as just a fifth-act too long play, that he found himself floated on a tide he would scarce have dared to show his favourite hero sustained by, found a hundred agreeable and interesting things happen to him which were all, one way or another, affluents of the golden stream.

The great renewed resonance—renewed by the incredible luck of the play—was always in his ears without so much as a conscious turn of his head to listen; so that the queer world of his fame was not the mere usual field of the Anglo-Saxon boom, but positively the bottom of the whole theatric sea, unplumbed source of the wave that had borne him in the course of a year or two over German, French, Italian, Russian, Scandinavian foot-lights. Paris itself really appeared for the hour the centre of his cyclone, with reports and "returns," to say nothing of agents and emissaries, converging from the minor capitals; though his impatience was scarce the less keen to get back to London, where his work had had no such critical excoriation to survive, no such lesson of anguish to learn, as it had received at the hand of supreme authority, of that French authority which was in such a matter the only one to be artistically reckoned with. If his spirit indeed had had to reckon with it his fourth act practically hadn't: it continued to make him blush every night for the public more even than the inimitable *feuilleton* had made him blush for himself.

This had figured, however, after all, the one bad drop in his cup; so that, for the rest, his high-water mark might well have been, that evening at Gloriani's studio, the approach of his odd and charming applicant, vaguely introduced at the latter's very own request by their hostess, who, with an honest, helpless, genial gesture, washed her fat begemmed hands of the name and identity of either, but left the fresh, fair, ever so habitually assured, yet ever so easily awkward Englishman with his plea to put forth. There was that in this pleasant personage which could still make Berridge wonder what conception of profit from him might have, all incalculably, taken form in such a head—these being truly the last intrenchments of our hero's modesty. He wondered, the splendid young man, he wondered awfully, he wondered (it was unmistakable) quite nervously, he wondered, to John's ardent and acute imagination, quite beautifully, if the author of "The Heart of Gold" would mind just looking at a book by a friend of his, a great friend, which he himself believed rather clever, and had in fact found very charming, but as to which—if it really wouldn't bore Mr. Berridge—he should so like

the verdict of some one who knew. His friend was awfully ambitious, and he thought there was something in it—with all of which might he send the book to any address?

Berridge thought of many things while the young Lord thus charged upon him, and it was odd that no one of them was any question of the possible worth of the offered achievement—which, for that matter, was certain to be of the quality of *all* the books, to say nothing of the plays, and the projects for plays, with which, for some time past, he had seen his daily post-bag distended. He had made out, on looking at these things, no difference at all from one to the other. Here, however, was something more—something that made his fellow-guest's overture *independently* interesting and, as he might imagine, important. He smiled, he was friendly and vague; said "A work of fiction, I suppose?" and that he didn't pretend ever to pronounce, that he in fact quite hated, always, to have to, not "knowing," as he felt, any better than any one else; but would gladly look at anything, under that demur, if it would give any pleasure. Perhaps the very brightest and most diamond-like twinkle he had yet seen the star of his renown emit was just the light brought into his young Lord's eyes by this so easy consent to oblige. It was easy because the presence before him was from moment to moment, referring itself back to some recent observation or memory; something caught somewhere, within a few weeks or months, as he had moved about, and that seemed to flutter forth at this stir of the folded leaves of his recent experience very much as a gathered, faded flower, placed there for "pressing," might drop from between the pages of a volume opened at hazard.

He had seen him before, this splendid and sympathetic person—whose flattering appeal was by no means *all* that made him sympathetic; he had met him, had noted, had wondered about him, had in fact imaginatively, intellectually, so to speak, quite yearned over him, in some conjunction lately, though ever so fleet-ingly, apprehended: which circumstance constituted precisely an association as tormenting, for the few minutes, as it was vague, and set him to sounding, intensely and vainly, the face that itself figured everything agreeable except recognition. He couldn't remember, and the young man didn't; distinctly, yes, they had been in presence, during the previous winter, by some chance of travel, through Sicily, through Italy, through the south of France, but his *Seigneurie*—so Berridge liked exotically to phrase it—had then (in ignorance of the present reasons) not noticed *him*. It was positive for the man of established identity, all the while too, and through the perfect lucidity of his sense of achievement in an air "conducting" nothing but the loudest bang, that this was fundamentally much less remarkable than the fact of his being made up to in such a quarter now. That was the disservice, in a manner, of one's having so much imagination: the mysterious values of other types kept looming larger before you than the doubtless often higher but comparatively familiar ones of your own, and if you had anything of the artist's real feeling for life the attraction and amusement of possibilities so projected were worth more to you, in nineteen moods out of twenty, than the sufficiency, the serenity, the felicity, whatever it might be, of your stale personal certitudes. You were intellectually, you were "artistically" rather abject, in fine, if your curiosity (in the grand sense of the term) wasn't worth more to you than your dignity. What was your dignity, "anyway," but just the consistency of your curiosity, and what moments were ever so ignoble for you as, under the blighting breath of the false gods, stupid conventions, traditions, examples, your lapses from that consistency? His *Seigneurie*, at all events, delightfully, hadn't the least real idea of what any John Berridge was talking about, and the latter felt that if he had been less beautifully witless, and thereby less true to his right figure, it might scarce have been forgiven him.

His right figure was that of life in irreflective joy and at the highest thinkable level of prepared security and unconscious insolence. What was the pale page of fiction compared with the intimately personal adventure that, in almost any direction, he would have been all

so stupidly, all so gallantly, all so instinctively and, by every presumption, so prevailingly ready for? Berridge would have given six months' "royalties" for even an hour of his looser dormant consciousness—since one was oneself, after all, no worm, but an heir of all the ages too—and yet without being able to supply chapter and verse for the felt, the huge difference. His *Seigneurie* was tall and straight, but so, thank goodness, was the author of "The Heart of Gold," who had no such vulgar "mug" either; and there was no intrinsic inferiority in being a bit inordinately, and so it might have seemed a bit strikingly, black-browed instead of being fair as the morning. Again while his new friend delivered himself our own tried in vain to place him; he indulged in plenty of pleasant, if rather restlessly headlong sound, the confessed incoherence of a happy mortal who had always many things "on," and who, while waiting at any moment for connections and consummations, had fallen into the way of talking, as they said, all artlessly, and a trifle more betrayingly, against time. He would always be having appointments, and somehow of a high "romantic" order, to keep, and the imperfect punctualities of others to wait for—though who would be of a quality to make such a pampered personage wait very much our young analyst could only enjoy asking himself. There were women who might be of a quality—half a dozen of those perhaps, of those alone, about the world; our friend was as sure of this, by the end of four minutes, as if he knew all about it.

After saying he would send him the book the young Lord indeed dropped that subject; he had asked where he might send it, and had had an "Oh, I shall remember!" on John's mention of an hotel; but he had made no further dash into literature, and it was ten to one that this would be the last the distinguished author might hear of the volume. Such again was a note of these high existences—that made one content to ask of them no whit of other consistency than that of carrying off the particular occasion, whatever it might be, in a dazzle of amiability and felicity and leaving *that* as a sufficient trace of their passage. Sought and achieved consistency was but an angular, a secondary motion; compared with the air of complete freedom it might have an effect of deformity. There was no placing this figure of radiant ease, for Berridge, in any relation that didn't appear not good enough—that is among the relations that hadn't been too good for Berridge himself. He was all right where he was; the great Gloriani somehow made that law; his house, with his supreme artistic position, was good enough for any one, and to-night in especial there were charming people, more charming than our friend could recall from any other scene, as the natural train or circle, as he might say, of such a presence. For an instant he thought he had got the face as a specimen of imperturbability watched, with wonder, across the hushed rattle of roulette at Monte-Carlo; but this quickly became as improbable as any question of a vulgar *table d'hote*, or a steam-boat deck, or a herd of fellow-pilgrims cicerone-led, or even an opera-box serving, during a performance, for frame of a type observed from the stalls. One placed young gods and goddesses only when one placed them on Olympus, and it met the case, always, that they were of Olympian race, and that they glimmered for one, at the best, through their silver cloud, like the visiting apparitions in an epic.

This was brief and beautiful indeed till something happened that gave it, for Berridge, on the spot, a prodigious extension—an extension really as prodigious, after a little, as if he had suddenly seen the silver clouds multiply and then the whole of Olympus presently open. Music, breaking upon the large air, enjoined immediate attention, and in a moment he was listening, with the rest of the company, to an eminent tenor, who stood by the piano; and was aware, with it, that his Englishman had turned away and that in the vast, rich, tapestried room where, in spite of figures and objects so numerous, clear spaces, wide vistas, and, as they might be called, becoming situations abounded, there had been from elsewhere, at the signal of unmistakable song, a rapid accession of guests. At first he but took this in, and the way

that several young women, for whom seats had been found, looked charming in the rapt attitude; while even the men, mostly standing and grouped, “composed,” in their stillness, scarce less impressively, under the sway of the divine voice. It ruled the scene, to the last intensity, and yet our young man’s fine sense found still a resource in the range of the eyes, without sound or motion, while all the rest of consciousness was held down as by a hand mailed in silver. It was better, in this way, than the opera—John alertly thought of that: the composition sung might be Wagnerian, but no Tristram, no Iseult, no Parsifal and, no Kundry of them all could ever show, could ever “act” to the music, as our friend had thus the power of seeing his dear contemporaries of either sex (armoured *they* so otherwise than in cheap Teutonic tinsel!) just continuously and inscrutably sit to it.

It made, the whole thing together, an enchantment amid which he had in truth, at a given moment, ceased to distinguish parts—so that he was himself certainly at last soaring as high as the singer’s voice and forgetting, in a lost gaze at the splendid ceiling, everything of the occasion but what his intelligence poured into it. This, as happened, was a flight so sublime that by the time he had dropped his eyes again a cluster of persons near the main door had just parted to give way to a belated lady who slipped in, through the gap made for her, and stood for some minutes full in his view. It was a proof of the perfect hush that no one stirred to offer her a seat, and her entrance, in her high grace, had yet been so noiseless that she could remain at once immensely exposed and completely unabashed. For Berridge, once more, if the scenic show before him so melted into the music, here precisely might have been the heroine herself advancing to the foot-lights at her cue. The interest deepened to a thrill, and everything, at the touch of his recognition of this personage, absolutely the most beautiful woman now present, fell exquisitely together and gave him what he had been wanting from the moment of his taking in his young Englishman.

It was there, the missing connection: her arrival had on the instant lighted it by a flash. Olympian herself, supremely, divinely Olympian, she had arrived, could *only* have arrived, for the one person present of really equal race, our young man’s late converser, whose flattering demonstration might now stand for one of the odd extravagant forms taken by nervous impatience. This charming, this dazzling woman had been one member of the couple disturbed, to his intimate conviction, the autumn previous, on his being pushed by the officials, at the last moment, into a compartment of the train that was to take him from Cremona to Mantua—where, failing a stop, he had had to keep his place. The other member, by whose felt but unseized identity he had been haunted, was the unconsciously insolent form of guaranteed happiness he had just been engaged with. The sense of the admirable intimacy that, having taken its precautions, had not reckoned with his irruption—this image had remained with him; to say nothing of the interest of aspect of the associated figures, so stamped somehow with rarity, so beautifully distinct from the common occupants of padded corners, and yet on the subject of whom, for the romantic structure he was immediately to raise, he had not had a scrap of evidence.

If he had imputed to them conditions it was all his own doing: it came from his inveterate habit of abysmal imputation, the snatching of the ell wherever the inch peeped out, without which where would have been the tolerability of life? It didn’t matter now what he had imputed—and he always held that his expenses of imputation were, at the worst, a compliment to those inspiring them. It only mattered that each of the pair had been then what he really saw each now—full, that is, of the pride of their youth and beauty and fortune and freedom, though at the same time particularly preoccupied: preoccupied, that is, with the affairs, and above all with the passions, of Olympus. Who had they been, and what? Whence had they come, whither were they bound, what tie united them, what adventure engaged, what felicity, tempered by what peril, magnificently, dramatically attended? These had been

his questions, all so inevitable and so impertinent, at the time, and to the exclusion of any scruples over his not postulating an inane honeymoon, his not taking the “tie,” as he should doubtless properly have done, for the mere blest matrimonial; and he now retracted not one of them, flushing as they did before him again with their old momentary life. To feel his two friends renewedly in presence—friends of the fleeting hour though they had but been, and with whom he had exchanged no sign save the vaguest of salutes on finally relieving them of his company—was only to be conscious that he hadn’t, on the spot, done them, so to speak, half justice, and that, for his superior entertainment, there would be ever so much more of them to come.

II

It might already have been coming indeed, with an immense stride, when, scarce more than ten minutes later, he was aware that the distinguished stranger had brought the Princess straight across the room to speak to him. He had failed in the interval of any glimpse of their closer meeting; for the great tenor had sung another song and then stopped, immediately on which Madame Gloriani had made his pulse quicken to a different, if not to a finer, throb by hovering before him once more with the man in the world he most admired, as it were, looking at him over her shoulder. The man in the world he most admired, the greatest then of contemporary Dramatists—and bearing, independently, the name inscribed if not in deepest incision at least in thickest gilding on the rich recreative roll—this prodigious personage was actually to suffer “presentation” to him at the good lady’s generous but ineffectual hands, and had in fact the next instant, left alone with him, bowed, in formal salutation, the massive, curly, witty head, so “romantic” yet so modern, so “artistic” and ironic yet somehow so civic, so Gallic yet somehow so cosmic, his personal vision of which had not hitherto transcended that of the possessor of a signed and framed photograph in a consecrated quarter of a writing-table.

It was positive, however, that poor John was afterward to remember of this conjunction nothing whatever but the fact of the great man’s looking at him very hard, straight in the eyes, and of his not having himself scrupled to do as much, and with a confessed intensity of appetite. It was improbable, he was to recognise, that they had, for the few minutes, only stared and grimaced, like pitted boxers or wrestlers; but what had abode with him later on, none the less, was just the cherished memory of his not having so lost presence of mind as to fail of feeding on his impression. It was precious and precarious, that was perhaps all there would be of it; and his subsequent consciousness was quite to cherish this queer view of the silence, neither awkward nor empty nor harsh, but on the contrary quite charged and brimming, that represented for him his use, his unforgettable enjoyment in fact, of his opportunity. Had nothing passed in words? Well, no misery of murmured “homage,” thank goodness; though something must have been said, certainly, to lead up, as they put it at the theatre, to John’s having asked the head of the profession, before they separated, if he by chance knew who the so radiantly handsome young woman might be, the one who had so lately come in and who wore the pale yellow dress, of the strange tone, and the magnificent pearls. They must have separated soon, it was further to have been noted; since it was before the advance of the pair, their wonderful dazzling charge upon him, that he had distinctly seen the great man, at a distance again, block out from his sight the harmony of the faded gold and the pearls—to speak only of that—and plant himself there (the mere high Atlas-back of renown to Berridge now) as for communion with them. He had blocked everything out, to this tune, effectually; with nothing of the matter left for our friend meanwhile but that, as he had said, the beautiful lady was the Princess. What Princess, or the Princess of what?—our young man had afterward wondered; his companion’s reply having lost itself in the prelude of an outburst by another vocalist who had approached the piano.

It was after these things that she so incredibly came to him, attended by her adorer—since he took it for absolute that the young Lord was her adorer, as who indeed mightn't be?—and scarce waiting, in her bright simplicity, for any form of introduction. It may thus be said in a word that this was the manner in which she made our hero's acquaintance, a satisfaction that she on the spot described to him as really wanting of late to her felicity. "I've read everything, you know, and 'The Heart of Gold' three times": she put it all immediately on that ground, while the young Lord now smiled, beside her, as if it were quite the sort of thing he had done too; and while, further, the author of the work yielded to the consciousness that whereas in general he had come at last scarce to be able to bear the iteration of those words, which affected him as a mere vain vocal convulsion, so not a breath of this association now attended them, so such a person as the Princess could make of them what she would.

Unless it was to be really what *he* would!—this occurred to him in the very thick of the prodigy, no single shade of possibility of which was less prodigious than any other. It was a declaration, simply, the admirable young woman was treating him to, a profession of "artistic sympathy"—for she was in a moment to use this very term that made for them a large, clear, common ether, an element all uplifted and rare, of which they could equally partake.

If she was Olympian—as in her rich and regular young beauty, that of some divine Greek mask over-painted say by Titian, she more and more appeared to him—this offered air was that of the gods themselves: she might have been, with her long rustle across the room, Artemis decorated, hung with pearls, for her worshippers, yet disconcerting them by having, under an impulse just faintly fierce, snatched the cup of gold from Hebe. It was to him, John Berridge, she thus publicly offered it; and it was his over-topping *confrere* of shortly before who was the worshipper most disconcerted. John had happened to catch, even at its distance, after these friends had joined him, the momentary deep, grave estimate, in the great Dramatist's salient watching eyes, of the Princess's so singular performance: the touch perhaps this, in the whole business, that made Berridge's sense of it most sharp. The sense of it as *prodigy* didn't in the least entail his feeling abject—any more, that is, than in the due dazzled degree; for surely there would have been supreme wonder in the eagerness of her exchange of mature glory for thin notoriety, hadn't it still exceeded everything that an Olympian of such race should have found herself bothered, as they said, to "read" at all—and most of all to read three times!

With the turn the matter took as an effect of this meeting, Berridge was more than once to find himself almost ashamed for her—since it seemed never to occur to her to be so for herself: he was jealous of the type where she might have been taken as insolently careless of it; his advantage (unless indeed it had been his ruin) being that he could inordinately reflect upon it, could wander off thereby into kinds of licence of which she was incapable. He hadn't, for himself, waited till now to be sure of what he would do were *he* an Olympian: he would leave his own stuff snugly unread, to begin with; that would be a beautiful start for an Olympian career. He should have been as unable to write those works in short as to make anything else of them; and he should have had no more arithmetic for computing fingers than any perfect-headed marble Apollo mutilated at the wrists. He should have consented to know but the grand personal adventure on the grand personal basis: nothing short of this, no poor cognisance of confusable, pettifogging things, the sphere of earth-grubbing questions and two-penny issues, would begin to be, on any side, Olympian enough.

Even the great Dramatist, with his tempered and tested steel and his immense "assured" position, even he was not Olympian: the look, full of the torment of earth, with which he had seen the Princess turn her back, and for such a purpose, on the prized privilege of his notice, testified sufficiently to that. Still, comparatively, it was to be said, the question of a personal

relation with an authority so eminent on the subject of the passions—to say nothing of the rest of his charm—might have had for an ardent young woman (and the Princess was unmistakably ardent) the absolute attraction of romance: unless, again, prodigy of prodigies, she were looking for her romance very particularly elsewhere. Yet where could she have been looking for it, Berridge was to ask himself with private intensity, in a manner to leave her so at her ease for appearing to offer *him* everything?—so free to be quite divinely gentle with him, to hover there before him in all her mild, bright, smooth sublimity and to say: “I should be so very grateful if you’d come to see me.”

There succeeded this a space of time of which he was afterward to lose all account, was never to recover the history; his only coherent view of it being that an interruption, some incident that kept them a while separate, had then taken place, yet that during their separation, of half an hour or whatever, they had still somehow not lost sight of each other, but had found their eyes meeting, in deep communion, all across the great peopled room; meeting and wanting to meet, wanting—it was the most extraordinary thing in the world for the suppression of stages, for confessed precipitate intensity—to use together every instant of the hour that might be left them. Yet to use it for what?—unless, like beautiful fabulous figures in some old-world legend, for the frankest and almost the crudest avowal of the impression they had made on each other. He couldn’t have named, later on, any other person she had during this space been engaged with, any more than he was to remember in the least what he had himself ostensibly done, who had spoken to him, whom he had spoken to, or whether he hadn’t just stood and publicly gaped or languished.

Ah, Olympians were unconventional indeed—that was a part of their high bravery and privilege; but what it also appeared to attest in this wondrous manner was that they could communicate to their chosen in three minutes, by the mere light of their eyes, the same shining cynicism. He was to wonder of course, tinglingly enough, whether he had really made an ass of himself, and there was this amount of evidence for it that there certainly *had* been a series of moments each one of which glowed with the lucid sense that, as she couldn’t like him as much as *that* either for his acted clap-trap or for his printed verbiage, what it must come to was that she liked him, and to such a tune, just for himself and quite after no other fashion than that in which every goddess in the calendar had, when you came to look, sooner or later liked some prepossessing young shepherd. The question would thus have been, for him, with a still sharper eventual ache, of whether he positively *had*, as an effect of the miracle, been petrified, before fifty pair of eyes, to the posture of a prepossessing shepherd—and would perhaps have left him under the shadow of some such imputable fatuity if his consciousness hadn’t, at a given moment, cleared up to still stranger things.

The agent of the change was, as quite congruously happened, none other than the shining youth whom he now seemed to himself to have been thinking of for ever so long, for a much longer time than he had ever in his life spent at an evening party, as the young Lord: which personage suddenly stood before him again, holding him up an odd object and smiling, as if in reference to it, with a gladness that at once struck our friend as almost too absurd for belief. The object was incongruous by reason of its being, to a second and less preoccupied glance, a book; and what had befallen Berridge within twenty minutes was that they—the Princess and he, that is—had got such millions of miles, or at least such thousands of years, away from *those* platitudes. The book, he found himself assuming, could only be *his* book (it seemed also to have a tawdry red cover); and there came to him memories, dreadfully false notes sounded so straight again by his new acquaintance, of certain altogether different persons who at certain altogether different parties had flourished volumes before him very much with that insinuating gesture, that arch expression, and that fell intention. The meaning of these things—of all possible breaks of the charm at such an hour!—was that he should

“signature” the ugly thing, and with a characteristic quotation or sentiment: that was the way people simpered and squirmed, the way they mouthed and beckoned, when animated by such purposes; and it already, on the spot, almost broke his heart to see such a type as that of the young Lord brought, by the vulgarest of fashions, so low. This state of quick displeasure in Berridge, however, was founded on a deeper question—the question of how in the world he was to remain for himself a prepossessing shepherd if he should consent to come back to these base actualities. It was true that even while this wonderment held him, his aggressor’s perfect good conscience had placed the matter in a slightly different light.

“By an extraordinary chance I’ve found a copy of my friend’s novel on one of the tables here—I see by the inscription that she has presented it to Gloriani. So if you’d like to glance at it—!” And the young Lord, in the pride of his association with the eminent thing, held it out to Berridge as artlessly as if it had been a striking natural specimen of some sort, a rosy round apple grown in his own orchard, or an exceptional precious stone, to be admired for its weight and lustre. Berridge accepted the offer mechanically—relieved at the prompt fading of his worst fear, yet feeling in himself a tell-tale facial blankness for the still absolutely anomalous character of his friend’s appeal. He was even tempted for a moment to lay the volume down without looking at it—only with some extemporised promise to borrow it of their host and take it home, to give himself to it at an easier moment. Then the very expression of his fellow-guests own countenance determined in him a different and a still more dreadful view; in fact an immediate collapse of the dream in which he had for the splendid previous space of time been living. The young Lord himself, in his radiant costly barbarism, figured far better than John Berridge could do the prepossessing shepherd, the beautiful mythological mortal “distinguished” by a goddess; for our hero now saw that his whole manner of dealing with his ridiculous tribute was marked exactly by the grand simplicity, the prehistoric good faith, as one might call it, of far-off romantic and “plastic” creatures, figures of exquisite Arcadian stamp, glorified rustics like those of the train of peasants in “A Winter’s Tale,” who thought nothing of such treasure-trove, on a Claude Lorrain sea-strand, as a royal infant wrapped in purple: something in that fabulous style of exhibition appearing exactly what his present demonstration might have been prompted by. “The Top of the Tree, by Amy Evans”—scarce credible words floating before Berridge after he had with an anguish of effort dropped his eyes on the importunate title-page—represented an object as alien to the careless grace of goddess-haunted Arcady as a washed-up “kodak” from a wrecked ship might have been to the appreciation of some islander of wholly unvisited seas. Nothing could have been more in the tone of an islander deplorably diverted from his native interests and dignities than the glibness with which John’s own child of nature went on. “It’s her pen-name, Amy Evans”—he couldn’t have said it otherwise had he been a blue-chinned penny-a-liner; yet marking it with a disconnectedness of intelligence that kept up all the poetry of his own situation and only crashed into that of other persons. The reference put the author of “The Heart of Gold” quite into *his* place, but left the speaker absolutely free of Arcady. “Thanks awfully”—Berridge somehow clutched at that, to keep everything from swimming. “Yes, I should like to look at it,” he managed, horribly grimacing now, he believed, to say; and there was in fact a strange short interlude after this in which he scarce knew what had become of any one or of anything; in which he only seemed to himself to stand alone in a desolate place where even its desolation didn’t save him from having to stare at the greyest of printed pages. Nothing here helped anything else, since the stamped greyness didn’t even in itself make it impossible his eyes should follow such sentences as: “The loveliness of the face, which was that of the glorious period in which Pheidias reigned supreme, and which owed its most exquisite note to that shell-like curl of the upper lip which always somehow recalls for us the smile with which windblown Astarte must have risen from the salt sea to which she owed her birth and her terrible moods; or it was too much for all the

passionate woman in her, and she let herself go, over the flowering land that had been, but was no longer their love, with an effect of blighting desolation that might have proceeded from one of the more physical, though not more awful, convulsions of nature.”

He seemed to know later on that other and much more natural things had occurred; as that, for instance, with now at last a definite intermission of the rare music that for a long time past, save at the briefest intervals, had kept all participants ostensibly attentive and motionless, and that in spite of its high quality and the supposed privilege of listening to it he had allowed himself not to catch a note of, there was a great rustling and shifting and vociferous drop to a lower plane, more marked still with the quick clearance of a way to supper and a lively dispersal of most of the guests. Hadn't he made out, through the queer glare of appearances, though they yet somehow all came to him as confused and unreal, that the Princess was no longer there, wasn't even only crowded out of his range by the immediate multiplication of her court, the obsequious court that the change of pitch had at once permitted to close round her; that Gloriani had offered her his arm, in a gallant official way, as to the greatest lady present, and that he was left with half a dozen persons more knowing than the others, who had promptly taken, singly or in couples, to a closer inspection of the fine small scattered treasures of the studio?

He himself stood there, rueful and stricken, nursing a silly red-bound book under his arm very much as if he might have been holding on tight to an upright stake, or to the nearest piece of furniture, during some impression of a sharp earthquake-shock or of an attack of dyspeptic dizziness; albeit indeed that he wasn't conscious of this absurd, this instinctive nervous clutch till the thing that was to be more wonderful than any yet suddenly flared up for him—the sight of the Princess again on the threshold of the room, poised there an instant, in her exquisite grace, for recovery of some one or of something, and then, at recognition of him, coming straight to him across the empty place as if he alone, and nobody and nothing else, were what she incredibly wanted. She was there, she was radiantly *at* him, as if she had known and loved him for ten years—ten years during which, however, she had never quite been able, in spite of undiscouraged attempts, to cure him, as goddesses *had* to cure shepherds, of his mere mortal shyness.

“Ah no, not *that* one!” she said at once, with her divine familiarity; for she had in the flash of an eye “spotted” the particular literary production he seemed so very fondly to have possessed himself of and against which all the Amy Evans in her, as she would doubtless have put it, clearly wished on the spot to discriminate. She pulled it away from him; he let it go; he scarce knew what was happening—only made out that she distinguished the right one, the one that should have been shown him, as blue or green or purple, and intimated that her other friend, her fellow-Olympian, as Berridge had thought of him from the first, really did too clumsily bungle matters, poor dear, with his officiousness over the red one! She went on really as if she had come for that, some such rectification, some such eagerness of reunion with dear Mr. Berridge, some talk, after all the tiresome music, of questions really urgent; while, thanks to the supreme strangeness of it, the high tide of golden fable floated him afresh, and her pretext and her plea, the queerness of her offered motive, melted away after the fashion of the enveloping clouds that do their office in epics and idylls. “You didn't perhaps know I'm Amy Evans,” she smiled, “or even perhaps that I write in English—which I love, I assure you, as much as you can yourself do, and which gives one (doesn't it? for who should know if not you?) the biggest of publicis. I ‘just love’—don't they say?—your American millions; and all the more that they really *take* me for Amy Evans, as I've just wanted to be taken, to be loved too for myself, don't you know?—that they haven't seemed to try at all to ‘go behind’ (don't you say?) my poor dear little *nom de guerre*. But it's the new one, my last, ‘The Velvet Glove,’ that I should like you to judge me by—if such

a *corvee* isn't too horrible for you to think of; though I admit it's a move straight in the romantic direction—since after all (for I might as well make a clean breast of it) it's dear old discredited romance that I'm most in sympathy with. I'll send you 'The Velvet Glove' to-morrow, if you *can* find half an hour for it; and then—and *then*—!" She paused as for the positive bright glory of her meaning.

It could only be so extraordinary, her meaning, whatever it was, that the need in him that would—whatever it was again!—meet it most absolutely formed the syllables on his lips as: "Will you be very, *very* kind to me?"

