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LORD BEAUPRÉ
THE VISITS
THE WHEEL OF TIME
AND OTHER TALES



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TORONTO

LORD BEAUPRÉ

THE VISITS THE WHEEL OF TIME AND OTHER TALES

BY
HENRY JAMES

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NOTE

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P. L.

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I

SOME reference had been made to Northerley, which was within an easy drive, and Firminger described how he had dined there the night before and had found a lot of people. Mrs. Ashbury, one of the two visitors, inquired who these people might be, and he mentioned half-a-dozen names, among which was that of young Raddle, which had been a good deal on people's lips, and even in the newspapers, on the occasion, still recent, of his stepping into the fortune, exceptionally vast even as the product of a patent-glue, left him by a father whose ugly name on all the vacant spaces of the world had exasperated generations of men.

"Oh, is he there?" asked Mrs. Ashbury, in a tone which might have been taken as a vocal rendering of the act of pricking up one's ears. She didn't hand on the information to her daughter, who was talking—if a beauty of so few phrases could have been said to talk—with Mary Gosselin, but in the course of a few moments she put down her teacup with a failure of suavity and, getting up, gave the girl a poke with her parasol. "Come, Maud, we must be stirring."

"You pay us a very short visit," said Mrs. Gosselin, intensely demure over the fine web of her knitting. Mrs. Ashbury looked hard for an instant into her bland eyes, then she gave poor Maud another poke. She alluded to a reason and expressed regrets; but

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she got her daughter into motion, and Guy Firminger passed through the garden with the two ladies to put them into their carriage. Mrs. Ashbury protested particularly against any further escort. While he was absent the other parent and child, sitting together on their pretty lawn in the yellow light of the August afternoon, talked of the frightful way Maud Ashbury had "gone off," and of something else as to which there was more to say when their third visitor came back.

"Don't think me grossly inquisitive if I ask you where they told the coachman to drive," said Mary Gosselin as the young man dropped, near her, into a low wicker chair, stretching his long legs as if he had been one of the family.

Firminger stared. "Upon my word I didn't particularly notice, but I think the old lady said 'Home.'"

"There, mamma dear!" the girl exclaimed triumphantly.

But Mrs. Gosselin only knitted on, persisting in profundity. She replied that "Home" was a feint, that Mrs. Ashbury would already have given another order, and that it was her wish to hurry off to Northerley that had made her keep them from going with her to the carriage, in which they would have seen her take a suspected direction. Mary explained to Guy Firminger that her mother had perceived poor Mrs. Ashbury to be frantic to reach the house at which she had heard that Mr. Raddle was staying. The young man stared again and wanted to know what she desired to do with Mr. Raddle. Mary replied that her mother would tell him what Mrs. Ashbury desired to do with poor Maud.

"What all Christian mothers desire," said Mrs. Gosselin. "Only she doesn't know how."

"To marry the dear child to Mr. Raddle," Mary added, smiling.

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Firminger's vagueness expanded with the subject. "Do you mean you want to marry *your* dear child to that little cad?" he asked of the elder lady.

"I speak of the general duty—not of the particular case," said Mrs. Gosselin.

"Mamma *does* know how," Mary went on.

"Then why ain't you married?"

"Because we're not acting, like the Ashburys, with injudicious precipitation. Is that correct?" the girl demanded, laughing, of her mother.

"Laugh at me, my dear, as much as you like—it's very lucky you've got me," Mrs. Gosselin declared.

"She means I can't manage for myself," said Mary to the visitor.

"What nonsense you talk!" Mrs. Gosselin murmured, counting stitches.

"I can't, mamma, I can't; I admit it," Mary continued.

"But injudicious precipitation and—what's the other thing?—creeping prudence, seem to come out in very much the same place," the young man objected.

"Do you mean since I too wither on the tree?"

"It only comes back to saying how hard it is nowadays to marry one's daughters," said the lucid Mrs. Gosselin, saving Firminger, however, the trouble of an ingenious answer. "I don't contend that, at the best, it's easy."

But Guy Firminger would not have struck you as capable of much conversational effort as he lounged there in the summer softness, with ironic familiarities, like one of the old friends who rarely deviate into sincerity. He was a robust but loose-limbed young man, with a well-shaped head and a face smooth, fair and kind. He was in knickerbockers, and his clothes, which had seen service, were composed of articles that didn't match. His laced boots were dusty—he had

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evidently walked a certain distance ; an indication confirmed by the lingering, sociable way in which, in his basket-seat, he tilted himself towards Mary Gosselin. It pointed to a pleasant reason for a long walk. This young lady, of five-and-twenty, had black hair and blue eyes ; a combination often associated with the effect of beauty. The beauty in this case, however, was dim and latent, not vulgarly obvious ; and if her height and slenderness gave that impression of length of line which, as we know, is the fashion, Mary Gosselin had on the other hand too much expression to be generally admired. Every one thought her intellectual ; a few of the most simple-minded even thought her plain. What Guy Firminger thought—or rather what he took for granted, for he was not built up on depths of reflexion—will probably appear from this narrative.

" Yes indeed ; things have come to a pass that's awful for *us*," the girl announced.

" For *us*, you mean," said Firminger. " We're hunted like the ostrich ; we're trapped and stalked and run to earth. We go in fear—I assure you we do."

" Are *you* hunted, Guy ? " Mrs. Gosselin asked with an inflexion of her own.

" Yes, Mrs. Gosselin, even *moi qui vous parle*, the ordinary male of commerce, inconceivable as it may appear. I know something about it."

" And of whom do you go in fear ? " Mary Gosselin took up an uncut book and a paper-knife which she had laid down on the advent of the other visitors.

" My dear child, of Diana and her nymphs, of the spinster at large. She's always out with her rifle. And it isn't only that ; you know there's always a second gun, a walking arsenal, at her heels. I forget, for the moment, who Diana's mother was, and the genealogy of the nymphs ; but not only do the old

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ladies know the younger ones are out, they distinctly go *with* them."

"Who was Diana's mother, my dear?" Mrs. Gosselin inquired of her daughter.

"She was a beautiful old lady with pink ribbons in her cap and a genius for knitting," the girl replied, cutting her book.

"Oh, I'm not speaking of you two dears; you're not like any one else; you're an immense comfort," said Guy Firminger. "But they've reduced it to a science, and I assure you that if one were any one in particular, if one were not protected by one's obscurity, one's life would be a burden. Upon my honour one wouldn't escape. I've seen it, I've watched them. Look at poor Beaupré—look at little Raddle over there. I object to him, but I bleed for him."

"Lord Beaupré won't marry again," said Mrs. Gosselin with an air of conviction.

"So much the worse for him!"

"Come—that's a concession to our charms!" Mary laughed.

But the ruthless young man explained away his concession. "I mean that to be married's the only protection—or else to be engaged."

"To be permanently engaged—wouldn't that do?" Mary Gosselin asked.

"Beautifully—I would try it if I were a *parti*."

"And how's the little boy?" Mrs. Gosselin presently inquired.

"What little boy?"

"Your little cousin—Lord Beaupré's child: isn't it a boy?"

"Oh, poor little beggar, he isn't up to much. He was awfully cut up by scarlet fever."

"You're not the rose indeed, but you're tolerably near it," the elder lady presently continued.

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"What do you call near it? Not even in the same garden—not in any garden at all, alas!"

"There are three lives—but after all!"

"Dear lady, don't be homicidal!"

"What do you call the 'rose'?" Mary asked of her mother.

"The title," said Mrs. Gosselin, promptly but softly.

Something in her tone made Firminger laugh aloud. "You don't mention the property."

"Oh, I mean the whole thing."

"Is the property very large?" said Mary Gosselin.

"Fifty thousand a year," her mother responded; at which the young man laughed out again.

"Take care, mamma, or we shall be thought to be out with our guns!" the girl interposed; a recommendation that drew from Guy Firminger the just remark that there would be time enough for this when his prospects should be worth speaking of. He leaned over to pick up his hat and stick, as if it were his time to go, but he didn't go for another quarter of an hour, and during these minutes his prospects received some frank consideration. He was Lord Beaupré's first cousin, and the three intervening lives were his lordship's own, that of his little sickly son, and that of his uncle the Major, who was also Guy's uncle and with whom the young man was at present staying. It was from homely Trist, the Major's house, that he had walked over to Mrs. Gosselin's. Frank Firminger, who had married in youth a woman with something of her own and eventually left the army, had nothing but girls, but he was only of middle age and might possibly still have a son. At any rate his life was a very good one. Beaupré might marry again, and, marry or not, he was barely thirty-three and might live to a great age. The child, moreover, poor little devil, would

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doubtless, with the growing consciousness of an incentive (there was none like feeling you were in people's way), develop a capacity for duration ; so that altogether Guy professed himself, with the best will in the world, unable to take a rosy view of the disappearance of obstacles. He treated the subject with a jocularly that, in view of the remoteness of his chance, was not wholly tasteless, and the discussion, between old friends and in the light of this extravagance, was less crude than perhaps it sounds. The young man quite declined to see any latent brilliancy in his future. They had all been lashing him up, his poor dear mother, his uncle Frank, and Beaupré as well, to make that future political ; but even if he should get in (he was nursing—oh, so languidly !—a possible opening), it would only be into the shallow edge of the stream. He would stand there like a tall idiot with the water up to his ankles. He didn't know how to swim—in that element ; he didn't know how to do anything.

"I think you're very perverse, my dear," said Mrs. Gosselin. "I'm sure you have great dispositions."

"For what—except for sitting here and talking with you and Mary ? I revel in this sort of thing, but I scarcely like anything else."

"You'd do very well if you weren't so lazy," Mary said. "I believe you're the very laziest person in the world."

"So do I—the very laziest in the world," the young man contentedly replied. "But how can I regret it, when it keeps me so quiet, when (I might even say) it makes me so amiable ?"

"You'll have, one of these days, to get over your quietness, and perhaps even a little over your amiability," Mrs. Gosselin sagaciously stated.

"I devoutly hope not."

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" You'll have to perform the duties of your position."

" Do you mean keep my stump of a broom in order and my crossing irreproachable ? "

" You may say what you like ; you will be a *parti*," Mrs. Gosselin continued.

" Well, then, if the worst comes to the worst I shall do what I said just now : I shall get some good plausible girl to see me through."

" The proper way to ' get ' her will be to marry her. After you're married you won't be a *parti*."

" Dear mamma, he'll think you're already levelling your rifle ! " Mary Gosselin laughingly wailed.

Guy Firminger looked at her a moment. " I say, Mary, wouldn't *you* do ? "

" For the good plausible girl ? Should I be plausible enough ? "

" Surely—what could be more natural ? Everything would seem to contribute to the suitability of our alliance. I should be known to have known you for years—from childhood's sunny hour ; I should be known to have bullied you, and even to have been bullied *by* you, in the period of pinafores. My relations from a tender age with your brother, which led to our schoolroom romps in holidays and to the happy footing on which your mother has always been so good as to receive me here, would add to all the presumptions of intimacy. People would accept such a conclusion as inevitable."

" Among all your reasons you don't mention the young lady's attractions," said Mary Gosselin.

Firminger stared a moment, his clear eye lighted by his happy thought. " I don't mention the young man's. They would be so obvious, on one side and the other, as to be taken for granted."

" And is it your idea that one should pretend to be engaged to you all one's life ? "

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" Oh no, simply till I should have had time to look round. I'm determined not to be hustled and bewildered into matrimony—to be dragged to the shambles before I know where I am. With such an arrangement as the one I speak of I should be able to take my time, to keep my head, to make my choice."

" And how would the young lady make hers ? "

" How do you mean, hers ? "

" The selfishness of men is something exquisite. Suppose the young lady—if it's conceivable that you should find one idiotic enough to be a party to such a transaction—suppose the poor girl herself should happen to wish to be *really* engaged ? "

Guy Firminger thought a moment, with his slow but not stupid smile. " Do you mean to *me* ? "

" To you—or to some one else."

" Oh, if she'd give me notice I'd let her off."

" Let her off till you could find a substitute ? "

" Yes—but I confess it would be a great inconvenience. People wouldn't take the second one so seriously."

" She would have to make a sacrifice ; she would have to wait till you should know where you were," Mrs. Gosselin suggested.

" Yes, but where would *her* advantage come in ? " Mary persisted.

" Only in the pleasure of charity ; the moral satisfaction of doing a fellow a good turn," said Firminger.

" You must think people are keen to oblige you ! "

" Ah, but surely I could count on *you*, couldn't I ? " the young man asked.

Mary had finished cutting her book ; she got up and flung it down on the tea-table. " What a preposterous conversation ! " she exclaimed with force, tossing the words from her as she tossed her book ;

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and, looking round her vaguely a moment, without meeting Guy Firminger's eye, she walked away to the house.

Firminger sat watching her ; then he said serenely to her mother : " Why has our Mary left us ? "

" She has gone to get something, I suppose."

" What has she gone to get ? "

" A little stick to beat you perhaps."

" You don't mean I've been objectionable ? "

" Dear, no—I'm joking. One thing is very certain," pursued Mrs. Gosselin ; " that you ought to work—to try to get on exactly as if nothing could ever happen. Oughtn't you ? " She threw off the question mechanically as her visitor continued silent.

" I'm sure she doesn't like it ! " he exclaimed, without heeding her appeal.

" Doesn't like what ? "

" My free play of mind. It's perhaps too much in the key of our old romps."

" You're very clever ; she always likes *that*," said Mrs. Gosselin. " You ought to go in for something serious, for something honourable," she continued, " just as much as if you had nothing at all to look to."

" Words of wisdom, dear Mrs. Gosselin," Firminger replied, rising slowly from his relaxed attitude. " But what *have* I to look to ? "

She raised her mild, deep eyes to him as he stood before her—she might have been a fairy godmother. " Everything ! "

" But you know I can't poison them ! "

" That won't be necessary."

He looked at her an instant ; then with a laugh : " One might think *you* would undertake it ! "

" I almost would—for *you*. Good-bye."

" Take care—if they *should* be carried off ! " But Mrs. Gosselin only repeated her good-bye, and the young man departed before Mary had come back.

II

NEARLY two years after Guy Firminger had spent that friendly hour in Mrs. Gosselin's little garden in Hampshire this far-seeing woman was enabled (by the return of her son, who at New York, in an English bank, occupied a position they all rejoiced over—to such great things might it duly lead) to resume possession, for the season, of the little London house which her husband had left her to inhabit, but which her native thrift, in determining her to let it for a term, had converted into a source of income. Hugh Gosselin, who was thirty years old, and at twenty-three, before his father's death, had been despatched to America to exert himself, was understood to be doing very well—so well that his devotion to the interests of his employers had been rewarded, for the first time, with a real holiday. He was to remain in England from May to August, undertaking, as he said, to make it all right if during this time his mother should occupy (to contribute to his entertainment) the habitation in Chester Street. He was a small, preoccupied young man, with a sharpness as acquired as a new hat; he struck his mother and sister as intensely American. For the first few days after his arrival they were startled by his intonations, though they admitted that they had had an escape when he reminded them that he might have brought with him an accent embodied in a wife.

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"When you do take one," said Mrs. Gosselin, who regarded such an accident, over there, as inevitable, "you must charge her high for it."

It was not with this question, however, that the little family in Chester Street was mainly engaged, but with the last incident in the extraordinary succession of events which, like a chapter of romance, had in the course of a few months converted their vague and impecunious friend into a personage envied and honoured. It was as if a blight had been cast on all Guy Firminger's hindrances. On the day Hugh Gosselin sailed from New York the delicate little boy at Bosco had succumbed to an attack of diphtheria. His father had died of typhoid the previous winter at Naples; his uncle, a few weeks later, had had a fatal accident in the hunting-field. So strangely, so rapidly had the situation cleared up, had his fate and theirs worked for him. Guy had opened his eyes one morning to an earldom which carried with it a fortune not alone nominally but really great. Mrs. Gosselin and Mary had not written to him, but they knew he was at Bosco; he had remained there after the funeral of the late little lord. Mrs. Gosselin, who heard everything, had heard somehow that he was behaving with the greatest consideration, giving the guardians, the trustees, whatever they were called, plenty of time to do everything. Everything was comparatively simple; in the absence of collaterals there were so few other people concerned. The principal relatives were poor Frank Firminger's widow and her girls, who had seen themselves so near to new honours and comforts. Probably the girls would expect their cousin Guy to marry one of them, and think it the least he could decently do; a view the young man himself (if he were very magnanimous) might possibly embrace. The question would be whether he would be very magnanimous. These

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young ladies exhausted in their three persons the numerous varieties of plainness. On the other hand Guy Firminger—or Lord Beaupré, as one would have to begin to call him now—was unmistakably kind. Mrs. Gosselin appealed to her son as to whether their noble friend were not unmistakably kind.

"Of course I've known him always, and that time he came out to America—when was it? four years ago—I saw him every day. I like him awfully and all that, but since you push me, you know," said Hugh Gosselin, "I'm bound to say that the first thing to mention in any description of him would be—if you wanted to be quite correct—that he's unmistakably selfish."

"I see—I see," Mrs. Gosselin unblushingly replied. "Of course I know what you mean," she added in a moment. "But is he any more so than any one else? Every one's unmistakably selfish."

"Every one but you and Mary," said the young man.

"And *you*, dear!" his mother smiled. "But a person may be kind, you know—mayn't he?—at the same time that he *is* selfish. There are different sorts."

"Different sorts of kindness?" Hugh Gosselin asked with a laugh; and the inquiry undertaken by his mother occupied them for the moment, demanding a subtlety of treatment from which they were not conscious of shrinking, of which rather they had an idea that they were perhaps exceptionally capable. They came back to the temperate view that Guy would never put himself out, would probably never do anything great, but might show himself all the same a delightful member of society. Yes, he was probably selfish, like other people; but unlike most of them he was, somehow, amiably, attachingly, sociably, almost lovably selfish. Without doing any-

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thing great he would yet be a great success—a big, pleasant, gossiping, lounging, and, in its way, doubtless very splendid presence. He would have no ambition, and it was ambition that made selfishness ugly. Hugh and his mother were sure of this last point until Mary, before whom the discussion, when it reached this stage, happened to be carried on, checked them by asking whether that, on the contrary, were not just what was supposed to make it fine.

"Oh, he only wants to be comfortable," said her brother; "but he *does* want it!"

"There'll be a tremendous rush for him," Mrs. Gosselin prophesied to her son.