"Ah 'kind,' dear Mr. Berridge? 'Kind,'" she splendidly laughed, "is nothing to what—!" But she pulled herself up again an instant. "Well, to what I want to be! Just *see*," she said, "how I want to be!" It was exactly, he felt, what he couldn't *but* see—in spite of books and publics and pen-names, in spite of the really "decadent" perversity, recalling that of the most irresponsibly insolent of the old Romans and Byzantines, that could lead a creature so formed for living and breathing her Romance, and so committed, up to the eyes, to the constant fact of her personal immersion in it and genius for it, the dreadful amateurish dance of ungrammatically scribbling it, with editions and advertisements and reviews and royalties and every other futile item: since what was more of the deep essence of throbbing intercourse itself than this very act of her having broken away from people, in the other room, to whom he was as nought, of her having, with her *crânerie* of audacity and indifference, just turned her back on them all as soon as she had begun to miss him? What was more of it than her having forbidden them, by a sufficient curt ring of her own supremely silver tone, to attempt to check or criticise her freedom, than her having looked him up, at his distance, under all the noses he had put out of joint, so as to let them think whatever they might—not of herself (much she troubled to care!) but of the new champion to be reckoned with, the invincible young lion of the day? What was more of it in short than her having perhaps even positively snubbed for him the great mystified Sculptor and the great bewildered Dramatist, treated to this queer experience for the first time of their lives?

It all came back again to the really great ease of really great ladies, and to the perfect facility of everything when once they were great enough. *That* might become the delicious thing to him, he more and more felt, as soon as it should be supremely attested; it was ground he had ventured on, scenically, representation-ally, in the artistic sphere, but without ever dreaming he should "realise" it thus in the social. Handsomely, gallantly just now, moreover, he didn't so much as let it occur to him that the social experience would perhaps on some future occasion richly profit further scenic efforts; he only lost himself in the consciousness of all she invited him to believe. It took licence, this consciousness, the next moment, for a tremendous further throb, from what she had gone on to say to him in so many words—though indeed the words were nothing and it was all a matter but of the implication that glimmered through them: "Do you *want* very much your supper here?" And then while he felt himself glare, for charmed response, almost to the point of his tears rising with it: "Because if you don't—!"

"Because if I don't—?" She had paused, not from the faintest shade of timidity, but clearly for the pleasure of making him press.

"Why shouldn't we go together, letting me drive you home?"

"You'll come home with me?" gasped John Berridge while the perspiration on his brow might have been the morning dew on a high lawn of Mount Ida.

"No—you had better come with *me*. That's what I mean; but I certainly will come to you with pleasure some time if you'll let me."

She made no more than that of the most fatuous of freedoms, as he felt directly he had spoken that it might have seemed to her; and before he had even time to welcome the relief of not having then himself, for beastly contrition, to make more of it, she had simply mentioned, with her affectionate ease, that she wanted to get away, that of the bores there she might easily, after a little, have too much, and that if he'd but say the word they'd nip straight out together by an independent door and be sure to find her motor in the court. What word he had found to say, he was afterward to reflect, must have little enough mattered; for he was to have kept, of what then occurred, but a single other impression, that of her great fragrant rustle beside him over the rest of the ample room and toward their nearest and friendliest resource, the door by which he had come in and which gave directly upon a staircase. This independent image was just that of the only other of his fellow-guests with whom he had been closely concerned; he had thought of him rather indeed, up to that moment, as the Princess's fellow-Olympian—but a new momentary vision of him seemed now to qualify it.

The young Lord had reappeared within a minute on the threshold, that of the passage from the supper-room, lately crossed by the Princess herself, and Berridge felt him there, saw him there, wondered about him there, all, for the first minute, without so much as a straight look at him. He would have come to learn the reason of his friend's extraordinary public demonstration—having more right to his curiosity, or his anxiety or whatever, than any one else; he would be taking in the remarkable appearances that thus completed it, and would perhaps be showing quite a different face for them, at the point they had reached, than any that would have hitherto consorted with the beautiful security of his own position. So much, on our own young man's part, for this first flush of a presumption that he might have stirred the germs of ire in a celestial breast; so much for the moment during which nothing would have induced him to betray, to a possibly rueful member of an old aristocracy, a vulgar elation or a tickled, unaccustomed glee. His inevitable second thought was, however, it has to be confessed, another matter, which took a different turn—for, frankly, all the conscious conqueror in him, as Amy Evans would again have said, couldn't forego a probably supreme consecration. He treated himself to no prolonged reach of vision, but there was something he nevertheless fully measured for five seconds—the sharp truth of the fact, namely, of how the interested observer in the doorway must really have felt about him. Rather disconcertingly, hereupon, the sharp truth proved to be that the most amused, quite the most encouraging and the least invidious of smiles graced the young Lord's handsome countenance—forming, in short, his final contribution to a display of high social candour unprecedented in our hero's experience. No, he wasn't jealous, didn't do John Berridge the honour to be, to the extent of the least glimmer of a spark of it, but was so happy to see his immortal mistress do what she liked that he could positively beam at the odd circumstance of her almost lavishing public caresses on a gentleman not, after all, of negligible importance.

III

Well, it was all confounding enough, but this indication in particular would have jostled our friend's grasp of the presented cup had he had, during the next ten minutes, more independence of thought. That, however, was out of the question when one positively felt, as with a pang somewhere deep within, or even with a smothered cry for alarm, one's whole sense of proportion shattered at a blow and ceasing to serve. "Not *straight*, and not too fast, shall we?" was the ineffable young woman's appeal to him, a few minutes later, beneath the wide glass porch-cover that sheltered their brief wait for their chariot of fire. It was there even as she spoke; the capped charioteer, with a great clean curve, drew up at the steps of the porch, and the Princess's footman, before rejoining him in front, held open the door of the car. She got in, and Berridge was the next instant beside her; he could only say: "As you like, Princess—where you will; certainly let us prolong it; let us prolong everything; don't let us

have it over—strange and beautiful as it can only be!—a moment sooner than we must.” So he spoke, in the security of their intimate English, while the perpendicular imperturbable *valet-de-pied*, white-faced in the electric light, closed them in and then took his place on the box where the rigid liveried backs of the two men, presented through the glass, were like a protecting wall; such a guarantee of privacy as might come—it occurred to Berridge’s inexpugnable fancy—from a vision of tall guards erect round Eastern seraglios.

His companion had said something, by the time they started, about their taking a turn, their looking out for a few of the night-views of Paris that were so wonderful; and after that, in spite of his constantly prized sense of knowing his enchanted city and his way about, he ceased to follow or measure their course, content as he was with the particular exquisite assurance it gave him. *That* was knowing Paris, of a wondrous bland April night; that was hanging over it from vague consecrated lamp-studded heights and taking in, spread below and afar, the great scroll of all its irresistible story, pricked out, across river and bridge and radiant *place*, and along quays and boulevards and avenues, and around monumental circles and squares, in syllables of fire, and sketched and summarised, further and further, in the dim fire-dust of endless avenues; that was all of the essence of fond and thrilled and throbbing recognition, with a thousand things understood and a flood of response conveyed, a whole familiar possessive feeling appealed to and attested.

“From you, you know, it *would* be such a pleasure, and I think—in fact I’m sure—it would do so much for the thing in America.” Had she gone on as they went, or had there been pauses of easy and of charmed and of natural silence, breaks and drops from talk, but only into greater confidence and sweetness?—such as her very gesture now seemed a part of; her laying her gloved hand, for emphasis, on the back of his own, which rested on his knee and which took in from the act he scarce knew what melting assurance. The emphasis, it was true—this came to him even while for a minute he held his breath—seemed rather that of Amy Evans; and if her talk, while they rolled, had been in the sense of these words (he had really but felt that they were shut intimately in together, all his consciousness, all his discrimination of meanings and indications being so deeply and so exquisitely merged in that) the case wasn’t as surely and sublimely, as extravagantly, as fabulously romantic for him as his excited pulses had been seeming to certify. Her hand was there on his own, in precious living proof, and splendid Paris hung over them, as a consecrating canopy, her purple night embroidered with gold; yet he waited, something stranger still having glimmered for him, waited though she left her hand, which expressed emphasis and homage and tenderness, and anything else she liked indeed—since it was all then a matter of what he next heard and what he slowly grew cold as he took from her.

“You know they do it here so charmingly—it’s a compliment a clever man is always so glad to pay a literary friend, and sometimes, in the case of a great name like yours, it renders such a service to a poor little book like mine!” She spoke ever so humbly and yet ever so gaily—and still more than before with this confidence of the sincere admirer and the comrade. That, yes, through his sudden sharpening chill, was what first became distinct for him; she was mentioning somehow her explanation and her conditions—her motive, in fine, disconcerting, deplorable, dreadful, in respect to the experience, otherwise so boundless, that he had taken her as having opened to him; and she was doing it, above all, with the clearest coolness of her general privilege. What in particular she was talking about he as yet, still holding his breath, wondered; it was something she wanted him to do for her—which was exactly what he had hoped, but something of what trivial and, heaven forgive them both, of what dismal order? Most of all, meanwhile, he felt the dire penetration of two or three of the words she had used; so that after a painful minute the quaver with which he repeated them resembled his-drawing, slowly, carefully, timidly, some barbed dart out of his flesh.

“A ‘literary friend’?” he echoed as he turned his face more to her; so that, as they sat, the whites of her eyes, near to his own, gleamed in the dusk like some silver setting of deep sapphires.

It made her smile—which in their relation now was like the breaking of a cool air-wave over the conscious sore flush that maintained itself through his general chill. “Ah, of course you don’t allow that I *am* literary—and of course if you’re awfully cruel and critical and incorruptible you won’t let it say for me what I so want it should!”

“Where are we, where, in the name of all that’s damnably, of all that’s grotesquely delusive, are we?” he said, without a sign, to himself; which was the form of his really being quite at sea as to what she was talking about. That uncertainty indeed he could but frankly betray by taking her up, as he cast about him, on the particular ambiguity that his voice perhaps already showed him to find most irritating. “Let it show? ‘It,’ dear Princess——?”

“Why, my dear man, let your Preface show, the lovely, friendly, irresistible log-rolling Preface that I’ve been asking you if you wouldn’t be an angel and write for me.”

He took it in with a deep long gulp—he had never, it seemed to him, had to swallow anything so bitter. “You’ve been asking me if I wouldn’t write you a Preface?”

“To ‘The Velvet Glove’—after I’ve sent it to you and you’ve judged if you really can. Of course I don’t want you to perjure yourself; but”—and she fairly brushed him again, at their close quarters, with her fresh fragrant smile—“I do want you so to like me, and to say it all out beautifully and publicly.” “You want me to like you, Princess?” “But, heaven help us, haven’t you understood?” Nothing stranger could conceivably have been, it struck him—if he was right now—than this exquisite intimacy of her manner of setting him down on the other side of an abyss. It was as if she had lifted him first in her beautiful arms, had raised him up high, high, high, to do it, pressing him to her immortal young breast while he let himself go, and then, by some extraordinary effect of her native force and her alien quality, setting him down exactly where she wanted him to be—which was a thousand miles away from her. Once more, so preposterously face to face with her for these base issues, he took it all in; after which he felt his eyes close, for amazement, despair and shame, and his head, which he had some time before, baring his brow to the mild night, eased of its crush-hat, sink to confounded rest on the upholstered back of the seat. The act, the ceasing to see, and if possible to hear, was for the moment a retreat, an escape from a state that he felt himself fairly flatter by thinking of it as “awkward”; the state of really wishing that his humiliation might end, and of wondering in fact if the most decent course open to him mightn’t be to ask her to stop the motor and let him down.

He spoke no word for a long minute, or for considerably more than that; during which time the motor went and went, now even somewhat faster, and he knew, through his closed eyes, that the outer lights had begun to multiply and that they were getting back somewhere into the spacious and decorative quarters. He knew this, and also that his retreat, for all his attitude as of accommodating thought, his air—*that* presently and quickly came to him—of having perhaps gathered himself in, for an instant, at her behest, to turn over, in his high ingenuity, some humbugging “rotten” phrase or formula that he might place at her service and make the note of such an effort; he became aware, I say, that his lapse was but a half-retreat, with her strenuous presence and her earnest pressure and the close cool respiration of her good faith absolutely timing the moments of his stillness and the progress of the car. Yes, it was wondrous well, he had all but made the biggest of all fools of himself, almost as big a one as *she* was still, to every appearance, in her perfect serenity, trying to make of him; and

the one straight answer to it *would* be that he should reach forward and touch the footman's shoulder and demand that the vehicle itself should make an end.

That would be an answer, however, he continued intensely to see, only to inane importunate, to utterly superfluous Amy Evans—not a bit to his at last exquisitely patient companion, who was clearly now quite taking it from him that what kept him in his attitude was the spring of the quick desire to oblige her, the charming loyal impulse to consider a little what he could do for her, say “handsomely yet conscientiously” (oh the loveliness!) before he should commit himself. She was enchanted—*that* seemed to breathe upon him; she waited, she hung there, she quite bent over him, as Diana over the sleeping Endymion, while all the conscientious man of letters in him, as she might so supremely have phrased it, struggled with the more peccable, the more muddled and “squared,” though, for her own ideal, the so much more *banal* comrade. Yes, he could keep it up now—that is he could hold out for his real reply, could meet the rather marked tension of the rest of their passage as well as she; he should be able somehow or other to make his wordless detachment, the tribute of his ostensibly deep consideration of her request, a retreat in good order. She *was*, for herself, to the last point of her guileless fatuity, Amy Evans and an asker for “lifts,” a conceiver of twaddle both in herself and in him; or at least, so far as she fell short of all this platitude, it was no fault of the really affecting folly of her attempt to become a mere magazine mortal after the only fashion she had made out, to the intensification of her self-complacency, that she might.

Nothing might thus have touched him more—if to be touched, beyond a certain point, hadn't been to be squared—than the way she failed to divine the bearing of his thoughts; so that she had probably at no one small crisis of her life felt so much a promise in the flutter of her own as on the occasion of the beautiful act she indulged in at the very moment, he was afterward to recognise, of their sweeping into her great smooth, empty, costly street—a desert, at that hour, of lavish lamplight and sculptured stone. She raised to her lips the hand she had never yet released and kept it there a moment pressed close against them; he himself closing his eyes to the deepest detachment he was capable of while he took in with a smothered sound of pain that this was the conferred bounty by which Amy Evans sought most expressively to encourage, to sustain and to reward. The motor had slackened and in a moment would stop; and meanwhile even after lowering his hand again she hadn't let it go. This enabled it, while he after a further moment roused himself to a more confessed consciousness, to form with his friend's a more active relation, to possess him of hers, in turn, and with an intention the straighter that her glove had by this time somehow come off. Bending over it without hinderance, he returned as firmly and fully as the application of all his recovered wholeness of feeling, under his moustache, might express, the consecration the bareness of his own knuckles had received; only after which it was that, still thus drawing out his grasp of her, and having let down their front glass by his free hand, he signified to the footman his view of their stopping short.

They had arrived; the high, closed *porte-cochere*, in its crested stretch of wall, awaited their approach; but his gesture took effect, the car pulled up at the edge of the pavement, the man, in an instant, was at the door and had opened it; quickly moving across the walk, the next moment, to press the bell at the gate. Berridge, as his hand now broke away, felt he had cut his cable; with which, after he had stepped out, he raised again the glass he had lowered and closed, its own being already down, the door that had released him. During these motions he had the sense of his companion, still radiant and splendid, but somehow momentarily suppressed, suspended, silvered over and celestially blurred, even as a summer moon by the loose veil of a cloud. So it was he saw her while he leaned for farewell on the open window-ledge; he took her in as her visible intensity of bright vagueness filled the circle that the

interior of the car made for her. It was such a state as she would have been reduced to—he felt this, was certain of it—for the first time in her life; and it was he, poor John Berridge, after all, who would have created the condition.

“Good-night, Princess. I sha’n’t see you again.”

Vague was indeed no word for it—shine though she might, in her screened narrow niche, as with the liquefaction of her pearls, the glimmer of her tears, the freshness of her surprise. “You won’t come in—when you’ve had no supper?”

He smiled at her with a purpose of kindness that could never in his life have been greater; and at first but smiled without a word. He presently shook his head, however—doubtless also with as great a sadness. “I seem to have supped to my fill, Princess. Thank you, I won’t come in.”

It drew from her, while she looked at him, a long low anxious wail. “And you won’t do my Preface?”

“No, Princess, I won’t do your Preface. Nothing would induce me to say a word in print about you. I’m in fact not sure I shall ever mention you in any manner at all as long as ever I live.”

He had felt for an instant as if he were speaking to some miraculously humanised idol, all sacred, all jewelled, all votively hung about, but made mysterious, in the recess of its shrine, by the very thickness of the accumulated lustre. And “Then you don’t like me—?” was the marvellous sound from the image.

“Princess,” was in response the sound of the worshipper, “Princess, I adore you. But I’m ashamed for you.”

“Ashamed——?”

“You *are* Romance—as everything, and by what I make out every one, about you is; so what more do you want? Your Preface—the only one worth speaking of—was written long ages ago by the most beautiful imagination of man.”

Humanised at least for these moments, she could understand enough to declare that she didn’t. “I don’t, I don’t!”

“You don’t need to understand. Don’t attempt such base things. Leave those to us. Only live. Only be. *We’ll* do the rest.”

She moved over—she had come close to the window. “Ah, but Mr. Berridge——!”

He raised both hands; he shook them at her gently, in deep and soft deprecation. “Don’t sound my dreadful name. Fortunately, however, you can’t help yourself.”

“Ah, *voyons!* I so want——-!”

He repeated his gesture, and when he brought down his hands they closed together on both of hers, which now quite convulsively grasped the window-ledge. “Don’t speak, because when you speak you really say things——!” “You *are* Romance,” he pronounced afresh and with the last intensity of conviction and persuasion. “That’s all you have to do with it,” he continued while his hands, for emphasis, pressed hard on her own.

Their faces, in this way, were nearer together than ever, but with the effect of only adding to the vividness of that dire non-intelligence from which, all perversely and incalculably, her very beauty now appeared to gain relief. This made for him a pang and almost an anguish; the fear of her saying something yet again that would wretchedly prove how little he moved her

perception. So his eyes, of remonstrant, of suppliant intention, met hers close, at the same time that these, so far from shrinking, but with their quite other swimming plea all bedimmed now, seemed almost to wash him with the tears of her failure. He soothed, he stroked, he reassured her hands, for tender conveyance of his meaning, quite as she had just before dealt with his own for brave demonstration of hers. It was during these instants as if the question had been which of them *could* most candidly and fraternally plead. Full but of that she kept it up. "Ah, if you'd only think, if you'd only try——!"

He couldn't stand it—she was capable of believing he had edged away, excusing himself and trumping up a factitious theory, because he hadn't the wit, hadn't the hand, to knock off the few pleasant pages she asked him for and that any proper Frenchman, master of the *metier*, would so easily and gallantly have promised. Should she so begin to commit herself he'd, by the immortal gods, anticipate it in the manner most admirably effective—in fact he'd even thus make her further derogation impossible. Their faces were so close that he could practise any rich freedom—even though for an instant, while the back of the chauffeur guarded them on that side and his own presented breadth, amplified by his loose mantle, filled the whole window-space, leaving him no observation from any quarter to heed, he uttered, in a deep-drawn final groan, an irrepressible echo of his pang for what might have been, the muffled cry of his insistence. "You *are* Romance!"—he drove it intimately, inordinately home, his lips, for a long moment, sealing it, with the fullest force of authority, on her own; after which, as he broke away and the car, starting again, turned powerfully across the pavement, he had no further sound from her than if, all divinely indulgent but all humanly defeated, she had given the question up, falling back to infinite wonder. He too fell back, but could still wave his hat for her as she passed to disappearance in the great floridly framed aperture whose wings at once came together behind her.

Crapy Cornelia

I

THREE times within a quarter of an hour—shifting the while his posture on his chair of contemplation—had he looked at his watch as for its final sharp hint that he should decide, that he should get up. His seat was one of a group fairly sequestered, unoccupied save for his own presence, and from where he lingered he looked off at a stretch of lawn freshened by recent April showers and on which sundry small children were at play. The trees, the shrubs, the plants, every stem and twig just ruffled as by the first touch of the light finger of the relenting year, struck him as standing still in the blest hope of more of the same caress; the quarter about him held its breath after the fashion of the child who waits with the rigour of an open mouth and shut eyes for the promised sensible effect of his having been good. So, in the windless, sun-warmed air of the beautiful afternoon, the Park of the winter's end had struck White-Mason as waiting; even New York, under such an impression, was “good,” good enough—for *him*; its very sounds were faint, were almost sweet, as they reached him from so seemingly far beyond the wooded horizon that formed the remoter limit of his large shallow glade. The tones of the frolic infants ceased to be nondescript and harsh—were in fact almost as fresh and decent as the frilled and puckered and ribboned garb of the little girls, which had always a way, in those parts, of so portentously flaunting the daughters of the strange native—that is of the overwhelmingly alien—populace at him.

Not that these things in particular were his matter of meditation now; he had wanted, at the end of his walk, to sit apart a little and think—and had been doing that for twenty minutes, even though as yet to no break in the charm of procrastination. But he had looked without seeing and listened without hearing: all that had been positive for him was that he hadn't failed vaguely to feel. He had felt in the first place, and he continued to feel—yes, at forty-eight quite as much as at any point of the supposed reign of younger intensities—the great spirit of the air, the fine sense of the season, the supreme appeal of Nature, he might have said, to his time of life; quite as if she, easy, indulgent, indifferent, cynical Power, were offering him the last chance it would rest with his wit or his blood to embrace. Then with that he had been entertaining, to the point and with the prolonged consequence of accepted immobilization, the certitude that if he did call on Mrs. Worthingham and find her at home he couldn't in justice to himself not put to her the question that had lapsed the other time, the last time, through the irritating and persistent, even if accidental, presence of others. What friends she had—the people who so stupidly, so wantonly stuck! If they *should*, he and she, come to an understanding, that would presumably have to include certain members of her singularly ill-composed circle, in whom it was incredible to him that he should ever take an interest. This defeat, to do himself justice—he had bent rather predominantly on *that*, you see; ideal justice to *her*, with her possible conception of what it should consist of, being another and quite a different matter—he had had the fact of the Sunday afternoon to thank for; she didn't “keep” that day for him, since they hadn't, up to now, quite begun to cultivate the appointment or assignation founded on explicit sacrifices. He might at any rate look to find this pleasant practical Wednesday—should he indeed, at his actual rate, stay it before it ebbed—more liberally and intendingly given him.

The sound he at last most wittingly distinguished in his nook was the single deep note of half-past five borne to him from some high-perched public clock. He finally got up with the sense that the time from then on *ought* at least to be felt as sacred to him. At this juncture it was—while he stood there shaking his garments, settling his hat, his necktie, his shirt-cuffs, fixing

the high polish of his fine shoes as if for some reflection in it of his straight and spare and grizzled, his refined and trimmed and dressed, his altogether distinguished person, that of a gentleman abundantly settled, but of a bachelor markedly nervous—at this crisis it was, doubtless, that he at once most measured and least resented his predicament. If he should go he would almost to a certainty find her, and if he should find her he would almost to a certainty come to the point. He wouldn't put it off again—there was that high consideration for him of justice at least to himself. He had never yet denied himself anything so apparently fraught with possibilities as the idea of proposing to Mrs. Worthingham—never yet, in other words, denied himself anything he had so distinctly wanted to do; and the results of that wisdom had remained for him precisely the precious parts of experience. Counting only the offers of his honourable hand, these had been on three remembered occasions at least the consequence of an impulse as sharp and a self-respect as reasoned; a self-respect that hadn't in the least suffered, moreover, from the failure of each appeal. He had been met in the three cases—the only ones he at all compared with his present case—by the frank confession that he didn't somehow, charming as he was, cause himself to be superstitiously believed in; and the lapse of life, afterward, had cleared up many doubts.

It *wouldn't* have done, he eventually, he lucidly saw, each time he had been refused; and the candour of his nature was such that he could live to think of these very passages as a proof of how right he had been—right, that is, to have put himself forward always, by the happiest instinct, only in impossible conditions. He had the happy consciousness of having exposed the important question to the crucial test, and of having escaped, by that persistent logic, a grave mistake. What better proof of his escape than the fact that he was now free to renew the all-interesting inquiry, and should be exactly, about to do so in different and better conditions? The conditions were better by as much more—as much more of his career and character, of his situation, his reputation he could even have called it, of his knowledge of life, of his somewhat extended means, of his possibly augmented charm, of his certainly improved mind and temper—as was involved in the actual impending settlement. Once he had got into motion, once he had crossed the Park and passed out of it, entering, with very little space to traverse, one of the short new streets that abutted on its east side, his step became that of a man young enough to find confidence, quite to find felicity, in the sense, in almost any sense, of action. He could still enjoy almost anything, absolutely an unpleasant thing, in default of a better, that might still remind him he wasn't so old. The standing newness of everything about him would, it was true, have weakened this cheer by too much presuming on it; Mrs. Worthingham's house, before which he stopped, had that gloss of new money, that glare of a piece fresh from the mint and ringing for the first time on any counter, which seems to claim for it, in any transaction, something more than the "face" value.

This could but be yet more the case for the impression of the observer introduced and committed. On our friend's part I mean, after his admission and while still in the hall, the sense of the general shining immediacy, of the still unshushed clamour of the shock, was perhaps stronger than he had ever known it. That broke out from every corner as the high pitch of interest, and with a candour that—no, certainly—he had never seen equalled; every particular expensive object shrieking at him in its artless pride that it had just "come home." He met the whole vision with something of the grimace produced on persons without goggles by the passage from a shelter to a blinding light; and if he had—by a perfectly possible chance—been "snap-shotted" on the spot, would have struck you as showing for his first tribute to the temple of Mrs. Worthingham's charming presence a scowl almost of anguish. He wasn't constitutionally, it may at once be explained for him, a goggled person; and he was condemned, in New York, to this frequent violence of transition—having to reckon with it whenever he went out, as who should say, from himself. The high pitch of interest, to his

taste, was the pitch of history, the pitch of acquired and earned suggestion, the pitch of association, in a word; so that he lived by preference, incontestably, if not in a rich gloom, which would have been beyond his means and spirits, at least amid objects and images that confessed to the tone of time.

He had ever felt that an indispensable presence—with a need of it moreover that interfered at no point with his gentle habit, not to say his subtle art, of drawing out what was left him of his youth, of thinly and thriftily spreading the rest of that choicest jam-pot of the cupboard of consciousness over the remainder of a slice of life still possibly thick enough to bear it; or in other words of moving the melancholy limits, the significant signs, constantly a little further on, very much as property-marks or staked boundaries are sometimes stealthily shifted at night. He positively cherished in fact, as against the too inveterate gesture of distressfully guarding his eyeballs—so many New York aspects seemed to keep him at it—an ideal of adjusted appreciation, of courageous curiosity, of fairly letting the world about him, a world of constant breathless renewals and merciless substitutions, make its flaring assault on its own inordinate terms. Newness was value in the piece—for the acquirer, or at least sometimes might be, even though the act of “blowing” hard, the act marking a heated freshness of arrival, or other form of irruption, could never minister to the peace of those already and long on the field; and this if only because maturer tone was after all most appreciable and most consoling when one staggered back to it, wounded, bleeding, blinded, from the riot of the raw—or, to put the whole experience more prettily, no doubt, from excesses of light.

II

If he went in, however, with something of his more or less inevitable scowl, there were really, at the moment, two rather valid reasons for screened observation; the first of these being that the whole place seemed to reflect as never before the lustre of Mrs. Worthingham’s own polished and prosperous little person—to smile, it struck him, with her smile, to twinkle not only with the gleam of her lovely teeth, but with that of all her rings and brooches and bangles and other gewgaws, to curl and spasmodically cluster as in emulation of her charming complicated yellow tresses, to surround the most animated of pink-and-white, of ruffled and ribboned, of frilled and festooned Dresden china shepherdesses with exactly the right system of rococo curves and convolutions and other flourishes, a perfect bower of painted and gilded and moulded conceits. The second ground of this immediate impression of scenic extravagance, almost as if the curtain rose for him to the first act of some small and expensively mounted comic opera, was that she hadn’t, after all, awaited him in fond singleness, but had again just a trifle inconsiderately exposed him to the drawback of having to reckon, for whatever design he might amiably entertain, with the presence of a third and quite superfluous person, a small black insignificant but none the less oppressive stranger. It was odd how, on the instant, the little lady engaged with her did affect him as comparatively black—very much as if that had absolutely, in such a medium, to be the graceless appearance of any item not positively of some fresh shade of a light colour or of some pretty pretension to a charming twist. Any witness of their meeting, his hostess should surely have felt, would have been a false note in the whole rosy glow; but what note so false as that of the dingy little presence that she might actually, by a refinement of her perhaps always too visible study of effect, have provided as a positive contrast or foil? whose name and intervention, moreover, she appeared to be no more moved to mention and account for than she might have been to “present”—whether as stretched at her feet or erect upon disciplined haunches—some shaggy old domesticated terrier or poodle.

Extraordinarily, after he had been in the room five minutes—a space of time during which his fellow-visitor had neither budged nor uttered a sound—he had made Mrs. Worthingham out as all at once perfectly pleased to see him, completely aware of what he had most in mind, and singularly serene in face of his sense of their impediment. It was as if for all the world she didn't take it for one, the immobility, to say nothing of the seeming equanimity, of their tactless companion; at whom meanwhile indeed our friend himself, after his first ruffled perception, no more adventured a look than if advised by his constitutional kindness that to notice her in any degree would perforce be ungraciously to glower. He talked after a fashion with the woman as to whose power to please and amuse and serve him, as to whose really quite organised and indicated fitness for lighting up his autumn afternoon of life his conviction had lately strained itself so clear; but he was all the while carrying on an intenser exchange with his own spirit and trying to read into the charming creature's behaviour, as he could only call it, some confirmation of his theory that she also had her inward flutter and anxiously counted on him. He found support, happily for the conviction just named, in the idea, at no moment as yet really repugnant to him, the idea bound up in fact with the finer essence of her appeal, that she had her own vision too of her quality and her price, and that the last appearance she would have liked to bristle with was that of being forewarned and eager.

He had, if he came to think of it, scarce definitely warned her, and he probably wouldn't have taken to her so consciously in the first instance without an appreciative sense that, as she was a little person of twenty superficial graces, so she was also a little person with her secret pride. She might just have planted her mangy lion—not to say her muzzled house-dog—there in his path as a symbol that she wasn't cheap and easy; which would be a thing he couldn't possibly wish his future wife to have shown herself in advance, even if to him alone. That she could make him put himself such questions was precisely part of the attaching play of her iridescent surface, the shimmering interfusion of her various aspects; that of her youth with her independence—her pecuniary perhaps in particular, that of her vivacity with her beauty, that of her facility above all with her odd novelty; the high modernity, as people appeared to have come to call it, that made her so much more “knowing” in some directions than even he, man of the world as he certainly was, could pretend to be, though all on a basis of the most unconscious and instinctive and luxurious assumption. She was “up” to everything, aware of everything—if one counted from a short enough time back (from week before last, say, and as if quantities of history had burst upon the world within the fortnight); she was likewise surprised at nothing, and in that direction one might reckon as far ahead as the rest of her lifetime, or at any rate as the rest of his, which was all that would concern him: it was as if the suitability of the future to her personal and rather pampered tastes was what she most took for granted, so that he could see her, for all her Dresden-china shoes and her flutter of wondrous befrilled contemporary skirts, skip by the side of the coming age as over the floor of a ball-room, keeping step with its monstrous stride and prepared for every figure of the dance. Her outlook took form to him suddenly as a great square sunny window that hung in assured fashion over the immensity of life. There rose toward it as from a vast swarming *plaza* a high tide of emotion and sound; yet it was at the same time as if even while he looked her light gemmed hand, flashing on him in addition to those other things the perfect polish of the prettiest pink finger-nails in the world, had touched a spring, the most ingenious of ecent devices for instant ease, which dropped half across the scene a soft-coloured mechanical blind, a fluttered, fringed awning of charmingly toned silk, such as would make a bath of cool shade for the favoured friend leaning with her there—that is for the happy couple itself—on the balcony. The great view would be the prospect and privilege of the very state he coveted—since didn't he covet it?—the state of being so securely at her side; while the wash of privacy, as one might count it, the broad fine brush dipped into clear

umber and passed, full and wet, straight across the strong scheme of colour, would represent the security itself, all the uplifted inner elegance, the condition, so ideal, of being shut out from nothing and yet of having, so gaily and breezily aloft, none of the burden or worry of anything. Thus, as I say, for our friend, the place itself, while his vivid impression lasted, portentously opened and spread, and what was before him took, to his vision, though indeed at so other a crisis, the form of the “glimmering square” of the poet; yet, for a still more remarkable fact, with an incongruous object usurping at a given instant the privilege of the frame and seeming, even as he looked, to block the view.

The incongruous object was a woman’s head, crowned with a little sparsely feathered black hat, an ornament quite unlike those the women mostly noticed by White-Mason were now “wearing,” and that grew and grew, that came nearer and nearer, while it met his eyes, after the manner of images in the kinematograph. It had presently loomed so large that he saw nothing else—not only among the things at a considerable distance, the things Mrs. Worthingham would eventually, yet unmistakably, introduce him to, but among those of this lady’s various attributes and appurtenances as to which he had been in the very act of cultivating his consciousness. It was in the course of another minute the most extraordinary thing in the world: everything had altered, dropped, darkened, disappeared; his imagination had spread its wings only to feel them flop all grotesquely at its sides as he recognised in his hostess’s quiet companion, the oppressive alien who hadn’t indeed interfered with his fanciful flight, though she had prevented his immediate declaration and brought about the thud, not to say the felt violent shock, of his fall to earth, the perfectly plain identity of Cornelia Rasch. It was she who had remained there at attention; it was she their companion hadn’t introduced; it was she he had forborne to face with his fear of incivility. He stared at her—everything else went.

“Why it has been *you* all this time?”

Miss Rasch fairly turned pale. “I was waiting to see if you’d know me.”

“Ah, my dear Cornelia”—he came straight out with it—“rather!”

“Well, it isn’t,” she returned with a quick change to red now, “from having taken much time to look at me!”

She smiled, she even laughed, but he could see how she had felt his unconsciousness, poor thing; the acquaintance, quite the friend of his youth, as she had been, the associate of his childhood, of his early manhood, of his middle age in fact, up to a few years back, not more than ten at the most; the associate too of so many of his associates and of almost all of his relations, those of the other time, those who had mainly gone for ever; the person in short whose noted disappearance, though it might have seemed final, had been only of recent seasons. She was present again now, all unexpectedly—he had heard of her having at last, left alone after successive deaths and with scant resources, sought economic salvation in Europe, the promised land of American thrift—she was present as this almost ancient and this oddly unassertive little rotund figure whom one seemed no more obliged to address than if she had been a black satin ottoman “treated” with buttons and gimp; a class of object as to which the policy of blindness was imperative. He felt the need of some explanatory plea, and before he could think had uttered one at Mrs. Worthingham’s expense. “Why, you see we weren’t introduced——!”

“No—but I didn’t suppose I should have to be named to you.”

“Well, my dear woman, you haven’t—do me that justice!” He could at least make this point. “I felt all the while——!” However, it would have taken him long to say what he had been feeling; and he was aware now of the pretty projected light of Mrs. Worthingham’s wonder.

She looked as if, out for a walk with her, he had put her to the inconvenience of his stopping to speak to a strange woman in the street.

“I never supposed you knew her!”—it was to him his hostess excused herself.

This made Miss Rasch spring up, distinctly flushed, distinctly strange to behold, but not vulgarly nettled—Cornelia was incapable of that; only rather funnily bridling and laughing, only showing that this was all she had waited for, only saying just the right thing, the thing she could make so clearly a jest. “Of course if you *had* you’d have presented him.”

Mrs. Worthingham looked while answering at White-Mason. “I didn’t want you to go—which you see you do as soon as he speaks to you. But I never dreamed——!”

“That there was anything between us? Ah, there are no end of things!” He, on his side, though addressing the younger and prettier woman, looked at his fellow-guest; to whom he even continued: “When did you get back? May I come and see you the very first thing?”

Cornelia gasped and wriggled—she practically giggled; she had lost every atom of her little old, her little young, though always unaccountable prettiness, which used to peep so, on the bare chance of a shot, from behind indefensible features, that it almost made watching her a form of sport. He had heard vaguely of her, it came back to him (for there had been no letters; their later acquaintance, thank goodness, hadn’t involved that) as experimenting, for economy, and then as settling, to the same rather dismal end, somewhere in England, “at one of those intensely English places, St. Leonards, Cheltenham, Bognor, Dawlish—which, awfully, *was* it?”—and she now affected him for all the world as some small squirming, exclaiming, genteelly conversing old maid of a type vaguely associated with the three-volume novels he used to feed on (besides his so often encountering it in “real life,”) during a far-away stay of his own at Brighton. Odder than any element of his ex-gossip’s identity itself, however, was the fact that she somehow, with it all, rejoiced his sight. Indeed the supreme oddity was that the manner of her reply to his request for leave to call should have absolutely charmed his attention. She didn’t look at him; she only, from under her frumpy, crapy, curiously exotic hat, and with her good little near-sighted insinuating glare, expressed to Mrs. Worthingham, while she answered him, wonderful arch things, the overdone things of a shy woman. “Yes, you may call—but only when this dear lovely lady has done with you!” The moment after which she had gone.

III

Forty minutes later he was taking his way back from the queer miscarriage of his adventure; taking it, with no conscious positive felicity, through the very spaces that had witnessed shortly before the considerable serenity of his assurance. He had said to himself then, or had as good as said it, that, since he might do perfectly as he liked, it couldn’t fail for him that he must soon retrace those steps, humming, to all intents, the first bars of a wedding-march; so beautifully had it cleared up that he was “going to like” letting Mrs. Worthingham accept him. He was to have hummed no wedding-march, as it seemed to be turning out—he had none, up to now, to hum; and yet, extraordinarily, it wasn’t in the least because she had refused him. Why then hadn’t he liked as much as he had intended to like it putting the pleasant act, the act of not refusing him, in her power? Could it all have come from the awkward minute of his failure to decide sharply, on Cornelia’s departure, whether or no he would attend her to the door? He hadn’t decided at all—what the deuce had been in him?—but had danced to and fro in the room, thinking better of each impulse and then thinking worse. He had hesitated like an ass erect on absurd hind legs between two bundles of hay; the upshot of which must have been his giving the falsest impression. In what way that was to be

for an instant considered had their common past committed him to crapy Cornelia? He repudiated with a whack on the gravel any ghost of an obligation.

What he could get rid of with scant success, unfortunately, was the peculiar sharpness of his sense that, though mystified by his visible flurry—and yet not mystified enough for a sympathetic question either—his hostess had been, on the whole, even more frankly diverted: which was precisely an example of that newest, freshest, finest freedom in her, the air and the candour of assuming, not “heartlessly,” not viciously, not even very consciously, but with a bright pampered confidence which would probably end by affecting one’s nerves as the most impertinent stroke in the world, that every blest thing coming up for her in any connection was somehow matter for her general recreation. There she was again with the innocent egotism, the gilded and overflowing anarchism, really, of her doubtless quite unwitting but none the less rabid modern note. Her grace of ease was perfect, but it was all grace of ease, not a single shred of it grace of uncertainty or of difficulty—which meant, when you came to see, that, for its happy working, not a grain of provision was left by it to mere manners. This was clearly going to be the music of the future—that if people were but rich enough and furnished enough and fed enough, exercised and sanitized and manicured and generally advised and advertised and made “knowing” enough, *avertis* enough, as the term appeared to be nowadays in Paris, all they had to do for civility was to take the amused ironic view of those who might be less initiated. In *his* time, when he was young or even when he was only but a little less middle-aged, the best manners had been the best kindness, and the best kindness had mostly been some art of not insisting on one’s luxurious differences, of concealing rather, for common humanity, if not for common decency, a part at least of the intensity or the ferocity with which one might be “in the know.”

Oh, the “know”—Mrs. Worthingham was in it, all instinctively, inevitably, and as a matter of course, up to her eyes; which didn’t, however, the least little bit prevent her being as ignorant as a fish of everything that really and intimately and fundamentally concerned *him*, poor dear old White-Mason. She didn’t, in the first place, so much as know who he was—by which he meant know who and what it was to *be* a White-Mason, even a poor and a dear and old one, “anyway.” That indeed—he did her perfect justice—was of the very essence of the newness and freshness and beautiful, brave, social irresponsibility by which she had originally dazzled him: just exactly that circumstance of her having no instinct for any old quality or quantity or identity, a single historic or social value, as he might say, of the New York of his already almost legendary past; and that additional one of his, on his side, having, so far as this went, cultivated blankness, cultivated positive prudence, as to her own personal background—the vagueness, at the best, with which all honest gentlefolk, the New Yorkers of his approved stock and conservative generation, were content, as for the most part they were indubitably wise, to surround the origins and antecedents and queer unimaginable early influences of persons swimming into their ken from those parts of the country that quite necessarily and naturally figured to their view as “Godforsaken” and generally impossible.

The few scattered surviving representatives of a society once “good”—*rari nantes in gurgite vasto*—were liable, at the pass things had come to, to meet, and even amid old shades once sacred, or what was left of such, every form of social impossibility, and, more irresistibly still, to find these apparitions often carry themselves (often at least in the case of the women) with a wondrous wild gallantry, equally imperturbable and inimitable, the sort of thing that reached its maximum in Mrs. Worthingham. Beyond that who ever wanted to look up their annals, to reconstruct their steps and stages, to dot their i’s in fine, or to “go behind” anything that was theirs? One wouldn’t do that for the world—a rudimentary discretion forbade it; and yet this check from elementary undiscussable taste quite consorted with a due respect for them, or at any rate with a due respect for oneself in connection with them; as was just

exemplified in what would be his own, what would be poor dear old White-Mason's, insurmountable aversion to having, on any pretext, the doubtless very queer spectre of the late Mr. Worthingham presented to him. No question had he asked, or would he ever ask, should his life—that is should the success of his courtship—even intimately depend on it, either about that obscure agent of his mistress's actual affluence or about the happy head-spring itself, and the apparently copious tributaries, of the golden stream.

From all which marked anomalies, at any rate, what was the moral to draw? He dropped into a Park chair again with that question, he lost himself in the wonder of why he had come away with his homage so very much unpaid. Yet it didn't seem at all, actually, as if he could say or conclude, as if he could do anything but keep on worrying—just in conformity with his being a person who, whether or no familiar with the need to make his conduct square with his conscience and his taste, was never wholly exempt from that of making his taste and his conscience square with his conduct. To this latter occupation he further abandoned himself, and it didn't release him from his second brooding session till the sweet spring sunset had begun to gather and he had more or less cleared up, in the deepening dusk, the effective relation between the various parts of his ridiculously agitating experience. There were vital facts he seemed thus to catch, to seize, with a nervous hand, and the twilight helping, by their vaguely whisked tails; unquiet truths that swarmed out after the fashion of creatures bold only at eventide, creatures that hovered and circled, that verily brushed his nose, in spite of their shyness. Yes, he had practically just sat on with his “mistress”—heaven save the mark!—as if not to come to the point; as if it had absolutely come up that there would be something rather vulgar and awful in doing so. The whole stretch of his stay after Cornelia's withdrawal had been consumed by his almost ostentatiously treating himself to the opportunity of which he was to make nothing. It was as if he had sat and watched himself—that came back to him: Shall I now or sha'n't I? Will I now or won't I? “Say within the next three minutes, say by a quarter past six, or by twenty minutes past, at the furthest—always if nothing more comes up to prevent.”

What had already come up to prevent was, in the strangest and drollest, or at least in the most preposterous, way in the world, that not Cornelia's presence, but her very absence, with its distraction of his thoughts, the thoughts that lumbered after her, had made the difference; and without his being the least able to tell why and how. He put it to himself after a fashion by the image that, this distraction once created, his working round to his hostess again, his reverting to the matter of his errand, began suddenly to represent a return from so far. That was simply all—or rather a little less than all; for something else had contributed. “I never dreamed you knew her,” and “I never dreamed *you* did,” were inevitably what had been exchanged between them—supplemented by Mrs. Worthingham's mere scrap of an explanation: “Oh yes—to the small extent you see. Two years ago in Switzerland when I was at a high place for an ‘aftercure,’ during twenty days of incessant rain, she was the only person in an hotel full of roaring, gorging, smoking Germans with whom I could have a word of talk. She and I were the only speakers of English, and were thrown together like castaways on a desert island and in a raging storm. She was ill besides, and she had no maid, and mine looked after her, and she was very grateful—writing to me later on and saying she should certainly come to see me if she ever returned to New York. She has returned, you see—and there she was, poor little creature!” Such was Mrs. Worthingham's tribute—to which even his asking her if Miss Rasch had ever happened to speak of him caused her practically to add nothing. Visibly she had never thought again of any one Miss Rasch had spoken of or anything Miss Rasch had said; right as she was, naturally, about her being a little clever queer creature. This was perfectly true, and yet it was probably—by being *all* she could dream of about her—what had

paralysed his proper gallantry. Its effect had been not in what it simply stated, but in what, under his secretly disintegrating criticism, it almost luridly symbolised.

He had quitted his seat in the Louis Quinze drawing-room without having, as he would have described it, done anything but give the lady of the scene a superior chance not to betray a defeated hope—not, that is, to fail of the famous “pride” mostly supposed to prop even the most infatuated women at such junctures; by which chance, to do her justice, she had thoroughly seemed to profit. But he finally rose from his later station with a feeling of better success. He had by a happy turn of his hand got hold of the most precious, the least obscure of the flitting, circling things that brushed his ears. What he wanted—as justifying for him a little further consideration—was there before him from the moment he could put it that Mrs. Worthingham had no data. He almost hugged that word,—it suddenly came to mean so much to him. No data, he felt, for a conception of the sort of thing the New York of “his time” had been in his personal life—the New York so unexpectedly, so vividly and, as he might say, so perversely called back to all his senses by its identity with that of poor Cornelia’s time: since even she had had a time, small show as it was likely to make now, and his time and hers had been the same. Cornelia figured to him while he walked away as, by contrast and opposition, a massive little bundle of data; his impatience to go to see her sharpened as he thought of this: so certainly should he find out that wherever he might touch her, with a gentle though firm pressure, he would, as the fond visitor of old houses taps and fingers a disfeatured, overpapered wall with the conviction of a wainscot-edge beneath, recognise some small extrusion of history.

IV

There would have been a wonder for us meanwhile in his continued use, as it were, of his happy formula—brought out to Cornelia Rasch within ten minutes, or perhaps only within twenty, of his having settled into the quite comfortable chair that, two days later, she indicated to him by her fireside. He had arrived at her address through the fortunate chance of his having noticed her card, as he went out, deposited, in the good old New York fashion, on one of the rococo tables of Mrs. Worthingham’s hall. His eye had been caught by the pencilled indication that was to affect him, the next instant, as fairly placed there for his sake. This had really been his luck, for he shouldn’t have liked to write to Mrs. Worthingham for guidance—*that* he felt, though too impatient just now to analyze the reluctance. There was nobody else he could have approached for a clue, and with this reflection he was already aware of how it testified to their rare little position, his and Cornelia’s—position as conscious, ironic, pathetic survivors together of a dead and buried society—that there would have been, in all the town, under such stress, not a member of their old circle left to turn to. Mrs. Worthingham had practically, even if accidentally, helped him to knowledge; the last nail in the coffin of the poor dear extinct past had been planted for him by his having thus to reach his antique contemporary through perforation of the newest newness. The note of this particular recognition was in fact the more prescribed to him that the ground of Cornelia’s return to a scene swept so bare of the associational charm was certainly inconspicuous. What had she then come back for?—he had asked himself that; with the effect of deciding that it probably would have been, a little, to “look after” her remnant of property. Perhaps she had come to save what little might still remain of that shrivelled interest; perhaps she had been, by those who took care of it for her, further swindled and despoiled, so that she wished to get at the facts. Perhaps on the other hand—it was a more cheerful chance—her investments, decently administered, were making larger returns, so that the rigorous thrift of Bognor could be finally relaxed.

He had little to learn about the attraction of Europe, and rather expected that in the event of his union with Mrs Worthingham he should find himself pleading for it with the competence of one more in the “know” about Paris and Rome, about Venice and Florence, than even she could be. He could have lived on in *his* New York, that is in the sentimental, the spiritual, the more or less romantic visitation of it; but had it been positive for him that he could live on in hers?—unless indeed the possibility of this had been just (like the famous *vertige de l’abîme*, like the solicitation of danger, or otherwise of the dreadful) the very hinge of his whole dream. However that might be, his curiosity was occupied rather with the conceivable hinge of poor Cornelia’s: it was perhaps thinkable that even Mrs. Worthingham’s New York, once it should have become possible again at all, might have put forth to this lone exile a plea that wouldn’t be in the chords of Bognor. For himself, after all, too, the attraction had been much more of the Europe over which one might move at one’s ease, and which therefore could but cost, and cost much, right and left, than of the Europe adapted to scrimping. He saw himself on the whole scrimping with more zest even in Mrs. Worthingham’s New York than under the inspiration of Bognor. Apart from which it was yet again odd, not to say perceptibly pleasing to him, to note where the emphasis of his interest fell in this fumble of fancy over such felt oppositions as the new, the latest, the luridest power of money and the ancient reserves and moderations and mediocrities. These last struck him as showing by contrast the old brown surface and tone as of velvet rubbed and worn, shabby, and even a bit dingy, but all soft and subtle and still velvety—which meant still dignified; whereas the angular facts of current finance were as harsh and metallic and bewildering as some stacked “exhibit” of ugly patented inventions, things his mediaeval mind forbade his taking in. He had for instance the sense of knowing the pleasant little old Rasch fortune—pleasant as far as it went; blurred memories and impressions of what it had been and what it hadn’t, of how it had grown and how languished and how melted; they came back to him and put on such vividness that he could almost have figured himself testify for them before a bland and encouraging Board. The idea of taking the field in any manner on the subject of Mrs. Worthingham’s resources would have affected him on the other hand as an odious ordeal, some glare of embarrassment and exposure in a circle of hard unhelpful attention, of converging, derisive, unsuggestive eyes.

In Cornelia’s small and quite cynically modern flat—the house had a grotesque name, “The Gainsborough,” but at least wasn’t an awful boarding-house, as he had feared, and she could receive him quite honourably, which was so much to the good—he would have been ready to use at once to her the greatest freedom of friendly allusion: “Have you still your old ‘family interest’ in those two houses in Seventh Avenue?—one of which was next to a corner grocery, don’t you know? and was occupied as to its lower part by a candy-shop where the proportion of the stock of suspectedly stale popcorn to that of rarer and stickier joys betrayed perhaps a modest capital on the part of your father’s, your grandfather’s, or whoever’s tenant, but out of which I nevertheless remember once to have come as out of a bath of sweets, with my very garments, and even the separate hairs of my head, glued together. The other of the pair, a tobacconist’s, further down, had before it a wonderful huge Indian who thrust out wooden cigars at an indifferent world—you could buy candy cigars too, at the pop-corn shop, and I greatly preferred them to the wooden; I remember well how I used to gape in fascination at the Indian and wonder if the last of the Mohicans was like him; besides admiring so the resources of a family whose ‘property’ was in such forms. I haven’t been round there lately—we must go round together; but don’t tell me the forms have utterly perished!” It was after *that* fashion he might easily have been moved, and with almost no transition, to break out to Cornelia—quite as if taking up some old talk, some old community of gossip, just where they had left it; even with the consciousness perhaps of overdoing a

little, of putting at its maximum, for the present harmony, recovery, recapture (what should he call it?) the pitch and quantity of what the past had held for them.

He didn't in fact, no doubt, dart straight off to Seventh Avenue, there being too many other old things and much nearer and long subsequent; the point was only that for everything they spoke of after he had fairly begun to lean back and stretch his legs, and after she had let him, above all, light the first of a succession of cigarettes—for everything they spoke of he positively cultivated extravagance and excess, piling up the crackling twigs as on the very altar of memory; and that by the end of half an hour she had lent herself, all gallantly, to their game. It was the game of feeding the beautiful iridescent flame, ruddy and green and gold, blue and pink and amber and silver, with anything they could pick up, anything that would burn and flicker. Thick-strown with such gleanings the occasion seemed indeed, in spite of the truth that they perhaps wouldn't have proved, under cross-examination, to have rubbed shoulders in the other life so very hard. Casual contacts, qualified communities enough, there had doubtless been, but not particular "passages," nothing that counted, as he might think of it, for their "very own" together, for nobody's else at all. These shades of historic exactitude didn't signify; the more and the less that there had been made perfect terms—and just by his being there and by her rejoicing in it—with their present need to have *had* all their past could be made to appear to have given them. It was to this tune they proceeded, the least little bit as if they knowingly pretended—he giving her the example and setting her the pace of it, and she, poor dear, after a first inevitable shyness, an uncertainty of wonder, a breathlessness of courage, falling into step and going whatever length he would.

She showed herself ready for it, grasping gladly at the perception of what he must mean; and if she didn't immediately and completely fall in—not in the first half-hour, not even in the three or four others that his visit, even whenever he consulted his watch, still made nothing of—she yet understood enough as soon as she understood that, if their finer economy hadn't so beautifully served, he might have been conveying this, that, and the other incoherent and easy thing by the comparatively clumsy method of sound and statement. "No, I never made love to you; it would in fact have been absurd, and I don't care—though I almost know, in the sense of almost remembering!—who did and who didn't; but you were always about, and so was I, and, little as you may yourself care who I did it to, I dare say you remember (in the sense of having known of it!) any old appearances that told. But we can't afford at this time of day not to help each other to have had—well, everything there was, since there's no more of it now, nor any way of coming by it except so; and therefore let us make together, let us make over and recreate, our lost world; for which we have after all and at the worst such a lot of material. You were in particular my poor dear sisters' friend—they thought you the funniest little brown thing possible; so isn't that again to the good? You were mine only to the extent that you were so much in and out of the house—as how much, if we come to that, wasn't one in and out, south of Thirtieth Street and north of Washington Square, in those days, those spacious, sociable, Arcadian days, that we flattered ourselves we filled with the modern fever, but that were so different from any of these arrangements of pretended hourly Time that dash themselves forever to pieces as from the fiftieth floors of sky-scrapers."

This was the kind of thing that was in the air, whether he said it or not, and that could hang there even with such quite other things as more crudely came out; came in spite of its being perhaps calculated to strike us that these last would have been rather and most the unspoken and the indirect. They were Cornelia's contribution, and as soon as she had begun to talk of Mrs. Worthingham—*he* didn't begin it!—they had taken their place bravely in the centre of the circle. There they made, the while, their considerable little figure, but all within the ring formed by fifty other allusions, fitful but really intenser irruptions that hovered and wavered and came and went, joining hands at moments and whirling round as in chorus, only then

again to dash at the slightly huddled centre with a free twitch or peck or push or other taken liberty, after the fashion of irregular frolic motions in a country dance or a Christmas game.

“You’re so in love with her and want to marry her!”—she said it all sympathetically and yearningly, poor crapy Cornelia; as if it were to be quite taken for granted that she knew all about it. And then when he had asked how she knew—why she took so informed a tone about it; all on the wonder of her seeming so much more “in” it just at that hour than he himself quite felt he could figure for: “Ah, how but from the dear lovely thing herself? Don’t you suppose *she* knows it?”

“Oh, she absolutely ‘knows’ it, does she?”—he fairly heard himself ask that; and with the oddest sense at once of sharply wanting the certitude and yet of seeing the question, of hearing himself say the words, through several thicknesses of some wrong medium. He came back to it from a distance; as he would have had to come back (this was again vivid to him) should he have got round again to his ripe intention three days before—after his now present but then absent friend, that is, had left him planted before his now absent but then present one for the purpose. “Do you mean she—at all confidently!—expects?” he went on, not much minding if it couldn’t but sound foolish; the time being given it for him meanwhile by the sigh, the wondering gasp, all charged with the unutterable, that the tone of his appeal set in motion. He saw his companion look at him, but it might have been with the eyes of thirty years ago; when—very likely.—he had put her some such question about some girl long since dead. Dimly at first, then more distinctly, didn’t it surge back on him for the very strangeness that there had been some such passage as this between them—yes, about Mary Cardew!—in the autumn of ‘68?

“Why, don’t you realise your situation?” Miss Rasch struck him as quite beautifully wailing—above all to such an effect of deep interest, that is, on her own part and in him.

“My situation?”—he echoed, he considered; but reminded afresh, by the note of the detached, the far-projected in it, of what he had last remembered of his sentient state on his once taking ether at the dentist’s.

“Yours and hers—the situation of her adoring you. I suppose you at least know it,” Cornelia smiled.

Yes, it was like the other time and yet it wasn’t. She was like—poor Cornelia was—everything that used to be; that somehow was most definite to him. Still he could quite reply “Do you call it—her adoring me—*my* situation?”

“Well, it’s a part of yours, surely—if you’re in love with her.”

“Am I, ridiculous old person! in love with her?” White-Mason asked.

“I may be a ridiculous old person,” Cornelia returned—”and, for that matter, of course I am! But she’s young and lovely and rich and clever: so what could be more natural?”

“Oh, I was applying that opprobrious epithet—!” He didn’t finish, though he meant he had applied it to himself. He had got up from his seat; he turned about and, taking in, as his eyes also roamed, several objects in the room, serene and sturdy, not a bit cheap-looking, little old New York objects of ‘68, he made, with an inner art, as if to recognise them—made so, that is, for himself; had quite the sense for the moment of asking them, of imploring them, to recognise *him*, to be for him things of his own past. Which they truly were, he could have the next instant cried out; for it meant that if three or four of them, small sallow carte-de-visite photographs, faithfully framed but spectrally faded, hadn’t in every particular, frames and balloon skirts and false “property” balustrades of unimaginable terraces and all, the tone of time, the secret for warding and easing off the perpetual imminent ache of one’s protective

scowl, one would verily but have to let the scowl stiffen, or to take up seriously the question of blue goggles, during what might remain of life.

V

What he actually took up from a little old Twelfth-Street table that piously preserved the plain mahogany circle, with never a curl nor a crook nor a hint of a brazen flourish, what he paused there a moment for commerce with, his back presented to crapy Cornelia, who sat taking that view of him, during this opportunity, very protrusively and frankly and fondly, was one of the wasted mementos just mentioned, over which he both uttered and suppressed a small comprehensive cry. He stood there another minute to look at it, and when he turned about still kept it in his hand, only holding it now a litde behind him. “You *must* have come back to stay—with all your beautiful things. What else does it mean?”