"Oh, he'll never marry. It will be too much trouble."

"It's done here without any trouble—for the men. One sees how long you've been out of the country."

"There was a girl in New York whom he might have married—he really liked her. But he wouldn't turn round for her."

"Perhaps she wouldn't turn round for *him*," said Mary.

"I daresay she'll turn round *now*," Mrs. Gosselin rejoined; on which Hugh mentioned that there was nothing to be feared from her, all her revolutions had been accomplished. He added that nothing would make any difference—so intimate was his conviction that Beaupré would preserve his independence.

"Then I think he's not so selfish as you say," Mary declared; "or at any rate one will never know whether he is. Isn't married life the great chance to show it?"

"Your father never showed it," said Mrs. Gosselin; and as her children were silent in presence of this tribute to the departed she added, smiling: "Perhaps you think that *I* did!" They embraced her, to indicate what they thought, and the conversation

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ended, when she had remarked that Lord Beaupré was a man who would be perfectly easy to manage *after* marriage, with Hugh's exclaiming that this was doubtless exactly why he wished to keep out of it.

Such was evidently his wish, as they were able to judge in Chester Street when he came up to town. He appeared there oftener than was to have been expected, not taking himself in his new character at all too seriously to find stray half-hours for old friends. It was plain that he was going to do just as he liked, that he was not a bit excited or uplifted by his change of fortune. Mary Gosselin observed that he had no imagination—she even reproached him with the deficiency to his face; an incident which showed indeed how little seriously *she* took him. He had no idea of playing a part, and yet he would have been clever enough. He wasn't even systematic about being simple; his simplicity was a series of accidents and indifferences. Never was a man more conscientiously superficial. There were matters on which he valued Mrs. Gosselin's judgement and asked her advice—without, as usually appeared later, ever taking it; such questions, mainly, as the claims of a predecessor's servants, and those, in respect to social intercourse, of the clergyman's family. He didn't like his parson—what was a fellow to do when he didn't like his parson? What he did like was to talk with Hugh about American investments, and it was amusing to Hugh, though he tried not to show his amusement, to find himself looking at Guy Firminger in the light of capital. To Mary he addressed from the first the oddest snatches of confidential discourse, rendered in fact, however, by the levity of his tone, considerably less confidential than in intention. He had something to tell her that he joked about, yet without admitting that it

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was any less important for being laughable. It was neither more nor less than that Charlotte Firminger, the eldest of his late uncle's four girls, had designated to him in the clearest manner the person she considered he ought to marry. She appealed to his sense of justice, she spoke and wrote, or at any rate she looked and moved, she sighed and sang, in the name of common honesty. He had had four letters from her that week, and to his knowledge there were a series of people in London, people she could bully, whom she had got to promise to take her in for the season. She was going to be on the spot, she was going to follow him up. He took his stand on common honesty, but he had a mortal horror of Charlotte. At the same time, when a girl had a jaw like that and had marked you—really *marked* you, mind, you felt your safety oozing away. He had given them during the past three months, all those terrible girls, every sort of present that Bond Street could supply : but these demonstrations had only been held to constitute another pledge. Therefore what was a fellow to do ? Besides, there were other portents ; the air was thick with them, as the sky over battle-fields was darkened by the flight of vultures. They were flocking, the birds of prey, from every quarter, and every girl in England, by Jove ! was going to be thrown at his head. What had he done to deserve such a fate ? He wanted to stop in England and see all sorts of things through ; but how could he stand there and face such a charge ? Yet what good would it do to bolt ? Wherever he should go there would be fifty of them there first. On his honour he could say that he didn't deserve it ; he had never, to his own sense, been a flirt, such a flirt at least as to have given any one a handle. He appealed candidly to Mary Gosselin to know whether his past conduct justified such penalties. "*Have I*

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been a flirt?—have I given any one a handle?" he inquired with pathetic intensity.

She met his appeal by declaring that he had been awful, committing himself right and left; and this manner of treating his affliction contributed to the sarcastic publicity (as regarded the little house in Chester Street) which presently became its natural element. Lord Beaupré's comical and yet thoroughly grounded view of his danger was soon a frequent theme among the Gosselins, who, however, had their own reasons for not communicating the alarm. They had no motive for concealing their interest in their old friend, but their allusions to him among their other friends may be said on the whole to have been studied. His state of mind recalled of course to Mary and her mother the queer talk about his prospects that they had had, in the country, that afternoon on which Mrs. Gosselin had been so strangely prophetic (she confessed that she had had a flash of divination: the future had been mysteriously revealed to her), and poor Guy too had seen himself quite as he was to be. He had seen his nervousness, under inevitable pressure, deepen to a panic, and he now, in intimate hours, made no attempt to disguise that a panic had become his portion. It was a fixed idea with him that he should fall a victim to woven toils, be caught in a trap constructed with superior science. The science evolved in an enterprising age by this branch of industry, the manufacture of the trap matrimonial, he had terrible anecdotes to illustrate; and what had he on his lips but a scientific term when he declared, as he perpetually did, that it was his fate to be hypnotised?

Mary Gosselin reminded him, they each in turn reminded him that his safeguard was to fall in love: were he once to put himself under that protection all the mothers and maids in Mayfair would not prevail against him. He replied that this was just

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the impossibility ; it took leisure and calmness and opportunity and a free mind to fall in love, and never was a man less open to such experiences. He was literally fighting his way. He reminded the girl of his old fancy for pretending already to have disposed of his hand if he could put that hand on a young person who should like him well enough to be willing to participate in the fraud. She would have to place herself in rather a false position of course—have to take a certain amount of trouble ; but there would after all be a good deal of fun in it (there was always fun in duping the world) between the pair themselves, the two happy comedians.

“ Why should they both be happy ? ” Mary Gosselin asked. “ I understand why you should ; but, frankly, I don’t quite grasp the reason of *her* pleasure.”

Lord Beaupré, with his sunny human eyes, thought a moment. “ Why, for the lark, as they say, and that sort of thing. I should be awfully nice to her.”

“ She would require indeed to be in want of recreation ! ”

“ Ah, but I should want a good sort—a quiet, reasonable one, you know ! ” he somewhat eagerly interposed.

“ You’re too delightful ! ” Mary Gosselin exclaimed, continuing to laugh. He thanked her for this appreciation, and she returned to her point—that she didn’t really see the advantage his accomplice could hope to enjoy as her compensation for extreme disturbance.

Guy Firminger stared. “ But what extreme disturbance ? ”

“ Why, it would take a lot of time ; it might become intolerable.”

“ You mean I ought to pay her—to hire her for the season ? ”

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Mary Gosselin considered him a moment. "Wouldn't marriage come cheaper at once?" she asked with a quieter smile.

"You *are* chaffing me!" he sighed forgivingly. "Of course she would have to be good-natured enough to pity me."

"Pity's akin to love. If she were good-natured enough to want so to help you she'd be good-natured enough to want to marry you. That would be *her* idea of help."

"Would it be *yours*?" Lord Beaupré asked rather eagerly.

"You're too absurd! You must sail your own boat!" the girl answered, turning away.

That evening at dinner she stated to her companions that she had never seen a fatuity so dense, so serene, so preposterous as his lordship's.

"Fatuity, my dear! what do you mean?" her mother inquired.

"Oh, mamma, you know perfectly." Mary Gosselin spoke with a certain impatience.

"If you mean he's conceited I'm bound to say I don't agree with you," her brother observed. "He's too indifferent to every one's opinion for that."

"He's not vain, he's not proud, he's not pompous," said Mrs. Gosselin.

Mary was silent a moment. "He takes more things for granted than any one I ever saw."

"What sort of things?"

"Well, one's interest in his affairs."

"With old friends surely a gentleman may."

"Of course," said Hugh Gosselin, "old friends have in turn the right to take for granted a corresponding interest on *his* part."

"Well, who could be nicer to us than he is or come to see us oftener?" his mother asked.

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"He comes exactly for the purpose I speak of—to talk about himself," said Mary.

"There are thousands of girls who would be delighted with his talk," Mrs. Gosselin returned.

"We agreed long ago that he's intensely selfish," the girl went on; "and if I speak of it to-day it's not because that in itself is anything of a novelty. What I'm freshly struck with is simply that he more shamelessly shows it."

"He shows it, exactly," said Hugh; "he shows all there is. There it is, on the surface; there are not depths of it underneath."

"He's not hard," Mrs. Gosselin contended; "he's not impervious."

"Do you mean he's soft?" Mary asked.

"I mean he's yielding." And Mrs. Gosselin, with considerable expression, looked across at her daughter. She added, before they rose from dinner, that poor Beaupré had plenty of difficulties and that she thought, for her part, they ought in common loyalty to do what they could to assist him.

For a week nothing more passed between the two ladies on the subject of their noble friend, and in the course of this week they had the amusement of receiving in Chester Street a member of Hugh's American circle, Mr. Bolton-Brown, a young man from New York. He was a person engaged in large affairs, for whom Hugh Gosselin professed the highest regard, from whom in New York he had received much hospitality, and for whose advent he had from the first prepared his companions. Mrs. Gosselin begged the amiable stranger to stay with them, and if she failed to overcome his hesitation it was because his hotel was near at hand and he should be able to see them often. It became evident that he would do so, and, to the two ladies, as the days went by, equally evident that no objection to such a

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relation was likely to arise. Mr. Bolton-Brown was delightfully fresh ; the most usual expressions acquired on his lips a well-nigh comical novelty, the most superficial sentiments, in the look with which he accompanied them, a really touching sincerity. He was unmarried and good-looking, clever and natural, and if he was not very rich was at least very free-handed. He literally strewed the path of the ladies in Chester Street with flowers, he choked them with French confectionery. Hugh, however, who was often rather mysterious on monetary questions, placed in a light sufficiently clear the fact that his friend had in Wall Street (they knew all about Wall Street) improved each shining hour. They introduced him to Lord Beaupré, who thought him " tremendous fun," as Hugh said, and who immediately declared that the four must spend a Sunday at Bosco a week or two later. The date of this visit was fixed—Mrs. Gosselin had uttered a comprehensive acceptance ; but after Guy Firminger had taken leave of them (this had been his first appearance since the odd conversation with Mary), our young lady confided to her mother that she should not be able to join the little party. She expressed the conviction that it would be all that was essential if Mrs. Gosselin should go with the two others. On being pressed to communicate the reason of this aloofness Mary was able to give no better one than that she never had cared for Bosco.

" What makes you hate him so ? " her mother presently broke out in a tone which brought the red to the girl's cheek. Mary denied that she entertained for Lord Beaupré any sentiment so intense ; to which Mrs. Gosselin rejoined with some sternness and, no doubt, considerable wisdom : " Look out what you do then, or you'll be thought by every one to be in love with him ! "

III

I KNOW not whether it was this danger—that of appearing to be moved to extremes—that weighed with Mary Gosselin; at any rate when the day arrived she had decided to be perfectly colourless and take her share of Lord Beaupré's hospitality. On perceiving that the house, when with her companions she reached it, was full of visitors, she consoled herself with the sense that such a share would be of the smallest. She even wondered whether its smallness might not be caused in some degree by the sufficiently startling presence, in this stronghold of the single life, of Maud Ashbury and her mother. It was true that during the Saturday evening she never saw their host address an observation to them; but she was struck, as she had been struck before, with the girl's cold and magnificent beauty. It was very well to say she had "gone off"; she was still handsomer than any one else. She had failed in everything she had tried; the campaign undertaken with so much energy against young Raddle had been conspicuously disastrous. Young Raddle had married his grandmother, or a person who might have filled such an office, and Maud was a year older, a year more disappointed and a year more ridiculous. Nevertheless one could scarcely believe that a creature with such advantages would always fail, though indeed the poor girl was stupid

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enough to be a warning. Perhaps it would be at Bosco, or with the master of Bosco, that fate had appointed her to succeed. Except Mary herself she was the only young unmarried woman on the scene, and Mary glowed with the generous sense of not being a competitor. She felt as much out of the question as the blooming wives, the heavy matrons, who formed the rest of the female contingent. Before the evening closed, however, her host, who, she saw, was delightful in his own house, mentioned to her that he had a couple of guests who had not been invited.

"Not invited?"

"They drove up to my door as they might have done to an inn. They asked for rooms and complained of those that were given them. Don't pretend not to know who they are."

"Do you mean the Ashburys? How amusing!"

"Don't laugh; it freezes my blood."

"Do you really mean you're afraid of them?"

"I tremble like a leaf. Some monstrous ineluctable fate seems to look at me out of their eyes."

"That's because you secretly admire Maud. How can you help it? She's extremely good-looking, and if you get rid of her mother she'll become a very nice girl."

"It's an odious thing, no doubt, to say about a young person under one's own roof, but I don't think I ever saw any one who happened to be less to my taste," said Guy Firminger. "I don't know why I don't turn them out even now."

Mary persisted in sarcasm. "Perhaps you can make her have a worse time by letting her stay."

"*Please* don't laugh," her interlocutor repeated. "Such a fact as I have mentioned to you seems to me to speak volumes—to show you what my life is."

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"Oh, your life, your life!" Mary Gosselin murmured, with her mocking note.

"Don't you agree that at such a rate it may easily become impossible?"

"Many people would change with you. I don't see what there is for you to do but to bear your cross!"

"That's easy talk!" Lord Beaupré sighed.

"Especially from me, do you mean? How do you know I don't bear mine?"

"Yours?" he asked vaguely.

"How do you know that *I'm* not persecuted, that *my* footsteps are not dogged, that *my* life isn't a burden?"

They were walking in the old gardens, the proprietor of which, at this, stopped short. "Do you mean by fellows who want to marry you?"

His tone produced on his companion's part an irrepressible peal of hilarity; but she walked on as she exclaimed: "You speak as if there couldn't *be* such madmen!"

"Of course such a charming girl must be made up to," Guy Firminger conceded as he overtook her.

"I don't speak of it; I keep quiet about it."

"You realise then, at any rate, that it's all horrid when you don't care for them."

"I suffer in silence, because I know there are worse tribulations. It seems to me you ought to remember that," Mary continued. "Your cross is small compared with your crown. You've everything in the world that most people most desire, and I'm bound to say I think your life is made very comfortable for you. If you're oppressed by the quantity of interest and affection you inspire you ought simply to make up your mind to bear up and be cheerful under it."

Lord Beaupré received this admonition with

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perfect good humour ; he professed himself able to do it full justice. He remarked that he would gladly give up some of his material advantages to be a little less badgered, and that he had been quite content with his former insignificance. No doubt, however, such annoyances were the essential drawbacks of ponderous promotions ; one had to pay for everything. Mary was quite right to rebuke him ; her own attitude, as a young woman much admired, was a lesson to his irritability. She cut this appreciation short, speaking of something else ; but a few minutes later he broke out irrelevantly : " Why, if you are hunted as well as I, that dodge I proposed to you would be just the thing for us *both* ! " He had evidently been reasoning it out.

Mary Gosselin was silent at first ; she only paused gradually in their walk at a point where four long alleys met. In the centre of the circle, on a massive pedestal, rose in Italian bronze a florid, complicated image, so that the place made a charming old-world picture. The grounds of Bosco were stately without stiffness and full of marble terraces and misty avenues. The fountains in particular were royal. The girl had told her mother in London that she disliked this fine residence, but she now looked round her with a vague pleased sigh, holding up her glass (she had been condemned to wear one, with a long handle, since she was fifteen) to consider the weather-stained garden group. " What a perfect place of its kind ! " she musingly exclaimed.

" Wouldn't it really be just the thing ? " Lord Beaupré went on, with the eagerness of his idea.

" Wouldn't what be just the thing ? "

" Why, the defensive alliance we've already talked of. You wanted to know the good it would do *you*. Now you see the good it would do *you* ! "

" I don't like practical jokes," said Mary. " The

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remedy's worse than the disease," she added ; and she began to follow one of the paths that took the direction of the house.

Poor Lord Beaupré was absurdly in love with his invention ; he had all an inventor's importunity. He kept up his attempt to place his "dodge" in a favourable light, in spite of a further objection from his companion, who assured him that it was one of those contrivances which break down in practice in just the proportion in which they make a figure in theory. At last she said : " I was not sincere just now when I told you I'm worried. I'm *not* worried ! "

" They *don't* buzz about you ? " Guy Firminger asked.

She hesitated an instant. " They buzz about me ; but at bottom it's flattering and I don't mind it. Now please drop the subject."

He dropped the subject, though not without congratulating her on the fact that, unlike his infirm self, she could keep her head and her temper. His infirmity found a trap laid for it before they had proceeded twenty yards, as was proved by his sudden exclamation of horror. " Good Heavens—if there isn't Lottie ! "

Mary perceived, in effect, in the distance a female figure coming towards them over a stretch of lawn, and she simultaneously saw, as a gentleman passed from behind a clump of shrubbery, that it was not unattended. She recognised Charlotte Firminger, and she also distinguished the gentleman. She was moved to larger mirth at the dismay expressed by poor Firminger, but she was able to articulate : " Walking with Mr. Brown."

Lord Beaupré stopped again before they were joined by the pair. " Does *he* buzz about you ? "

" Mercy, what questions you ask ! " his companion exclaimed.

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"Does he—*please*?" the young man repeated with odd intensity.

Mary looked at him an instant; she was puzzled by the deep annoyance that had flushed through the essential good-humour of his face. Then she saw that this annoyance had exclusive reference to poor Charlotte; so that it left her free to reply, with another laugh: "Well, yes—he does. But you know I like it!"

"I don't, then!" Before she could have asked him, even had she wished to, in what manner such a circumstance concerned him, he added with his droll agitation: "I never invited *her*, either! Don't let her get at me!"

"What can I do?" Mary demanded as the others advanced.

"Please take her away; keep her yourself! I'll take the American, I'll keep *him*," he murmured, inconsequently, as a bribe.

"But I don't object to him."

"Do you like him so much?"

"Very much indeed," the girl replied.

The reply was perhaps lost upon her interlocutor, whose eye now fixed itself gloomily on the dauntless Charlotte. As Miss Firminger came nearer he exclaimed almost loud enough for her to hear: "I think I shall *murder* her some day!"

Mary Gosselin's first impression had been that, in his panic, under the empire of that fixed idea to which he confessed himself subject, he attributed to his kinswoman machinations and aggressions of which she was incapable; an impression that might have been confirmed by this young lady's decorous placidity, her passionless eyes, her expressionless cheeks and colourless tones. She was ugly, yet she was orthodox; she was not what writers of books called intense. But after Mary, to oblige their host, had tried, success-

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fully enough, to be crafty, had drawn her on to stroll a little in advance of the two gentlemen, she became promptly aware, by the mystical influence of propinquity, that Miss Firminger was indeed full of views, of a purpose single, simple and strong, which gave her the effect of a person carrying with a stiff, steady hand, with eyes fixed and lips compressed, a cup charged to the brim. She had driven over to lunch, driven from somewhere in the neighbourhood ; she had picked up some weak woman as an escort. Mary, though she knew the neighbourhood, failed to recognise her base of operations, and, as Charlotte was not specific, ended by suspecting that, far from being entertained by friends, she had put up at an inn and hired a fly. This suspicion startled her ; it gave her for the first time something of the measure of the passions engaged, and she wondered to what the insecurity complained of by Guy might lead. Charlotte, on arriving, had gone through a part of the house in quest of its master (the servants being unable to tell her where he was), and she had finally come upon Mr. Bolton-Brown, who was looking at old books in the library. He had placed himself at her service, as if he had been trained immediately to recognise in such a case his duty, and informing her that he believed Lord Beaupré to be in the grounds, had come out with her to help to find him. Lottie Firminger questioned her companion about this accommodating person ; she intimated that he was rather odd but rather nice. Mary mentioned to her that Lord Beaupré thought highly of him ; she believed they were going somewhere together. At this Miss Firminger turned round to look for them, but they had already disappeared, and the girl became ominously dumb.

Mary wondered afterwards what profit she could hope to derive from such proceedings ; they struck her

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own sense, naturally, as disreputable and desperate. She was equally unable to discover the compensation they offered, in another variety, to poor Maud Ashbury, whom Lord Beaupré, the greater part of the day, neglected as conscientiously as he neglected his cousin. She asked herself if he should be blamed, and replied that the others should be blamed first. He got rid of Charlotte somehow after tea ; she had to fall back to her mysterious lines. Mary knew this method would have been detestable to him—he hated to force his friendly nature ; she was sorry for him and wished to lose sight of him. She wished not to be mixed up even indirectly with his tribulations, and the fevered faces of the Ashburys were particularly dreadful to her. She spent as much of the long summer afternoon as possible out of the house, which indeed on such an occasion emptied itself of most of its inmates. Mary Gosselin asked her brother to join her in a devious ramble ; she might have had other society, but she was in a mood to prefer his. These two were “ great chums,” and they had been separated so long that they had arrears of talk to make up. They had been at Bosco more than once, and though Hugh Gosselin said that the land of the free (which he had assured his sister was even more enslaved than dear old England) made one forget there were such spots on earth, they both remembered, a couple of miles away, a little ancient church to which the walk across the fields would be the right thing. They talked of other things as they went, and among them they talked of Mr. Bolton-Brown, in regard to whom Hugh, as scantily addicted to enthusiasm as to bursts of song (he was determined not to be taken in), became, in commendation, almost lyrical. Mary asked what he had done with his paragon, and he replied that he believed him to have gone out stealthily to sketch : they might come across him. He was extraordinarily

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clever at water-colours, but haunted with the fear that the public practice of such an art on Sunday was viewed with disfavour in England. Mary exclaimed that this was the respectable fact, and when her brother ridiculed the idea she told him she had already noticed he had lost all sense of things at home, so that Mr. Bolton-Brown was apparently a better Englishman than he. "He is indeed—he's awfully artificial!" Hugh returned; but it must be added that in spite of this rigour their American friend, when they reached the goal of their walk, was to be perceived in an irregular attitude in the very churchyard. He was perched on an old flat tomb, with a box of colours beside him and a sketch half completed. Hugh asserted that this exercise was the only thing that Mr. Bolton-Brown really cared for, but the young man protested against the imputation in the face of an achievement so modest. He showed his sketch to Mary, however, and it consoled her for not having kept up her own experiments; she never could make her trees so leafy. He had found a lovely bit on the other side of the hill, a bit he should like to come back to, and he offered to show it to his friends. They were on the point of starting with him to look at it when Hugh Gosselin, taking out his watch, remembered the hour at which he had promised to be at the house again to give his mother, who wanted a little mild exercise, his arm. His sister, at this, said she would go back with him; but Bolton-Brown interposed an earnest inquiry. Mightn't she let Hugh keep his appointment and let *him* take her over the hill and bring her home?

"Happy thought—*do* that!" said Hugh, with a crudity that showed the girl how completely he had lost his English sense. He perceived, however, in an instant that she was embarrassed, whereupon he went on: "My dear child, I've walked with girls so

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often in America that we really ought to let poor Brown walk with one in England." I know not if it was the effect of this plea or that of some further eloquence of their friend ; at any rate Mary Gosselin in the course of another minute had accepted the accident of Hugh's secession, had seen him depart with an injunction to her to render it clear to poor Brown that he had made quite a monstrous request. As she went over the hill with her companion she reflected that since she had granted the request it was not in her interest to pretend she had gone out of her way. She wondered, moreover, whether her brother had wished to throw them together : it suddenly occurred to her that the whole incident might have been prearranged. The idea made her a little angry with Hugh ; it led her, however, to entertain no resentment against the other party (if party Mr. Brown had been) to the transaction. He told her all the delight that certain sweet old corners of rural England excited in his mind, and she liked him for hovering near some of her own secrets.

Hugh Gosselin meanwhile, at Bosco, strolling on the terrace with his mother, who preferred walks that were as slow as conspiracies and had had much to say to him about his extraordinary indiscretion, repeated over and over (it ended by irritating her), that as he himself had been out for hours with American girls it was only fair to let their friend have a turn with an English one.

"Pay as much as you like, but don't pay with your sister !" Mrs. Gosselin replied ; while Hugh submitted that it was just his sister who was required to make the payment *his*. She turned his logic to easy scorn and she waited on the terrace till she had seen the two explorers reappear. When the ladies went to dress for dinner she expressed to her daughter her extreme disapproval of such conduct, and Mary

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did nothing more to justify herself than to exclaim at first "Poor dear man!" and then to say "I was afraid you wouldn't like it." There were reservations in her silence that made Mrs. Gosselin uneasy, and she was glad that at dinner Mr. Bolton-Brown had to take in Mrs. Ashbury: it served him so right. This arrangement had in Mrs. Gosselin's eyes the added merit of serving Mrs. Ashbury right. She was more uneasy than ever when after dinner, in the drawing-room, she saw Mary sit for a period on the same small sofa with the culpable American. This young couple leaned back together familiarly, and their conversation had the air of being desultory without being in the least difficult. At last she quitted her place and went over to them, remarking to Mr. Bolton-Brown that she wanted him to come and talk a bit to *her*. She conducted him to another part of the room, which was vast and animated by scattered groups, and held him there very persuasively, quite maternally, till the approach of the hour at which the ladies would exchange looks and murmur good-nights. She made him talk about America, though he wanted to talk about England, and she judged that she gave him an impression of the kindest attention, though she was really thinking, in alternation, of three important things. One of these was a circumstance of which she had become conscious only just after sitting down with him—the prolonged absence of Lord Beaupré from the drawing-room; the second was the absence, equally marked (to her imagination) of Maud Ashbury; the third was a matter different altogether. "England gives one such a sense of immemorial continuity, something that drops like a plummet-line into the past," said the young American, ingeniously exerting himself while Mrs. Gosselin, rigidly contemporaneous, strayed into deserts of conjecture. Had the fact that their host

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was out of the room any connexion with the fact that the most beautiful, even though the most suicidal, of his satellites had quitted it? Yet if poor Guy was taking a turn by starlight on the terrace with the misguided girl, what had he done with his resentment at her invasion and by what inspiration of despair had Maud achieved such a triumph? The good lady studied Mrs. Ashbury's face across the room; she decided that triumph, accompanied perhaps with a shade of nervousness, looked out of her insincere eyes. An intelligent consciousness of ridicule was at any rate less present in them than ever. While Mrs. Gosselin had her infallible finger on the pulse of the occasion one of the doors opened to readmit Lord Beaupré, who struck her as pale and who immediately approached Mrs. Ashbury with a remark evidently intended for herself alone. It led this lady to rise with a movement of dismay and, after a question or two, leave the room. Lord Beaupré left it again in her company. Mr. Bolton-Brown had also noticed the incident; his conversation languished and he asked Mrs. Gosselin if she supposed anything had happened. She turned it over a moment and then she said: "Yes, something will have happened to Miss Ashbury."

"What do you suppose? Is she ill?"

"I don't know; we shall see. They're capable of anything."

"Capable of anything?"

"I've guessed it,—she wants to have a grievance."

"A grievance?" Mr. Bolton-Brown was mystified.

"Of course you don't understand; how should you? Moreover, it doesn't signify. But I'm so vexed with them (he's a very old friend of ours) that really, though I daresay I'm indiscreet, I can't speak civilly of them."

"Miss Ashbury's a wonderful type," said the young American.

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This remark appeared to irritate his companion. "I see perfectly what has happened ; she has made a scene."

"A scene?" Mr. Bolton-Brown was terribly out of it.

"She has tried to be injured—to provoke him, I mean, to some act of impatience, to some failure of temper, of courtesy. She has asked him if he wishes her to leave the house at midnight, and he may have answered—— But no, he wouldn't!" Mrs. Gosselin suppressed the wild supposition.

"How you read it! She looks so quiet."

"Her mother has coached her, and (I won't pretend to say *exactly* what has happened) they've done, somehow, what they wanted ; they've got him to do something to them that he'll have to make up for."

"What an evolution of ingenuity!" the young man laughed.

"It often answers."

"Will it in this case?"

Mrs. Gosselin was silent a moment. "It *may*."

"Really, you think?"

"I mean it might if it weren't for something else."

"I'm too judicious to ask what that is."

"I'll tell you when we're back in town," said Mrs. Gosselin, getting up.

Lord Beaupré was restored to them, and the ladies prepared to withdraw. Before she went to bed Mrs. Gosselin asked him if there had been anything the matter with Maud ; to which he replied with abysmal blankness (she had never seen him wear just that face) that he was afraid Miss Ashbury was ill. She proved in fact in the morning too unwell to return to London : a piece of news communicated to Mrs. Gosselin at breakfast.

"She'll have to stay ; I can't turn her out of the house," said Guy Firminger.

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"Very well ; let her stay her fill ! "

"I wish you would stay too," the young man went on.

"Do you mean to nurse her ? "

"No, her mother must do that. I mean to keep me company."

"You ? You're not going up ? "

"I think I had better wait over to-day, or long enough to see what's the matter."

"Don't you *know* what's the matter ? "

He was silent a moment. "I may have been nasty last night."

"You have compunctions ? You're too good-natured."

"I daresay I hit rather wild. It will look better for me to stop over twenty-four hours."

Mrs. Gosselin fixed her eyes on a distant object.

"Let no one ever say you're selfish ! "

"Does any one ever say it ? "

"You're too generous, you're too soft, you're too foolish. But if it will give you any pleasure Mary and I will wait till to-morrow."

"And Hugh, too, won't he, and Bolton-Brown ? "

"Hugh will do as he pleases. But don't keep the American."

"Why not ? He's all right."

"That's why I want him to go," said Mrs. Gosselin, who could treat a matter with candour, just as she could treat it with humour, at the right moment.

The party at Bosco broke up and there was a general retreat to town. Hugh Gosselin pleaded pressing business, he accompanied the young American to London. His mother and sister came back on the morrow, and Bolton-Brown went in to see them, as he often did, at tea-time. He found Mrs. Gosselin alone in the drawing-room, and she took such a convenient occasion to mention to him, what she had

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withheld on the eve of their departure from Bosco, the reason why poor Maud Ashbury's frantic assault on the master of that property would be vain. He was greatly surprised, the more so that Hugh hadn't told him. Mrs. Gosselin replied that Hugh didn't know : she had not seen him all day and it had only just come out. Hugh's friend at any rate was deeply interested, and his interest took for several minutes the form of throbbing silence. At last Mrs. Gosselin heard a sound below, on which she said quickly : " That's Hugh—I'll tell him now ! " She left the room with the request that their visitor would wait for Mary, who would be down in a moment. During the instants that he spent alone the visitor lurched, as if he had been on a deck in a blow, to the window, and stood there with his hands in his pockets, staring vacantly into Chester Street ; then, turning away, he gave himself, with an odd ejaculation, an impatient shake which had the effect of enabling him to meet Mary Gosselin composedly enough when she came in. It took her mother apparently some time to communicate the news to Hugh, so that Bolton-Brown had a considerable margin for nervousness and hesitation before he could say to the girl, abruptly, but with an attempt at a voice properly gay : " You must let me very heartily congratulate you ! "

Mary stared. " On what ? "

" On your engagement. "

" My engagement ? "

" To Lord Beaupré. "

Mary Gosselin looked strange ; she coloured. " Who told you I'm engaged ? "

" Your mother—just now. "

" Oh ! " the girl exclaimed, turning away. She went and rang the bell for fresh tea, rang it with noticeable force. But she said " Thank you very much ! " before the servant came.

IV

BOLTON-BROWN did something that evening toward disseminating the news : he told it to the first people he met socially after leaving Chester Street ; and this although he had to do himself a certain violence in speaking. He would have preferred to hold his peace ; therefore if he resisted his inclination it was for an urgent purpose. This purpose was to prove to himself that he didn't mind. A perfect indifference could be for him the only result of any understanding Mary Gosselin might arrive at with any one, and he wanted to be more and more conscious of his indifference. He was aware indeed that it required demonstration, and this was why he was almost feverishly active. He could mentally concede at least that he had been surprised, for he had suspected nothing at Bosco. When a fellow was attentive in America every one knew it, and judged by this standard Lord Beaupré made no show : how otherwise should *he* have achieved that sweet accompanied ramble ? Everything at any rate was lucid now, except perhaps a certain ambiguity in Hugh Gosselin, who on coming into the drawing-room with his mother had looked flushed and grave and had stayed only long enough to kiss Mary and go out again. There had been nothing effusive in the scene ; but then there was nothing effusive in any English scene. This helped to explain why Miss Gosselin had been so blank during the

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minutes she spent with him before her mother came back.

He himself wanted to cultivate tranquillity, and he felt that he did so the next day in not going again to Chester Street. He went instead to the British Museum, where he sat quite like an elderly gentleman, with his hands crossed on the top of his stick and his eyes fixed on an Assyrian bull. When he came away, however, it was with the resolution to move briskly ; so that he walked westward the whole length of Oxford Street and arrived at the Marble Arch. He stared for some minutes at this monument, as in the national collection he had stared at even less intelligible ones ; then brushing away the apprehension that he should meet two persons riding together, he passed into the park. He didn't care a straw whom he met. He got upon the grass and made his way to the southern expanse, and when he reached the Row he dropped into a chair, rather tired, to watch the capering procession of riders. He watched it with a lustreless eye, for what he seemed mainly to extract from it was a vivification of his disappointment. He had had a hope that he should not be forced to leave London without inducing Mary Gosselin to ride with him ; but that prospect failed, for what he had accomplished in the British Museum was the determination to go to Paris. He tried to think of the attractions supposed to be evoked by that name, and while he was so engaged he recognised that a gentleman on horseback, close to the barrier of the Row, was making a sign to him. The gentleman was Lord Beaupré, who had pulled up his horse and whose sign the young American lost no time in obeying. He went forward to speak to his late host, but during the instant of the transit he was able both to observe that Mary Gosselin was not in sight and to ask himself why she was not. She rode with her brother ; why

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then didn't she ride with her future husband? It was singular at such a moment to see her future husband disporting himself alone. This personage conversed a few moments with Bolton-Brown, said it was too hot to ride, but that he ought to be mounted (*he* would give him a mount if he liked) and was on the point of turning away when his interlocutor succumbed to the temptation to put his modesty to the test.

"Good-bye, but let me congratulate you first," said Bolton-Brown.

"Congratulate me? On what?" His look, his tone were very much what Mary Gosselin's had been.

"Why, on your engagement. Haven't you heard of it?"

Lord Beaupré stared a moment while his horse shifted uneasily. Then he laughed and said: "Which of them do you mean?"

"There's only one I know anything about. To Miss Gosselin," Brown added, after a puzzled pause.

"Oh yes, I see—thanks so much!" With this, letting his horse go, Lord Beaupré broke off, while Bolton-Brown stood looking after him and saying to himself that perhaps he *didn't* know! The chapter of English oddities was long.

But on the morrow the announcement was in "The Morning Post," and that surely made it authentic. It was doubtless only superficially singular that Guy Firminger should have found himself unable to achieve a call in Chester Street until this journal had been for several hours in circulation. He appeared there just before luncheon, and the first person who received him was Mrs. Gosselin. He had always liked her, finding her infallible on the question of behaviour; but he was on this occasion more than ever struck with her ripe astuteness, her independent wisdom.

"I knew what you wanted, I knew what you

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needed, I knew the subject on which you had pressed her," the good lady said ; " and after Sunday I found myself really haunted with your dangers. There was danger in the air at Bosco, in your own defended house ; it seemed to me too monstrous. I said to myself ' We *can* help him, poor dear, and we *must*. It's the least one can do for so old and so good a friend.' I decided what to do : I simply put this other story about. In London that always answers. I knew that Mary pitied you really as much as I do, and that what she saw at Bosco had been a revelation—had at any rate brought your situation home to her. Yet of course she would be shy about saying out for herself : ' Here I am—I'll do what you want.' The thing was for me to say it *for* her ; so I said it first to that chattering American. He repeated it to several others, and there you are ! I just forced her hand a little, but it's all right. All she has to do is not to contradict it. It won't be any trouble and you'll be comfortable. That will be our reward ! " smiled Mrs. Gosselin.

" Yes, all she has to do is not to contradict it," Lord Beaupré replied, musing a moment. " It *won't* be any trouble," he added, " and I *hope* I shall be comfortable." He thanked Mrs. Gosselin formally and liberally, and expressed all his impatience to assure Mary herself of his deep obligation to her ; upon which his hostess promised to send her daughter to him on the instant : she would go and call her, so that they might be alone. Before Mrs. Gosselin left him, however, she touched on one or two points that had their little importance. Guy Firminger had asked for Hugh, but Hugh had gone to the City, and his mother mentioned candidly that he didn't take part in the game. She even disclosed his reason : he thought there was a want of dignity in it. Lord Beaupré stared at this and after a

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moment exclaimed : " Dignity ? Dignity be hanged ! One must save one's life ! "

" Yes, but the point poor Hugh makes is that one must save it by the use of one's *own* wits, or one's *own* arms and legs. But do you know what I said to him ? " Mrs. Gosselin continued.