“‘Beautiful’?” his old friend commented with her brow all wrinkled and her lips thrust out in expressive dispraise. They might at that rate have been scarce more beautiful than she herself. “Oh, don’t talk so—after Mrs. Worthingham’s! *They’re* wonderful, if you will: such things, such things! But one’s own poor relics and odds and ends are one’s own at least; and one *has*—yes—come back to them. They’re all I have in the world to come back to. They were stored, and what I was paying—!” Miss Rasch wofully added.

He had possession of the small old picture; he hovered there; he put his eyes again to it intently; then again held it a little behind him as if it might have been snatched away or the very feel of it, pressed against him, was good to his palm. “Mrs. Worthingham’s things? You think them beautiful?”

Cornelia did now, if ever, show an odd face. “Why certainly prodigious, or whatever. Isn’t that conceded?”

“No doubt every horror, at the pass we’ve come to, is conceded. That’s just what I complain of.”

“Do you *complain*?”—she drew it out as for surprise: she couldn’t have imagined such a thing.

“To me her things are awful. They’re the newest of the new.”

“Ah, but the old forms!”

“Those are the most blatant. I mean the swaggering reproductions.”

“Oh but,” she pleaded, “we can’t all be *really* old.”

“No, we can’t, Cornelia. But *you* can—!” said White-Mason with the frankest appreciation.

She looked up at him from where she sat as he could imagine her looking up at the curate at Bognor. “Thank you, sir! If that’s all you want——!”

“It *is*” he said, “all I want—or almost.”

“Then no wonder such a creature as that,” she lightly moralised, “won’t suit you!”

He bent upon her, for all the weight of his question, his smoothest stare. “You hold she certainly won’t suit me?”

“Why, what can I tell about it? Haven’t you by this time found out?”

“No, but I think I’m finding.” With which he began again to explore.

Miss Rasch immensely wondered. “You mean you don’t expect to come to an understanding with her?” And then as even to this straight challenge he made at first no answer: “Do you mean you give it up?”

He waited some instants more, but not meeting her eyes—only looking again about the room. “What do you think of my chance?”

“Oh,” his companion cried, “what has what I think to do with it? How can I think anything but that she must like you?”

“Yes—of course. But how much?”

“Then don’t you really know?” Cornelia asked.

He kept up his walk, oddly preoccupied and still not looking at her. “Do you, my dear?”

She waited a little. “If you haven’t really put it to her I don’t suppose she knows.”

This at last arrested him again. “My dear Cornelia, she doesn’t know——!”

He had paused as for the desperate tone, or at least the large emphasis of it, so that she took him up. “The more reason then to help her to find it out.”

“I mean,” he explained, “that she doesn’t know anything.”

“Anything?”

“Anything else, I mean—even if she does know *that*.”

Cornelia considered of it. “But what else need she—in particular—know? Isn’t that the principal thing?”

“Well”—and he resumed his circuit—“she doesn’t know anything that we know. But nothing,” he re-emphasised—“nothing whatever!”

“Well, can’t she do without that?”

“Evidently she can—and evidently she does, beautifully. But the question is whether *I* can!”

He had paused once more with his point—but she glared, poor Cornelia, with her wonder.

“Surely if you know for yourself——!”

“Ah, it doesn’t seem enough for me to know for myself! One wants a woman,” he argued—but still, in his prolonged tour, quite without his scowl—“to know *for* one, to know *with* one. That’s what you do now,” he candidly put to her.

It made her again gape. “Do you mean you want to marry *me*?”

He was so full of what he did mean, however, that he failed even to notice it. “She doesn’t in the least know, for instance, how old I am.”

“That’s because you’re so young!”

“Ah, there you are!”—and he turned off afresh and as if almost in disgust. It left her visibly perplexed—though even the perplexed Cornelia was still the exceedingly pointed; but he had come to her aid after another turn. “Remember, please, that I’m pretty well as old as you.”

She had all her point at least, while she bridled and blinked, for this. “You’re exactly a year and ten months older.”

It checked him there for delight. “You remember my birthday?”

She twinkled indeed like some far-off light of home. “I remember every one’s. It’s a little way I’ve always had—and that I’ve never lost.”

He looked at her accomplishment, across the room, as at some striking, some charming phenomenon. “Well, *that’s* the sort of thing I want!” All the ripe candour of his eyes confirmed it.

What could she do therefore, she seemed to ask him, but repeat her question of a moment before?—which indeed presently she made up her mind to. “Do you want to marry *me*?”

It had this time better success—if the term may be felt in any degree to apply. All his candour, or more of it at least, was in his slow, mild, kind, considering head-shake. “No, Cornelia—not to *marry* you.”

His discrimination was a wonder; but since she was clearly treating him now as if everything about him was, so she could as exquisitely meet it. “Not at least,” she convulsively smiled, “until you’ve honourably tried Mrs. Worthingham. Don’t you really *mean* to?” she gallantly insisted.

He waited again a little; then he brought out: “I’ll tell you presently.” He came back, and as by still another mere glance over the room, to what seemed to him so much nearer. “That table was old Twelfth-Street?”

“Everything here was.”

“Oh, the pure blessings! With you, ah, with you, I haven’t to wear a green shade.” And he had retained meanwhile his small photograph, which he again showed himself. “Didn’t we talk of Mary Cardew?”

“Why, do you remember it?” She marvelled to extravagance.

“You make me. You connect me with it. You connect it with we.” He liked to display to her this excellent use she thus had, the service she rendered. “There are so many connections—there will be so many. I feel how, with you, they must all come up again for me: in fact you’re bringing them out already, just while I look at you, as fast as ever you can. The fact that you knew every one—!” he went on; yet as if there were more in that too than he could quite trust himself about.

“Yes, I knew every one,” said Cornelia Rasch; but this time with perfect simplicity. “I knew, I imagine, more than you do—or more than you did.”

It kept him there, it made him wonder with his eyes on her. “Things about *them*—our people?”

“Our people. Ours only now.”

Ah, such an interest as he felt in this—taking from her while, so far from scowling, he almost gaped, all it might mean! “Ours indeed—and it’s awfully good they are; or that we’re still here for them! Nobody else is—nobody but you: not a cat!”

“Well, I *am* a cat!” Cornelia grinned.

“Do you mean you can tell me things—?” It was too beautiful to believe.

“About what really *was*?” she artfully considered, holding him immensely now. “Well, unless they’ve come to you with time; unless you’ve learned—or found out.”

“Oh,” he reassuringly cried—reassuringly, it most seemed, for himself—“nothing has come to me with time, everything has gone from me. How can I find out now! What creature has an idea——?”

She threw up her hands with the shrug of old days—the sharp little shrug his sisters used to imitate and that she hadn't had to go to Europe for. The only thing was that he blessed her for bringing it back.

“Ah, the ideas of people now——!”

“Yes, their ideas are certainly not about us” But he ruefully faced it. “We've none the less, however, to live with them.”

“With their ideas—?” Cornelia questioned.

“With *them*—these modern wonders; such as they are!” Then he went on: “It must have been to help me you've come back.”

She said nothing for an instant about that, only nodding instead at his photograph. “What has become of yours? I mean of *her*.”

This time it made him turn pale. “You remember I *have* one?”

She kept her eyes on him. “In a ‘pork-pie’ hat, with her hair in a long net. That was so ‘smart’ then; especially with one's skirt looped up, over one's hooped magenta petticoat, in little festoons, and a row of very big onyx beads over one's braided velveteen sack—braided quite plain and very broad, don't you know?”

He smiled for her extraordinary possession of these things—she was as prompt as if she had had them before her. “Oh, rather—'don't I know?' You wore brown velveteen, and, on those remarkably small hands, funny gauntlets—like mine.”

“Oh, do *you* remember? But like yours?” she wondered.

“I mean like hers in my photograph.” But he came back to the present picture. “This is better, however, for really showing her lovely head.”

“Mary's head was a perfection!” Cornelia testified.

“Yes—it was better than her heart.”

“Ah, don't say that!” she pleaded. “You weren't fair.”

“Don't you think I was fair?” It interested him immensely—and the more that he indeed mightn't have been; which he seemed somehow almost to hope.

“She didn't think so—to the very end.”

“She didn't?”—ah the right things Cornelia said to him! But before she could answer he was studying again closely the small faded face. “No, she doesn't, she doesn't. Oh, her charming sad eyes and the way they say that, across the years, straight into mine! But I don't know, I don't know!” White-Mason quite comfortably sighed.

His companion appeared to appreciate this effect. “That's just the way you used to flirt with her, poor thing. Wouldn't you like to have it?” she asked.

“This—for my very own?” He looked up delighted. “I really may?”

“Well, if you'll give me yours. We'll exchange.”

“That's a charming idea. We'll exchange. But you must come and get it at my rooms—where you'll see my things.”

For a little she made no answer—as if for some feeling. Then she said: “You asked me just now why I've come back.”

He stared as for the connection; after which with a smile: “Not to do *that*——?”

She waited briefly again, but with a queer little look. "I can do those things now; and—yes!—that's in a manner why. I came," she then said, "because I knew of a sudden one day—knew as never before—that I was old."

"I see. I see." He quite understood—she had notes that so struck him. "And how did you like it?"

She hesitated—she decided. "Well, if I liked it, it was on the principle perhaps on which some people like high game!"

"High game—that's good!" he laughed. "Ah, my dear, we're 'high'!"

She shook her head. "No, not you—yet. I at any rate didn't want any more adventures," Cornelia said.

He showed their small relic again with assurance. "You wanted *us*. Then here we are. Oh how we can talk!—with all those things you know! You are an invention. And you'll see there are things I know. I shall turn up here—well, daily."

She took it in, but only after a moment answered. "There was something you said just now you'd tell me. Don't you mean to try——?"

"Mrs. Worthingham?" He drew from within his coat his pocket-book and carefully found a place in it for Mary Cardew's *carte-de-visite*, folding it together with deliberation over which he put it back. Finally he spoke. "No—I've decided. I can't—I don't want to."

Cornelia marvelled—or looked as if she did. "Not for all she has?"

"Yes—I know all she has. But I also know all she hasn't. And, as I told you, she herself doesn't—hasn't a glimmer of a suspicion of it; and never will have."

Cornelia magnanimously thought "No—but she knows other things."

He shook his head as at the portentous heap of them. "Too many—too many. And other indeed—*so* other! Do you know," he went on, "that it's as if *you*—by turning up for me—had brought that home to me?"

"For you," she candidly considered. "But what—since you can't marry me!—can you do with me?"

Well, he seemed to have it all. "Everything. I can live with you—just this way." To illustrate which he dropped into the other chair by her fire; where, leaning back, he gazed at the flame. "I can't give you up. It's very curious. It has come over me as it did over you when you renounced Bognor. That's it—I know it at last, and I see one can like it. I'm 'high.' You needn't deny it. That's my taste. I'm old." And in spite of the considerable glow there of her little household altar he said it without the scowl.

The Bench Of Desolation

I

SHE had practically, he believed, conveyed the intimation, the horrid, brutal, vulgar menace, in the course of their last dreadful conversation, when, for whatever was left him of pluck or confidence—confidence in what he would fain have called a little more aggressively the strength of his position—he had judged best not to take it up. But this time there was no question of not understanding, or of pretending he didn't; the ugly, the awful words, ruthlessly formed by her lips, were like the fingers of a hand that she might have thrust into her pocket for extraction of the monstrous object that would serve best for—what should he call it?—a gage of battle.

“If I haven't a very different answer from you within the next three days I shall put the matter into the hands of my solicitor, whom it may interest you to know I've already seen. I shall bring an action for 'breach' against you, Herbert Dodd, as sure as my name's Kate Cookham.”

There it was, straight and strong—yet he felt he could say for himself, when once it had come, or even, already, just as it was coming, that it turned on, as if she had moved an electric switch, the very brightest light of his own very reasons. There *she* was, in all the grossness of her native indelicacy, in all her essential excess of will and destitution of scruple; and it was the woman capable of that ignoble threat who, his sharper sense of her quality having become so quite deterrent, was now making for him a crime of it that he shouldn't wish to tie himself to her for life. The vivid, lurid thing was the reality, all unmistakable, of her purpose; she had thought her case well out; had measured its odious, specious presentability; had taken, he might be sure, the very best advice obtainable at Properley, where there was always a first-rate promptitude of everything fourth-rate; it was disgustingly certain, in short, that she'd proceed. She was sharp and adroit, moreover—distinctly in certain ways a master-hand; how otherwise, with her so limited mere attractiveness, should she have entangled him? He couldn't shut his eyes to the very probable truth that if she should try it she'd pull it off. She *knew* she would—precisely; and her assurance was thus the very proof of her cruelty. That she had pretended she loved him was comparatively nothing; other women had pretended it, and other women too had really done it; but that she had pretended he could possibly have been right and safe and blest in loving *her*, a creature of the kind who could sniff that squalor of the law-court, of claimed damages and brazen lies and published kisses, of love-letters read amid obscene guffaws, as a positive tonic to resentment, as a high incentive to her course—this was what put him so beautifully in the right. It was what might signify in a woman all through, he said to himself, the mere imagination of such machinery. Truly what a devilish conception and what an appalling nature!

But there was no doubt, luckily, either, that he *could* plant his feet the firmer for his now intensified sense of these things. He was to live, it appeared, abominably worried, he was to live consciously rueful, he was to live perhaps even what a scoffing world would call abjectly exposed; but at least he was to live saved. In spite of his clutch of which steady truth, however, and in spite of his declaring to her, with many other angry protests and pleas, that the line of conduct she announced was worthy of a vindictive barmaid, a lurking fear in him, too deep to counsel mere defiance, made him appear to keep open a little, till he could somehow turn round again, the door of possible composition. He had scoffed at her claim, at

her threat, at her thinking she could hustle and bully him—"Such a way, my eye, to call back to life a dead love!"—yet his instinct was ever, prudentially but helplessly, for gaining time, even if time only more wofully to quake, and he gained it now by not absolutely giving for his ultimatum that he wouldn't think of coming round. He didn't in the smallest degree mean to come round, but it was characteristic of him that he could for three or four days breathe a little easier by having left her under the impression that he perhaps might. At the same time he couldn't not have said—what had conduced to bring out, in retort, her own last word, the word on which they had parted—"Do you mean to say you yourself would now be *willing* to marry and live with a man of whom you could feel, the thing done, that he'd be all the while thinking of you in the light of a hideous coercion?" "Never you mind about *my* willingness," Kate had answered; "you've known what that has been for the last six months. Leave that to me, my willingness—I'll take care of it all right; and just see what conclusion you can come to about your own."

He was to remember afterward how he had wondered whether, turned upon her in silence while her odious lucidity reigned unchecked, his face had shown her anything like the quantity of hate he felt. Probably not at all; no man's face *could* express that immense amount; especially the fair, refined, intellectual, gentlemanlike face which had had—and by her own more than once repeated avowal—so much to do with the enormous fancy she had originally taken to him. "Which—frankly now—would you personally *rather* I should do," he had at any rate asked her with an intention of supreme irony: "just sordidly marry you on top of this, or leave you the pleasure of your lovely appearance in court and of your so assured (since that's how you feel it) big haul of damages? Sha'n't you be awfully disappointed, in fact, if I don't let you get something better out of me than a poor plain ten-shilling gold ring and the rest of the blasphemous rubbish, as we should make it between us, pronounced at the altar? I take it of course," he had swaggered on, "that your pretension wouldn't be for a moment that I should—after the act of profanity—take up my life with you."

"It's just as much my dream as it ever was, Herbert Dodd, to take up mine with *you!* Remember for me that I can do with it, my dear, that my idea is for even as much as that of you!" she had cried; "remember that for me, Herbert Dodd; remember, remember!"

It was on this she had left him—left him frankly under a mortal chill. There might have been the last ring of an appeal or a show of persistent and perverse tenderness in it, however preposterous any such matter; but in point of fact her large, clean, plain, brown face—so much too big for her head, he now more than ever felt it to be, just as her head was so much too big for her body, and just as her hats had an irritating way of appearing to decline choice and conformity in respect to *any* of her dimensions—presented itself with about as much expression as his own shop-window when the broad, blank, sallow blind was down. He was fond of his shop-window with some good show on; he had a fancy for a good show and was master of twenty different schemes of taking arrangement for the old books and prints, "high-class rarities" his modest catalogue called them, in which he dealt and which his maternal uncle, David Geddes, had, as he liked to say, "handed down" to him. His widowed mother had screwed the whole thing, the stock and the connection and the rather bad little house in the rather bad little street, out of the ancient worthy, shortly before his death, in the name of the youngest and most interesting, the "delicate" one and the literary, of her five scattered and struggling children. He could enjoy his happiest collocations and contrasts and effects, his harmonies and varieties of toned and faded leather and cloth, his sought color-notes and the high clearnesses, here and there, of his white and beautifully figured price-labels, which pleased him enough in themselves almost to console him for not oftener having to break, on a customer's insistence, into the balanced composition. But the dropped expanse of time-soiled

canvas, the thing of Sundays and holidays, with just his name, “Herbert Dodd, Successor,” painted on below his uncle’s antique style, the feeble penlike flourishes already quite archaic—this ugly vacant mask, which might so easily be taken for the mask of failure, somehow always gave him a chill.

That had been just the sort of chill—the analogy was complete—of Kate Cookham’s last look. He supposed people doing an awfully good and sure and steady business, in whatever line, could see a whole front turned to vacancy that way and merely think of the hours off represented by it. Only for this—nervously to bear it, in other words, and Herbert Dodd, quite with the literary temperament himself, was capable of that amount of play of fancy, or even of morbid analysis—you had to be on some footing, you had to feel some confidence, pretty different from his own up to now. He had never *not* enjoyed passing his show on the other side of the street and taking it in thence with a casual obliquity; but he had never held optical commerce with the drawn blind for a moment longer than he could help. It *always* looked horribly final and as if it never would come up again. Big and bare, with his name staring at him from the middle, it thus offered in its grimness a turn of comparison for Miss Cookham’s ominous visage. She never wore pretty, dotty, transparent veils, as Nan Drury did, and the words “Herbert Dodd”—save that she had sounded them at him there two or three times more like a Meg Merrilies or the bold bad woman in one of the melodramas of high life given during the fine season in the pavilion at the end of Properley Pier—were dreadfully, were permanently, seated on her lips. *She* was grim, no mistake.

That evening, alone in the back room above the shop, he saw so little what he could do that, consciously demoralised for the hour, he gave way to tears about it. Her taking a stand so incredibly “low,” that was what he couldn’t get over. The particular bitterness of his cup was his having let himself in for a struggle on such terms—the use, on her side, of the vulgarest process known to the law: the vulgarest, the vulgarest, he kept repeating that, clinging to the help rendered him by this imputation to his terrorist of the vice he sincerely believed he had ever, among difficulties (for oh he recognised the difficulties!) sought to keep most alien to him. He knew what he was, in a dismal, down-trodden sphere enough—the lean young proprietor of an old business that had itself rather shrivelled with age than ever grown fat, the purchase and sale of second-hand books and prints, with the back street of a long-fronted south-coast watering-place (Old Town by good luck) for the dusky field of his life. But he had gone in for all the education he could get—his educated customers would often hang about for more talk by the half-hour at a time, he actually feeling himself, and almost with a scruple, hold them there; which meant that he had had (he couldn’t be blind to that) natural taste and had lovingly cultivated and formed it. Thus, from as far back as he could remember, there had been things all round him that he suffered from when other people didn’t; and he had kept most of his suffering to himself—which had taught him, in a manner, *how* to suffer, and how almost to like to.

So, at any rate, he had never let go his sense of certain differences, he had done everything he could to keep it up—whereby everything that was vulgar was on the wrong side of his line. He had believed, for a series of strange, oppressed months, that Kate Cookham’s manners and tone were on the right side; she had been governess—for young children—in two very good private families, and now had classes in literature and history for bigger girls who were sometimes brought by their mammas; in fact, coming in one day to look over his collection of students’ manuals, and drawing it out, as so many did, for the evident sake of his conversation, she had appealed to him that very first time by her apparently pronounced intellectual side—goodness knew she didn’t even then by the physical!—which she had artfully kept in view till she had entangled him past undoing. And it had all been but the cheapest of traps—when he came to take the pieces apart a bit—laid over a brazen avidity.

What he now collapsed for, none the less—what he sank down on a chair at a table and nursed his weak, scared sobs in his resting arms for—was the fact that, whatever the trap, it held him as with the grip of sharp murderous steel. There he was, there he was; alone in the brown summer dusk—brown through *his* windows—he cried and he cried. He shouldn't get out without losing a limb. The only question was which of his limbs it should be.

Before he went out, later on—for he at last felt the need to—he could, however, but seek to remove from his face and his betraying eyes, over his washing-stand, the traces of his want of fortitude. He brushed himself up; with which, catching his stricken image a bit spectrally in an old dim toilet-glass, he knew again, in a flash, the glow of righteous resentment. Who should be assured against coarse usage if a man of his really elegant, perhaps in fact a trifle over-refined or “effete” appearance, his absolutely gentlemanlike type, couldn't be? He never went so far as to rate himself, with exaggeration, a gentleman; but he would have maintained against all comers, with perfect candour and as claiming a high advantage, that he was, in spite of that liability to blubber, “like” one; which he *was* no doubt, for that matter, at several points. Like what lady then, who could ever possibly have been taken for one, was Kate Cookham, and therefore how could one have anything—anything of the intimate and private order—out with her fairly and on the plane, the only possible one, of common equality? He might find himself crippled for life; he believed verily, the more he thought, that that was what was before him. But he ended by seeing this doom in the almost redeeming light of the fact that it would all have been because he was, comparatively, too aristocratic. Yes, a man in his station couldn't afford to carry that so far—it must sooner or later, in one way or another, spell ruin. Never mind—it was the only thing he could be. Of course he should exquisitely suffer—but when hadn't he exquisitely suffered? How was he going to get through life by *any* arrangement without that? No wonder such a woman as Kate Cookham had been keen to annex so rare a value. The right thing would have been that the highest price should be paid for it—by such a different sort of logic from this nightmare of *his* having to pay.

II

Which was the way, of course, he talked to Nan Drury—as he had felt the immediate wild need to do; for he should perhaps be able to bear it all somehow or other with *her*—while they sat together, when time and freedom served, on one of the very last, the far westward, benches of the interminable sea-front. It wasn't every one who walked so far, especially at that flat season—the only ghost of a bustle now, save for the gregarious, the obstreperous haunters of the fluttering, far-shining Pier, being reserved for the sunny Parade of midwinter. It wasn't every one who cared for the sunsets (which you got awfully well from there and which were a particular strong point of the lower, the more “sympathetic,” as Herbert Dodd liked to call it, Properley horizon) as he had always intensely cared, and as he had found Nan Drury care; to say nothing of his having also observed how little they directly spoke to Miss Cookham. He had taught this oppressive companion to notice them a bit, as he had taught her plenty of other things, but that was a different matter; for the reason that the “land's end” (stretching a point it carried off that name) had been, and had had to be, by their lack of more sequestered resorts and conveniences, the scene of so much of what she styled their wooing-time—or, to put it more properly, of the time during which she had made the straightest and most unabashed love to *him*: just as it could henceforth but render possible, under an equal rigour, that he should enjoy there periods of consolation from beautiful, gentle, tender-souled Nan, to whom he was now at last, after the wonderful way they had helped each other to behave, going to make love, absolutely unreserved and abandoned, absolutely reckless and romantic love, a refuge from poisonous reality, as hard as ever he might.

The league-long, paved, lighted, garden-plotted, seated and refuged Marina renounced its more or less celebrated attractions to break off short here; and an inward curve of the kindly westward shore almost made a wide-armed bay, with all the ugliness between town and country, and the further casual fringe of the coast, turning, as the day waned, to rich afternoon blooms of grey and brown and distant—it might fairly have been beautiful Hampshire—blue. Here it was that, all that blighted summer, with Nan—from the dreadful May-day on—he gave himself up to the reaction of intimacy with the *kind* of woman, at least, that he liked; even if of everything else that might make life possible he was to be, by what he could make out, forever starved. Here it was that—as well as on whatever other scraps of occasions they could manage—Nan began to take off and fold up and put away in her pocket her pretty, dotty, becoming veil; as under the logic of his having so tremendously ceased, in the shake of his dark storm-gust, to be engaged to another woman. Her removal of that obstacle to a trusted friend’s assuring himself whether the peachlike bloom’ of her finer facial curves bore the test of such further inquiry into their cool sweetness as might reinforce a mere baffled gaze—her momentous, complete surrender of so much of her charm, let us say, both marked the change in the situation of the pair and established the record of their perfect observance of every propriety for so long before. They afterward in fact could have dated it, their full clutch of their freedom and the bliss of their having so little henceforth to consider save their impotence, their poverty, their ruin; dated it from the hour of his recital to her of the—at the first blush—quite appalling upshot of his second and conclusive “scene of violence” with the mistress of his fortune, when the dire terms of his release had had to be formally, and oh! so abjectly, acceded to. She “compromised,” the cruel brute, for Four Hundred Pounds down—for not a farthing less would she stay her strength from “proceedings.” No jury in the land but would give her six, on the nail (“Oh she knew quite where she was, thank you!”) and he might feel lucky to get off with so whole a skin. This was the sum, then, for which he had grovellingly compounded—under an agreement sealed by a supreme exchange of remarks.

“Where in the name of lifelong ruin are you to *find* Four Hundred?” Miss Cookham had mockingly repeated after him while he gasped as from the twist of her grip on his collar. “That’s *your* look-out, and I should have thought you’d have made sure you knew before you decided on your base perfidy.” And then she had mouthed and minced, with ever so false a gentility, her consistent, her sickening conclusion. “Of course—I may mention again—if you too distinctly object to the trouble of looking, you know where to find *me*.”

“I had rather starve to death than ever go within a mile of you!” Herbert described himself as having sweetly answered; and that was accordingly where *they* devotedly but desperately were—he and she, penniless Nan Drury. Her father, of Drury & Dean, was, like so far too many other of the anxious characters who peered through the dull window-glass of dusty offices at Properley, an Estate and House Agent, Surveyor, Valuer and Auctioneer; she was the prettiest of six, with two brothers, neither of the least use, but, thanks to the manner in which their main natural protector appeared to languish under the accumulation of his attributes, they couldn’t be said very particularly or positively to live. Their continued collective existence was a good deal of a miracle even to themselves, though they had fallen into the way of not unnecessarily, or too nervously, exchanging remarks upon it, and had even in a sort, from year to year, got used to it. Nan’s brooding pinkness when he talked to her, her so very parted lips, considering her pretty teeth, her so very parted eyelids, considering her pretty eyes, all of which might have been those of some waxen image of uncritical faith, cooled the heat of his helplessness very much as if he were laying his head on a tense silk pillow. She had, it was true, forms of speech, familiar watchwords, that affected him as small scratchy perforations of the smooth surface from within; but his pleasure in her and need of her were independent of such things and really almost altogether determined by

the fact of the happy, even if all so lonely, forms and instincts in her which claimed kinship with his own. With her natural elegance stamped on her as by a die, with her dim and disinherited individual refinement of grace, which would have made any one wonder who she was anywhere—hat and veil and feather-boa and smart umbrella-knob and all—with her regular God-given distinction of type, in fine, she couldn't abide vulgarity much more than he could.

Therefore it didn't seem to him, under his stress, to matter particularly, for instance, if she *would* keep on referring so many things to the time, as she called it, when she came into his life—his own great insistence and contention being that she hadn't in the least entered there till his mind was wholly made up to eliminate his other friend. What that methodical fury was so fierce to bring home to him was the falsity to herself involved in the later acquaintance; whereas just his precious right to hold up his head to everything—before himself at least—sprang from the fact that she couldn't make dates fit anyhow. He hadn't so much as heard of his true beauty's existence (she had come back but a few weeks before from her two years with her terribly trying deceased aunt at Swindon, previous to which absence she had been an unnoticeable chit) till days and days, ever so many, upon his honour, after he had struck for freedom by his great first backing-out letter—the precious document, the treat for a British jury, in which, by itself, Miss Cookham's firm instructed her to recognise the prospect of a fortune. The way the ruffians had been “her” ruffians—it appeared as if she had posted them behind her from the first of her beginning her game!—and the way “instructions” bounced out, with it, at a touch, larger than life, as if she had arrived with her pocket full of them! The date of the letter, taken with its other connections, and the date of *her* first give-away for himself, his seeing her get out of the Brighton train with Bill Frankle that day he had gone to make the row at the Station parcels' office about the miscarriage of the box from Wales—those were the facts it sufficed him to point to, as he had pointed to them for Nan Drury's benefit, goodness knew, often and often enough. If he didn't seek occasion to do so for any one else's—in open court as they said—that was his own affair, or at least his and Nan's.

It little mattered, meanwhile, if on their bench of desolation, all that summer—and it may be added for summers and summers, to say nothing of winters, there and elsewhere, to come—she did give way to her artless habit of not contradicting him enough, which led to her often trailing up and down before him, too complacently, the untimely shreds and patches of his own glooms and desperations. “Well, I'm glad I *am* in your life, terrible as it is, however or whenever I did come in!” and “*Of course* you'd rather have starved—and it seems pretty well as if we shall, doesn't it?—than have bought her off by a false, abhorrent love, wouldn't you?” and “It isn't as if she hadn't made up to you the way she did before you had so much as looked at her, is it? or as if you hadn't shown her what you felt her really to be before you had so much as looked at *me*, is it either?” and “Yes, how on earth, pawning the shoes on your feet, you're going to raise another shilling—*that's* what you want to know, poor darling, don't you?”

III

His creditor, at the hour it suited her, transferred her base of operations to town, to which impenetrable scene she had also herself retired; and his raising of the first Two Hundred, during five exasperated and miserable months, and then of another Seventy piecemeal, bleedingly, after long delays and under the epistolary whiplash cracked by the London solicitor in his wretched ear even to an effect of the very report of Miss Cookham's tongue—these melancholy efforts formed a scramble up an arduous steep where steps were planted and missed, and bared knees were excoriated, and clutches at wayside tufts succeeded and

failed, on a system to which poor Nan could have intelligently entered only if she had been somehow less ladylike. She kept putting into his mouth the sick quaver of where he should find the rest, the always inextinguishable rest, long after he had in silent rage fallen away from any further payment at all—at first, he had but too blackly felt, for himself, to the still quite possible non-exclusion of some penetrating ray of “exposure.” He didn’t care a tuppenny damn now, and in point of fact, after he had by hook and by crook succeeded in being able to unload to the tune of Two-Hundred-and-Seventy, and then simply returned the newest reminder of his outstanding obligation unopened, this latter belated but real sign of fight, the first he had risked, remarkably caused nothing at all to happen; nothing at least but his being moved to quite tragically rueful wonder as to whether exactly some such demonstration mightn’t have served his turn at an earlier stage.

He could by this time at any rate measure his ruin—with three fantastic mortgages on his house, his shop, his stock, and a burden of interest to carry under which his business simply stretched itself inanimate, without strength for a protesting kick, without breath for an appealing groan. Customers lingering for further enjoyment of the tasteful remarks he had cultivated the unobtrusive art of throwing in, would at this crisis have found plenty to repay them, might his wit have strayed a little more widely still, toward a circuitous egotistical outbreak, from the immediate question of the merits of this and that author or of the condition of this and that volume. He had come to be conscious through it all of strangely glaring at people when they tried to haggle—and not, as formerly, with the glare of derisive comment on their overdone humour, but with that of fairly idiotised surrender—as if they were much mistaken in supposing, for the sake of conversation, that he might take himself for saveable by the difference between sevenpence and ninepence. He watched everything impossible and deplorable happen as in an endless prolongation of his nightmare; watched himself proceed, that is, with the finest, richest incoherence, to the due preparation of his catastrophe. Everything came to seem *equally* part of this—in complete defiance of proportion; even his final command of detachment, on the bench of desolation (where each successive fact of his dire case regularly cut itself out black, yet of senseless silhouette, against the red west) in respect to poor Nan’s flat infelicities, which for the most part kept no pace with the years or with change, but only shook like hard peas in a child’s rattle, the same peas a ways, of course, so long as the rattle didn’t split open with usage or from somebody’s act of irritation. They represented, or they had long done so, her contribution to the more superficial of the two branches of intimacy—the intellectual alternative, the one that didn’t merely consist of her preparing herself for his putting his arm round her waist.

There were to have been moments, nevertheless, all the first couple of years, when she did touch in him, though to his actively dissimulating it, a more or less sensitive nerve—moments as they were too, to do her justice, when she treated him not to his own wisdom, or even folly, served up cold, but to a certain small bitter fruit of her personal, her unnatural, plucking. “I wonder that since *she* took legal advice so freely, to come down on you, you didn’t take it yourself, a little, before being so sure you stood no chance. Perhaps *your* people would have been sure of something quite different—*perhaps*, I only say, you know.” She “only” said it, but she said it, none the less, in the early time, about once a fortnight. In the later, and especially after their marriage, it had a way of coming up again to the exclusion, as it seemed to him, of almost everything else; in fact during the most dismal years, the three of the loss of their two children, the long stretch of sordid embarrassment ending in her death, he was afterward to think of her as having generally said it several times a day. He was then also to remember that his answer, before she had learnt to discount it, had been inveterately at hand: “What would any solicitor have done or wanted to do but drag me just into the hideous public arena”—he had always so put it—“that it has been at any rate my pride and my

honour, the one rag of self-respect covering my nakedness, to have loathed and avoided from every point of view?"

That had disposed of it so long as he cared, and by the time he had ceased to care for anything it had also lost itself in the rest of the vain babble of home. After his wife's death, during his year of mortal solitude, it awoke again as an echo of far-off things—far-off, very far-off, because he felt then not ten but twenty years older. That was by reason simply of the dead weight with which his load of debt had settled—the persistence of his misery dragging itself out. With all that had come and gone the bench of desolation was still there, just as the immortal flush of the westward sky kept hanging its indestructible curtain. He had never got away—everything had left him, but he himself had been able to turn his back on nothing—and now, his day's labour before a dirty desk at the Gas Works ended, he more often than not, almost any season at temperate Properley serving his turn, took his slow straight way to the Land's End and, collapsing there to rest, sat often for an hour at a time staring before him. He might in these sessions, with his eyes on the grey-green sea, have been counting again and still recounting the beads, almost all worn smooth, of his rosary of pain—which had for the fingers of memory and the recurrences of wonder the same felt break of the smaller ones by the larger that would have aided a pious mumble in some dusky altar-chapel.

If it has been said of him that when once full submersion, as from far back, had visibly begun to await him, he watched himself, in a cold lucidity, *do* punctually and necessarily each of the deplorable things that were inconsistent with his keeping afloat, so at present again he might have been held agaze just by the presented grotesqueness of that vigil. Such ghosts of dead seasons were all he *had* now to watch—such a recaptured sense for instance as that of the dismal unavailing awareness that had attended his act of marriage. He had let submersion final and absolute become the signal for it—a mere minor determinant having been the more or less contemporaneously unfavourable effect on the business of Drury & Dean of the sudden disappearance of Mr. Dean with the single small tin box into which the certificates of the firm's credit had been found to be compressible. That had been his only form—or had at any rate seemed his only one. He couldn't not have married, no doubt, just as he couldn't not have suffered the last degree of humiliation and almost of want, or just as his wife and children couldn't not have died of the little he was able, under dire reiterated pinches, to do for them; but it was "rum," for final solitary brooding, that he hadn't appeared to see his way definitely to undertake the support of a family till the last scrap of his little low-browed, high-toned business, and the last figment of "property" in the old tiled and timbered shell that housed it, had been sacrificed to creditors mustering six rows deep.

Of course what had counted too in the odd order was that even at the end of the two or three years he had "allowed" her, Kate Cookham, gorged with his unholy tribute, had become the subject of no successful siege on the part either of Bill Frankle or, by what he could make out, of any one else. She had judged decent—he could do her that justice—to take herself personally out of his world, as he called it, for good and all, as soon as he had begun regularly to bleed; and, to whatever lucrative practice she might be devoting her great talents in London or elsewhere, he felt his conscious curiosity about her as cold, with time, as the passion of vain protest that she had originally left him to. He could recall but two direct echoes of her in all the bitter years—both communicated by Bill Frankle, disappointed and exposed and at last quite remarkably ingenuous sneak, who had also, from far back, taken to roaming the world, but who, during a period, used fitfully and ruefully to reappear. Herbert Dodd had quickly seen, at their first meeting—every one met every one sooner or later at Properley, if meeting it could always be called, either in the glare or the gloom of the explodedly attractive Embankment—that no silver stream of which he himself had been the remoter source could have played over the career of this all but repudiated acquaintance. That

hadn't fitted with his first, his quite primitive raw vision of the probabilities, and he had further been puzzled when, much later on, it had come to him in a roundabout way that Miss Cookham was supposed to be, or to have been, among them for a few days "on the quiet," and that Frankle, who had seen her and who claimed to know more about it than he said, was cited as authority for the fact. But he hadn't himself at this juncture seen Frankle; he had only wondered, and a degree of mystification had even remained.

That memory referred itself to the dark days of old Drury's smash, the few weeks between his partner's dastardly flight and Herbert's own comment on it in the form of his standing up with Nan for the nuptial benediction of the Vicar of St. Bernard's on a very cold, bleak December morning and amid a circle of seven or eight long-faced, red-nosed and altogether dowdy persons. Poor Nan herself had come to affect him as scarce other than red-nosed and dowdy by that time, but this only added, in his then, and indeed in his lasting view, to his general and his particular morbid bravery. He had cultivated ignorance, there were small inward immaterial luxuries he could scrap-pily cherish even among other, and the harshest, destitutions; and one of them was represented by this easy refusal of his mind to render to certain passages of his experience, to various ugly images, names, associations, the homage of continued attention. That served him, that helped him; but what happened when, a dozen dismal years having worn themselves away, he sat single and scraped bare again, as if his long wave of misfortune had washed him far beyond everything and then conspicuously retreated, was that, thus stranded by tidal action, deposited in the lonely hollow of his fate, he felt even sustaining pride turn to nought and heard no challenge from it when old mystifications, stealing forth in the dusk of the day's work done, scratched at the door of speculation and hung about, through the idle hours, for irritated notice.

The evenings of his squalid clerkship were all leisure now, but there was nothing at all near home on the other hand, for his imagination, numb and stiff from its long chill, to begin to play with. Voices from far off would quaver to him therefore in the stillness; where he knew for the most recurrent, little by little, the faint wail of his wife. He had become deaf to it in life, but at present, after so great an interval, he listened again, listened and listened, and seemed to hear it sound as by the pressure of some weak broken spring. It phrased for his ear her perpetual question, the one she had come to at the last as under the obsession of a discovered and resented wrong, a wrong withal that had its source much more in his own action than anywhere else. "That you didn't make *sure* she could have done anything, that you didn't make sure and that you were too afraid!"—this commemoration had ended by playing such a part of Nan's finally quite contracted consciousness as to exclude everything else.

At the time, somehow, he had made his terms with it; he had then more urgent questions to meet than that of the poor creature's taste in worrying pain; but actually it struck him—not the question, but the fact itself of the taste—as the one thing left over from all that had come and gone. So it was; nothing remained to him in the world, on the bench of desolation, but the option of taking up that echo—together with an abundance of free time for doing so. That he hadn't made sure of what might and what mightn't have been done to him, that he had been too afraid—had the proposition a possible bearing on his present apprehension of things? To reply indeed he would have had to be able to say what his present apprehension of things, left to itself, amounted to; an uninspiring effort indeed he judged it, sunk to so poor a pitch was his material of thought—though it might at last have been the feat he sought to perform as he stared at the grey-green sea.

IV

It was seldom he was disturbed in any form of sequestered speculation, or that at his times of predilection, especially that of the long autumn blankness between the season of trippers and the season of Bath-chairs, there were westward stragglers enough to jar upon his settled sense of priority. For himself his seat, the term of his walk, was consecrated; it had figured to him for years as the last (though there were others, not immediately near it, and differently disposed, that might have aspired to the title); so that he could invidiously distinguish as he approached, make out from a distance any accident of occupation, and never draw nearer while that unpleasantness lasted. What he disliked was to compromise on his tradition, whether for a man, a woman or a connodding couple; it was to idiots of this last composition he most objected, he having sat there, in the past, alone, having sat there interminably with Nan, having sat there with—well, with other women when women, at hours of ease, could still care or count for him, but having never shared the place with any shuffling or snuffling stranger. It was a world of fidgets and starts, however, the world of his present dreariness—he alone possessed in it, he seemed to make out, of the secret, of the dignity of sitting still with one's fate; so that if he took a turn about or rested briefly elsewhere even foolish philanderers—though this would never have been his and Nan's way—ended soon by some adjournment as visibly pointless as their sprawl. Then, their backs turned, he would drop down on it, the bench of desolation—which was what he, and he only, made it by sad adoption; where, for that matter, moreover, once he had settled at his end, it was marked that nobody else ever came to sit. He saw people, along the Marina, take this liberty with other resting presences; but his own struck them perhaps in general as either of too grim or just of too dingy a vicinage. He might have affected the fellow-lounger as a man evil, unsociable, possibly engaged in working out the idea of a crime; or otherwise, more probably—for on the whole he surely looked harmless—devoted to the worship of some absolutely unpractical remorse.

On a certain October Saturday he had got off, as usual, early; but the afternoon light, his pilgrimage drawing to its aim, could still show him, at long range, the rare case of an established usurper. His impulse was then, as by custom, to deviate a little and wait, all the more that the occupant of the bench was a lady, and that ladies, when alone, were—at that austere end of the varied frontal stretch—markedly discontinuous; but he kept on at sight of this person's rising, while he was still fifty yards off, and proceeding, her back turned, to the edge of the broad terrace, the outer line of which followed the interspaced succession of seats and was guarded by an iron rail from the abruptly lower level of the beach. Here she stood before the sea, while our friend on his side, recognising no reason to the contrary, sank into the place she had quitted. There were other benches, eastward and off by the course of the drive, for vague ladies. The lady indeed thus thrust upon Herbert's vision might have struck an observer either as not quite vague or as vague with a perverse intensity suggesting design.

Not that our own observer at once thought of these things; he only took in, and with no great interest, that the obtruded presence was a "real" lady; that she was dressed—he noticed such matters—with a certain elegance of propriety or intention of harmony; and that she remained perfectly still for a good many minutes; so many in fact that he presently ceased to heed her, and that as she wasn't straight before him, but as far to the left as was consistent with his missing her profile, he had turned himself to one of his sunsets again (though it wasn't quite one of his best) and let it hold him for a time that enabled her to alter her attitude and present a fuller view. Without other movement, but her back now to the sea and her face to the odd person who had appropriated her corner, she had taken a sustained look at him before he was aware she had stirred. On that apprehension, however, he became also promptly aware of her direct, her applied observation. As his sense of this quickly increased he wondered who she was and what she wanted—what, as it were, was the matter with her; it suggested to him, the

next thing, that she had, under some strange idea, actually been waiting for him. Any idea about him to-day on the part of any one could only be strange.

Yes, she stood there with the ample width of the Marina between them, but turned to him, for all the world, as to show frankly that she was concerned with him. And she *was*—oh yes—a real lady: a middle-aged person, of good appearance and of the best condition, in quiet but “handsome” black, save for very fresh white kid gloves, and with a pretty, dotty, becoming veil, predominantly white, adjusted to her countenance; which through it somehow, even to his imperfect sight, showed strong fine black brows and what he would have called on the spot character. But she was pale; her black brows were the blacker behind the flattering tissue; she still kept a hand, for support, on the terrace-rail, while the other, at the end of an extended arm that had an effect of rigidity, clearly pressed hard on the knob of a small and shining umbrella, the lower extremity of whose stick was equally, was sustainingly, firm on the walk. So this mature, qualified, important person stood and looked at the limp, undistinguished—oh his values of aspect now!—shabby man on the bench.

It was extraordinary, but the fact of her interest, by immensely surprising, by immediately agitating him, blinded him at first to her identity and, for the space of his long stare, diverted him from it; with which even then, when recognition did break, the sense of the shock, striking inward, simply consumed itself in gaping stillness. He sat there motionless and weak, fairly faint with surprise, and there was no instant, in all the succession of so many, at which Kate Cookham could have caught the special sign of his intelligence. Yet that she did catch something he saw—for he saw her steady herself, by her two supported hands, to meet it; while, after she had done so, a very wonderful thing happened, of which he could scarce, later on, have made a clear statement, though he was to think it over again and again. She moved toward him, she reached him, she stood there, she sat down near him, he merely passive and wonderstruck, unresentfully “impressed,” gaping and taking it in—and all as with an open allowance on the part of each, so that they positively and quite intimately met in it, o the impertinence for their case, this case that brought them again, after horrible years, face to face, of the vanity, the profanity, the impossibility, of anything between them but silence.

Nearer to him, beside him at a considerable interval (oh she was immensely considerate!) she presented him, in the sharp terms of her transformed state—but thus the more amply, formally, ceremoniously—with the reasons that would serve him best for not having precipitately known her. She was simply another and a totally different person, and the exhibition of it to which she had proceeded with this solemn anxiety was all, obviously, for his benefit—once he had, as he appeared to be doing, provisionally accepted her approach. He had remembered her as inclined to the massive and disowned by the graceful; but this was a spare, fine, worn, almost wasted lady—who had repaired waste, it was true, however, with something he could only appreciate as a rich accumulation of manner. She was strangely older, so far as that went—marked by experience and as if many things had happened to her; her face had suffered, to its improvement, contraction and concentration; and if he had granted, of old and from the first, that her eyes were remarkable, had they yet ever had for him this sombre glow? Withal, something said, she had flourished—he felt it, wincing at it, as that; she had had a life, a career, a history—something that her present waiting air and nervous consciousness couldn’t prevent his noting there as a deeply latent assurance. She had flourished, she had flourished—though to learn it after this fashion was somehow at the same time not to feel she flaunted it. It wasn’t thus execration that she revived in him; she made in fact, exhibitively, as he could only have put it, the matter of long ago irrelevant, and these extraordinary minutes of their reconstituted relation—how many? how few?—addressed themselves altogether to new possibilities.

Still it after a little awoke in him as with the throb of a touched nerve that his own very attitude was supplying a connection; he knew presently that he wouldn't have had her go, *couldn't* have made a sign to her for it—which was what she had been uncertain of—without speaking to him; and that therefore he was, as at the other, the hideous time, passive to whatever she might do. She was even yet, she was always, in possession of him; she had known how and where to find him and had appointed that he should see her, and, though he had never dreamed it was again to happen to him, he was meeting it already as if it might have been the only thing that the least humanly *could*. Yes, he had come back there to flop, by long custom, upon the bench of desolation *as* the man in the whole place, precisely, to whom nothing worth more than tuppence could happen; whereupon, in the grey desert of his consciousness, the very earth had suddenly opened and flamed. With this, further, it came over him that he hadn't been prepared and that his wretched appearance must show it. He wasn't fit to receive a visit—any visit; a flush for his felt misery, in the light of her opulence, broke out in his lean cheeks. But if he coloured he sat as he was—she should at least, as a visitor, be satisfied. His eyes only, at last, turned from her and resumed a little their gaze at the sea. That, however, didn't relieve him, and he perpetrated in the course of another moment the odd desperate gesture of raising both his hands to his face and letting them, while he pressed it to them, cover and guard it. It was as he held them there that she at last spoke.

"I'll go away if you wish me to." And then she waited a moment. "I mean now—now that you've seen I'm here. I wanted you to know it, and I thought of writing—I was afraid of our meeting accidentally. Then I was afraid that if I wrote you might refuse. So I thought of this way—as I knew you must come out here." She went on with pauses, giving him a chance to make a sign. "I've waited several days. But I'll do what you wish. Only I should like in that case to come back." Again she stopped; but strange was it to him that he wouldn't have made her break off. She held him in boundless wonder. "I came down—I mean I came from town—on purpose. I'm staying on still, and I've a great patience and will give you time. Only may I say it's important? Now that I do see you," she brought out in the same way, "I see how inevitable it was—I mean that I should have wanted to come. But you must feel about it as you can," she wound up—"till you get used to the idea."

She spoke so for accommodation, for discretion, for some ulterior view already expressed in her manner, that, after taking well in, from behind his hands, that this was her very voice—oh ladylike!—heard, and heard in deprecation of displeasure, after long years again, he uncovered his face and freshly met her eyes. More than ever he couldn't have known her. Less and less remained of the figure all the facts of which had long ago so hardened for him. She was a handsome, grave, authoritative, but refined and, as it were, physically rearranged person—she, the outrageous vulgarity of whose prime assault had kept him shuddering so long as a shudder was in him. That atrocity in her was what everything had been built on, but somehow, all strangely, it was slipping from him; so that, after the oddest fashion conceivable, when he felt he mustn't let her go, it was as if he were putting out his hand to save the past, the hideous real unalterable past, exactly as she had been the cause of its being and the cause of his undergoing it. He should have been too awfully "sold" if he wasn't going to have been right about her.

"I don't mind," he heard himself at last say. Not to mind had seemed for the instant the length he was prepared to go; but he was afterward aware of how soon he must have added: "You've come on purpose to see me?" He was on the point of putting to her further: "What then do you want of me?" But he would keep—yes, in time—from appearing to show he cared. If he showed he cared, where then would be his revenge? So he was already, within five minutes, thinking his revenge uncomfortably over instead of just comfortably knowing it. What came to him, at any rate, as they actually fell to talk, was that, with such precautions,

considerations, reduplications of consciousness, almost avowed feelings of her way on her own part, and light fingerings of his chords of sensibility, she was understanding, she *had* understood, more things than all the years, up to this strange eventide, had given him an inkling of. They talked, they went on—he hadn't let her retreat, to whatever it committed him and however abjectly it did so; yet keeping off and off, dealing with such surface facts as involved ancient acquaintance but held abominations at bay. The recognition, the attestation that she *had* come down for him, that there would be reasons, that she had even hovered and watched, assured herself a little of his habits (which she managed to speak of as if, on their present ampler development, they were much to be deferred to), detained them enough to make vivid how, listen as stiffly or as serenely as he might, she sat there in fear, just as she had so stood there at first, and that her fear had really to do with her calculation of some sort of chance with him. What chance could it possibly be? Whatever it might have done, on this prodigious showing, with Kate Cookham, it made the present witness to the state of his fortunes simply exquisite: he ground his teeth secretly together as he saw he should have to take *that*. For what did it mean but that she would have liked to pity him if she could have done it with safety? Ah, however, he must give her no measure of safety!

By the time he had remarked, with that idea, that she probably saw few changes about them there that weren't for the worse—the place was going down, down and down, so fast that goodness knew where it would stop—and had also mentioned that in spite of this he himself remained faithful, with all its faults loving it still; by the time he had, after that fashion, superficially indulged her, adding a few further light and just sufficiently dry reflections on local matters, the disappearance of landmarks and important persons, the frequency of gales, the low policy of the town-council in playing down to cheap excursionists: by the time he had so acquitted himself, and she had observed, of her own motion, that she was staying at the Royal, which he knew for the time-honoured, the conservative and exclusive hotel, he had made out for himself one thing at least, the amazing fact that he had been landed by his troubles, at the end of time, in a “social relation,” of all things in the world, and how of that luxury he was now having unprecedented experience. He had but once in his life had his nose in the Royal, on the occasion of his himself delivering a parcel during some hiatus in his succession of impossible small boys and meeting in the hall the lady who had bought of him, in the morning, a set of Crabbe, largely, he flattered himself, under the artful persuasion of his acute remarks on that author, gracefully associated by him, in this colloquy, he remembered, with a glance at Charles Lamb as well, and who went off in a day or two without settling, though he received her cheque from London three or four months later.

That hadn't been a social relation; and truly, deep within his appeal to himself to be remarkable, to be imperturbable and impenetrable, to be in fact quite incomparable now, throbbed the intense vision of his drawing out and draining dry the sensation he had begun to taste. He would do it, moreover—that would be the refinement of his art—not only without the betraying anxiety of a single question, but just even by seeing her flounder (since she must, in a vagueness deeply disconcerting to her) as to her real effect on him. She was distinctly floundering by the time he had brought her—it had taken ten minutes—down to a consciousness of absurd and twaddling topics, to the reported precarious state, for instance, of the syndicate running the Bijou Theatre at the Pierhead—all as an admonition that she might want him to want to know why she was thus waiting on him, might want it for all she was worth, before he had ceased to be so remarkable as not to ask her. He didn't—and this assuredly was wondrous enough—want to do anything worse to her than let her flounder; but he was willing to do that so long as it mightn't prevent his seeing at least where *he* was. He seemed still to see where he was even at the minute that followed her final break-off, clearly intended to be resolute, from make-believe talk.

“I wonder if I might prevail on you to come to tea with me to-morrow at five.”

He didn't so much as answer it—though he could scarcely believe his ears. To-morrow was Sunday, and the proposal referred, clearly, to the custom of “five-o'clock” tea, known to him only by the contemporary novel of manners and the catchy advertisement of table-linen. He had never in his life been present at any such luxurious rite, but he was offering practical indifference to it as a false mark of his sense that his social relation had already risen to his chin. “I gave up my very modest, but rather interesting little old book business, perhaps you know, ever so long ago.”

She floundered so that she could say nothing—meet *that* with no possible word; all the less too that his tone, casual and colourless, wholly defied any apprehension of it as a reverse. Silence only came; but after a moment she returned to her effort. “If you *can* come I shall be at home. To see you otherwise than thus was in fact what, as I tell you, I came down for. But I leave it,” she returned, “to your feeling.”

He had at this, it struck him, an inspiration; which he required however a minute or two to decide to carry out; a minute or two during which the shake of his foot over his knee became an intensity of fidget. “Of course I know I still owe you a large sum of money. If it's about *that* you wish to see me,” he went on, “I may as well tell you just here that I shall be able to meet my full obligation in the future as little as I've met it in the past. I can never,” said Herbert Dodd, “pay up that balance.”

He had looked at her while he spoke, but on finishing looked off at the sea again and continued to agitate his foot. He knew now what he had done and why; and the sense of her fixed dark eyes on him during his speech and after didn't alter his small contentment. Yet even when she still said nothing he didn't turn round; he simply kept his corner as if *that* were his point made, should it even be the last word between them. It might have been, for that matter, from the way in which she presently rose, gathering herself, her fine umbrella and her very small smart reticule, in the construction of which shining gilt much figured, well together, and, after standing another instant, moved across to the rail of the terrace as she had done before and remained, as before, with her back to him, though this time, it well might be, under a different fear. A quarter of an hour ago she hadn't tried him, and had had that anxiety; now that she had tried him it wasn't easier—but she was thinking what she still could do. He left her to think—nothing in fact more interesting than the way she might decide had ever happened to him; but it was a part of this also that as she turned round and came nearer again he didn't rise, he gave her no help. If she got any, at least, from his looking up at her only, meeting her fixed eyes once more in silence, that was her own affair. “You must think,” she said—“you must take all your time, but I shall be at home.” She left it to him thus—she insisted, with her idea, on leaving him something too. And on her side as well she showed an art—which resulted, after another instant, in his having to rise to his feet. He flushed afresh as he did it—it exposed him so shabbily the more; and now if she took him in, with each of his seedy items, from head to foot, he didn't and couldn't and wouldn't know it, attaching his eyes hard and straight to something quite away from them.

It stuck in his throat to say he'd come, but she had so curious a way with her that he still less could say he wouldn't, and in a moment had taken refuge in something that was neither. “Are you married?”—he put it to her with that plainness, though it had seemed before he said it to do more for him than while she waited before replying.

“No, I'm not married,” she said; and then had another wait that might have amounted to a question of what this had to do with it.

He surely couldn't have told her; so that he had recourse, a little poorly as he felt, but to an "Oh!" that still left them opposed. He turned away for it—that is for the poorness, which, lingering in the air, had almost a vulgar platitude; and when he presently again wheeled about she had fallen off as for quitting him, only with a pause, once more, for a last look. It was all a bit awkward, but he had another happy thought, which consisted in his silently raising his hat as for a sign of dignified dismissal. He had cultivated of old, for the occasions of life, the right, the discriminated bow, and now, out of the grey limbo of the time when he could care for such things, this flicker of propriety leaped and worked. She might, for that matter, herself have liked it; since, receding further, only with her white face toward him, she paid it the homage of submission. He remained dignified, and she almost humbly went.

V

Nothing in the world, on the Sunday afternoon, could have prevented him from going; he was not after all destitute of three or four such articles of clothing as, if they wouldn't particularly grace the occasion, wouldn't positively dishonour it. That deficiency might have kept him away, but no voice of the spirit, no consideration of pride. It sweetened his impatience in fact—for he fairly felt it a long time to wait—that his pride would really most find its account in his acceptance of these conciliatory steps. From the moment he could put it in that way—that he couldn't refuse to hear what she might have, so very elaborately, to say for herself—he ought certainly to be at his ease; in illustration of which he whistled odd snatches to himself as he hung about on that cloud-dappled autumn Sunday, a mild private minstrelsy that his lips hadn't known since when? The interval of the twenty-four hours, made longer by a night of many more revivals than oblivions, had in fact dragged not a little; in spite of which, however, our extremely brushed-up and trimmed and polished friend knew an unprecedented flutter as he was ushered, at the Royal Hotel, into Miss Cookham's sitting-room. Yes, it was an adventure, and he had never had an adventure in his life; the term, for him, was essentially a term of high appreciation—such as disqualified for that figure, under due criticism, every single passage of his past career.