" Something very clever, I daresay."

" That if *we* were drowning you'd be the very first to jump in. And we may fall overboard yet ! " Fidgeting there with his hands in his pockets Lord Beaupré gave a laugh at this, but assured her that there was nothing in the world for which they mightn't count upon him. None the less she just permitted herself another warning, a warning, it is true, that was in his own interest, a reminder of a peril that he ought beforehand to look in the face. Wasn't there always the chance—just the bare chance—that a girl in Mary's position would, in the event, decline to let him off, decline to release him even on the day he should wish to marry ? She wasn't speaking of Mary, but there were of course girls who would play him that trick. Guy Firminger considered this contingency ; then he declared that it wasn't a question of " girls," it was simply a question of dear old Mary ! If *she* should wish to hold him, so much the better : he would do anything in the world that she wanted. " Don't let us dwell on such vulgarities ; but I had it on my conscience ! " Mrs. Gosselin wound up.

She left him, but at the end of three minutes Mary came in, and the first thing she said was : " Before you speak a word, please understand this, that it's wholly mamma's doing. I hadn't dreamed of it, but she suddenly began to tell people."

" It was charming of her, and it's charming of you ! " the visitor cried.

" It's not charming of any one, I think," said

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Mary Gosselin, looking at the carpet. "It's simply idiotic."

"Don't be nasty about it. It will be tremendous fun."

"I've only consented because mamma says we owe it to you," the girl went on.

"Never mind your reason—the end justifies the means. I can never thank you enough nor tell you what a weight it lifts off my shoulders. Do you know I feel the difference already?—a peace that passeth understanding!" Mary replied that this was childish; how could such a feeble fiction last? At the very best it could live but an hour, and then he would be no better off than before. It would bristle, moreover, with difficulties and absurdities; it would be so much more trouble than it was worth. She reminded him that so ridiculous a service had never been asked of any girl, and at this he seemed a little struck; he said: "Ah, well, if it's positively disagreeable to you we'll instantly drop the idea. But I—I thought you really liked me enough——!" She turned away impatiently, and he went on to argue imperturbably that she had always treated him in the kindest way in the world. He added that the worst was over, the start, they were off: the thing would be in all the evening papers. Wasn't it much simpler to accept it? That was all they would have to do; and all *she* would have to do would be not to gainsay it and to smile and thank people when she was congratulated. She would have to *act* a little, but that would just be part of the fun. Oh, he hadn't the shadow of a scruple about taking the world in; the world deserved it richly, and she couldn't deny that this was what she had felt for him, that she had really been moved to compassion. He grew eloquent and charged her with having recognised in his predicament a genuine motive for charity.

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Their little plot would last what it could—it would be a part of their amusement to *make* it last. Even if it should be but a thing of a day there would have been always so much gained. But they would be ingenious, they would find ways, they would have no end of sport.

"*You* must be ingenious ; I can't," said Mary. " If people scarcely ever see us together they'll guess we're trying to humbug them."

" But they *will* see us together. We *are* together. We've been together—I mean we've seen a lot of each other—all our lives."

" Ah, not *that* way ! "

" Oh, trust me to work it right ! " cried the young man, whose imagination had now evidently begun to glow in the air of their pious fraud.

" You'll find it a dreadful bore," said Mary Gosselin.

" Then I'll drop it, don't you see ? And *you*'ll drop it, of course, the moment *you*'ve had 'enough,'" Lord Beaupré punctually added. " But as soon as you begin to realise what a lot of good you do me you won't *want* to drop it. That is if you're what I take you for ! " laughed his lordship.

If a third person had been present at this conversation—and there was nothing in it surely that might not have been spoken before a trusty listener—that person would perhaps have thought, from the immediate expression of Mary Gosselin's face, that she was on the point of exclaiming " You take me for too big a fool ! " No such ungracious words in fact, however, passed her lips ; she only said after an instant : " What reason do you propose to give, on the day you need one, for our rupture ? "

Her interlocutor stared. " To you, do you mean ? "

" *I* shan't ask you for one. I mean to other people."

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" Oh, I'll tell them you're sick of me. I'll put everything on you, and you'll put everything on me."

" You *have* worked it out ! " Mary exclaimed.

" Oh, I shall be intensely considerate."

" Do you call that being considerate—publicly accusing me ? "

Guy Firminger stared again. " Why, isn't that the reason *you'll* give ? "

She looked at him an instant. " I won't tell you the reason I shall give."

" Oh, I shall learn it from others."

" I hope you'll like it when you do ! " said Mary, with sudden gaiety ; and she added frankly though kindly the hope that he might soon light upon some young person who would really meet his requirements. He replied that he shouldn't be in a hurry—that was now just the comfort ; and she, as if thinking over to the end the list of arguments against his clumsy contrivance, broke out : " And of course you mustn't dream of giving me anything—any tokens or presents."

" Then it won't look natural."

" That's exactly what I say. You can't make it deceive anybody."

" I *must* give you something—something that people can see. There must be some evidence ! You can simply put my offerings away after a little and give them back." But about this Mary was visibly serious ; she declared that she wouldn't touch anything that came from his hand, and she spoke in such a tone that he coloured a little and hastened to say : " Oh, all right, I shall be thoroughly careful ! " This appeared to complete their understanding ; so that after it was settled that for the deluded world they *were* engaged, there was obviously nothing for him to do but to go. He therefore shook hands with her very gratefully and departed.

V

HE was able promptly to assure his accomplice that their little plot was working to a charm ; it already made such a difference for the better. Only a week had elapsed, but he felt quite another man ; his life was no longer spent in springing to arms and he had ceased to sleep in his boots. The ghost of his great fear was laid, he could follow out his inclinations and attend to his neglected affairs. The news had been a bomb in the enemy's camp, and there were plenty of blank faces to testify to the confusion it had wrought. Every one was " sold " and every one made haste to clap him on the back. Lottie Firminiger only had written in terms of which no notice could be taken, though of course he expected, every time he came in, to find her waiting in his hall. Her mother was coming up to town and he should have the family at his ears ; but, taking them as a single body, he could manage them, and that was a detail. The Ashburys had remained at Bosco till that establishment was favoured with the tidings that so nearly concerned it (they were communicated to Maud's mother by the housekeeper), and then the beautiful sufferer had found in her defeat strength to seek another asylum. The two ladies had departed for a destination unknown ; he didn't think they had turned up in London. Guy Firminiger averred that there were precious portable objects which he was

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sure he should miss on returning to his country home.

He came every day to Chester Street, and was evidently much less bored than Mary had prefigured by this regular tribute to verisimilitude. It was amusement enough to see the progress of their comedy and to invent new touches for some of its scenes. The girl herself was amused; it was an opportunity like another for cleverness such as hers and had much in common with private theatricals, especially with the rehearsals, the most amusing part. Moreover, she was good-natured enough to be really pleased at the service it was impossible for her not to acknowledge that she had rendered. Each of the parties to this queer contract had anecdotes and suggestions for the other, and each reminded the other duly that they must at every step keep their story straight. Except for the exercise of this care Mary Gosselin found her duties less onerous than she had feared and her part in general much more passive than active. It consisted indeed largely of murmuring thanks and smiling and looking happy and handsome; as well as perhaps also in saying in answer to many questions that nothing as yet was fixed and of trying to remain humble when people expressed without ceremony that such a match was a wonder for such a girl. Her mother on the other hand was devotedly active. She treated the situation with private humour but with public zeal and, making it both real and ideal, told so many fibs about it that there were none left for Mary. The girl had failed to understand Mrs. Gosselin's interest in this elaborate pleasantry; the good lady had seen in it from the first more than she herself had been able to see. Mary performed her task mechanically, sceptically, but Mrs. Gosselin attacked hers with conviction and had really the air at moments of thinking that their

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fable had crystallised into fact. Mary allowed her as little of this attitude as possible and was ironical about her duplicity ; warnings which the elder lady received with gaiety until one day when repetition had made them act on her nerves. Then she begged her daughter, with sudden asperity, not to talk to her as if she were a fool. She had already had words with Hugh about some aspects of the affair—so much as this was evident in Chester Street ; a smothered discussion which at the moment had determined the poor boy to go to Paris with Bolton-Brown. The young men came back together after Mary had been "engaged" three weeks, but she remained in ignorance of what passed between Hugh and his mother the night of his return. She had gone to the opera with Lady Whiteroy, after one of her invariable comments on Mrs. Gosselin's invariable remark that of course Guy Firminger would spend his evening in their box. The remedy for his trouble, Lord Beaupré's prospective bride had said, was surely worse than the disease ; she was in perfect good faith when she wondered that his lordship's sacrifices, his laborious cultivation of appearances should "pay."

Hugh Gosselin dined with his mother and at dinner talked of Paris and of what he had seen and done there ; he kept the conversation superficial and after he had heard how his sister, at the moment, was occupied, asked no question that might have seemed to denote an interest in the success of the experiment for which in going abroad he had declined responsibility. His mother could not help observing that he never mentioned Guy Firminger by either of his names, and it struck her as a part of the same detachment that later, upstairs (she sat with him while he smoked), he should suddenly say as he finished a cigar :

"I return to New York next week."

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"Before your time? What for?" Mrs. Gosselin was horrified.

"Oh, mamma, you know what for!"

"Because you still resent poor Mary's good-nature?"

"I don't understand it, and I don't like things I don't understand; therefore I'd rather not be here to see it. Besides I really can't tell a pack of lies."

Mrs. Gosselin exclaimed and protested; she had arguments to prove that there was no call at present for the least deflexion from the truth; all that any one had to reply to any question (and there could be none that was embarrassing save the ostensible determination of the date of the marriage) was that nothing was settled as yet—a form of words in which for the life of her she couldn't see any perjury. "Why, then, go in for anything in such bad taste, to culminate only in something so absurd?" Hugh demanded. "If the essential part of the matter can't be spoken of as fixed nothing is fixed, the deception becomes transparent and they give the whole idea away. It's child's play."

"That's why it's so innocent. All I can tell you is that practically their attitude answers; he's delighted with its success. Those dreadful women have given him up; they've already found some other victim."

"And how is it all to end, please?"

Mrs. Gosselin was silent for a moment. "Perhaps it won't end."

"Do you mean that the engagement will become real?"

Again the good lady said nothing until she broke out: "My dear boy, can't you trust your poor old mummy?"

"Is *that* your speculation? Is that Mary's? I never heard of anything so odious!" Hugh Gosselin

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cried. But she defended his sister with eagerness, with a gloss of coaxing, maternal indignation, declaring that Mary's disinterestedness was complete—she had the perfect proof of it. Hugh was conscious as he lighted another cigar that the conversation was more fundamental than any that he had ever had with his mother, who, however, hung fire but for an instant when he asked her what this "perfect proof" might be. He didn't doubt of his sister, he admitted that; but the perfect proof would make the whole thing more luminous. It took finally the form of a confession from Mrs. Gosselin that the girl evidently liked—well, greatly liked—Mr. Bolton-Brown. Yes, the good lady had seen for herself at Bosco that the smooth young American was making up to her and that, time and opportunity aiding, something might very well happen which could not be regarded as satisfactory. She had been very frank with Mary, had besought her not to commit herself to a suitor who in the very nature of the case couldn't meet the most legitimate of their views. Mary, who pretended not to know what their "views" were, had denied that she was in danger; but Mrs. Gosselin had assured her that she had all the air of it and had said triumphantly: "Agree to what Lord Beaupré asks of you, and I'll *believe* you." Mary had wished to be believed—so she had agreed. That was all the witchcraft any one had used.

Mrs. Gosselin out-talked her son, but there were two or three plain questions that he came back to; and the first of these bore upon the ground of her aversion to poor Bolton-Brown. He told her again, as he had told her before, that his friend was that rare bird a maker of money who was also a man of culture. He was a gentleman to his finger-tips, accomplished, capable, kind, with a charming mother and two lovely sisters (she should see them!) the

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sort of fellow in short whom it was stupid not to appreciate.

"I believe it all, and if I had three daughters he should be very welcome to one of them."

"You might easily have had three daughters who wouldn't attract him at all! You've had the good fortune to have one who does, and I think you do wrong to interfere with it."

"My eggs are in one basket then, and that's a reason the more for preferring Lord Beaupré," said Mrs. Gosselin.

"Then it is your calculation——?" stammered Hugh in dismay; on which she coloured and requested that he would be a little less rough with his mother. She would rather part with him immediately, sad as that would be, than that he should attempt to undo what she had done. When Hugh replied that it was not to Mary but to Beaupré himself that he judged it important he should speak, she informed him that a rash remonstrance might do his sister a cruel wrong. Dear Guy was *most* attentive.

"If you mean that he really cares for her there's the less excuse for his taking such a liberty with her. He's either in love with her or he isn't. If he is, let him make her a serious offer; if he isn't, let him leave her alone."

Mrs. Gosselin looked at her son with a kind of patient joy. "He's in love with her, but he doesn't know it."

"He ought to know it, and if he's so idiotic I don't see that we ought to consider him."

"Don't worry—he *shall* know it!" Mrs. Gosselin cried; and, continuing to struggle with Hugh, she insisted on the delicacy of the situation. She made a certain impression on him, though on confused grounds; she spoke at one moment as if he was to

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forbear because the matter was a make-believe that happened to contain a convenience for a distressed friend, and at another as if one ought to strain a point because there were great possibilities at stake. She was most lucid when she pictured the social position and other advantages of a peer of the realm. What had those of an American stockbroker, however amiable and with whatever shrill belongings in the background, to compare with them? She was inconsistent, but she was diplomatic, and the result of the discussion was that Hugh Gosselin became conscious of a dread of "injuring" his sister. He became conscious at the same time of a still greater apprehension, that of seeing her arrive at the agreeable in a tortuous, a second-rate manner. He might keep the peace to please his mother, but he couldn't enjoy it, and he actually took his departure, travelling in company with Bolton-Brown, who of course before going waited on the ladies in Chester Street to thank them for the kindness they had shown him. It couldn't be kept from Guy Firminger that Hugh was not happy, though when they met, which was only once or twice before he quitted London, Mary Gosselin's brother flattered himself that he was too proud to show it. He had always liked old loafing Guy and it was disagreeable to him not to like him now; but he was aware that he must either quarrel with him definitely or not at all and that he had passed his word to his mother. Therefore his attitude was strictly negative; he took with the parties to it no notice whatever of the "engagement," and he couldn't help it if to other people he had the air of not being initiated. They doubtless thought him strangely fastidious. Perhaps he was; the tone of London struck him in some respects as very horrid; he had grown in a manner away from it. Mary was impenetrable; tender, gay, charming,

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but with no patience, as she said, for his premature flight. Except when Lord Beaupré was present you would not have dreamed that he existed for her. In his company—he had to be present more or less of course—she was simply like any other English girl who disliked effusiveness. They had each the same manner, that of persons of rather a shy tradition who were on their guard against public “spooning.” They practised their fraud with good taste, a good taste mystifying to Bolton-Brown, who thought their precautions excessive. When he took leave of Mary Gosselin her eyes consented for a moment to look deep down into his. He had been from the first of the opinion that they were beautiful, and he was more mystified than ever.

If Guy Firminger had failed to ask Hugh Gosselin whether he had a fault to find with what they were doing, this was, in spite of old friendship, simply because he was too happy now to care much whom he didn't please, to care at any rate for criticism. He had ceased to be critical himself, and his high prosperity could take his blamelessness for granted. His happiness would have been offensive if people generally hadn't liked him, for it consisted of a kind of monstrous candid comfort. To take all sorts of things for granted was still his great, his delightful characteristic; but it didn't prevent his showing imagination and tact and taste in particular circumstances. He made, in their little comedy, all the right jokes and none of the wrong ones: the girl had an acute sense that there were some jokes that would have been detestable. She gathered that it was universally supposed she was having an unprecedented season, and something of the glory of an enviable future seemed indeed to hang about her. People no doubt thought it odd that she didn't go about more with her future husband; but those who

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knew anything about her knew that she had never done exactly as other girls did. She had her own ways, her own freedoms and her own scruples. Certainly he made the London weeks much richer than they had ever been for a subordinate young person ; he put more things into them, so that they grew dense and complicated. This frightened her at moments, especially when she thought with compunction that she was deceiving her very friends. She didn't mind taking the vulgar world in, but there were people she hated not to enlighten, to reassure. She could undeceive no one now, and indeed she would have been ashamed. There were hours when she wanted to stop—she had such a dread of doing too much ; hours when she thought with dismay that the fiction of the rupture was still to come, with its horrid train of new untrue things. She spoke of it repeatedly to her confederate, who only postponed and postponed, told her she would never dream of forsaking him if she measured the good she was doing him. She did measure it, however, when she met him in the great world ; she was of course always meeting him : that was the only way appearances were kept up. There was a certain attitude she could allow him to take on these occasions ; it covered and carried off their subterfuge. He could talk to her unmolested ; for herself she never spoke of anything but the charming girls, everywhere present, among whom he could freely choose. He didn't protest, because to choose freely was what he wanted, and they discussed these young ladies one by one. Some she recommended, some she disparaged, but it was almost the only subject she tolerated. It was her system in short, and she wondered he didn't get tired of it ; she was so tired of it herself.

She tried other things that she thought he might

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find wearisome, but his good-humour was magnificent. He was now really for the first time enjoying his promotion, his wealth, his insight into the terms on which the world offered itself to the happy few, and these terms made a mixture healing to irritation. Once, at some glittering ball, he asked her if she would be jealous if he were to dance again with Lady Whiteroy, with whom he had danced already, and this was the only occasion on which he had come near making a joke of the wrong sort. She showed him what she thought of it and made him feel that the way to be forgiven was to spend the rest of the evening with that lovely creature. Now that the phalanx of the pressingly nubile was held in check there was accordingly nothing to prevent his passing his time pleasantly. Before he had taken this effective way the diplomatic mother, when she spied him flirting with a married woman, felt that in urging a virgin daughter's superior claims she worked for righteousness as well as for the poor girl. But Mary Gosselin protected these scandals practically by the still greater scandal of her indifference ; so that he was in the odd position of having waited to be confined to know what it was to be at large. He had in other words the maximum of security with the minimum of privation. The lovely creatures of Lady Whiteroy's order thought Mary Gosselin charming, but they were the first to see through her falsity.