What struck him at the moment as qualifying in the highest degree this actual passage was the fact that at no great distance from his hostess in the luxurious room, as he apprehended it, in which the close of day had begun to hang a few shadows, sat a gentleman who rose as she rose, and whose name she at once mentioned to him. He had for Herbert Dodd all the air of a swell, the gentleman—rather red-faced and bald-headed, but moustachioed, waistcoated, necktied to the highest pitch, with an effect of chains and rings, of shining teeth in a glassily monocular smile; a wondrous apparition to have been asked to "meet" him, as in contemporary fiction, or for him to have been asked to meet. "Captain Roper, Mr. Herbert Dodd"—their entertainer introduced them, yes; but with a sequel immediately afterward more disconcerting apparently to Captain Roper himself even than to her second and more breathless visitor; a "Well then, good-bye till the next time," with a hand thrust straight out, which allowed the personage so addressed no alternative but to lay aside his teacup, even though Herbert saw there was a good deal left in it, and glare about him for his hat. Miss Cookham had had her tea-tray on a small table before her, she had served Captain Roper while waiting for Mr. Dodd; but she simply dismissed him now, with a high sweet unmistakable decision, a knowledge of what she was about, as our hero would have called it, which enlarged at a stroke the latter's view of the number of different things and sorts of things, in the sphere of the manners and ways of those living at their ease, that a social relation would put before one. Captain Roper would have liked to remain, would have liked more tea, but Kate signified in this direct fashion that she had had enough of him. Herbert had seen things, in his walk of life—rough things, plenty; but never things smoothed with that especial smoothness, carried out as it were by the fine form of Captain Roper's own

retreat, which included even a bright convulsed leave-taking cognisance of the plain, vague individual, of no lustre at all and with the very low-class guard of an old silver watch buttoned away under an ill-made coat, to whom he was sacrificed.

It came to Herbert as he left the place a shade less remarkable—though there was still wonder enough and to spare—that he had been even publicly and designedly sacrificed; exactly so that, as the door closed behind him, Kate Cookham, standing there to wait for it, could seem to say, across the room, to the friend of her youth, only by the expression of her fine eyes: “There—see what I do for you!” “For” him—that was the extraordinary thing, and not less so that he was already, within three minutes, after this fashion, taking it in as by the intensity of a new light; a light that was one somehow with this rich inner air of the plush-draped and much-mirrored hotel, where the fire-glow and the approach of evening confirmed together the privacy, and the loose curtains at the wide window were parted for a command of his old lifelong Parade—the field of life so familiar to him from below and in the wind and the wet, but which he had never in all the long years hung over at this vantage.

“He’s an acquaintance, but a bore,” his hostess explained in respect to Captain Roper. “He turned up yesterday, but I didn’t invite him, and I had said to him before you came in that I was expecting a gentleman with whom I should wish to be alone. I go quite straight at my idea that way, as a rule; but you know,” she now strikingly went on, “how straight I go. And he had had,” she added, “his tea.”

Dodd had been looking all round—had taken in, with the rest, the brightness, the distinguished elegance, as he supposed it, of the tea-service with which she was dealing and the variously tinted appeal of certain savoury edibles on plates. “Oh but he *hadn’t* had his tea!” he heard himself the next moment earnestly reply; which speech had at once betrayed, he was then quickly aware, the candour of his interest, the unsophisticated state that had survived so many troubles. If he was so interested how could he be proud, and if he was proud how could he be so interested?

He had made her at any rate laugh outright, and was further conscious, for this, both that it was the first time of that since their new meeting, and that it didn’t affect him as harsh. It affected him, however, as free, for she replied at once, still smiling and as a part of it: “Oh, I think we shall get on!”

This told him he had made some difference for her, shown her the way, or something like it, that she hadn’t been sure of yesterday; which moreover wasn’t what he had intended—he had come armed for showing her nothing; so that after she had gone on with the same gain of gaiety, “You must at any rate comfortably have yours,” there was but one answer for him to make.

His eyes played again over the tea-things—they seemed strangely to help him; but he didn’t sit down.

“I’ve come, as you see—but I’ve come, please, to understand; and if you require to be alone with me, and if I break bread with you, it seems to me I should first know exactly where I am and to what you suppose I so commit myself.” He had thought it out and over and over, particularly the turn about breaking bread; though perhaps he didn’t give it, in her presence—this was impossible, her presence altered so many things—quite the full sound or the weight he had planned.

But it had none the less come to his aid—it had made her perfectly grave. “You commit yourself to nothing. You’re perfectly free. It’s only I who commit myself.”

On which, while she stood there as if all handsomely and deferentially waiting for him to consider and decide, he would have been naturally moved to ask her what she committed herself then *to*—so moved, that is, if he hadn't, before saying it, thought more sharply still of something better. "Oh, that's another thing."

"Yes, that's another thing," Kate Cookham returned. To which she added, "So *now* won't you sit down?" He sank with deliberation into the seat from which Captain Roper had risen; she went back to her own and while she did so spoke again. "I'm *not* free. At least," she said over her tea-tray, "I'm free only for this."

Everything was there before them and around them, everything massive and shining, so that he had instinctively fallen back in his chair as for the wondering, the resigned acceptance of it; where her last words stirred in him a sense of odd deprecation. Only for "that"? "That" was everything, at this moment, to his long inanition, and the effect, as if she had suddenly and perversely mocked him, was to press the spring of a protest. "Isn't 'this' then riches?"

"Riches?" she smiled over, handing him his cup—for she had triumphed in having struck from him a question.

"I mean haven't you a lot of money?" He didn't care now that it was out; his cup was in his hand, and what was that but proved interest? He had succumbed to the social relation.

"Yes, I've money. Of course you wonder—but I've wanted you to wonder. It was to make you take that in that I came. So now you know," she said, leaning back where she faced him, but in a straighter chair and with her arms closely folded, after a fashion characteristic of her, as for some control of her nerves.

"You came to show you've money?"

"That's one of the things. Not a lot—not even very much. But enough," said Kate Cookham.

"Enough? I should think so!" he again couldn't help a bit crudely exhaling.

"Enough for what I wanted. I don't always live like this—not at all. But I came to the best hotel on purpose. I wanted to show you I could. Now," she asked, "do you understand?"

"Understand?" He only gaped.

She threw up her loosed arms, which dropped again beside her. "I did it *for* you—I did it *for* you!"

"For' me——?"

"What I did—what I did here of old."

He stared, trying to see it. "When you made me pay you?"

"The Two Hundred and Seventy—all I could get from you, as you reminded me yesterday, so that I had to give up the rest It was my idea," she went on—"it was my idea."

"To bleed me quite to death?" Oh, his ice was broken now!

"To make you raise money—since you could, you *could*. You did, you did—so what better proof?"

His hands fell from what he had touched; he could only stare—her own manner for it was different now too. "I did. I did indeed—!" And the woful weak simplicity of it, which seemed somehow all that was left him, fell even on his own ear.

"Well then, here it is—it isn't lost!" she returned with a graver face.

“‘Here’ it is,” he gasped, “my poor agonised old money—my blood?”

“Oh, it’s *my* blood too, you must know now!” She held up her head as not before—as for her right to speak of the thing to-day most precious to her. “I took it, but this—my being here this way—is what I’ve made of it! That was the idea I had!”

Her “ideas,” as things to boast of, staggered him. “To have everything in the world, like this, at my wretched expense?”

She had folded her arms back again—grasping each elbow she sat firm; she knew he could see, and had known well from the first, what she had wanted to say, difficult, monstrous though it might be. “No more than at my own—but to do something with your money that you’d never do yourself.”

“Myself, myself?” he wonderingly wailed. “Do you know—or don’t you?—what my life has been?”

She waited, and for an instant, though the light in the room had failed a little more and would soon be mainly that of the flaring lamps on the windy Parade, he caught from her dark eye a silver gleam of impatience. “You’ve suffered and you’ve worked—which, God knows, is what I’ve done! *Of course* you’ve suffered,” she said—“you inevitably had to! We have to,” she went on, “to do or to be or to get anything.”

“And pray what have I done or been or got?” Herbert Dodd found it almost desolately natural to demand.

It made her cover him again as with all she was thinking of. “Can you imagine nothing, or can’t you conceive—?” And then as her challenge struck deeper in, deeper down than it had yet reached, and with the effect of a rush of the blood to his face, “It was *for* you, it was *for* you!” she again broke out—“and for what or whom else could it have been?”

He saw things to a tune now that made him answer straight: “I thought at one time it might be for Bill Frankle.”

“Yes—that was the way you treated me,” Miss Cookham as plainly replied.

But he let this pass; his thought had already got away from it. “What good then—its having been for me—has that ever done me?”

“Doesn’t it do you any good *now*?” his friend returned. To which she added, with another dim play of her tormented brightness, before he could speak: “But if you won’t even have your tea——!”

He had in fact touched nothing and, if he could have explained, would have pleaded very veraciously that his appetite, keen when he came in, had somehow suddenly failed. It was beyond eating or drinking, what she seemed to want him to take from her. So if he looked, before him, over the array, it was to say, very grave and graceless: “Am I to understand that you offer to repay me?”

“I offer to repay you with interest, Herbert Dodd”—and her emphasis of the great word was wonderful.

It held him in his place a minute, and held his eyes upon her; after which, agitated too sharply to sit still, he pushed back his chair and stood up. It was as if mere distress or dismay at first worked in him, and was in fact a wave of deep and irresistible emotion which made him, on his feet, sway as in a great trouble and then, to correct it, throw himself stiffly toward the window, where he stood and looked out unseeing. The road, the wide terrace beyond, the seats, the eternal sea beyond that, the lighted lamps now flaring in the October night-wind,

with the few dispersed people abroad at the tea-hour; these things, meeting and melting into the firelit hospitality at his elbow—or was it that portentous amenity that melted into *them?*—seemed to form round him and to put before him, all together, the strangest of circles and the newest of experiences, in which the unforgettable and the unimaginable were confoundingly mixed. “Oh, oh, oh!”—he could only almost howl for it.

And then, while a thick blur for some moments mantled everything, he knew she had got up, that she stood watching him, allowing for everything, again all “cleverly” patient with him, and he heard her speak again as with studied quietness and clearness. “I wanted to take care of you—it was what I first wanted—and what you first consented to. I’d have done it, oh I’d have done it, I’d have loved you and helped you and guarded you, and you’d have had no trouble, no bad blighting ruin, in all your easy, yes, just your quite jolly and comfortable life. I showed you and proved to you this—I brought it home to you, as I fondly fancied, and it made me briefly happy. You swore you cared for me, you wrote it and made me believe it—you pledged me your honour and your faith. Then you turned and changed suddenly from one day to another; everything altered, you broke your vows, you as good as told me you only wanted it off. You faced me with dislike, and in fact tried not to face me at all; you behaved as if you hated me—you had seen a girl, of great beauty, I admit, who made me a fright and a bore.”

This brought him straight round. “No, Kate Cookham.”

“Yes, Herbert Dodd.” She but shook her head, calmly and nobly, in the now gathered dusk, and her memories and her cause and her character—or was it only her arch-subtlety, her line and her “idea”?—gave her an extraordinary large assurance.

She had touched, however, the treasure of his own case—his terrible own case that began to live again at once by the force of her talking of hers, and which could always all cluster about his great asseveration. “No, no, never, never; I had never seen her then and didn’t dream of her; so that when you yourself began to be harsh and sharp with me, and to seem to want to quarrel, I could have but one idea—which was an appearance you didn’t in the least, as I saw it then, account for or disprove.”

“An appearance—?” Kate desired, as with high astonishment, to know which one.

“How *shouldn’t* I have supposed you really to care for Bill Frankle?—as thoroughly believing the motive of your claim for my money to be its help to your marrying him, since you couldn’t marry me. I was only surprised when, time passing, I made out that that hadn’t happened; and perhaps,” he added the next instant with something of a conscious lapse from the finer style, “hadn’t been in question.”

She had listened to this only staring, and she was silent after he had said it, so silent for some instants that while he considered her something seemed to fail him, much as if he had thrown out his foot for a step and not found the place to rest it. He jerked round to the window again, and then she answered, but without passion unless it was that of her weariness for something stupid and forgiven in him, “Oh, the blind, the pitiful folly!”—to which, as it might perfectly have applied to her own behaviour, he returned nothing. She had moreover at once gone on. “Have it then that there wasn’t much to do—between your finding that you loathed me for another woman or discovering only, when it came to the point, that you loathed me quite enough for myself.”

Which, as she put it in that immensely effective fashion, he recognised that he must just unprotestingly and not so very awkwardly—not so *very!*—take from her; since, whatever he had thus come to her for, it wasn’t to perjure himself with any pretence that, “another woman” or no other woman, he hadn’t, for years and years, abhorred her. Now he was taking

tea with her—or rather, literally, seemed not to be; but this made no difference, and he let her express it as she would while he distinguished a man he knew, Charley Coote, outside on the Parade, under favour of the empty hour and one of the flaring lamps, making up to a young woman with whom (it stuck out grotesquely in his manner) he had never before conversed. Dodd's own position was that of acquiescing in this recall of what had so bitterly been—but he hadn't come back to her, of himself, to stir up, to recall or to recriminate, and for *her* it could but be the very lesson of her whole present act that if she touched anything she touched everything. Soon enough she *was* indeed, and all overwhelmingly, touching everything—with a hand of which the boldness grew.

“But I didn't let *that*, even, make a difference in what I wanted—which was all,” she said, “and had only and passionately been, to take care of you. I had *no* money whatever—nothing then of my own, not a penny to come by anyhow; so it wasn't with mine I could do it. But I could do it with yours,” she amazingly wound up—“if I could once get yours out of you.”

He faced straight about again—his eyebrows higher than they had ever been in his life. “Mine? What penny of it was mine? What scrap beyond a bare, mean little living had I ever pretended to have?”

She held herself still a minute, visibly with force; only her eyes consciously attached to the seat of a chair the back of which her hands, making it tilt toward her a little, grasped as for support. “You pretended to have enough to marry me—and that was all I afterward claimed of you when you wouldn't.”

He was on the point of retorting that he had absolutely pretended to nothing—least of all to the primary desire that such a way of stating it fastened on him; he was on the point for ten seconds of giving her full in the face: “I never *had* any such dream till you yourself—infatuated with me as, frankly, you on the whole appeared to be—got round me and muddled me up and made me behave as if in a way that went against the evidence of my senses.” But he was to feel as quickly that, whatever the ugly, the spent, the irrecoverable truth, he might better have bitten his tongue off: there beat on him there this strange and other, this so prodigiously different beautiful and dreadful truth that no far remembrance and no abiding ache of his own could wholly falsify, and that was indeed all out with her next words.

“That—*using* it for you and using you yourself for your own future—was my motive. I've led my life, which has been an affair, I assure you; and, as I've told you without your quite seeming to understand, I've brought everything fivefold back to you.”

The perspiration broke out on his forehead. “Everything's mine?” he quavered as for the deep piercing pain of it.

“Everything!” said Kate Cookham.

So it told him how she had loved him—but with the tremendous effect at once of its only glaring out at him from the whole thing that it was verily she, a thousand times over, who, in the exposure of his youth and his vanity, had, on the bench of desolation, the scene of yesterday's own renewal, left for him no forward steps to take. It hung there for him tragically vivid again, the hour she had first found him sequestered and accessible after making his acquaintance at his shop. And from this, by a succession of links that fairly clicked to his ear as with their perfect fitting, the fate and the pain and the payment of others stood together in a great grim order. Everything there then was *his*—to make him ask what had been Nan's, poor Nan's of the constant question of whether he need have collapsed. She was before him, she was between them, his little dead dissatisfied wife; across all whose final woe and whose lowly grave he was to reach out, it appeared, to take gifts. He saw them too, the gifts; saw them—she bristled with them—in his actual companion's brave and sincere

and authoritative figure, her strangest of demonstrations. But the other appearance was intenser, as if their ghost had waved wild arms; so that half a minute hadn't passed before the one poor thing that remained of Nan, and that yet thus became a quite mighty and momentous poor thing, was sitting on his lips as for its sole opportunity.

"Can you give me your word of honour that I mightn't, under decent advice, have defied you?"

It made her turn very white; but now that she had said what she *had* said she could still hold up her head. "Certainly you might have defied me, Herbert Dodd."

"They would have told me you had no legal case?"

Well, if she was pale she was bold. "You talk of decent advice—!" She broke off, there was too much to say, and all needless. What she said instead was: "They would have told you I had nothing."

"I didn't so much as ask," her sad visitor remarked.

"Of course you didn't so much as ask."

"I couldn't be so outrageously vulgar," he went on.

"I could, by God's help!" said Kate Cookham.

"Thank you." He had found at his command a tone that made him feel more gentlemanlike than he had ever felt in his life or should doubtless ever feel again. It might have been enough—but somehow as they stood there with this immense clearance between them it wasn't. The clearance was like a sudden gap or great bleak opening through which there blew upon them a deadly chill. Too many things had fallen away, too many new rolled up and over him, and they made something within shake him to his base. It upset the full vessel, and though she kept her eyes on him he let that consequence come, bursting into tears, weakly crying there before her even as he had cried to himself in the hour of his youth when she had made him groundlessly fear. She turned away then—*that* she couldn't watch, and had presently flung herself on the sofa and, all responsively wailing, buried her own face on the cushioned arm. So for a minute their smothered sobs only filled the room. But he made out, through this disorder, where he had put down his hat; his stick and his new tan-coloured gloves—they had cost two-and-thruppence and would have represented sacrifices—were on the chair beside it. He picked these articles up and all silently and softly—gasping, that is, but quite on tiptoe—reached the door and let himself out.

VI

Off there on the bench of desolation a week later she made him a more particular statement, which it had taken the remarkably tense interval to render possible. After leaving her at the hotel that last Sunday he had gone forth in his reaggrieved trouble and walked straight before him, in the teeth of the west wind, close to the iron rails of the stretched Marina and with his telltale face turned from persons occasionally met, and toward the surging sea. At the Land's End, even in the confirmed darkness and the perhaps imminent big blow, his immemorial nook, small shelter as it yielded, had again received him; and it was in the course of this heedless session, no doubt, where the agitated air had nothing to add to the commotion within him, that he began to look his extraordinary fortune a bit straighter in the face and see it confess itself at once a fairy-tale and a nightmare. That, visibly, confoundingly, she was still attached to him (attached in fact was a mild word!) and that the unquestionable proof of it was in this offered pecuniary salve, of the thickest composition, for his wounds and sores and shames—these things were the fantastic fable, the tale of money in handfuls, that he seemed

to have only to stand there and swallow and digest and feel himself full-fed by; but the whole of the rest was nightmare, and most of all nightmare his having thus to thank one through whom Nan and his little girls had known torture.

He didn't care for himself now, and this unextinguished and apparently inextinguishable charm by which he had held her was a fact incredibly romantic; but he gazed with a longer face than he had ever had for anything in the world at his potential acceptance of a great bouncing benefit from the person he intimately, if even in a manner indirectly, associated with the conditions to which his lovely wife and his children (who would have been so lovely too) had pitifully succumbed. He had accepted the social relation—which meant he had taken even that on trial—without knowing what it so dazzlingly masked; for a social relation it had become with a vengeance when it drove him about the place as now at his hours of freedom (and he actually and recklessly took, all demoralised and unstrung and unfit either for work or for anything else, other liberties that would get him into trouble) under this queer torment of irreconcilable things, a bewildered consciousness of tenderness and patience and cruelty, of great evident mystifying facts that were as little to be questioned as to be conceived or explained, and that were yet least, withal, to be lost sight of.

On that Sunday night he had wandered wild, incoherently ranging and throbbing, but this became the law of his next days as well, since he lacked more than ever all other resort or refuge and had nowhere to carry, to deposit, or contractedly let loose and lock up, as it were, his swollen consciousness, which fairly split in twain the raw shell of his sordid little boarding-place. The arch of the sky and the spread of sea and shore alone gave him space; he could roam with himself anywhere, in short, far or near—he could only never take himself back. That certitude—that this was impossible to him even should she wait there among her plushes and bronzes ten years—was the thing he kept closest clutch of; it did wonders for what he would have called his self-respect. Exactly as he had left her so he would stand off—even though at moments when he pulled up sharp somewhere to put himself an intensest question his heart almost stood still. The days of the week went by, and as he had left her she stayed; to the extent, that is, of his having neither sight nor sound of her, and of the failure of every sign. It took nerve, he said, not to return to her, even for curiosity—since how, after all, in the name of wonder, had she invested the fruits of her extortion to such advantage, there being no chapter of all the obscurity of the years to beat that for queer-ness? But he dropped, tired to death, on benches, half a dozen times an evening—exactly on purpose to recognise that the nerve required was just the nerve he had.

As the days without a token from her multiplied he came in as well for hours—and these indeed mainly on the bench of desolation—of sitting stiff and stark in presence of the probability that he had lost everything for ever. When he passed the Royal he never turned an eyelash, and when he met Captain Roper on the Front, three days after having been introduced to him, he “cut him dead”—another privileged consequence of a social relation—rather than seem to himself to make the remotest approach to the question of whether Miss Cookham had left Properley. He had cut people in the days of his life before, just as he had come to being himself cut—since there had been no time for him wholly without one or other face of that necessity—but had never effected such a severance as of this rare connection, which helped to give him thus the measure of his really precious sincerity. If he had lost what had hovered before him he had lost it, his only tribute to which proposition was to grind his teeth with one of those “scrunches,” as he would have said, of which the violence fairly reached his ear. It wouldn't make him lift a finger, and in fact if Kate had simply taken herself off on the Tuesday or the Wednesday she would have been reabsorbed again into the darkness from which she had emerged—and no lifting of fingers, the unspeakable chapter closed, would evermore avail. That at any rate was the kind of man he still was—even after

all that had come and gone, and even if for a few dazed hours certain things had seemed pleasant. The dazed hours had passed, the surge of the old bitterness had dished him (shouldn't he have been shamed if it hadn't?), and he might sit there as before, as always, with nothing at all on earth to look to. He had therefore wrongfully believed himself to be degraded; and the last word about him would be that he *couldn't* then, it appeared, sink to vulgarity as he had tried to let his miseries make him.

And yet on the next Sunday morning, face to face with him again at the Land's End, what she very soon came to was: "As if I believed you didn't *know* by what cord you hold me!" Absolutely too, and just that morning in fact, above all, he wouldn't, he quite couldn't have taken his solemn oath that he hadn't a sneaking remnant, as he might have put it to himself—a remnant of faith in tremendous things still to come of their interview. The day was sunny and breezy, the sea of a cold purple; he wouldn't go to church as he mostly went of Sunday mornings, that being in its way too a social relation—and not least when two-and-thrupenny tan-coloured gloves were new; which indeed he had the art of keeping them for ages. Yet he would dress himself as he scarce mustered resources for even to figure on the fringe of Society, local and transient, at St. Bernard's, and in this trim he took his way westward; occupied largely, as he went, it might have seemed to any person pursuing the same course and happening to observe him, in a fascinated study of the motions of his shadow, the more or less grotesque shape projected, in front of him and mostly a bit to the right, over the blanched asphalt of the Parade and dandling and dancing at such a rate, shooting out and then contracting, that, viewed in themselves, its eccentricities might have formed the basis of an interesting challenge: "Find the state of mind, guess the nature of the agitation, possessing the person so remarkably represented!" Herbert Dodd, for that matter, might have been himself attempting to make by the sun's sharp aid some approach to his immediate horoscope.

It had at any rate been thus put before him that the dandling and dancing of his image occasionally gave way to perfect immobility, when he stopped and kept his eyes on it. "Suppose she should come, suppose she *should!*" it is revealed at least to ourselves that he had at these moments audibly breathed—breathed with the intensity of an arrest between hope and fear. It had glimmered upon him from early, with the look of the day, that, given all else that could happen, this would be rather, as he put it, in her line; and the possibility lived for him, as he proceeded, to the tune of a suspense almost sickening. It was, from one small stage of his pilgrimage to another, the "For ever, never!" of the sentimental case the playmates of his youth used to pretend to settle by plucking the petals of a daisy. But it came to his truly turning faint—so "queer" he felt—when, at the gained point of the long stretch from which he could always tell, he arrived within positive sight of his immemorial goal. His seat was taken and she was keeping it for him—it could only be *she* there in possession; whereby it shone out for Herbert Dodd that if he hadn't been quite sure of her recurrence she had at least been quite sure of his. *That* pulled him up to some purpose, where recognition began for them—or to the effect, in other words, of his pausing to judge if he could bear, for the sharpest note of their intercourse, this inveterate demonstration of her making him do what she liked. What settled the question for him then—and just while they avowedly watched each other, over the long interval, before closing, as if, on either side, for the major advantage—what settled it was this very fact that what she liked she liked so terribly. If it were simply to "use" him, as she had said the last time, and no matter to the profit of which of them she called it, one might let it go for that; since it could make her wait over, day after day, in that fashion, and with such a spending of money, on the hazard of their meeting again. How could she be the least sure he would ever again consent to it after the proved action on him, a week ago, of her last monstrous honesty? It was indeed positively as if he were now himself putting this influence—and for their common edification—to the supreme, to the

finest test. He had a sublime, an ideal flight, which lasted about a minute. "Suppose, now that I see her there and what she has taken so characteristically for granted, suppose I just show her that she *hasn't* only confidently to wait or whistle for me, and that the length of my leash is greater than she measures, and that everything's impossible always?—show it by turning my back on her now and walking straight away. She won't be able not to understand *that!*"

Nothing had passed, across their distance, but the mute apprehension of each on the part of each; the whole expanse, at the church hour, was void of other life (he had scarce met a creature on his way from end to end), and the sun-seasoned gusts kept brushing the air and all the larger prospect clean. It was through this beautiful lucidity that he watched her watch him, as it were—watch him for what he would do. Neither moved at this high tension; Kate Cookham, her face fixed on him, only waited with a stiff appearance of leaving him, not for dignity but—to an effect of even deeper perversity—for kindness, free to choose. It yet somehow affected him at present, this attitude, as a gage of her *knowing too*—knowing, that is, that he wasn't really free, that this was the thinnest of vain parades, the poorest of hollow heroics, that his need, his solitude, his suffered wrong, his exhausted rancour, his foredoomed submission to any shown interest, all hung together too heavy on him to let the weak wings of his pride do more than vaguely tremble. They couldn't, they didn't carry him a single beat further away; according to which he stood rooted, neither retreating nor advancing, but presently correcting his own share of the bleak exchange by looking off at the sea. Deeply conscious of the awkwardness this posture gave him, he yet clung to it as the last shred of his honour, to the clear argument that it was one thing for him to have felt beneath all others, the previous days, that she was to be counted on, but quite a different for her to have felt that *he* was. His checked approach, arriving thus at no term, could in these odd conditions have established that he wasn't only if Kate Cookham had, as either of them might have said, taken it so—if she had given up the game at last by rising, by walking away and adding to the distance between them, and he had then definitely let her vanish into space. It became a fact that when she did finally rise—though after how long our record scarce takes on itself to say—it was not to confirm their separation but to put an end to it; and this by slowly approaching him till she had come within earshot. He had wondered, once aware of it in spite of his averted face, what she would say and on what note, as it were, she would break their week's silence; so that he had to recognise anew, her voice reaching him, that remarkable quality in her which again and again came up for him as her art.

"There are twelve hundred and sixty pounds, to be definite, but I have it all down for you—and you've only to draw."

They lost themselves, these words, rare and exquisite, in the wide bright genial medium and the Sunday stillness, but even while that occurred and he was gaping for it she was herself there, in her battered ladylike truth, to answer for them, to represent them, and, if a further grace than their simple syllabled beauty were conceivable, almost embarrassingly to cause them to materialise. Yes, she let her smart and tight little reticule hang as if it bulged, beneath its clasp, with the whole portentous sum, and he felt himself glare again at this vividest of her attested claims. She might have been ready, on the spot, to open the store to the plunge of his hand, or, with the situation otherwise conceived, to impose on his pauperised state an acceptance of alms on a scale unprecedented in the annals of street charity. Nothing so much counted for him, however, neither grave numeral nor elegant fraction, as the short, rich, rounded word that the breeze had picked up as it dropped and seemed now to blow about between them. "To draw—to draw?" Yes, he gaped it as if it had no sense; the fact being that even while he did so he was reading into her use of the term more romance than any word in the language had ever had for him. He, Herbert Dodd, was to live to "draw," like people, scarce hampered by the conditions of earth, whom he had remotely and circuitously heard

about, and in fact when he walked back with her to where she had been sitting it was very much, for his strained nerves, as if the very bench of desolation itself were to be the scene of that exploit and he mightn't really live till he reached it.

When they had sat down together she did press the spring of her reticule, from which she took, not a handful of gold nor a packet of crisp notes, but an oblong sealed letter, which she had thus waited on him, she remarked, on purpose to deliver, and which would certify, with sundry particulars, to the credit she had opened for him at a London bank. He received it without looking at it—he held it, in the same manner, conspicuous and unassimilated, for most of the rest of the immediate time, appearing embarrassed with it, nervously twisting and flapping it, yet thus publicly retaining it even while aware, beneath everything, of the strange, the quite dreadful, wouldn't it be? engagement that such inaction practically stood for. He could accept money to that amount, yes—but not for nothing in return. For what then in return? He kept asking himself for what, while she said other things and made above all, in her high, shrewd, successful way the point that, no, he needn't pretend that his conviction of her continued personal interest in him wouldn't have tided him over any question besetting him since their separation. She put it to him that the deep instinct of where he should at last find her must confidently have worked for him, since she confessed to her instinct of where she should find *him*; which meant—oh it came home to him as he fingered his sealed treasure!—neither more nor less than that she had now created between them an equality of experience. He wasn't to have done all the suffering, *she* was to have “been through” things he couldn't even guess at; and, since he was bargaining away his right ever again to allude to the unforgettable, so much there was of it, what her tacit proposition came to was that they were “square” and might start afresh.