All this carried our precious pair to the middle of July ; but nearly a month before that, one night under the summer stars, on the deck of the steamer that was to reach New York on the morrow, something had passed between Hugh Gosselin and his brooding American friend. The night was warm and splendid ; these were their last hours at sea, and Hugh, who had been playing whist in the cabin, came up very late to take an observation before

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turning in. It was in this way that he chanced on his companion, who was leaning over the stern of the ship and gazing off, beyond its phosphorescent track, at the muffled, moaning ocean, the backward darkness, everything he had relinquished. Hugh stood by him for a moment and then asked him what he was thinking about. Bolton-Brown gave at first no answer; after which he turned round and, with his back against the guard of the deck, looked up at the multiplied stars. "He has it badly," Hugh Gosselin mentally commented. At last his friend replied: "About something you said yesterday."

"I forget what I said yesterday."

"You spoke of your sister's intended marriage; it was the only time you had spoken of it. You seemed to intimate that it might not after all take place."

Hugh hesitated a little. "Well, it *won't* take place. They're not engaged, not really. This is a secret, a preposterous secret. I wouldn't tell any one else, but I'm willing to tell *you*. It may make a difference to you."

Bolton-Brown turned his head; he looked at Hugh a minute through the fresh darkness. "It does make a difference to me. But I don't understand," he added.

"Neither do I. I don't like it. It's a pretence, a temporary make-believe, to help Beaupré through."

"Through what?"

"He's so run after."

The young American stared, ejaculated, mused. "Oh, yes—your mother told me."

"It's a sort of invention of my mother's and a notion of his own (very absurd, I think) till he can see his way. Mary serves as a kind of escort for these first exposed months. It's ridiculous, but I don't know that it hurts her."

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"Oh!" said Bolton-Brown.

"I don't know either that it does her any good."

"No!" said Bolton-Brown. Then he added:
"It's certainly very kind of her."

"It's a case of old friends," Hugh explained, inadequately as he felt. "He has always been in and out of our house."

"But how will it end?"

"I haven't the least idea."

Bolton-Brown was silent; he faced about to the stern again and stared at the rush of the ship. Then shifting his position once more: "Won't the engagement, before they've done, develop into the regular thing?"

Hugh felt as if his mother were listening. "I daresay not. If there were even a remote chance of that, Mary wouldn't have consented."

"But mayn't *he* easily find that—charming as she is—he's in love with her?"

"He's too much taken up with himself."

"That's just the reason," said Bolton-Brown. "Love is selfish." He considered a moment longer, then he went on: "And mayn't *she* find——?"

"Find what?" said Hugh, as he hesitated.

"Why, that she likes him."

"She likes him of course, else she wouldn't have come to his assistance. But her certainty about herself must have been just what made her not object to lending herself to the arrangement. She could do it decently because she doesn't seriously care for him. If she did——!" Hugh suddenly stopped.

"If she did?" his friend repeated.

"It would have been odious."

"I see," said Bolton-Brown gently. "But how will they break off?"

"It will be Mary who'll break off."

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" Perhaps she'll find it difficult."

" She'll require a pretext."

" I see," mused Bolton-Brown, shifting his position again.

" She'll find one," Hugh declared.

" I hope so," his companion responded.

For some minutes neither of them spoke ; then Hugh asked : " Are you in love with her ? "

" Oh, my dear fellow ! " Bolton-Brown wailed. He instantly added : " Will it be any use for me to go back ? "

Again Hugh felt as if his mother were listening. But he answered : " *Do* go back."

" It's awfully strange," said Bolton-Brown. " I'll go back."

" You had better wait a couple of months, you know."

" Mayn't I lose her then ? "

" No—they'll drop it all."

" I'll go back ! " the American repeated, as if he hadn't heard. He was restless, agitated ; he had evidently been much affected. He fidgeted away dimly, moved up the level length of the deck. Hugh Gosselin lingered longer at the stern ; he fell into the attitude in which he had found the other, leaning over it and looking back at the great vague distance they had come. He thought of his mother.

VI

To remind her fond parent of the vanity of certain expectations which she more than suspected her of entertaining, Mary Gosselin, while she felt herself intensely watched (it had all brought about a horrid new situation at home) produced every day some fresh illustration of the fact that people were no longer imposed upon. Moreover, these illustrations were not invented; the girl believed in them, and when once she had begun to note them she saw them multiply fast. Lady Whiteroy, for one, was distinctly suspicious; she had taken the liberty more than once of asking the future Lady Beaupré what in the world was the matter with her. Brilliant figure as she was and occupied with her own pleasures, which were of a very independent nature, she had nevertheless constituted herself Miss Gosselin's social sponsor: she took a particular interest in her marriage, an interest all the greater as it rested not only on a freely-professed regard for her, but on a keen sympathy with the other party to the transaction. Lady Whiteroy, who was very pretty and very clever and whom Mary secretly but profoundly mistrusted, delighted in them both in short; so much so that Mary judged herself happy to be in a false position, so certain should she have been to be jealous had she been in a true one. This charming woman threw out inquiries that made the girl not

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care to meet her eyes ; and Mary ended by forming a theory of the sort of marriage for Lord Beaupré that Lady Whiteroy really would have appreciated. It would have been a marriage to a fool, a marriage to Maud Ashbury or to Charlotte Firminger. She would have her reasons for preferring that ; and, as regarded the actual prospect, she had only discovered that Mary was even more astute than herself.

It will be understood how much our young lady was on the crest of the wave when I mention that in spite of this complicated consciousness she was one of the ornaments (Guy Firminger was of course another) of the party entertained by her zealous friend and Lord Whiteroy during the Goodwood week. She came back to town with the firm intention of putting an end to a comedy which had more than ever become odious to her ; in consequence of which she had on this subject with her fellow-comedian a scene—the scene she had dreaded—half-pathetic, half-ridiculous. He appealed to her, wrestled with her, took his usual ground that she was saving his life without really lifting a finger. He denied that the public was not satisfied with their pretexts for postponement, their explanations of delay ; what else was expected of a man who would wish to celebrate his nuptials on a suitable scale, but who had the misfortune to have had, one after another, three grievous bereavements ? He promised not to molest her for the next three months, to go away till his “mourning” was over, to go abroad, to let her do as she liked. He wouldn’t come near her, he wouldn’t even write (no one would know it), if she would let him keep up the mere form of their fiction ; and he would let her off the very first instant he definitely perceived that this expedient had ceased to be effective. She couldn’t judge of that—she

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must let *him* judge ; and it was a matter in which she could surely trust to his honour.

Mary Gosselin trusted to it, but she insisted on his going away. When he took such a tone as that she couldn't help being moved ; he breathed with such frank, generous lips on the irritation she had stored up against him. Guy Firminger went to Homburg, and if his confederate consented not to clip the slender thread by which this particular engagement still hung, she made very short work with every other. A dozen invitations, for Cowes, for the country, for Scotland, shimmered there before her, made a pathway of flowers, but she sent barbarous excuses. When her mother, aghast, said to her " What then will you do ? " she replied in a very conclusive manner " I'll go home ! " Mrs. Gosselin was wise enough not to struggle ; she saw that the thread was delicate, that it must dangle in quiet air. She therefore travelled back with her daughter to homely Hampshire, feeling that they were people of less importance than they had been for many a week. On the August afternoons they sat again on the little lawn on which Guy Firminger had found them the day he first became eloquent about the perils of the desirable young bachelor ; and it was on this very spot that, toward the end of the month, and with some surprise, they beheld Mr. Bolton-Brown once more approach. He had come back from America ; he had arrived but a few days before ; he was staying, of all places in the world, at the inn in the village.

His explanation of this caprice was of all explanations the oddest ; he had come three thousand miles for the love of water-colour. There was nothing more sketchable than the sketchability of Hampshire—wasn't it celebrated, classic ? and he was so good as to include Mrs. Gosselin's charming premises, and

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even their charming occupants, in his view of the field. He fell to work with speed, with a sort of feverish eagerness; he seemed possessed indeed by the frenzy of the brush. He sketched everything on the place, and when he had represented an object once he went straight at it again. His advent was soothing to Mary Gosselin, in spite of his nervous activity; it must be admitted indeed that at the moment he arrived she had already felt herself in quiet waters. The August afternoons, the relinquishment of London, the simplified life, had rendered her a service which, if she had freely qualified it, she would have described as a restoration of her self-respect. If poor Guy found any profit in such conditions as these there was no great reason to repudiate him. She had so completely shaken off responsibility that she took scarcely more than a languid interest in the fact, communicated to her by Lady Whiteroy, that Charlotte Firminger had also, as the newspapers said, "proceeded" to Homburg. Lady Whiteroy knew, for Lady Whiteroy had "proceeded" as well; her physician had discovered in her constitution a pressing need for the comfort imbibed in dripping matutinal tumblers. She chronicled Charlotte's presence, and even to some extent her behaviour, among the haunters of the spring, but it was not till some time afterwards that Mary learned how Miss Firminger's pilgrimage had been made under her ladyship's protection. This was a further sign that, like Mrs. Gosselin, Lady Whiteroy had ceased to struggle; she had, in town, only shrugged her shoulders ambiguously on being informed that Lord Beaupré's intended was going down to her stupid home.

The fullness of Mrs. Gosselin's renunciation was apparent during the stay of the young American in the neighbourhood of that retreat. She occupied herself with her knitting, her garden and the cares

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of a punctilious hospitality, but she had no appearance of any other occupation. When people came to tea Bolton-Brown was always there, and she had the self-control to attempt to say nothing that could assuage their natural surprise. Mrs. Ashbury came one day with poor Maud, and the two elder ladies, as they had done more than once before, looked for some moments into each other's eyes. This time it was not a look of defiance, it was rather—or it would have been for an observer completely in the secret—a look of reciprocity, of fraternity, a look of arrangement. There was, however, no one completely in the secret save perhaps Mary, and Mary didn't heed. The arrangement at any rate was ineffectual; Mrs. Gosselin might mutely say, over the young American's eager, talkative shoulders, "Yes, you may have him if you can get him": the most rudimentary experiments demonstrated that he was not to be got. Nothing passed on this subject between Mary and her mother, whom the girl none the less knew to be holding her breath and continuing to watch. She counted it more and more as one unpleasant result of her conspiracy with Guy Firminger that it almost poisoned a relation that had always been sweet. It was to show that she was independent of it that she did as she liked now, which was almost always as Bolton-Brown liked. When in the first days of September—it was in the warm, clear twilight, and they happened, amid the scent of fresh hay, to be leaning side by side on a stile—he gave her a view of the fundamental and esoteric, as distinguished from the convenient and superficial motive of his having come back to England, she of course made no allusion to a prior tie. On the other hand she insisted on his going up to London by the first train the next day. He was to wait—that was distinctly understood—for his satisfaction.

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She desired meanwhile to write immediately to Guy Firminger, but as he had kept his promise of not complicating their contract with letters she was uncertain as to his actual whereabouts: she was only sure he would have left Homburg. Lady Whiteroy had become silent, so there were no more sidelights, and she was on the point of telegraphing to London for an address when she received a telegram from Bosco. The proprietor of that seat had arrived there the day before, and he found he could make trains fit if she would on the morrow allow him to come over and see her for a day or two. He had returned sooner than their agreement allowed, but she answered "Come" and she showed his missive to her mother, who at the sight of it wept with strange passion. Mary said to her "For heaven's sake, don't let him see you!" She lost no time; she told him on the morrow as soon as he entered the house that she couldn't keep it up another hour.

"All right—it *is* no use," he conceded; "they're at it again!"

"You see you've gained nothing!" she replied triumphantly. She had instantly recognised that he was different, how much had happened.

"I've gained some of the happiest days of my life."

"Oh, that was not what you tried for!"

"Indeed it was, and I got exactly what I wanted," said Guy Firminger. They were in the cool little drawing-room where the morning light was dim. Guy Firminger had a sunburnt appearance, as in England people returning from other countries are apt to have, and Mary thought he had never looked so well. It was odd, but it was noticeable, that he had grown much handsomer since he had become a personage. He paused a moment, smiling at her while her mysterious eyes rested on him, and then

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he added : " Nothing ever worked better. It's no use now—people see. But I've got a start. I wanted to turn round and look about, and I *have* turned round and looked about. There are things I've escaped. I'm afraid you'll never understand how deeply I'm indebted to you."

" Oh, it's all right ! " said Mary Gosselin.

There was another short silence, after which he went on : " I've come back sooner than I promised, but only to be strictly fair. I began to see that we couldn't hold out and that it was my duty to let you off. From that moment I was bound to put an end to your situation. I might have done so by letter, but that seemed scarcely decent. It's all I came back for, you know, and it's why I wired to you yesterday."

Mary hesitated an instant, she reflected intensely. What had happened, what would happen, was that if she didn't take care the signal for the end of their little arrangement would not have appeared to come from herself. She particularly wished it not to come from any one else, she had even a horror of that ; so that after an instant she hastened to say : " I was on the very point of wiring to *you*—I was only waiting for your address."

" Wiring to me ? " He seemed rather blank.

" To tell you that our absurd affair really, this time, can't go on another day—to put a complete stop to it."

" Oh ! " said Guy Firminger.

" So it's all right."

" You've always hated it ! " Guy laughed ; and his laugh sounded slightly foolish to the girl.

" I found yesterday that I hated it more than ever."

Lord Beaupré showed a quickened attention.
" For what reason—yesterday ? "

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"I would rather not tell you, please. Perhaps some time you'll find it out."

He continued to look at her brightly and fixedly with his confused cheerfulness. Then he said with a vague, courteous alacrity: "I see, I see!" She had an impression that he didn't see; but it didn't matter, she was nervous and quite preferred that he shouldn't. They both got up, and in a moment he exclaimed: "Well, I'm intensely sorry it's over! It has been so charming."

"You've been very good about it; I mean very reasonable," Mary said, to say something. Then she felt in her nervousness that this was just what she ought not to have said: it sounded ironical and provoking, whereas she had meant it as pure good-nature. "Of course you'll stay to luncheon?" she continued. She was bound in common hospitality to speak of that, and he answered that it would give him the greatest pleasure. After this her apprehension increased, and it was confirmed in particular by the manner in which he suddenly asked:

"By the way, what reason shall we give?"

"What reason?"

"For our rupture. Don't let us seem to have quarrelled."

"We can't help that," said Mary. "Nothing else will account for our behaviour."

"Well, I shan't say anything about *you*."

"Do you mean you'll let people think it was yourself who were tired of it?"

"I mean I shan't *blame* you."

"You ought to behave as if you cared!" said Mary.

Guy Firminger laughed, but he looked worried and he evidently was puzzled. "You must act as if you had jilted me."

"You're not the sort of person unfortunately that people jilt."

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Lord Beaupré appeared to accept this statement as incontestable ; not with elation, however, but with candid regret, the slightly embarrassed recognition of a fundamental obstacle. " Well, it's no one's business, at any rate, is it ? "

" No one's, and that's what I shall say if people question me. Besides," Mary added, " they'll see for themselves."

" What will they see ? "

" I mean they'll understand. And now we had better join mamma."

It was his evident inclination to linger in the room after she had said this that gave her complete alarm. Mrs. Gosselin was in another room, in which she sat in the morning, and Mary moved in that direction, pausing only in the hall for him to accompany her. She wished to get him into the presence of a third person. In the hall he joined her, and in doing so laid his hand gently on her arm. Then looking into her eyes with all the pleasantness of his honesty, he said : " It will be very easy for me to appear to care—for I *shall* care. I shall care immensely ! " Lord Beaupré added smiling.

Anything, it struck her, was better than that—than that he should say : " We'll keep on, if you like (*I* should !) only this time it will be serious. Hold me to it—do ; don't let me go ; lead me on to the altar—really ! " Some such words as these, she believed, were rising to his lips, and she had an insurmountable horror of hearing them. It was as if, well enough meant on *his* part, they would do her a sort of dishonour, so that all her impulse was quickly to avert them. That was not the way she wanted to be asked in marriage. " Thank you very much," she said, " but it doesn't in the least matter. You will seem to have been jilted—so it's all right ! "

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"All right! You mean——?" He hesitated, he had coloured a little: his eyes questioned her.

"I'm engaged to be married—in earnest."

"Oh!" said Lord Beaupré.

"You asked me just now if I had a special reason for having been on the point of telegraphing to you, and I said I had. That was my special reason."

"I see!" said Lord Beaupré. He looked grave for a few seconds, then he gave an awkward smile. But he behaved with perfect tact and discretion, didn't even ask her who the gentleman in the case might be. He congratulated her in the dark, as it were, and if the effect of this was indeed a little odd she liked him for his quick perception of the fine fitness of pulling up short. Besides, he extracted the name of the gentleman soon enough from her mother, in whose company they now immediately found themselves. Mary left Guy Firminger with the good lady for half an hour before luncheon; and when the girl came back it was to observe that she had been crying again. It was dreadful—what she might have been saying. Their guest, however, at luncheon was not lachrymose; he was natural, but he was talkative and gay. Mary liked the way he now behaved, and more particularly the way he departed immediately after the meal. As soon as he was gone Mrs. Gosselin broke out suppliantly: "Mary!" But her daughter replied:

"I know, mamma, perfectly what you're going to say, and if you attempt to say it I shall leave the room." With this threat (day after day, for the following time) she kept the terrible appeal unuttered until it was too late for an appeal to be of use. That afternoon she wrote to Bolton-Brown that she accepted his offer of marriage.

Guy Firminger departed altogether; he went abroad again and to far countries. He was there-

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fore not able to be present at the nuptials of Miss Gosselin and the young American whom he had entertained at Bosco, which took place in the middle of November. Had he been in England, however, he probably would have felt impelled by a due regard for past verisimilitude to abstain from giving his countenance to such an occasion. His absence from the country contributed to the needed even if astonishing effect of his having been jilted ; so, likewise, did the reputed vastness of Bolton-Brown's young income, which in London was grossly exaggerated. Hugh Gosselin had perhaps a little to do with this ; as he had sacrificed a part of his summer holiday, he got another month and came out to his sister's wedding. He took public comfort in his brother-in-law ; nevertheless he listened with attention to a curious communication made him by his mother after the young couple had started for Italy ; even to the point of bringing out the inquiry (in answer to her assertion that poor Guy had been ready to place everything he had at Mary's feet) : " Then why the devil didn't he do it ? "

" From simple delicacy ! He didn't want to make her feel as if she had lent herself to an artifice only on purpose to get hold of him—to treat her as if she too had been at bottom one of the very harpies she helped him to elude."