He didn't take up her charge, as his so compromised “pride” yet in a manner prompted him, that he had enjoyed all the week all those elements of ease about her; the most he achieved for that was to declare, with an ingenuity contributing to float him no small distance further, that of course he had turned up at their old place of tryst, which had been, through the years, the haunt of his solitude and the goal of his walk any Sunday morning that seemed too beautiful for church; but that he hadn't in the least built on her presence there—since that supposition gave him, she would understand, wouldn't she? the air, disagreeable to him, of having come in search of her. Her quest of himself, once he had been seated there, would have been another matter—but in short “Of course after all you did come to me, just now, didn't you?” He felt himself, too, lamely and gracelessly grin, as for the final kick of his honour, in confirmation of the record that he had then yielded but to her humility. Her humility became for him at this hour and to this tune, on the bench of desolation, a quantity more prodigious and even more mysterious than that other guaranteed quantity the finger-tips of his left hand could feel the tap by the action of his right; though what was in especial extraordinary was the manner in which she could keep making him such allowances and yet meet him again, at some turn, as with her residuum for her clever self so great.

“Come to you, Herbert Dodd?” she imperturbably echoed. “I've been coming to you for the last ten years!”

There had been for him just before this sixty supreme seconds of intensest aspiration—a minute of his keeping his certificate poised for a sharp thrust back at her, the thrust of the wild freedom of his saying: “No, no, I *can't* give them up; I can't simply sink them deep down in my soul forever, with no cross in all my future to mark *that* burial; so that if this is what our arrangement means I must decline to have anything to do with it.” The words none the less hadn't come, and when she had herself, a couple of minutes later, spoken those

others, the blood rose to his face as if, given his stiffness and her extravagance, he had just indeed saved himself.

Everything in fact stopped, even his fidget with his paper; she imposed a hush, she imposed at any rate the conscious decent form of one, and he couldn't afterward have told how long, at this juncture, he must have sat simply gazing before him. It was so long, at any rate, that Kate herself got up—and quite indeed, presently, as if her own forms were now at an end. He had returned her nothing—so what was she waiting for? She had been on the two other occasions momentarily at a loss, but never so much so, no doubt, as was thus testified to by her leaving the bench and moving over once more to the rail of the terrace. She could carry it off, in a manner, with her resources, that she was waiting with so little to wait for; she could face him again, after looking off at the sea, as if this slightly stiff delay, not wholly exempt from awkwardness, had been but a fine scruple of her courtesy. She had gathered herself in; after giving him time to appeal she could take it that he had decided and that nothing was left for her to do. “Well then,” she clearly launched at him across the broad walk—“well then, good-bye.”

She had come nearer with it, as if he might rise for some show of express separation; but he only leaned back motionless, his eyes on her now—he kept her a moment before him. “Do you mean that we don't—that we don't—?” But he broke down.

“Do I ‘mean’—?” She remained as for questions he might ask, but it was wellnigh as if there played through her dotty veil an irrepressible irony for that particular one. “I've meant, for long years, I think, all I'm capable of meaning. I've meant so much that I can't mean more. So there it is.”

“But if you go,” he appealed—and with a sense as of final flatness, however he arranged it, for his own attitude—“but if you go sha'n't I see you again?”

She waited a little, and it was strangely for him now as if—though at last so much more gorged with her tribute than she had ever been with his—something still depended on her. “Do you *like* to see me?” she very simply asked.

At this he did get up; that was easier than to say—at least with responsive simplicity; and again for a little he looked hard and in silence at his letter; which at last, however, raising his eyes to her own for the act, while he masked their conscious ruefulness, to his utmost, in some air of assurance, he slipped into the inner pocket of his coat, letting it settle there securely. “You're too wonderful.” But he frowned at her with it as never in his life. “Where does it all come from?”

“The wonder of poor me?” Kate Cookham said. “It comes from *you*.”

He shook his head slowly—feeling, with his letter there against his heart, such a new agility, almost such a new range of interest. “I mean so *much* money—so extraordinarily much.”

Well, she held him a while blank. “Does it seem to you extraordinarily much—twelve-hundred-and-sixty? Because, you know,” she added, “it's all.”

“It's enough!” he returned with a slight thoughtful droop of his head to the right and his eyes attached to the far horizon as through a shade of shyness for what he was saying. He felt all her own lingering nearness somehow on his cheek.

“It's enough? Thank you then!” she rather oddly went on.

He shifted a little his posture. “It was more than a hundred a year—for you to get together.”

“Yes,” she assented, “that was what year by year I tried for.”

“But that you could live all the while and save that—!” Yes, he was at liberty, as he hadn’t been, quite pleasantly to marvel. All his wonderments in life had been hitherto unanswered—and didn’t the change mean that here again was the social relation?

“Ah, I didn’t live as you saw me the other day.”

“Yes,” he answered—and didn’t he the next instant feel he must fairly have smiled with it?—”the other day you *were* going it!”

“For once in my life,” said Kate Cookham. “I’ve left the hotel,” she after a moment added.

“Ah, you’re in—a—lodgings?” he found himself inquiring as for positive sociability.

She had apparently a slight shade of hesitation, but in an instant it was all right; as what he showed he wanted to know she seemed mostly to give him. “Yes—but far of course from here. Up on the hill.” To which, after another instant, “At The Mount, Castle Terrace,” she subjoined.

“Oh, I *know* The Mount. And Castle Terrace is awfully sunny and nice.”

“Awfully sunny and nice,” Kate Cookham took from him.

“So that if it isn’t,” he pursued, “like the Royal, why you’re at least comfortable.”

“I shall be comfortable anywhere now,” she replied with a certain dryness.

It was astonishing, however, what had become of his own. “Because I’ve accepted——?”

“Call it that!” she dimly smiled.

“I hope then at any rate,” he returned, “you can now thoroughly rest” He spoke as for a cheerful conclusion and moved again also to smile, though as with a poor grimace, no doubt; since what he seemed most clearly to feel was that since he “accepted” he mustn’t, for his last note, have accepted in sulkiness or gloom. With that, at the same time, he couldn’t but know, in all his fibres, that with such a still-watching face as the dotty veil didn’t disguise for him there was no possible concluding, at least on his part On hers, on hers it was—as he had so often for a week had reflectively to pronounce things—another affair. Ah, somehow, both formidably and helpfully, her face concluded—yet in a sense so strangely enshrouded in things she didn’t tell him. What *must* she, what *mustn’t* she, have done? What she had said—and she had really told him nothing—was no account of her life; in the midst of which conflict of opposed recognitions, at any rate, it was as if, for all he could do, he himself now considerably floundered. “But I can’t think—I can’t think——!”

“You can’t think I can have made so much money in the time and been honest?”

“Oh, you’ve been *honest!*” Herbert Dodd distinctly allowed.

It moved her stillness to a gesture—which, however, she had as promptly checked; and she went on the next instant as for further generosity to his failure of thought. “Everything was possible, under my stress, with my hatred.”

“Your hatred——?” For she had paused as if it were after all too difficult.

“Of what I should for so long have been doing to you.”

With this, for all his failures, a greater light than any yet shone upon him. “It made you think of ways——?”

“It made me think of everything. It made me work,” said Kate Cookham. She added, however, the next moment: “But that’s my story.”

“And I mayn’t hear it?”

“No—because I mayn’t hear yours.”

“Oh, mine—!” he said with the strangest, saddest, yet after all most resigned sense of surrender of it; which he tried to make sound as if he couldn’t have told it, for its splendor of sacrifice and of misery, even if he would.

It seemed to move in her a little, exactly, that sense of the invidious. “Ah, mine too, I assure you——!”

He rallied at once to the interest. “Oh, we *can* talk then?”

“Never,” she all oddly replied. “Never,” said Kate Cookham.

They remained so, face to face; the effect of which for him was that he had after a little understood why. That was fundamental. “Well, I see.”

Thus confronted they stayed; and then, as he saw with a contentment that came up from deeper still, it was indeed she who, with her worn fine face, would conclude. “But I can take care of you.”

“You *have!*” he said as with nothing left of him but a beautiful appreciative candour.

“Oh, but you’ll want it now in a way—!” she responsibly answered.

He waited a moment, dropping again on the seat. So, while she still stood, he looked up at her; with the sense somehow that there were too many things and that they were all together, terribly, irresistibly, doubtless blessedly, in her eyes and her whole person; which thus affected him for the moment as more than he could bear. He leaned forward, dropping his elbows to his knees and pressing his head on his hands. So he stayed, saying nothing; only, with the sense of her own sustained, renewed and wonderful action, knowing that an arm had passed round him and that he was held. She was beside him on the bench of desolation.

A Round Of Visits

I

HE had been out but once since his arrival, Mark Monteith; that was the next day after—he had disembarked by night on the previous; then everything had come at once, as he would have said, everything had changed. He had got in on Tuesday; he had spent Wednesday for the most part down town, looking into the dismal subject of his anxiety—the anxiety that, under a sudden decision, had brought him across the unfriendly sea at mid-winter, and it was through information reaching him on Wednesday evening that he had measured his loss, measured above all his pain. These were two distinct things, he felt, and, though both bad, one much worse than the other. It wasn't till the next three days had pretty well ebbed, in fact, that he knew himself for so badly wounded. He had waked up on Thursday morning, so far as he had slept at all, with the sense, together, of a blinding New York blizzard and of a deep sore inward ache. The great white savage storm would have kept him at the best within doors, but his stricken state was by itself quite reason enough.

He so felt the blow indeed, so gasped, before what had happened to him, at the ugliness, the bitterness, and, beyond these things, the sinister strangeness, that, the matter of his dismay little by little detaching and projecting itself, settling there face to face with him as something he must now live with always, he might have been in charge of some horrid alien thing, some violent, scared, unhappy creature whom there was small joy, of a truth, in remaining with, but whose behaviour wouldn't perhaps bring him under notice, nor otherwise compromise him, so long as he should stay to watch it. A young jibbering ape of one of the more formidable sorts, or an ominous infant panther, smuggled into the great gaudy hotel and whom it might yet be important he shouldn't advertise, couldn't have affected him as needing more domestic attention. The great gaudy hotel—The Pocahontas, but carried out largely on “Du Barry” lines—made all about him, beside, behind, below, above, in blocks and tiers and superpositions, a sufficient defensive hugeness; so that, between the massive labyrinth and the New York weather, life in a lighthouse during a gale would scarce have kept him more apart. Even when in the course of that worse Thursday it had occurred to him for vague relief that the odious certified facts couldn't be all his misery, and that, with his throat and a probable temperature, a brush of the epidemic, which was for ever brushing him, accounted for something, even then he couldn't resign himself to bed and broth and dimness, but only circled and prowled the more within his high cage, only watched the more from his tenth story the rage of the elements.

In the afternoon he had a doctor—the caravanserai, which supplied everything in quantities, had one for each group of so many rooms—just in order to be assured that he was *grippé* enough for anything. What his visitor, making light of his attack, perversely told him was that he was, much rather, “blue” enough, and from causes doubtless known to himself—which didn't come to the same thing; but he “gave him something,” prescribed him warmth and quiet and broth and courage, and came back the next day as to readminister this last dose. He then pronounced him better, and on Saturday pronounced him well—all the more that the storm had abated and the snow had been dealt with as New York, at a push, knew how to deal with things. Oh, how New York knew how to deal—to deal, that is, with other accumulations lying passive to its hand—was exactly what Mark now ached with his impression of; so that, still threshing about in this consciousness, he had on the Saturday come near to breaking out as to what was the matter with him. The Doctor brought in somehow the air of the hotel—which, cheerfully and conscientiously, by his simple

philosophy, the good man wished to diffuse; breathing forth all the echoes of other woes and worries and pointing the honest moral that, especially with such a thermometer, there were enough of these to go round.

Our sufferer, by that time, would have liked to tell some one; extracting, to the last acid strain of it, the full strength of his sorrow, taking it all in as he could only do by himself and with the conditions favourable at least to this, had been his natural first need. But now, he supposed, he *must* be better; there was something of his heart's heaviness he wanted so to give out. He had rummaged forth on the Thursday night half a dozen old photographs stuck into a leather frame, a small show-case that formed part of his usual equipage of travel—he mostly set it up on a table when he stayed anywhere long enough; and in one of the neat gilt-edged squares of this convenient portable array, as familiar as his shaving-glass or the hair-brushes, of backs and monograms now so beautifully toned and wasted, long ago given him by his mother, Phil Blood-good handsomely faced him. Not contemporaneous, and a little faded, but so saying what it said only the more dreadfully, the image seemed to sit there, at an immemorial window, like some long effective and only at last exposed “decoy” of fate. It was *because* he was so beautifully good-looking, because he was so charming and clever and frank—besides being one's third cousin, or whatever it was, one's early schoolfellow and one's later college classmate—that one had abjectly trusted him. To live thus with his unremoved, undestroyed, engaging, treacherous face, had been, as our traveller desired, to live with all of the felt pang; had been to consume it in such a single hot, sore mouthful as would so far as possible dispose of it and leave but cold dregs. Thus, if the Doctor, casting about for pleasantness, had happened to notice him there, salient since he was, and possibly by the same stroke even to know him, as New York—and more or less to its cost now, mightn't one say?—so abundantly and agreeable had, the cup would have overflowed and Monteith, for all he could be sure of the contrary, would have relieved himself positively in tears.

“Oh *he's* what's the matter with me—that, looking after some of my poor dividends, as he for the ten years of my absence had served me by doing, he has simply jockeyed me out of the whole little collection, such as it was, and taken the opportunity of my return, inevitably at last bewildered and uneasy, to ‘sail,’ ten days ago, for parts unknown and as yet unguessable. It isn't the beastly values themselves, however; that's only awkward and I can still live, though I don't quite know how I shall turn round; it's the horror of *his* having done it, and done it to *me*—without a mitigation or, so to speak, a warning or an excuse.” That, at a hint or a jog, is what he would have brought out—only to feel afterward, no doubt, that he had wasted his impulse and profaned even a little his sincerity. The Doctor didn't in the event so much as glance at his cluster of portraits—which fact quite put before our friend the essentially more vivid range of imagery that a pair of eyes transferred from room to room and from one queer case to another, in such a place as that, would mainly be adjusted to. It wasn't for *him* to relieve himself touchingly, strikingly or whatever, to such a man: such a man might much more pertinently—save for professional discretion—have emptied out there his own bag of wonders; prodigies of observation, flowers of oddity, flowers of misery, flowers of the monstrous, gathered in current hotel practice. Countless possibilities, making doctors perfunctory, Mark felt, swarmed and seethed at their doors; it showed for an incalculable world, and at last, on Sunday, he decided to leave his room.

II

Everything, as he passed through the place, went on—all the offices of life, the whole bustle of the market, and withal, surprisingly, scarce less that of the nursery and the playground; the whole sprawl in especial of the great gregarious fireside: it was a complete social scene in

itself, on which types might figure and passions rage and plots thicken and dramas develop, without reference to any other sphere, or perhaps even to anything at all outside. The signs of this met him at every turn as he threaded the labyrinth, passing from one extraordinary masquerade of expensive objects, one portentous “period” of decoration, one violent phase of publicity, to another: the heavy heat, the luxuriance, the extravagance, the quantity, the colour, gave the impression of some wondrous tropical forest, where vociferous, bright-eyed, and feathered creatures, of every variety of size and hue, were half smothered between undergrowths of velvet and tapestry and ramifications of marble and bronze. The fauna and the flora startled him alike, and among them his bruised spirit drew in and folded its wings. But he roamed and rested, exploring and in a manner enjoying the vast rankness—in the depth of which he suddenly encountered Mrs. Folllott, whom he had last seen, six months before, in London, and who had spoken to him then, precisely, of Phil Bloodgood, for several years previous her confidential American agent and factotum too, as she might say, but at that time so little in her good books, for the extraordinary things he seemed to be doing, that she was just hurrying home, she had made no scruple of mentioning, to take everything out of his hands.

Mark remembered how uneasy she had made him—how that very talk with her had wound him up to fear, as so acute and intent a little person she affected him; though he had affirmed with all emphasis and flourish his own confidence and defended, to iteration, his old friend. This passage had remained with him for a certain pleasant heat of intimacy, his partner, of the charming appearance, being what she was; he liked to think how they had fraternised over their difference and called each other idiots, or almost, without offence. It was always a link to have scuffled, failing a real scratch, with such a character; and he had at present the flutter of feeling that something of this would abide. *He* hadn’t been hurrying home, at the London time, in any case; he was doing nothing then, and had continued to do it; he would want, before showing suspicion—that had been his attitude—to have more, after all, to go upon. Mrs. Folllott also, and with a great actual profession of it, remembered and rejoiced; and, also staying in the house as she was, sat with him, under a spreading palm, in a wondrous rococo salon, surrounded by the pinkest, that is the fleshiest, imitation Boucher panels, and wanted to know if he *now* stood up for his swindler. She would herself have tumbled on a cloud, very passably, in a fleshy Boucher manner, hadn’t she been over-dressed for such an exercise; but she was quite realistically aware of what had so naturally happened—she was prompt about Bloodgood’s “flight.”

She had acted with energy, on getting back—she had saved what she could; which hadn’t, however, prevented her losing all disgustedly some ten thousand dollars. She was lovely, lively, friendly, interested, she connected Monteith perfectly with their discussion that day during the water-party on the Thames; but, sitting here with him half an hour, she talked only of her peculiar, her cruel sacrifice—since she should never get a penny back. He had felt himself, on their meeting, quite yearningly reach out to her—so decidedly, by the morning’s end, and that of his scattered sombre stations, had he been sated with meaningless contacts, with the sense of people all about him intensely, though harmlessly, animated, yet at the same time raspingly indifferent. *They* would have, he and she at least, their common pang—through which fact, somehow, he should feel less stranded. It wasn’t that he wanted to be pitied—he fairly didn’t pity himself; he winced, rather, and even to vicarious anguish, as it rose again, for poor shamed Bloodgood’s doom-ridden figure. But he wanted, as with a desperate charity, to give some easier turn to the mere ugliness of the main facts; to work off his obsession from them by mixing with it some other blame, some other pity, it scarce mattered what—if it might be some other experience; as an effect of which larger ventilation

it would have, after a fashion and for a man of free sensibility, a diluted and less poisonous taste.

By the end of five minutes of Mrs. Folliott, however, he felt his dry lips seal themselves to a makeshift simper. She could *take* nothing—no better, no broader perception of anything than fitted her own small faculty; so that though she must have recalled or imagined that he had still, up to lately, had interests at stake, the rapid result of her egotistical little chatter was to make him wish he might rather have conversed with the French waiter dangling in the long vista that showed the oriental café as a climax, or with the policeman, outside, the top of whose helmet peeped above the ledge of a window. She bewailed her wretched money to excess—she who, he was sure, had quantities more; she pawed and tossed her bare bone, with her little extraordinarily gemmed and manicured hands, till it acted on his nerves; she rang all the changes on the story, the dire fatality, of her having wavered and muddled, thought of this and but done that, of her stupid failure to have pounced, when she had first meant to, in season. She abused the author of their wrongs—recognising thus too Monteith's right to loathe him—for the desperado he assuredly had proved, but with a vulgarity of analysis and an incapacity for the higher criticism, as her listener felt it to be, which made him determine resentfully, almost grimly, that she shouldn't have the benefit of a grain of *his* vision or *his* version of what had befallen them, and of how, in particular, it had come; and should never dream thereby (though much would she suffer from that!) of how interesting he might have been. She had, in a finer sense, no manners, and to be concerned with her in any retrospect was—since their discourse was of losses—to feel the dignity of history incur the very gravest. It was true that such fantasies, or that any shade of inward irony, would be Greek to Mrs. Folliott. It was also true, however, and not much more strange, when she had presently the comparatively happy thought of “Lunch with *us*, you poor dear!” and mentioned three or four of her “crowd”—a new crowd, rather, for her, all great Sunday lunchers there and immense fun, who would in a moment be turning up—that this seemed to him as easy as anything else; so that after a little, deeper in the jungle and while, under the temperature as of high noon, with the crowd complete and “ordering,” he wiped the perspiration from his brow, he felt he was letting himself go. He did that certainly to the extent of leaving far behind any question of Mrs. Folliott's manners. They didn't matter there—nobody's did; and if she ceased to lament her ten thousand it was only because, among higher voices, she couldn't make herself heard. Poor Blood-good didn't have a show, as they might have said, didn't get through at any point; the crowd was so new that—there either having been no hue and cry for him, or having been too many others, for other absconders, in the intervals—they had never so much as heard of him and would have no more of Mrs. Folliott's true inwardness, on that subject at least, than she had lately cared to have of Monteith's.

There was nothing like a crowd, this unfortunate knew, for making one feel lonely, and he felt so increasingly during the meal; but he got thus at least in a measure away from the terrible little lady; after which, and before the end of the hour, he wanted still more to get away from every one else. He was in fact about to perform this manoeuvre when he was checked by the jolly young woman he had been having on his left and who had more to say about the Hotels, up and down the town, than he had ever known a young woman to have to say on any subject at all; she expressed herself in hotel terms exclusively, the names of those establishments playing through her speech as the *leit-motif* might have recurrently flashed and romped through a piece of profane modern music. She wanted to present him to the pretty girl she had brought with her, and who had apparently signified to her that she must do so.

“I think you know my brother-in-law, Mr. Newton Winch,” the pretty girl had immediately said; she moved her head and shoulders together, as by a common spring, the effect of a stiff

neck or of something loosened in her back hair; but becoming, queerly enough, all the prettier for doing so. He had seen in the papers, her brother-in-law, Mr. Monteith's arrival—Mr. Mark P. Monteith, wasn't it?—and where he was, and she had been with him, three days before, at the time; whereupon he had said "Hullo, what can have brought old Mark back?" He seemed to have believed—Newton had seemed—that that shirker, as he called him, never *would* come; and she guessed that if she had known she was going to meet such a former friend ("Which he claims you are, sir," said the pretty girl) he would have asked her to find out what the trouble could be. But the real satisfaction would just be, she went on, if his former friend would himself go and see him and tell him; he had appeared of late so down.

"Oh, I remember him"—Mark didn't repudiate the friendship, placing him easily; only then he wasn't married and the pretty girl's sister must have come in later: which showed, his not knowing such things, how they had lost touch. The pretty girl was sorry to have to say in return to this that her sister wasn't living—had died two years after marrying; so that Newton was up there in Fiftieth Street alone; where (in explanation of his being "down") he had been shut up for days with bad *grippe*; though now on the mend, or she wouldn't have gone to him, not she, who had had it nineteen times and didn't want to have it again. But the horrid poison just seemed to have entered into poor Newton's soul.

"That's the way it *can* take you, don't you know?" And then as, with her single twist, she just charmingly hunched her eyes at our friend, "Don't you want to go to see him?"

Mark bethought himself: "Well, I'm going to see a lady——"

She took the words from his mouth. "Of course you're going to see a lady—every man in New York is. But Newton isn't a lady, unfortunately for him, to-day; and Sunday afternoon in this place, in this weather, alone——!"

"Yes, isn't it awful?"—he was quite drawn to her.

"Oh, *you've* got your lady!"

"Yes, I've got my lady, thank goodness!" The fervour of which was his sincere tribute to the note he had had on Friday morning from Mrs. Ash, the only thing that had a little tempered his gloom.

"Well then, feel for others. Fit him in. Tell him why!"

"Why I've come back? I'm glad I *have*—since it was to see *you!*" Monteith made brave enough answer, promising to do what he could. He liked the pretty girl, with her straight attack and her free awkwardness—also with her difference from the others through something of a sense and a distinction given her by so clearly having Newton on her mind. Yet it was odd to him, and it showed the lapse of the years, that Winch—as he had known him of old—could *be* to that degree on any one's mind.

III

Outside in the intensity of the cold—it was a jump from the Tropics to the Pole—he felt afresh the force of what he had just been saying; that if it weren't for the fact of Mrs. Ash's good letter of welcome, despatched, characteristically, as soon as she had, like the faithful sufferer in Fiftieth Street, observed his name, in a newspaper, on one of the hotel-lists, he should verily, for want of a connection and an abutment, have scarce dared to face the void and the chill together, but have sneaked back into the jungle and there tried to lose himself. He made, as it was, the opposite effort, resolute to walk, though hovering now and then at vague crossways, radiations of roads to nothing, or taking cold counsel of the long but still sketchy vista, as it struck him, of the northward Avenue, bright and bleak, fresh and harsh,

rich and evident somehow, a perspective like a page of florid modern platitudes. He didn't quite know what he had expected for his return—not certainly serenades and deputations; but without Mrs. Ash his mail would have quite lacked geniality, and it was as if Phil Blood-good had gone off not only with so large a slice of his small *peculium*, but with all the broken bits of the past, the loose ends of old relationships, that he had supposed he might pick up again. Well, perhaps he should still pick up a few—by the sweat of his brow; no motion of their own at least, he by this time judged, would send them fluttering into his hand.

Which reflections but quickened his forecast of this charm of the old Paris inveteracy renewed—the so-prized custom of nine years before, when he still believed in results from his fond frequentation of the Beaux Arts; that of walking over the river to the Rue de Marignan, precisely, every Sunday without exception, and sitting at her fireside, and often all offensively, no doubt, outstaying every one. How he had used to want those hours then, and how again, after a little, at present, the Rue de Marignan might have been before him! He had gone to her there at that time with his troubles, such as they were, and they had always worked for her amusement—which had been her happy, her clever way of taking them: she couldn't have done anything better for them in that phase, poor innocent things compared with what they might have been, than be amused by them. Perhaps that was what she would still be—with those of his present hour; now too they might inspire her with the touch she best applied and was most instinctive mistress of: this didn't at all events strike him as what he should most resent. It wasn't as if Mrs. Folllott, to make up for boring him with her own plaint, for example, had had so much as a gleam of conscious diversion over his.

“I'm *so* delighted to see you, I've such immensities to tell you!”—it began with the highest animation twenty minutes later, the very moment he stood there, the sense of the Rue de Marignan in the charming room and in the things about all reconstituted, regrouped, wonderfully preserved, down to the very sitting-places in the same relations, and down to the faint sweet mustiness of generations of cigarettes; but everything else different, and even vaguely alien, and by a measure still other than that of their own stretched interval and of the dear delightful woman's just a little pathetic alteration of face. He had allowed for the nine years, and so, it was to be hoped, had she; but the last thing, otherwise, that would have been touched, he immediately felt, was the quality, the intensity, of her care to see him. She cared, oh so visibly and touchingly and almost radiantly—save for her being, yes, distinctly, a little *more* battered than from even a good nine years' worth; nothing could in fact have perched with so crowning an impatience on the heap of what she had to “tell” as that special shade of revived consciousness of having him in particular to tell it to. It wasn't perhaps much to matter how soon she brought out and caused to ring, as it were, on the little recognised marqueterie table between them (such an anciently envied treasure), the heaviest gold-piece of current history she was to pay him with for having just so felicitously come back: he knew already, without the telling, that intimate domestic tension must lately, within those walls, have reached a climax and that he could serve supremely—oh how he was going to serve!—as the most sympathetic of all pairs of ears.

The whole thing was upon him, in any case, with the minimum of delay: Bob had had it from her, definitely, the first of the week, and it was absolutely final now, that they must set up avowedly separate lives—without horrible “proceedings” of any sort, but with her own situation, her independence, secured to her once for all. She had been coming to it, taking her time, and she had gone through—well, so old a friend would guess enough what; but she was at the point, oh blessedly now, where she meant to stay, he'd see if she didn't; with which, in this wonderful way, he himself had arrived for the cream of it and she was just selfishly glad. Bob had gone to Washington—ostensibly on business, but really to recover breath; she had, speaking vulgarly, knocked the wind out of him and was allowing him time to turn round.

Mrs. Folllott moreover, she was sure, would have gone—was certainly believed to have been seen there five days ago; and of course his first necessity, for public use, would be to patch up something with Mrs. Folllott. Mark knew about Mrs. Folllott?—who was only, for that matter, one of a regular “bevy.” Not that it signified, however, if he didn’t: she would tell him about *her* later.

He took occasion from the first fraction of a break not quite to know what he knew about Mrs. Folllott—though perhaps he could imagine a little; and it was probably at this minute that, having definitely settled to a position, and precisely in his very own tapestry *bergère*, the one with the delicious little spectral “subjects” on the back and seat, he partly exhaled, and yet managed partly to keep to himself, the deep resigned sigh of a general comprehension. He knew what he was “in” for, he heard her go on—she said it again and again, seemed constantly to be saying it while she smiled at him with her peculiar fine charm, her positive gaiety of sensibility, scarce dimmed: “I’m just selfishly glad, just selfishly glad!” Well, she was going to have reason to be; she was going to put the whole case to him, all her troubles and plans, and each act of the tragi-comedy of her recent existence, as to the dearest and safest sympathiser in all the world. There would be no chance for *his* case, though it was so much for his case he had come; yet there took place within him but a mild, dumb convulsion, the momentary strain of his substituting, by the turn of a hand, one prospect of interest for another.