Hugh thought a moment. " That *was* delicate."

" He's the dearest creature in the world. He's on his guard, he's prudent, he tested himself by separation. Then he came back to England in love with her. She might have had it all ! "

" I'm glad she didn't get it *that* way."

" She had only to wait—to put an end to their artifice, harmless as it was, for the present, but still wait. She might have broken off in a way that would have made it come on again better."

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"That's exactly what she didn't want."

"I mean as a quite separate incident," said Mrs. Gosselin.

"I loathed their artifice, harmless as it was!" her son observed.

Mrs. Gosselin for a moment made no answer; then she turned away from the fire into which she had been pensively gazing with the ejaculation "Poor dear Guy!"

"I can't for the life of me see that he's to be pitied."

"He'll marry Charlotte Firminger."

"If he's such an ass as that it's his own affair."

"Bessie Whiteroy will bring it about."

"What has *she* to do with it?"

"She wants to get hold of him."

"Then why will she marry him to another woman?"

"Because in that way she can select the other—a woman he won't care for. It will keep him from taking some one that's nicer."

Hugh Gosselin stared—he laughed aloud. "Lord, mamma, you're deep!"

"Indeed I am, I see much more."

"What do you see?"

"Mary won't in the least care for America. Don't tell me she will," Mrs. Gosselin added, "for you know perfectly you don't believe it."

"She'll care for her husband, she'll care for everything that concerns him."

"He's very nice, in his little way he's delightful. But as an alternative to Lord Beaupré he's ridiculous!"

"Mary's in a position in which she has nothing to do with alternatives."

"For the present, yes, but not for ever. She'll have enough of your New York; they'll come back here. I see the future dark," Mrs. Gosselin pursued, inexorably musing.

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"Tell me then all you see."

"She'll find poor Guy wretchedly married, and she'll be very sorry for him."

"Do you mean that he'll make love to her? You give a queer account of your paragon."

"He'll value her sympathy. I see life as it is."

"You give a queer account of your daughter."

"I don't give *any* account. She'll behave perfectly," Mrs. Gosselin somewhat inconsequently subjoined.

"Then what are you afraid of?"

"She'll be sorry for him, and it will be all a worry."

"A worry to whom?"

The good lady was silent a moment. "To me," she replied. "And to you as well."

"Then they mustn't come back."

"That will be a greater worry still."

"Surely not a greater—a smaller. We'll put up with the lesser evil."

"Nothing will prevent her coming to a sense, eventually, of what *might* have been. And when they *both* recognise it——"

"It will be very dreadful!" Hugh exclaimed, completing gaily his mother's phrase. "I don't see, however," he added, "what in all this you do with Bessie Whiteroy."

"Oh, he'll be tired of her; she's hard, she'll have become despotic. I see life as it is," the good lady repeated.

"Then all I can say is that it's not very nice! But they shan't come back: *I'll* attend to that!" said Hugh Gosselin, who has attended to it up to this time successfully, though the rest of his mother's prophecy is so far accomplished (it was her second hit) as that Charlotte Firminger is now, strange as it may seem, Lady Beaupré.

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THE other day, after her death, when they were discussing her, some one said in reference to the great number of years she had lived, the people she had seen and the stories she knew : " What a pity no one ever took any notes of her talk ! " For a London epitaph that was almost exhaustive, and the subject presently changed. One of the listeners had taken many notes, but he didn't confess it on the spot. The following story is a specimen of my exactitude—I took it down, *verbatim*, having that faculty, the day after I heard it. I choose it, at hazard, among those of her reminiscences that I have preserved ; it's not worse than the others. I will give you some of the others too—when occasion offers—so that you may judge.

I met in town that year a dear woman whom I had scarcely seen since I was a girl ; she had dropped out of the world ; she came up but once in five years. We had been together as very young creatures, and then we had married and gone our ways. It was arranged between us that after I should have paid a certain visit in August in the west of England I would take her—it would be very convenient, she was just over the Cornish border—on the way to my other engagements : I would work her in, as you say nowadays. She wanted immensely to show me her home, and she wanted still more to show me her girl, who had not come up to London, choosing instead,

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after much deliberation, to go abroad for a month with her brother and her brother's coach—he had been cramming for something—and Mrs. Coach of course. All that Mrs. Chantry had been able to show me in town was her husband, one of those country gentlemen with a moderate property and an old place who are a part of the essence in their own neighbourhood and not a part of anything anywhere else.

A couple of days before my visit to Chantry Court the people to whom I had gone from town took me over to see some friends of theirs who lived, ten miles away, in a place that was supposed to be fine. As it was a long drive we stayed to luncheon; and then as there were gardens and other things that were more or less ~~an~~ show we struggled along to tea, so as to get home just in time for dinner. There were a good many other people present, and before luncheon a very pretty girl came into the drawing-room, a real maiden in her flower, less than twenty, fresh and fair and charming, with the expression of some one I knew. I asked who she was, and was told she was Miss Chantry, so that in a moment I spoke to her, mentioning that I was an old friend of her mother's and that I was coming to pay them a visit. She looked rather frightened and blank, was apparently unable to say that she had ever heard of me, and hinted at no pleasure in the idea that she was to hear of me again. But this didn't prevent my perceiving that she was lovely, for I was wise enough even then not to think it necessary to measure people by the impression that one makes on them. I saw that any I should make on Louisa Chantry would be much too clumsy a test. She had been staying at the house at which I was calling; she had come alone, as the people were old friends and to a certain extent neighbours, and was going home in a few days. It was a daughterless house, but there was inevitable

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young life : a couple of girls from the vicarage, a married son and his wife, a young man who had "ridden over" and another young man who was staying.

Louisa Chantry sat opposite to me at luncheon, but too far for conversation, and before we got up I had discovered that if her manner to me had been odd it was not because she was inanimate. She was on the contrary in a state of intense though carefully muffled vibration. There was some fever in her blood, but no one perceived it, no one, that is, with an exception—an exception which was just a part of the very circumstance. This single suspicion was lodged in the breast of the young man whom I have alluded to as staying in the house. He was on the ~~same~~ side of the table as myself and diagonally facing the girl ; therefore what I learned about him was for the moment mainly what she told me ; meaning by "she" her face, her eyes, her movements, her whole perverted personality. She was extremely on her guard, and I should never have guessed her secret but for an accident. The accident was that the only time she dropped her eyes upon him during the repast I happened to notice it. It might not have been much to notice, but it led to my seeing that there was a little drama going on and that the young man would naturally be the hero. It was equally natural that in this capacity he should be the cause of my asking my left-hand neighbour, who happened to be my host, for some account of him. But "Oh, that fellow ? he's my nephew," was a description which, to appear copious, required that I should know more about the uncle.

We had coffee on the terrace of the house ; a terrace laid out in one quarter, oddly and charmingly, in grass where the servants who waited upon us seemed to tread, processionally, on soundless velvet.

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There I had a good look at my host's nephew and a longer talk with my friend's daughter, in regard to whom I had become conscious of a faint, formless anxiety. I remember saying to her, gropingly, instinctively: "My dear child, can I do anything for you? I shall perhaps see your mother before you do. Can I for instance say anything to her *from* you?" This only made her blush and turn away; and it was not till too many days had passed that I guessed that what had looked out at me unwittingly in her little gazing trepidation was something like "Oh, just take me away in spite of myself!" Superficially, conspicuously, there was nothing in the young man to take her away from. He was a person of the middle condition, and save that he didn't look at all humble might have passed for a poor relation. I mean that he had rather a seedy, shabby air, as if he were wearing out old clothes (he had on faded things that didn't match); and I formed vaguely the theory that he was a specimen of the numerous youthful class that goes to seek its fortune in the colonies, keeps strange company there and comes home without a penny. He had a brown, smooth, handsome face, a slightly swaggering, self-conscious ease, and was probably objected to in the house. He hung about, smoking cigarettes on the terrace, and nobody seemed to have much to say to him—a circumstance which, as he managed somehow to convey, left him absolutely indifferent. Louisa Chantry strolled away with one of the girls from the vicarage; the party on the terrace broke up and the nephew disappeared.

It was settled that my friends and I should take leave at half-past five, and I begged to be abandoned in the interval to my devices. I turned into the library and, mounted on ladders, I handled old books and old prints and soiled my gloves. Most of the

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others had gone to look at the church, and I was left in possession. I wandered into the rooms in which I knew there were pictures ; and if the pictures were not good there was some interesting china which I followed from corner to corner and from cabinet to cabinet. At last I found myself on the threshold of a small room which appeared to terminate the series and in which, between the curtains draping the doorways, there appeared to be rows of rare old plates on velvet screens. I was on the point of going in when I became aware that there was something else beside, something which threw me back. Two persons were standing side by side at the window, looking out together with their backs to me—two persons as to whom I immediately felt that they believed themselves to be alone and unwatched. One of them was Louisa Chantry, the other was the young man whom my host had described as his nephew. They were so placed as not to see me, and when I recognised them I checked myself instinctively. I hesitated a moment ; then I turned away altogether. I can't tell you why, except that if I had gone in I should have had somehow the air of discovering them. There was no visible reason why they should have been embarrassed by discovery, inasmuch as, so far as I could see, they were doing no harm, were only standing more or less together, without touching, and for the moment apparently saying nothing. Were they watching something out of the window ? I don't know ; all I know is that the observation I had made at luncheon gave me a sense of responsibility. I might have taken my responsibility the other way and broken up their communion ; but I didn't feel this to be sufficiently my business. Later on I wished I had.

I passed through the rooms again, and then out of the house. The gardens were ingenious, but they made me think (I have always that conceited habit)

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how much cleverer *I* should have been about them. Presently I met several of the rest of the party coming back from the church ; on which my hostess took possession of me, declaring there was a point of view I must absolutely be treated to. I saw she was a walking woman and that this meant half a mile in the park. But I was good for that, and we wandered off together while the others returned to the house. It was present to me that I ought to ask my companion, for Helen Chantry's sake, a question about Louisa—whether for instance she had happened to notice the way the girl seemed to be going. But it was difficult to say anything without saying too much ; so that to begin with I merely risked the observation that our young friend was remarkably pretty. As the point admitted of no discussion this didn't take us very far ; nor was the subject much enlarged by our unanimity as to the fact that she was also remarkably nice. I observed that I had had very little chance to talk with her, for which I was sorry, having known her mother for years. My hostess, at this, looked vaguely round, as if she had missed her for the first time. " Sure enough, she has not been about. I daresay she's been writing to her mother—she's always writing to her mother." " Not always," I mentally reflected ; but I waited discreetly, admiring everything and rising to the occasion and the views, before I inquired casually who the young man might be who had sat two or three below me at luncheon—the rather good-looking young man, with the regular features and the brownish clothes—not the one with the moustache.

" Oh, poor Jack Brandon," said my companion, in a tone calculated to make him seem no one in particular.

" Is he very poor ? " I asked, with a laugh.

" Oh dear, yes. There are nine of them—fancy !

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—all boys; and there's nothing for any one but the eldest. He's my husband's nephew—his poor mother's my sister-in-law. He sometimes turns up here when he has nothing better to do; but I don't think he likes us much." I saw she meant that they didn't like *him*; and I exposed myself to suspicion by asking if he had been with them long. But my friend was not very plastic, and she simplified my whole theory of the case by replying after she had thought a moment that she wasn't clear about it—she thought he had come only the morning before. It seemed to me I could safely feel a little further, so I inquired if he were likely to stay many days. "Oh dear, no; he'll go to-morrow!" said my hostess. There was nothing whatever to show that she saw a connexion between my odd interest in Mr. Brandon and the subject of our former reference; there was only a quick lucidity on the subject of the young man's departure. It reassured me, for no great complications would have arisen in forty-eight hours.

In retracing our steps we passed again through a part of the gardens. Just after we had entered them my hostess, begging me to excuse her, called at a man who was raking leaves to ask him a question about his wife. I heard him reply "Oh, she's very bad, my lady," and I followed my course. Presently my lady turned round with him, as if to go to see his wife, who apparently was ill and on the place. I continued to look about me—there were such charming things; and at the end of five minutes I missed my way—I had not taken the direction of the house. Suddenly at the turn of a walk, the angle of a great clipped hedge, I found myself face to face with Jack Brandon. He was moving rapidly, looking down, with his hands in his pockets, and he started and stared at me a moment. I said "Oh, how d'ye do?" and I was on the point of adding "Won't you kindly

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show me the right way?" But with a summary salute and a queer expression of face he had already passed me. I looked after him an instant and I all but stopped him; then one of the faintest voices of the air told me that Louisa Chantry would not be far off, that in fact if I were to go on a few steps I should find her. I continued and I passed through an arched aperture of the hedge, a kind of door in the partition. This corner of the place was like an old French garden, a little enclosed apartment, with statues set into the niches of the high walls of verdure. I paused in admiration; then just opposite to me I saw poor Louisa. She was on a bench, with her hands clasped in her lap, her head bent, her eyes staring down before her. I advanced on the grass, attracting her attention; and I was close to her before she looked at me, before she sprang up and showed me a face convulsed with nameless pain. She was so pale that I thought she was ill—I had a vision of her companion's having rushed off for help. She stood gazing at me with expanded eyes and parted lips, and what I was mainly conscious of was that she had become ten years older. Whatever troubled her it was something pitiful—something that prompted me to hold out my two hands to her and exclaim tenderly "My poor child, my poor child!" She wavered a moment, as if she wanted to escape me but couldn't trust herself to run; she looked away from me, turning her head this way and that. Then as I went close to her she covered her face with her two hands, she let me lay mine upon her and draw her to my breast. As she dropped her head upon it she burst into tears, sobbing soundlessly and tragically. I asked her no question, I only held her so long as she would, letting her pour out the passion which I felt at the same time she made a tremendous effort to smother. She couldn't smother it, but she could

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break away violently ; and this she quickly did, hurrying out of the nook where our little scene—and some other greater scene, I judged, just before it—had taken place, and leaving me infinitely mystified. I sat down on the bench a moment and thought it over ; then I succeeded in discovering a path to the house.

The carriage was at the door for our drive home, but my companions, who had had tea, were waiting for our hostess, of whom they wished to take leave and who had not yet come in. I reported her as engaged with the wife of one of the gardeners, but we lingered a little in the hall, a largeish group, to give her time to arrive. Two other persons were absent, one of whom was Louisa Chantry and the other the young man whom I had just seen quitting her in the garden. While I sat there, a trifle abstracted, still somewhat agitated by the sequel to that incident and at the same time impatient of our last vague dawdle, one of the footmen presented me with a little folded note. I turned away to open it, and at the very moment our hostess fortunately came in. This diverted the attention of the others from the action of the footman, whom, after I had looked at the note, I immediately followed into the drawing-room. He led me through it and through two or three others to the door of the little retreat in which, nearly an hour before, I had come upon Louisa Chantry and Mr. Brandon. The note was from Louisa, it contained the simple words " Would you very kindly speak to me an instant before you go ? " She was waiting for me in the most sequestered spot, she had been able to select, and there the footman left us. The girl came straight at me and in an instant she had grasped my hands. I became aware that her condition had changed ; her tears were gone, she had a concentrated purpose. I could scarcely

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see her beautiful young face—it was pressed, beseechingly, so close to mine. I only felt, as her dry, shining eyes almost dazzled me, that a strong light had been waved back and forth before me. Her words at first seemed to me incoherent; then I understood that she was asking me for a pledge.

“Excuse me, forgive me for bringing you here—to say something I can’t say before all those people. *Do* forgive me—it was so awfully kind of you to come.. I couldn’t think of any other way—just for two seconds. I want you to swear to me,” she went on, with her hands now raised and intensely clasped.

“To swear, dearest child?”

“I’m not your dearest child—I’m not any one’s! But *don’t* tell mamma. Promise me—promise me,” she insisted.

“Tell her what?—I don’t understand.”

“Oh, you do—you do!” she kept on, “and if you’re going to Chantry you’ll see her, you’ll be with her, you may see her before I do. On my knees I ask you for a vow!”

She seemed on the point of throwing herself at my feet, but I stopped her, I kept her erect. “When shall *you* see your mother?”

“As soon as I can. I want to get home—I want to get home!” With this I thought she was going to cry again, but she controlled herself and only pressed me with feverish eyes.

“You have some great trouble—for heaven’s sake tell me what it is.”

“It isn’t anything—it will pass. Only don’t breathe it to mamma!”

“How can I breathe it if I don’t know what it is?”

“You do know—you know what I mean.” Then after an instant’s pause she added: “What I did in the garden.”

“*What* did you do in the garden?”

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"I threw myself on your neck and I sobbed—I behaved like a maniac."

"Is that all you mean?"

"It's what I don't want mamma to know—it's what I beseech you to keep silent about. If you don't I'll never, never go home. Have *mercy* on me!" the poor child quavered.

"Dear girl, I only want to be tender to you—to be perfect. But tell me first: has any one acted wrongly to you?"

"No one—*no* one. I speak the truth."

She looked into my eyes, and I looked far into hers. They were wild with pain and yet they were so pure that they made me confusedly believe her. I hesitated a moment; then I risked the question: "Isn't Mr. Brandon responsible for anything?"

"For nothing—for nothing! Don't blame *him*!" the girl passionately cried.

"He hasn't made love to you?"

"Not a word—before God! Oh, it was too awful!" And with this she broke away from me, flung herself on her knees before a sofa, burying her face in it and in her arms. "Promise me, promise me, promise me!" she continued to wail.

I was horribly puzzled but I was immeasurably touched. I stood looking a moment at her extravagant prostration; then I said "I'm dreadfully in the dark, but I promise."

This brought her to her feet again, and again she seized my hands. "Solemnly, sacredly?" she panted.

"Solemnly, sacredly."

"Not a syllable—not a hint?"

"Dear Louisa," I said kindly, "when I promise I perform."

"You see I don't know you. And when do you go to Chantry?"

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" Day after to-morrow. And when do you ? "

" To-morrow if I can."

" Then you'll see your mother first—it will be all right," I said smiling.

" All right, all right ! " she repeated, with her woeful eyes. " Go, go ! " she added, hearing a step in the adjoining room.

The footman had come back to announce that my friends were seated in the carriage, and I was careful to say before him in a different tone : " Then there's nothing more I can do for you ? "

" Nothing—good-bye," said Louisa, tearing herself away too abruptly to take my kiss, which, to follow the servant again, I left unbestowed. I felt awkward and guilty as I took leave of the company, murmuring something to my entertainers about having had an arrangement to make with Miss Chantry. Most of the people bade us good-bye from the steps, but I didn't see Jack Brandon. On our drive home in the waning afternoon my other friends doubtless found me silent and stupid.

I went to Chantry two days later, and was disappointed to find that the daughter of the house had not returned, though indeed after parting with her I had been definitely of the opinion that she was much more likely to go to bed and be ill. Her mother, however, had not heard that she was ill, and my inquiry about the young lady was of course full of circumspection. It was a little difficult, for I had to talk about her, Helen being particularly delighted that we had already made acquaintance. No day had been fixed for her return, but it came over my friend that she oughtn't to be absent during too much of my visit. She was the best thing they had to show—she was the flower and the charm of the place. It had other charms as well—it was a sleepy, silvery old home, exquisitely grey and ex-

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quisitely green ; a house where you could have confidence in your leisure : it would be as genuine as the butter and the claret. The very look of the pleasant, prosaic drawing-room suggested long mornings of fancy work, of Berlin wool and premeditated patterns, new stitches and mild pauses. My good Helen was always in the middle of something eternal, of which the past and the future were rolled up in oilcloth and tissue paper, and the intensest moments of conversation were when it was spread out for pensive opinions. These used to drop sometimes even from Christopher Chantry when he straddled vaguely in with muddy leggings and the raw materials of a joke. He had a mind like a large, full milk-pan, and his wit was as thick as cream.

One evening I came down to dinner a little early and, to my surprise, found my troubled maiden in possession of the drawing-room. She was evidently troubled still, and had been waiting there in the hope of seeing me alone. We were too quickly interrupted by her parents, however, and I had no conversation with her till I sat down to the piano after dinner and beckoned to her to come and stand by it. Her father had gone off to smoke ; her mother dozed by one of the crackling little fires of the summer's end.

" Why didn't you come home the day you told me you meant to ? "

She fixed her eyes on my hands. " I couldn't, I couldn't ! "

" You look to me as if you were very ill. "

" I am, " the girl said simply.

" You ought to see some one. Something ought to be done. "

She shook her head with quiet despair. " It would be no use—no one would know. "

" What do you mean—would know ? "

" No one would understand. "

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"You ought to make them!"

"Never—never!" she repeated. "Never!"

"I confess *I* don't," I replied, with a kind of angry renunciation. I played louder, with the passion of my uneasiness and the aggravation of my responsibility.

"No, you don't indeed," said Louisa Chantry.

I had only to accept this disadvantage, and after a moment I went on: "What became of Mr. Brandon?"

"I don't know."

"Did he go away?"

"That same evening."

"Which same evening?"

"The day you were there. I never saw him again."

I was silent a minute, then I risked: "And you never will, eh?"

"Never—never."

"Then why shouldn't you get better?"

She also hesitated, after which she answered: "Because I'm going to die."

My music ceased, in spite of me, and we sat looking at each other. Helen Chantry woke up with a little start and asked what was the matter. I rose from the piano and I couldn't help saying "Dear Helen, I haven't the least idea." Louisa sprang up, pressing her hand to her left side, and the next instant I cried aloud "She's faint—she's ill—do come to her!" Mrs. Chantry bustled over to us, and immediately afterwards the girl had thrown herself on her mother's breast, as she had thrown herself days before on mine; only this time without tears, without cries, in the strangest, most tragic silence. She was not faint, she was only in despair—that at least is the way I really saw her. There was something in her contact that scared poor Helen,

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that operated a sudden revelation : I can see at this hour the queer frightened look she gave me over Louisa's shoulder. The girl, however, in a moment disengaged herself, declaring that she was not ill, only tired, very tired, and wanted to go to bed. " Take her, take her—go with her," I said to her mother ; and I pushed them, got them out of the room, partly to conceal my own trepidation. A few moments after they had gone Christopher Chantry came in, having finished his cigar, and I had to mention to him—to explain their absence—that his daughter was so fatigued that she had withdrawn under her mother's superintendence. " Didn't she seem done up, awfully done up ? What on earth, at that confounded place, did she go in for ? " the dear man asked with his pointless kindness. I couldn't tell him this was just what I myself wanted to know ; and while I pretended to read I wondered inextinguishably what indeed she had " gone in " for. It had become still more difficult to keep my vow than I had expected ; it was also very difficult that evening to converse with Christopher Chantry. His wife's continued absence rendered some conversation necessary ; yet it had the advantage of making him remark, after it had lasted an hour, that he must go to see what was the matter. He left me, and soon afterwards I betook myself to my room ; bed-time was elastic in the early sense at Chantry. I knew I should only have to wait awhile for Helen to come to me, and in fact by eleven o'clock she arrived.

" She's in a very strange state—something happened there."

" And *what* happened, pray ? "

" I can't make out ; she won't tell me."

" Then what makes you suppose so ? "

" She has broken down utterly ; she says there was something."

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"Then she does tell you?"

"Not a bit. She only begins and then stops short—she says it's too dreadful."

"Too dreadful?"

"She says it's *horrible*," my poor friend murmured, with tears in her eyes and tragic speculation in her mild maternal face.

"But in what way? Does she give you no facts, no clue?"

"It was something she did."

We looked at each other a moment. "Did?" I echoed. "Did to whom?"

"She won't tell me—she says she *can't*. She tries to bring it out, but it sticks in her throat."

"Nonsense. She did nothing," I said.

"What *could* she do?" Helen asked, gazing at me.

"She's ill, she's in a fever, her mind's wandering."

"So I say to her father."

"And what does *she* say to him?"

"Nothing—she won't speak to him. He's with her now, but she only lies there letting him hold her hand, with her face turned away from him and her eyes closed."

"You must send for the doctor immediately."

"I've already sent for him."

"Should you like me to sit up with her?"

"Oh, I'll do that!" Helen said. Then she asked: "But if you were there the other day, what did *you* see?"

"Nothing whatever," I resolutely answered.

"*Really* nothing?"

"Really, my dear child."

"But was there nobody there who could have made up to her?"

I hesitated a moment. "My poor Helen, you should have seen them!"

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"She wouldn't look at anybody that wasn't remarkably nice," Helen mused.

"Well—I don't want to abuse your friends—but nobody was remarkably nice. Believe me, she hasn't looked at anybody, and nothing whatever has occurred. She's ill, and it's a mere morbid fancy."

"It's a mere morbid fancy——!" Mrs. Chantry gobbled down this formula. I felt that I was giving her another still more acceptable, and which she as promptly adopted, when I added that Louisa would soon get over it.

I may as well say at once that Louisa never got over it. There followed an extraordinary week, which I look back upon as one of the most uncomfortable of my life. The doctor had something to say about the action of his patient's heart—it was weak and slightly irregular, and he was anxious to learn whether she had lately been exposed to any violent shock or emotion—but he could give no name to the disorder under the influence of which she had begun unmistakably to sink. She lay on the sofa in her room—she refused to go to bed, and in the absence of complications it was not insisted on—utterly white, weak and abstracted, shaking her head at all suggestion, waving away all nourishment save the infinitesimally little that enabled her to stretch out her hand from time to time (at intervals of very unequal length) and begin "Mother, mother!" as if she were mustering courage for a supreme confession. The courage never came; she was haunted by a strange impulse to speak, which in turn was checked on her lips by some deeper horror or some stranger fear. She seemed to seek relief spasmodically from some unforgettable consciousness and then to find the greatest relief of all in impenetrable silence. I knew these things only from her mother, for before me (I went gently in and out of her room

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two or three times a day) she gave no sign whatever. The little local doctor, after the first day, acknowledged himself at sea and expressed a desire to consult with a colleague at Exeter. The colleague journeyed down to us and shuffled and stammered: he recommended an appeal to a high authority in London. The high authority was summoned by telegraph and paid us a flying visit. He enunciated the valuable opinion that it was a very curious case and dropped the striking remark that in so charming a home a young lady ought to bloom like a flower. The young lady's late hostess came over, but she could throw no light on anything: all that she had ever noticed was that Louisa had seemed "rather blue" for a day or two before she brought her visit to a close. Our days were dismal enough and our nights were dreadful, for I took turns with Helen in sitting up with the girl. Chantry Court itself seemed conscious of the riddle that made its chambers ache; it bowed its grey old head over the fate of its daughter. The people who had been coming were put off; dinner became a ceremony enacted mainly by the servants. I sat alone with Christopher Chantry, whose honest hair, in his mystification, stuck out as if he had been overhauling accounts. My hours with Louisa were even more intensely silent, for she almost never looked at me. In the watches of the night, however, I at last saw more clearly into what she was thinking of. Once when I caught her wan eyes resting upon me I took advantage of it to kneel down by her bed and speak to her with the utmost tenderness.

"If you can't say it to your mother, can you say it perhaps to *me*?"

She gazed at me for some time. "What does it matter now—if I'm dying?"

I shook my head and smiled. "You won't die if you get it off your mind."

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"You'd be cruel to him," she said. "He's innocent—he's innocent."

"Do you mean *you're* guilty? What trifle are you magnifying?"

"Do you call it a trifle——?" She faltered and paused.

"Certainly I do, my dear." Then I risked a great stroke. "I've often done it myself!"

"*You*? Never, never! I was cruel to him," she added.

This puzzled me; I couldn't work it into my conception. "How were you cruel?"

"In the garden. I changed suddenly, I drove him away, I told him he filled me with horror."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because my shame came over me."

"Your shame?"

"What I had done in the house."

"And what had you done?"

She lay a few moments with her eyes closed, as if she were living it over. "I broke out to him, I told him," she began at last. But she couldn't continue, she was powerless to utter it.

"Yes, I know what you told him. Millions of girls have told young men that before."

"They've been asked, they've been asked! They didn't speak *first*! I didn't even know him, he didn't care for me, I had seen him for the first time the day before. I said strange things to him, and he behaved like a gentleman."

"Well he might!"

"Then before he could turn round, when we had simply walked out of the house together and strolled in the garden—it was as if I were borne along in the air by the wonder of what I had said—it rolled over me that I was lost."

"Lost?"

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"That I had been horrible—that I had been mad. Nothing could ever unsay it. I frightened him—I almost struck him."

"Poor fellow!" I smiled.

"Yes—pity him. He was kind. But he'll see me that way—always!"

I hesitated as to the answer it was best to make to this; then I produced: "Don't think he'll remember you—he'll see other girls."

"Ah, he'll *forget* me!" she softly and miserably wailed; and I saw that I had said the wrong thing. I bent over her more closely, to kiss her, and when I raised my head her mother was on the other side of the bed. She fell on her knees there for the same purpose, and when Louisa felt her lips she stretched out her arms to embrace her. She had the strength to draw her close, and I heard her begin again, for the hundredth time, "Mother, mother——"

"Yes, my own darling."

Then for the hundredth time I heard her stop. There was an intensity in her silence. It made me wildly nervous; I got up and turned away.

"Mother, mother," the girl repeated, and poor Helen replied with a sound of passionate solicitation. But her daughter only exhaled in the waiting hush, while I stood at the window where the dawn was faint, the most miserable moan in the world. "I'm dying," she said, articulately; and she died that night, after an hour, unconscious. The doctor arrived almost at the moment; this time he was sure it must have been the heart. The poor parents were in stupefaction, and I gave up half my visits and stayed with them a month. But in spite of their stupefaction I kept my vow.

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I

"AND your daughter?" said Lady Greyswood; "tell me about her. She must be nice."

"Oh, yes, she's nice enough. She's a great comfort." Mrs. Knocker hesitated a moment, then she went on: "Unfortunately she's not good-looking—not a bit."

"That doesn't matter, when they're not ill-natured," rejoined, insincerely, Lady Greyswood, who had the remains of great beauty.

"Oh, but poor Fanny is quite extraordinarily plain. I assure you it does matter. She knows it herself; she suffers from it. It's the sort of thing that makes a great difference in a girl's life."

"But if she's charming, if she's clever!" said Lady Greyswood, with more benevolence than logic. "I've known plain women who were liked."

"Do you mean *me*, my dear?" her old friend straightforwardly inquired. "But I'm not so awfully liked!"

"You?" Lady Greyswood exclaimed. "Why, you're grand!"

"I'm not so repulsive as I was when I was young perhaps, but that's not saying much."

"As when you were young!" laughed Lady Greyswood. "You sweet thing, you *are* young. I thought India dried people up."

"Oh, when you're a mummy to begin with!" Mrs. Knocker returned, with her trick of self-abase-

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ment. "Of course I've not been such a fool as to keep my children there. My girl *is* clever," she continued, "but she's afraid to show it. Therefore you may judge whether, with her unfortunate appearance, she's charming."

"She shall show it to *me*! You must let me do everything for her."

"Does that include finding her a husband? I should like her to show it to some one who'll marry her."

"I'll marry her!" said Lady Greyswood, who was handsomer than ever when she laughed and looked capable.

"What a blessing to meet you this way on the threshold of home! I give you notice that I shall cling to you. But that's what I meant; that's the thing the want of beauty makes so difficult—as if it were not difficult enough at the best."

"My dear child, one meets plenty of ugly women with husbands," Lady Greyswood argued, "and often with very nice ones."

"Yes, mine is very nice. There are men who don't mind one's face, for whom beauty isn't indispensable, but they are rare. I don't understand them. If I'd been a man about to marry I should have gone in for looks. However, the poor child will *have* something," Mrs. Knocker continued.

Lady Greyswood rested thoughtful eyes on her. "Do you mean she'll be well off?"

"We shall do everything we can for her. We're not in such misery as we used to be. We've managed to save in India, strange to say, and six months ago my husband came into money (more than we had ever dreamed of), by the death of his poor brother. We feel quite opulent (it's rather nice!) and we should expect to do something decent for our daughter. I don't mind its being known."

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"It *shall* be known!" said Lady Greyswood, getting up. "Leave the dear child to me!" The old friends embraced, for the porter of the hotel had come in to say that the carriage ordered for her ladyship was at the door. They had met in Paris by the merest chance, in the court of an inn, after a separation of years, just as Lady Greyswood was going home. She had been to Aix-les-Bains early in the season and was resting on her way back to England. Mrs. Knocker and the General, bringing their eastern exile to a close, had arrived only the night before from Marseilles and were to wait in Paris for their children, a tall girl and two younger boys, who, inevitably dissociated from their parents, had been for the past two years with a devoted aunt, their father's maiden sister, at Heidelberg. The reunion of the family was to take place with jollity in Paris, whither this good lady was now hurrying with her drilled and demoralised charges. Mrs. Knocker had come to England to see them two years before, and the period at Heidelberg had been planned during this visit. With the termination of her husband's service a new life opened before them all, and they had plans of comprehensive rejoicing for the summer—plans involving, however, a continuance, for a few months, of useful foreign opportunities, during which various questions connected with the organisation of a final home in England were practically to be dealt with. There was to be a salubrious house on the continent, taken in some neighbourhood that would both yield a stimulus to plain Fanny's French (her German was much commended), and permit of frequent "running over" for the General. With these preoccupations Mrs. Knocker, after her delightful encounter with Lady Greyswood, was less keenly conscious of the variations of destiny than she had been when, at the age of twenty, that intimate friend of her youth,

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beautiful, lovable and about to be united to a nobleman of ancient name, was brightly, almost insolently alienated. The less attractive of the two girls had married only several years later, and her marriage had perhaps emphasised the divergence of their ways. To-day, however, the inequality, as Mrs. Knocker would have phrased it, rather dropped out of the impression produced by the somewhat wasted and faded dowager, exquisite still, but unexpectedly appealing, who made no secret (an attempt that in an age of such publicity would have been useless) of what she had had, in vulgar parlance, to put up with, or of her having been left badly off. She had spoken of her children—she had had no less than six—but she had evidently thought it better not to speak of her husband. That somehow made up, on Mrs. Knocker's part, for some ancient aches.

It was not till a year after this incident that, one day in London, in her little house in Queen Street, Lady Greyswood said to her third son, Maurice—the one she was fondest of, the one who on his own side had given her most signs of affection :

“ I don't see what there is for you but to marry a girl of a certain fortune.”

“ Oh, that's not my line ! I may be an idiot, but I'm not mercenary,” the young man declared. He was not an idiot, but there was an examination, rather stiff indeed, to which, without success, he had gone up twice. The diplomatic service was closed to him by this catastrophe ; nothing else appeared particularly open ; he was terribly at leisure. There had been a theory none the less that he was the ablest of the family. Two of his brothers had been squeezed into the army and had declared rather crudely that they would do their best to keep Maurice out. They were not put to any trouble in this respect, however, as he professed a complete indifference to the trade

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of arms. His mother, who was vague about everything except the idea that people ought to like him, if only for his extraordinary good looks, thought it strange there shouldn't be some opening for him in political life, or something to be picked up even in the City. But no bustling borough solicited the advantage of his protection, no eminent statesman in want of a secretary took him by the hand, no great commercial house had been keeping a stool for him. Maurice, in a word, was not "approached" from any quarter, and meanwhile he was as irritating as the intending traveller who allows you the pleasure of looking out his railway-connections. Poor Lady Greyswood fumbled the social Bradshaw in vain. The young man had only one marked taste, with which his mother saw no way to deal—an invincible passion for photography. He was perpetually taking shots at his friends, but she couldn't open premises for him in Baker Street. He smoked endless cigarettes—she was sure they made him languid. She would have been more displeased with him if she had not felt so vividly that some one ought to do something for him; nevertheless, she almost lost patience at his remark about not being mercenary. She was on the point of asking him what he called it to live on his relations, but she checked the words as she remembered that she herself was the only one who did much for him. Nevertheless, as she hated open professions of disinterestedness, she replied that that was a nonsensical tone. Whatever one should get in such a way one would give quite as much, even if it didn't happen to be money; and when he inquired in return what it was (beyond the disgrace of his failures) that she judged a fellow like him would bring to his bride, she replied that he would bring himself, his personal qualities (she didn't like to be more definite about his appearance), his name, his descent,

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his connexions—good honest commodities all, for which any girl of proper feeling would be glad to pay. Such a name as that of the Glanvils was surely worth something, and she appealed to him to try what he could do with it.