Squaring himself in his old *bergère*, and with his lips, during the effort, compressed to the same passive grimace that had an hour or two before operated for the encouragement of Mrs. Folllott—just as it was to clear the stage completely for the present more prolonged performance—he shut straight down, as he even in the act called it to himself, on any personal claim for social consideration and rendered a perfect little agony of justice to the grounds of his friend’s vividness. For it was all the justice that could be expected of him that, though, secretly, he wasn’t going to be interested in her being interesting, she was yet going to be so, all the same, by the very force of her lovely material (Bob Ash *was* such a pure pearl of a donkey!) and he was going to keep on knowing she was—yes, to the very end. When after the lapse of an hour he rose to go, the rich fact that she *had* been was there between them, and with an effect of the frankly, fearlessly, harmlessly intimate fireside passage for it that went beyond even the best memories of the pleasant past. He hadn’t “amused” her, no, in quite the same way as in the Rue de Marignan time—it had then been he who for the most part took frequent turns, emphatic, explosive, elocutionary, over that wonderful waxed parquet while she laughed as for the young perversity of him from the depths of the second, the matching *bergère*. To-day she herself held and swept the floor, putting him merely to the trouble of his perpetual “Brava!” But that was all through the change of basis—the amusement, another name only for the thrilled absorption, having been inevitably for *him*; as how could it have failed to be with such a regular “treat” to his curiosity? With the tea-hour now other callers were turning up, and he got away on the plea of his wanting so to think it all over. He hoped again he hadn’t too queer a grin with his assurance to her, as if she would quite know what he meant, that he had been thrilled to the core. But she returned, quite radiantly, that he had carried *her* completely away; and her sincerity was proved by the final frankness of their temporary parting. “My pleasure of you is selfish, horribly, I admit; so that if *that* doesn’t suit you—!” Her faded beauty flushed again as she said it.

IV

In the street again, as he resumed his walk, he saw how perfectly it would *have* to suit him and how he probably for a long time wouldn’t be suited otherwise. Between them and that time, however, what mightn’t, for him, poor devil, on his new basis, have happened? She

wasn't at any rate within any calculable period going to care so much for anything as for the so quaintly droll terms in which her rearrangement with her husband—thanks to that gentleman's inimitable fatuity—would have to be made. This was what it was to own, exactly, her special grace—the brightest gaiety in the finest sensibility; *such* a display of which combination, Mark felt as he went (if he could but have done it still more justice) she must have regaled him with! That exquisite last flush of her fadedness could only remain with him; yet while he presently stopped at a street-corner in a district redeemed from desolation but by the passage just then of a choked trolley-car that howled, as he paused for it, beneath the weight of its human accretions, he seemed to know the inward “sinking” that had been determined in a hungry man by some extravagant sight of the preparation of somebody else's dinner. Florence Ash was dining, so to speak, off the feast of appreciation, appreciation of what she had to “tell” him, that he had left her seated at; and she was welcome, assuredly—welcome, welcome, welcome, he musingly, he wistfully, and yet at the same time a trifle mechanically, repeated, stayed as he was a moment longer by the suffering shriek of another public vehicle and a sudden odd automatic return of his mind to the pretty girl, the flower of Mrs. Folliott's crowd, who had spoken to him of Newton Winch. It was extraordinarily as if, on the instant, she reminded him, from across the town, that she had offered him dinner: it was really quite strangely, while he stood there, as if she had told him where he could go and get it. With which, none the less, it was apparently where he wouldn't find her—and what was there, after all, of nutritive in the image of Newton Winch? He made up his mind in a moment that it owed that property, which the pretty girl had somehow made imputable, to the fact of its simply being just then the one image of anything known to him that the terrible place had to offer. Nothing, he a minute later reflected, could have been so “rum” as that, sick and sore, of a bleak New York eventide, he should have had nowhere to turn if not to the said Fiftieth Street.

That was the direction he accordingly took, for when he found the number given him by the same remarkable agent of fate also present to his memory he recognised the direct intervention of Providence and how it absolutely required a miracle to explain his so precipitately embracing this loosest of connections. The miracle indeed soon grew clearer: Providence had, on some obscure system, chosen this very ridiculous hour to save him from cultivation of the sin of selfishness, the obsession of egotism, and was breaking him to its will by constantly directing his attention to the claims of others. Who could say what at that critical moment mightn't have become of Mrs. Folliott (otherwise too then so sadly embroiled!) if she hadn't been enabled to air to him her grievance and her rage?—just as who could deny that it must have done Florence Ash a world of good to have put her thoughts about Bob in order by the aid of a person to whom the vision of Bob in the light of those thoughts (or in other words to whom *her* vision of Bob and nothing else) would mean so delightfully much? It was on the same general lines that poor Newton Winch, bereft, alone, ill, perhaps dying, and with the drawback of a not very sympathetic personality—as Mark remembered it at least—to contend against in almost any conceivable appeal to human furtherance, it was on these lines, very much, that the luckless case in Fiftieth Street was offered him as a source of salutary discipline. The moment for such a lesson might strike him as strange, in view of the quite special and independent opportunity for exercise that his spirit had during the last three days enjoyed there in his hotel bedroom; but evidently his languor of charity needed some admonition finer than any it might trust to chance for, and by the time he at last, Winch's residence recognised, was duly elevated to his level and had pressed the electric button at his door, he felt himself acting indeed as under stimulus of a sharp poke in the side.

V

Within the apartment to which he had been admitted, moreover, the fine intelligence we have imputed to him was in the course of three minutes confirmed; since it took him no longer than that to say to himself, facing his old acquaintance, that he had never seen any one so improved. The place, which had the semblance of a high studio light as well as a general air of other profusions and amplitudes, might have put him off a little by its several rather glaringly false accents, those of contemporary domestic “art” striking a little wild. The scene was smaller, but the rich confused complexion of the Pocahontas, showing through Du Barry paint and patches, might have set the example—which had been followed with the costliest candour—so that, clearly, Winch was in these days rich, as most people in New York seemed rich; as, in spite of Bob’s depredations, Florence Ash was, as even Mrs. Folliot was in spite of Phil Bloodgood’s, as even Phil Bloodgood himself must have been for reasons too obvious; as in fine every one had a secret for being, or for feeling, or for looking, every one at least but Mark Monteith.

These facts were as nothing, however, in presence of his quick and strong impression that his pale, nervous, smiling, clean-shaven host had undergone since their last meeting some extraordinary process of refinement. He had been ill, unmistakably, and the effects of a plunge into plain clean living, where any fineness had remained, were often startling, sometimes almost charming. But independently of this, and for a much longer time, some principle of intelligence, some art of life, would discernibly have worked in him. Remembered from college years and from those two or three luckless and faithless ones of the Law School as constitutionally common, as consistently and thereby doubtless even rather powerfully coarse, clever only for uncouth and questionable things, he yet presented himself now as if he had suddenly and mysteriously been educated. There was a charm in his wide, “drawn,” convalescent smile, in the way his fine fingers—had he anything like fine fingers of old?—played, and just fidgeted, over the prompt and perhaps a trifle incoherent offer of cigars, cordials, ashtrays, over the question of his visitor’s hat, stick, fur coat, general best accommodation and ease; and how the deuce, accordingly, had charm, for coming out so on top, Mark wondered, “squared” the other old elements? For the short interval so to have dealt with him what force had it turned on, what patented process, of the portentous New York order in which there were so many, had it skilfully applied? Were these the things New York did when you just gave her all her head, and that he himself then had perhaps too complacently missed? Strange almost to the point of putting him positively off at first—quite as an exhibition of the uncanny—this sense of Newton’s having all the while neither missed nor muffed anything, and having, as with an eye to the *coup de théâtre* to come, lowered one’s expectations, at the start, to that abject pitch. It might have been taken verily for an act of bad faith—really for such a rare stroke of subtlety as could scarce have been achieved by a straight or natural aim.

So much as this at least came and went in Monteith’s agitated mind; the oddest intensity of apprehension, admiration, mystification, which the high north-light of the March afternoon and the quite splendidly vulgar appeal of fifty overdone decorative effects somehow fostered and sharpened. Everything had already gone, however, the next moment, for wasn’t the man he had come so much too intelligently himself to patronise absolutely bowling him over with the extraordinary speech: “See here, you know—you must be ill, or have had a bad shock, or some beastly upset: are you very sure you ought to have come out?” Yes, he after an instant believed his ears; coarse common Newton Winch, whom he had called on because he could, as a gentleman, after all afford to, coarse common Newton Winch, who had had troubles and been epidemically poisoned, lamentably sick, who bore in his face and in the very tension, quite exactly the “charm,” of his manner, the traces of his late ordeal, and, for that matter, of scarce completed gallant emergence—this astonishing ex-comrade was simply writing

himself at a stroke (into our friend's excited imagination at all events) the most distinguished of men. Oh, *he* was going to be interesting, if Florence Ash had been going to be; but Mark felt how, under the law of a lively present difference, that would be as an effect of one's having one's self thoroughly rallied. He knew within the minute that the tears stood in his eyes; he stared through them at his friend with a sharp "Why, how do you know? How *can* you?" To which he added before Winch could speak: "I met your charming sister-in-law a couple of hours since—at luncheon, at the Pocahontas; and heard from her that you were badly laid up and had spoken of me. So I came to minister to you."

The object of this design hovered there again, considerably restless, shifting from foot to foot, changing his place, beginning and giving up motions, striking matches for a fresh cigarette, offering them again, redundantly, to his guest and then not lighting himself—but all the while with the smile of another creature than the creature known to Mark; all the while with the history of something that had happened to him ever so handsomely shining out. Mark was conscious within himself from this time on of two quite distinct processes of notation—that of his practically instant surrender to the consequences of the act of perception in his host of which the two women trained suppos-ably in the art of pleasing had been altogether incapable; and that of some other condition on Newton's part that left his own poor power of divination nothing less than shamed. This last was signally the case on the former's saying, ever so responsively, almost radiantly, in answer to his account of how he happened to come: "Oh then it's very interesting!" *That* was the astonishing note, after what he had been through: neither Mrs. Folllott nor Florence Ash had so much as hinted or breathed to him that *he* might have incurred that praise. No wonder therefore he was now taken—with this fresh party's instant suspicion and imputation of it; though it was indeed for some minutes next as if each tried to see which could accuse the other of the greater miracle of penetration. Mark was so struck, in a word, with the extraordinarily straight guess Winch had had there in reserve for him that, other quick impressions helping, there was nothing for him but to bring out, himself: "There must be, my dear man, something rather wonderful the matter with you!" The quite more intensely and more irresistibly drawn grin, the quite unmistakably deeper consciousness in the dark, wide eye, that accompanied the not quite immediate answer to which remark he was afterward to remember. "How do you know that—or why do you think it?" "Because there *must* be—for you to see! I shouldn't have expected it."

"Then you take me for a damned fool?" laughed wonderful Newton Winch.

VI

He could say nothing that, whether as to the sense of it or as to the way of it, didn't so enrich Mark's vision of him that our friend, after a little, as this effect proceeded, caught himself in the act of almost too curiously gaping. Everything, from moment to moment, fed his curiosity; such a question, for instance, as whether the quite ordinary peepers of the Newton Winch of their earlier youth could have looked, under any provocation, either dark or wide; such a question, above all, as how *this* incalculable apparition came by the whole startling power of play of its extravagantly sensitive labial connections—exposed, so to its advantage (he now jumped at one explanation) by the removal of what had probably been one of the vulgar-est of moustaches. With this, at the same time, the oddity of that particular consequence was vivid to him; the glare of his curiosity fairly lasting while he remembered how he had once noted the very opposite turn of the experiment for Phil Bloodgood. He would have said in advance that poor Winch couldn't have afforded to risk showing his "real" mouth; just as he would have said that in spite of the fine ornament that so considerably muffled it Phil could only have gained by showing his. But to have seen Phil shorn—as he once had done—was earnestly to pray that he might promptly again bristle;

beneath Phil's moustache lurked nothing to "make up" for it in case of removal. While he thought of which things the line of grimace, as he could only have called it, the mobile, interesting, ironic line the great double curve of which connected, in the face before him, the strong nostril with the lower cheek, became the very key to his first idea of Newton's capture of refinement. He had shaved and was happily transfigured. Phil Bloodgood had shaved and been wellnigh lost; though why should he just now too precipitately drag the reminiscence in?

That question too, at the queer touch of association, played up for Mark even under so much proof that the state of his own soul was being with the lapse of every instant registered. Phil Bloodgood had brought about the state of his soul—there was accordingly that amount of connection; only it became further remarkable that from the moment his companion had sounded him, and sounded him, he knew, down to the last truth of things, his disposition, his necessity to talk, the desire that had in the morning broken the spell of his confinement, the impulse that had thrown him so defeatedly into Mrs. Folliott's arms and into Florence Ash's, these forces seemed to feel their impatience ebb and their discretion suddenly grow. His companion was talking again, but just then, incongruously, made his need to communicate lose itself. It was as if his personal case had already been touched by some tender hand—and that, after all, was the modest limit of its greed. "I know now why you came back—did Lottie mention how I had wondered? But sit down, sit down—only let me, nervous beast as I am, take it standing!—and believe me when I tell you that I've now ceased to wonder. My dear chap, I *have* it! It can't but have been for poor Phil Blood-good. He sticks out of you, the brute—as how, with what he has done to you, shouldn't he? There was a man to see me yesterday—Tim Slater, whom I don't think you know, but who's 'on' everything within about two minutes of its happening (I never saw such a fellow!) and who confirmed my supposition, all my own, however, mind you, at first, that you're one of the sufferers. So how the devil can you *not* feel knocked? Why *should* you look as if you were having the time of your life? What a hog to have played it on *you*, on *you*, of all his friends!" So Newton Winch continued, and so the air between the two men might have been, for a momentary watcher—which is indeed what I can but invite the reader to become—that of a nervously displayed, but all considerate, as well as most acute, curiosity on the one side, and that on the other, after a little, of an eventually fascinated acceptance of so much free and in especial of so much right attention. "Do you *mind* my asking you? Because if you do I won't press; but as a man whose own responsibilities, some of 'em at least, don't differ much, I gather, from some of his, one would like to know how he was ever allowed to get to the point—! But I *do* plough you up?"

Mark sat back in his chair, moved but holding himself, his elbows squared on each arm, his hands a bit convulsively interlocked across him—very much in fact as he had appeared an hour ago in the old tapestry *bergère*; but as his rigour was all then that of the grinding effort to profess and to give, so it was considerably now for the fear of too hysterically gushing. Somehow too—since his wound was to that extent open—he winced at hearing the author of it branded. He hadn't so much minded the epithets Mrs. Folliott had applied, for they were to the appropriator of *her* securities. As the appropriator of his own he didn't so much want to brand him as—just more "amusingly" even, if one would.—to make out, perhaps, with intelligent help, how such a man, in such a relation, *could* come to tread such a path: which was exactly the interesting light that Winch's curiosity and sympathy were there to assist him to. He pleaded at any rate immediately his advertising no grievance. "I feel sore, I admit, and it's a horrid sort of thing to have had happen; but when you call him a brute and a hog I rather squirm, for brutes and hogs never live, I guess, in the sort of hell in which he now must be."

Newton Winch, before the fireplace, his hands deep in his pockets, where his guest could see his long fingers beat a tattoo on his thighs, Newton Winch dangled and swung himself, and threw back his head and laughed. "Well, I must say you take it amazingly!—all the more that to see you again this way is to feel that if, all along, there was a man whose delicacy and confidence and general attitude might have marked him for a particular consideration, you'd have been the man." And they were more directly face to face again; with Newton smiling and smiling *so* appreciatively; making our friend in fact almost ask himself when before a man had ever grinned from ear to ear to the effect of its so becoming him. What he replied, however, was that Newton described in those flattering terms a client temptingly fatuous; after which, and the exchange of another protest or two in the interest of justice and decency, and another plea or two in that of the still finer contention that even the basest misdeeds had always somewhere or other, could one get at it, their propitiatory side, our hero found himself on his feet again, under the influence of a sudden failure of everything but horror—a horror determined by some turn of their talk and indeed by the very fact of the freedom of it. It was as if a far-borne sound of the hue and cry, a vision of his old friend hunted and at bay, had suddenly broken in—this other friend's, this irresistibly intelligent other companion's, practically vivid projection of that making the worst ugliness real. "Oh, it's just making my wry face to somebody, and your letting me and caring and wanting to know: that," Mark said, "is what does me good; not any other hideous question. I mean I don't take any interest in *my* case—what one wonders about, you see, is what can be done for him. I mean, that is"—for he floundered a little, not knowing at last quite what he did mean, a great rush of mere memories, a great humming sound as of thick, thick echoes, rising now to an assault that he met with his face indeed contorted. If he didn't take care he should howl; so he more or less successfully took care—yet with his host vividly watching him while he shook the danger temporarily off. "I don't mind—though it's rather *that*; my having felt this morning, after three dismal dumb bad days, that one's friends perhaps would be thinking of one. All I'm conscious of now—I give you my word—is that I'd like to see him."

"You'd like to see him?"

"Oh, I don't say," Mark ruefully smiled, "that I should like him to see *me*—!"

Newton Winch, from where he stood—and they were together now, on the great hearth-rug that was a triumph of modern orientalism—put out one of the noted fine hands and, with an expressive headshake, laid it on his shoulder. "Don't wish him that, Monteith—don't wish him that!"

"Well, but,"—and Mark raised his eyebrows still higher—"he'd see I bear up; pretty well!"

"God forbid he should see, my dear fellow!" Newton cried as for the pang of it.

Mark had for his idea, at any rate, the oddest sense of an exaltation that grew by this use of frankness. "I'd go to him. Hanged if I wouldn't—anywhere!"

His companion's hand still rested on him. "You'd go to him?"

Mark stood up to it—though trying to sink solemnity as pretentious. "I'd go like a shot." And then he added: "And it's probably what—when we've turned round—I *shall* do."

"When 'we' have turned round?"

"Well"—he was a trifle disconcerted at the tone—"I say that because you'll have helped me."

"Oh, I do nothing but want to help you!" Winch replied—which made it right again; especially as our friend still felt himself reassuringly and sustainingly grasped. But Winch went on: "You *would* go to him—in kindness?"

“Well—to understand.”

“To understand how he could swindle you?”

“Well,” Mark kept on, “to try and make out with him how, after such things—!” But he stopped; he couldn’t name them.

It was as if his companion knew. “Such things as you’ve done for him of course—such services as you’ve rendered him.”

“Ah, from far back. If I could tell you,” our friend vainly wailed—“if I could tell you!”

Newton Winch patted his shoulder. “Tell me—tell me!”

“The sort of relation, I mean; ever so many things of a kind—!” Again, however, he pulled up; he felt the tremor of his voice.

“Tell me, tell me,” Winch repeated with the same movement.

The tone in it now made their eyes meet again, and with this presentation of the altered face Mark measured as not before, for some reason, the extent of the recent ravage. “You must have been ill indeed.”

“Pretty bad. But I’m better. And you do me good”—with which the light of convalescence came back.

“I don’t awfully bore you?”

Winch shook his head. “You keep me up—and you see how no one else comes near me.”

Mark’s eyes made out that he was better—though it wasn’t yet that nothing was the matter with him. If there was ever a man with whom there was still something the matter—! Yet one couldn’t insist on that, and meanwhile he clearly did want company. “Then there we are. I myself had no one to go to.”

“You save my life,” Newton renewedly grinned.

VII

“Well, it’s your own fault,” Mark replied to that, “if you make me take advantage of you.” Winch had withdrawn his hand, which was back, violently shaking keys or money, in his trousers pocket; and in this position he had abruptly a pause, a sensible, absence, that might have represented either some odd drop of attention, some turn-off to another thought, or just simply the sudden act of listening. His guest had indeed himself—under suggestion—the impression of a sound. “Mayn’t you perhaps—if you hear something—have a call?”

Mark had said it so lightly, however, that he was the more struck with his host’s appearing to turn just paler; and, with it, the latter now *was* listening. “You hear something?”

“I thought *you* did.” Winch himself, on Mark’s own pressure of the outside bell, had opened the door of the apartment—an indication then, it sufficiently appeared, that Sunday afternoons were servants’, or attendants’, or even trained nurses’ holidays. It had also marked the stage of his convalescence, and to that extent—after his first flush of surprise—had but smoothed Monteith’s way. At present he barely gave further attention; detaching himself as under some odd cross-impulse, he had quitted the spot and then taken, in the wide room, a restless turn—only, however, to revert in a moment to his friend’s just-uttered deprecation of the danger of boring him. “If I make you take advantage of me—that is blessedly talk to me—it’s exactly what I want to do. Talk to me—talk to me!” He positively waved it on; pulling up again, however, in his own talk, to say with a certain urgency: “Hadn’t you better sit down?”

Mark, who stayed before the fire, couldn't but excuse himself. "Thanks—I'm very well so. I think of things and I fidget."

Winch stood a moment with his eyes on the ground. "Are you very sure?"

"Quite—I'm all right if you don't mind."

"Then as you like!" With which, shaking to extravagance again his long legs, Newton had swung off—only with a movement that, now his back was turned, affected his visitor as the most whimsical of all the forms of his rather unnatural manner. He was curiously different with his back turned, as Mark now for the first time saw it—dangling and somewhat wavering, as from an excess of uncertainty of gait; and this impression was so strange, it created in our friend, uneasily and on the spot, such a need of explanation, that his speech was stayed long enough to give Winch time to turn round again. The latter had indeed by this moment reached one of the limits of the place, the wide studio bay, where he paused, his back to the light and his face afresh presented, to let his just passingly depressed and quickened eyes take in as much as possible of the large floor, range over it with such brief freedom of search as the disposition of the furniture permitted. He was looking for something, though the betrayed reach of vision was but of an instant. Mark caught it, however, and with his own sensibility all in vibration, found himself feeling at once that it meant something and that what it meant was connected with his entertainer's slightly marked appeal to him, the appeal of a moment before, not to remain standing. Winch knew by this time quite easily enough that he was hanging fire; which meant that they were suddenly facing each other across the wide space with a new consciousness.

Everything had changed—changed extraordinarily with the mere turning of that gentleman's back, the treacherous aspect of which its owner couldn't surely have suspected. If the question was of the pitch of their sensibility, at all events, it wouldn't be Mark's that should vibrate to least purpose. Visibly it had come to his host that something had within the few instants remarkably happened, but there glimmered on him an induction that still made him keep his own manner. Newton himself might now resort to any manner he liked. His eyes had raked the floor to recover the position of something dropped or misplaced, and something, above all, awkward or compromising; and he had wanted his companion not to command this scene from the hearth-rug, the hearthrug where he had been just before holding him, hypnotising him to blindness, *because* the object in question would there be most exposed to sight Mark embraced this with a further drop—while the apprehension penetrated—of his power to go on, and with an immense desire at the same time that his eyes should seem only to look at his friend; who broke out now, for that matter, with a fresh appeal. "Aren't you going to take advantage of me, man—aren't you going to *take* it?"

Everything had changed, we have noted, and nothing could more have proved it than the fact that, by the same turn, sincerity of desire had dropped out of Winch's chords, while irritation, sharp and almost imperious, had come in. "That's because he sees I see something!" Mark said to himself; but he had no need to add that it shouldn't prevent his seeing more—for the simple reason that, in a miraculous fashion, this was exactly what he did do in glaring out the harder.

It was beyond explanation, but the very act of blinking thus in an attempt at showy steadiness became one and the same thing with an optical excursion lasting the millionth of a minute and making him aware that the edge of a rug, at the point where an arm-chair, pushed a little out of position, over-straddled it, happened just not wholly to have covered in something small and queer, neat and bright, crooked and compact, in spite of the strong toe-tip surreptitiously applied to giving it the right lift Our gentleman, from where he hovered, and

while looking straight at the master of the scene, yet saw, as by the tiny flash of a reflection from fine metal, *under* the chair.

What he recognised, or at least guessed at, as sinister, made him for a moment turn cold, and that chill was on him while Winch again addressed him—as differently as possible from any manner yet used. “I beg of you in God’s name to talk to me—to *talk* to me!”

It had the ring of pure alarm and anguish, but was by this turn at least more human than the dazzling glitter of intelligence to which the poor man had up to now been treating him. “It’s you, my good friend, who are in deep trouble,” Mark was accordingly quick to reply, “and I ask your pardon for being so taken up with my own sorry business.”

“Of course I’m in deep trouble”—with which Winch came nearer again; “but turning you on was exactly what I wanted.”

Mark Monteith, at this, couldn’t, for all his rising dismay, but laugh out; his sense of the ridiculous so swallowed up, for that brief convulsion, his sense of the sinister. Of such conivence in pain, it seemed, was the fact of another’s pain, and of so much worth again disinterested sympathy! “Your interest was then——?”

“My interest was in your being interesting. For you *are!* And my nerves——!” said Newton Winch with a face from which the mystifying smile had vanished, yet in which distinction, as Mark so persistently appreciated it, still sat in the midst of ravage.

Mark wondered and wondered—he made strange things out. “Your nerves have needed company.” He could lay his hand on him now, even as shortly before he had felt Winch’s own pressure of possession and detention. “As good for you yourself, that—or still better,” he went on——“than I and my grievance were to have found you. Talk to we, talk to we, Newton Winch!” he added with an immense inspiration of charity.

“That’s a different matter—that others but too much can do! But I’ll say this. If you want to go to Phil Bloodgood——!”

“Well?” said Mark as he stopped. He stopped, and Mark had now a hand on each of his shoulders and held him at arm’s-length, held him with a fine idea that was not disconnected from the sight of the small neat weapon he had been fingering in the low luxurious morocco chair—it was of the finest orange colour—and then had laid beside him on the carpet; where, after he had admitted his visitor, his presence of mind coming back to it and suggesting that he couldn’t pick it up without making it more conspicuous, he had thought, by some swing of the foot or other casual manoeuvre, to dissimulate its visibility.

They were at close quarters now as not before and Winch perfectly passive, with eyes that somehow had no shadow of a secret left and with the betrayal to the sentient hands that grasped him of an intense, an extraordinary general tremor. To Mark’s challenge he opposed afresh a brief silence, but the very quality of it, with his face speaking, was that of a gaping wound. “Well, you needn’t take *that* trouble. You see I’m such another.”

“Such another as Phil——-?”

He didn’t blink. “I don’t know for sure, but I guess I’m worse.”

“Do you mean you’re guilty——-?”

“I mean I shall be wanted. Only I’ve stayed to take it.”

Mark threw back his head, but only tightened his hands. He inexpressibly understood, and nothing in life had ever been so strange and dreadful to him as his thus helping himself by a longer and straighter stretch, as it were, to the monstrous sense of his friend’s “education.” It

had been, in its immeasurable action, the education of business, of which the fruits were all around them.

Yet prodigious was the interest, for prodigious truly—it seemed to loom before Mark—must have been the system. “To ‘take’ it?” he echoed; and then, though faltering a little, “To take what?”

He had scarce spoken when a long sharp sound shrilled in from the outer door, seeming of so high and peremptory a pitch that with the start it gave him his grasp of his host’s shoulders relaxed an instant, though to the effect of no movement in *them* but what came from just a sensibly intenser vibration of the whole man. “For *that!*” said Newton Winch.

“Then you’ve known——?”

“I’ve expected. You’ve helped me to wait.” And then as Mark gave an ironic wail: “You’ve tided me over. My condition has *wanted* somebody or something. Therefore, to complete this service, will you be so good as to open the door?”

Deep in the eyes Mark looked him, and still to the detection of no glimmer of the earlier man in the depths. The earlier man had been what he invidiously remembered—yet would *he* had been the whole simpler story! Then he moved his own eyes straight to the chair under which the revolver lay and which was but a couple of yards away. He felt his companion take this consciousness in, and it determined in them another long, mute exchange. “What do you mean to do?”

“Nothing.”

“On your honour?”

“*My* ’honour’?” his host returned with an accent that he felt even as it sounded he should never forget.

It brought to his own face a crimson flush—he dropped his guarding hands. Then as for a last look at him: “You’re wonderful!”

“We *are* wonderful,” said Newton Winch, while, simultaneously with the words, the pressed electric bell again and for a longer time pierced the warm cigaretted air.

Mark turned, threw up his arms, and it was only when he had passed through the vestibule and laid his hand on the door-knob that the horrible noise dropped. The next moment he was face to face with two visitors, a nondescript personage in a high hat and an astrakhan collar and cuffs, and a great belted constable, a splendid massive New York “officer” of the type he had had occasion to wonder at much again in the course of his walk, the type so by itself—his wide observation quite suggested—among those of the peacemakers of the earth. The pair stepped straight in—no word was said; but as he closed the door behind them Mark heard the infallible crack of a discharged pistol and, so nearly with it as to make all one violence, the sound of a great fall; things the effect of which was to lift him, as it were, with his company, across the threshold of the room in a shorter time than that taken by this record of the fact.

But their rush availed little; Newton was stretched on his back before the fire; he had held the weapon horribly to his temple, and his upturned face was disfigured. The emissaries of the law, looking down at him, exhaled simultaneously a gruff imprecation, and then while the worthy in the high hat bent over the subject of their visit the one in the helmet raised a severe pair of eyes to Mark. “Don’t you think, sir, you might have prevented it?”

Mark took a hundred things in, it seemed to him—things of the scene, of the moment, and of all the strange moments before; but one appearance more vividly even than the others stared out at him. “I really think I must practically have caused it.”

THE END

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