"Surely I can do something better with it than sell it," said Maurice.

"I should like then very much to hear what," she replied very calmly, waiting reasonably for his answer. She waited to no purpose; the question baffled him, like those of his examinations. She explained that she meant of course that he should care for the girl, who might easily have a worse fault than the command of bread and butter. To humour her, for he was always good-natured, he said after a moment, smiling :

"Dear mother, is she pretty ? "

"Is who pretty ? "

"The young lady you have in your eye. Of course I see you've picked her out."

She coloured slightly at this—she had planned a more gradual revelation. For an instant she thought of saying that she had only had a general idea, for the form of his question embarrassed her ; but on reflexion she determined to be frank and practical. "Well, I confess I *am* thinking of a girl—a very nice one. But she hasn't great beauty."

"Oh, then it's of no use."

"But she's delightful, and she'll have thirty thousand pounds down, to say nothing of expectations."

Maurice Glanvil looked at his mother. "She must be hideous—for you to admit it. Therefore if she's rich she becomes quite impossible ; for how can a fellow have the air of having been bribed with gold to marry a monster ? "

"Fanny Knocker isn't the least a monster, and I

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can see that she'll improve. She's tall, and she's quite strong, and there's nothing at all disagreeable about her. Remember that you can't have everything."

"I thought you contended that I could!" said Maurice, amused at his mother's description of her young friend's charms. He had never heard any one damned, as regards that sort of thing, with fainter praise. He declared that he would be perfectly capable of marrying a poor girl, but that the prime necessity in any young person he should think of would be the possession of a face—to put it at the least—that it would give him positive pleasure to look at. "I don't ask for much, but I do ask for beauty," he went on. "My eye must be gratified—I must have a wife I can photograph."

Lady Greyswood was tempted to answer that he himself had good looks enough to make a handsome couple, but she withheld the remark as injudicious, though effective, for it was a part of her son's amiability that he appeared to have no conception of his plastic side. He would have been disgusted if she had put it forward; if he had the ideal he had just described it was not because his own profile was his standard. What she herself saw in it was a force for coercing heiresses. She had, however, to be patient, and she promised herself to be adroit; which was all the easier as she really liked Fanny Knocker.

The girl's parents had at last taken a house in Ennismore Gardens, and the friend of her mother's youth had been confronted with the question of redeeming the pledges uttered in Paris. This unsophisticated and united family, with relations to visit and schoolboys' holidays to outlive, had spent the winter in the country and had but lately begun to talk of itself, extravagantly of course, through Mrs. Knocker's droll lips, as open to social attentions.

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Lady Greyswood had not been false to her vows ; she had on the contrary recognised from the first that, if he could only be made to see it, Fanny Knocker would be just the person to fill out poor Maurice's blanks. She had kept this confidence to herself, but it had made her very kind to the young lady. One of the forms of this kindness had been an ingenuity in keeping her from coming to Queen Street until Maurice should have been prepared. Was he to be regarded as prepared now that he asserted he would have nothing to do with Miss Knocker ? This was a question that worried Lady Greyswood, who at any rate said to herself that she had told him the worst. Her idea had been to sound her old friend only after the young people should have met and Fanny should have fallen in love. Such a catastrophe for Fanny belonged for Lady Greyswood to that order of convenience that she could always take for granted.

She had found the girl, as she expected, ugly and awkward, but had also discovered a charm of character in her intelligent timidity. No one knew better than this observant woman how thankless a task in general it was in London to "take out" a plain girl ; she had seen the nicest creatures, in the brutality of balls, participate only through wistful, almost tearful eyes ; her little drawing-room, at intimate hours, had been shaken by the confidences of desperate mothers. None the less she felt sure that Fanny's path would not be rugged ; thirty thousand pounds were a fine set of features, and her anxiety was rather on the score of the expectations of the young lady's parents. Mrs. Knocker had dropped remarks suggestive of a high imagination, of the conviction that there might be a real efficacy in what they were doing for their daughter. The danger, in other words, might well be that no younger son need apply—a possibility that made Lady Greyswood take all her precautions. The

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acceptability of her favourite child was consistent with the rejection of those of other people—on which indeed it even directly depended. She remembered on the other hand the proverb about taking your horse to the water; the crystalline spring of her young friend's homage might overflow, but she couldn't compel her boy to drink. The clever way was to break down his prejudice—to get him to consent to give poor Fanny a chance. Therefore if she was careful not to worry him she let him see her project as something patient and deeply wise; she had the air of waiting resignedly for the day on which, in the absence of other solutions, he would say to her: "Well, let me have a look at my fate!" Meanwhile, moreover, she was nothing if not conscientious, and as she had made up her mind about the girl's susceptibility she had a scruple against exposing her. This exposure would not be justified so long as Maurice's theoretic rigour should remain unabated.

She felt virtuous in carrying her scruple to the point of rudeness; she knew that Jane Knocker wondered why, though so attentive in a hundred ways, she had never definitely included the poor child in any invitation to Queen Street. There came a moment when it gave her pleasure to suspect that her old friend had begun to explain this omission by the idea of a positive exaggeration of good faith—an honest recognition of the detrimental character of the young man in ambush there. As Maurice, though much addicted to kissing his mother at home, never dangled about her in public, he had remained a mythical figure to Mrs. Knocker: he had been absent (culpably—there was a touch of the inevitable incivility in it) on each of the occasions on which, after their arrival in London, she and her husband dined with Lady Greyswood. This astute woman knew that her delightful Jane was whimsical enough to be excited

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good-humouredly by a mystery : she might very well want to make Maurice's acquaintance in just the degree in which she guessed that his mother's high sense of honour kept him out of the way. Moreover, she desired intensely that her daughter should have the sort of experience that would help her to take confidence. Lady Greyswood knew that no one had as yet asked the girl to dinner and that this particular attention was the one for which her mother would be most grateful. No sooner had she arrived at these illuminations than, with deep diplomacy, she requested the pleasure of the company of her dear Jane and the General. Mrs. Knocker accepted with delight—she always accepted with delight—so that nothing remained for Lady Greyswood but to make sure of Maurice in advance. After this was done she had only to wait. When the dinner, on a day very near at hand, took place (she had jumped at the first evening on which the Knockers were free), she had the gratification of seeing her prevision exactly fulfilled. Her whimsical Jane had thrown the game into her hands, had been taken at the very last moment with one of her Indian headaches and, infinitely apologetic and explanatory, had hustled poor Fanny off with the General. The girl, flurried and frightened by her responsibility, sat at dinner next to Maurice, who behaved beautifully—not in the least as the victim of a trick ; and when a fortnight later Lady Greyswood was able to divine that her mind from that evening had been filled with a virginal ecstasy, she was also fortunately able to feel serenely, delightfully guiltless.

II

SHE knew this fact about Fanny's mind, she believed, some time before Jane Knocker knew it ; but she also had reason to think that Jane Knocker had known it for some time before she spoke of it. It was not till the middle of June, after a succession of encounters between the young people, that her old friend came one morning to discuss the circumstance. Mrs. Knocker asked her if she suspected it, and she promptly replied that it had never occurred to her. She added that she was extremely sorry and that it had probably in the first instance been the fault of that injudicious dinner.

" Ah, the day of my headache—my miserable headache ? " said her visitor. " Yes, very likely that did it. He's so dreadfully good-looking."

" Poor child, he can't help that. Neither can I ! " Lady Greyswood ventured to add.

" He comes by it honestly. He seems very nice."

" He's nice enough, but he hasn't a farthing, you know, and his expectations are *nil*." They considered, they turned the matter about, they wondered what they had better do. In the first place there was no room for doubt ; of course Mrs. Knocker hadn't sounded the girl, but a mother, a true mother was never reduced to that. If Fanny was in every relation of life so painfully, so constitutionally awkward, the still depths of her shyness, of

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her dissimulation even, in such a predicament as this, might easily be imagined. She would give no sign that she could possibly smother, she would say nothing and do nothing, watching herself, poor child, with trepidation ; but she would suffer, and some day when the question of her future should really come up—it might after all in the form of some good proposal—they would find themselves beating against a closed door. That was what they had to think of ; that was why Mrs. Knocker had come over. Her old friend cross-examined her with a troubled face, but she was very impressive with her reasons, her intuitions.

" I'll send him away in a moment, if you'd like that," Lady Greyswood said at last. " I'll try and get him to go abroad."

Her visitor made no direct reply to this, and no reply at all for some moments. " What does he expect to do—what does he want to do ? " she asked.

" Oh, poor boy, he's looking—he's trying to decide. He asks nothing of any one. If he would only knock at a few doors ! But he's too proud."

" Do you call him *very* clever ? " Fanny's mother demanded.

" Yes, decidedly—and good and kind and true. But he has been unlucky."

" Of course he can't bear her ! " said Mrs. Knocker with a little dry laugh.

Lady Greyswood stared ; then she broke out : " Do you mean you'd be willing ?——"

" He's very charming."

" Ah, but you must have great ideas."

" He's very well connected," said Mrs. Knocker, snapping the tight elastic on her umbrella.

" Oh, my dear Jane—' connected ' ! " Lady Greyswood gave a sigh of the sweetest irony.

" He's connected with you, to begin with."

Lady Greyswood put out her hand and held her

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visitor's for a moment. "Of course it isn't as if he were a different sort of person. Of course I should like it!" she added.

"Does he dislike her *very* much?"

Lady Greyswood looked at her friend with a smile. "He resembles Fanny—he doesn't tell. But what would her father say?" she went on.

"He doesn't know it."

"You've not talked with him?"

Mrs. Knocker hesitated a moment. "He thinks she's all right." Both the ladies laughed a little at the density of men; then the visitor said: "I wanted to see you first."

This circumstance gave Lady Greyswood food for thought; it suggested comprehensively that in spite of a probable deficiency of zeal on the General's part the worthy man would not be the great obstacle. She had begun so quickly to turn over in her mind the various ways in which this new phase of the business might make it possible the real obstacle should be surmounted that she scarcely heard her companion say next: "The General will only want his daughter to be happy. He has no definite ambitions for her. I daresay Maurice could make him like him." It was something more said by her companion about Maurice that sounded sharply through her reverie. "But unless the idea appeals to *him* a bit there's no use talking about it."

At this Lady Greyswood spoke with decision. "It *shall* appeal to him. Leave it to me! Kiss your dear child for me," she added as the ladies embraced and separated.

In the course of the day she made up her mind, and when she again broached the question to her son (it befell that very evening) she felt that she stood on firmer ground. She began by mentioning to him that her dear old friend had the same charm-

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ing dream—for the girl—that *she* had ; she sketched with a light hand a picture of their preconceived happiness in the union of their children. When he replied that he couldn't for the life of him imagine what the Knockers could see in a poor beggar of a younger son who had publicly come a cropper, she took pains to prove that he was as good as any one else and much better than many of the young men to whom persons of sense were often willing to confide their daughters. She had been in much tribulation over the circumstance announced to her in the morning, not knowing whether, in her present enterprise, to keep it back or put it forward. If Maurice should happen not to take it in the right way it was the sort of thing that might dish the whole experiment. He might be bored, he might be annoyed, he might be horrified—there was no limit, in such cases, to the perversity, to the possible brutality of even the most amiable man. On the other hand he might be pleased, touched, flattered—if he didn't dislike the girl too much. Lady Greyswood could indeed imagine that it might be unpleasant to know that a person who was disagreeable to you was in love with you ; so that there was just that risk to run. She determined to run it only if there should be absolutely no other card to play. Meanwhile she said : “ Don't you see, now, how intelligent she is, in her quiet way, and how perfect she is at home—without any nonsense or affectation or ill-nature ? She's not a bit stupid, she's remarkably clever. She can do a lot of things ; she has no end of talents. Many girls with a quarter of her abilities would make five times the show.”

“ My dear mother, she's a great swell, I freely admit it. She's far too good for me. What in the world puts it into your two heads that she would look at me ? ”

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At this Lady Greyswood was tempted to speak ; but after an instant she said instead : " She *has* looked at you, and you've seen how. You've seen her several times now, and she has been remarkably nice to you."

" Nice ? Ah, poor girl, she's frightened to death ! "

" Believe me—I read her," Lady Greyswood replied.

" She knows she has money and she thinks I'm after it. She thinks I'm a ravening wolf and she's scared."

" I happen to know as a fact that she's in love with you ! " Before she could check herself Lady Greyswood had played her card, and though she held her breath a little after doing so she felt that it had been a good moment. " If I hadn't known it," she hastened further to declare, " I should never have said another word." Maurice burst out laughing—how in the world *did* she know it ? When she put the evidence before him she had the pleasure of seeing that he listened without irritation ; and this emboldened her to say : " Don't you think you could *try* to like her ? "

Maurice was lounging on a sofa opposite to her ; jocosely but embarrassed, he had thrown back his head, and while he stretched himself his eyes wandered over the upper expanse of the room. " It's very kind of her and of her mother, and I'm much obliged and all that, though a fellow feels rather an ass in talking about such a thing. Of course also I don't pretend—before such a proof of wisdom—that I think her in the least a fool. But, oh, dear——! " And the young man broke off with laughing impatience, as if he had too much to say. His mother waited an instant, then she uttered a persuasive, interrogative sound, and he went on : " It's only a pity she's so awful ! "

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" So awful ? " murmured Lady Greyswood.

" Dear mother, she's about as ugly a woman as ever turned round on you. If there were only just a touch or two less of it ! "

Lady Greyswood got up : she stood looking in silence at the tinted shade of the lamp. She remained in this position so long that he glanced at her—he was struck with the sadness in her face. He would have been in error, however, if he had suspected that this sadness was assumed for the purpose of showing him that she was wounded by his resistance, for the reflexion that his last words caused her to make was as disinterested as it was melancholy. Here was an excellent, a charming girl—a girl, she was sure, with a rare capacity for devotion—whose future was reduced to nothing by the mere accident, in her face, of a certain want of drawing. A man could settle her fate with a laugh, could give her away with a snap of his fingers. She seemed to see Maurice administer to poor Fanny's image the little displeased shove with which he would have disposed of an ill-seasoned dish. Moreover, he greatly exaggerated. Her heart grew heavy with a sense of the hardness of the lot of women, and when she looked again at her son there were tears in her eyes that startled him. " Poor girl—poor girl ! " she simply sighed, in a tone that was to reverberate in his mind and to constitute in doing so a real appeal to his imagination. After a moment she added : " We'll talk no more about her—no, no ! "

All the same she went three days later to see Mrs. Knocker and say to her : " My dear creature, I think it's all right."

" Do you mean he'll take us up ? "

" He'll come and see you, and you must give him plenty of chances." What Lady Greyswood would have liked to be able to say, crudely and comfortably,

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was: "He'll try to manage it—he promises to do what he can." What she did say, however, was: "He's greatly prepossessed in the dear child's favour."

"Then I dare say he'll be very nice."

"If I didn't think he'd behave like a gentleman I wouldn't raise a finger. The more he sees of her the more he'll be sure to like her."

"Of course with poor Fanny that's the only thing one can build on," said Mrs. Kocker. "There's so much to get over."

Lady Greyswood hesitated a moment. "Maurice *has* got over it. But I should tell you that at first he doesn't want it known."

"Doesn't want what known?"

"Why, the footing on which he comes. You see it's just the least bit experimental."

"For what do you take me?" asked Mrs. Kocker. "The child shall never dream that anything has passed between us. No more, of course, shall her father."

"It's too delightful of you to leave it that way," Lady Greyswood replied. "We must surround her happiness with every safeguard."

Mrs. Kocker sat pensive for some moments. "So that if nothing comes of it there's no harm done? That idea—that nothing may come of it—makes one a little nervous," she added.

"Of course I can't absolutely answer for my poor boy!" said Lady Greyswood, with just the faintest ring of impatience. "But he's much affected by what he knows—I told him. That's what moves him."

"He must, of course, be perfectly free."

"The great thing is for her not to know."

Mrs. Kocker considered. "Are you very sure?" "She had apparently had a profounder second thought."

"Why, my dear—with the risk!"

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"Isn't the risk, after all, greater the other way? Mayn't it help the matter on, mayn't it do the poor child a certain degree of good, the idea that, as you say, he's prepossessed in her favour? It would perhaps cheer her up, as it were, and encourage her, so that by the very fact of being happier about herself she may make a better impression. That's what she wants, poor thing—to be helped to hold up her head, to take herself more seriously, to believe that people can like her. And fancy, when it's a case of such a beautiful young man who's all ready to!"

"Yes, he's all ready to," Lady Greyswood conceded. "Of course it's a question for your own discretion. I can't advise you, for you know your child. But it seems to me a case for tremendous caution."

"Oh, trust me for that!" said Mrs. Knocker. "We shall be very kind to him," she smiled, as her visitor got up.

"He'll appreciate that. But it's too nice of you to leave it so."

Mrs. Knocker gave a hopeful shrug. "He has only to be civil to Blake!"

"Ah, he isn't a brute!" Lady Greyswood exclaimed, caressing her.

After this she passed a month of no little anxiety. She asked her son no question, and for two or three weeks he offered her no other information than to say two or three times that Miss Knocker really could ride; but she learned from her old friend everything she wanted to know. Immediately after the conference of the two ladies, Maurice, in the Row, had taken an opportunity of making up to the girl. She rode every day with her father, and Maurice rode, though possessed of nothing in life to put a leg across; and he had been so well received that this proved the beginning of a custom. He had a canter with the young lady most days in the week, and

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when they parted it was usually to meet again in the evening. His relations with the household in Ennismore Gardens were indeed not left greatly to his initiative ; he became on the spot the subject of perpetual invitations and arrangements, the centre of the friendliest manœuvres ; so that Lady Greyswood was struck with Jane Knocker's feverish energy in the good cause—the ingenuity, the bribery, the cunning that an exemplary mother might be inspired to practise. She herself did nothing, she left it all to poor Jane, and this perhaps gave her for the moment a sense of contemplative superiority. She wondered if *she* would in any circumstances have plotted so almost fiercely for one of her children. She was glad her old friend's design had her full approbation ; she held her breath a little when she said to herself : “ Suppose I hadn't liked it—suppose it had been for Chumleigh ! ” Chumleigh was the present Lord Greyswood, whom his mother still called by his earlier designation. Fanny Knocker's thirty thousand would have been by no means enough for Chumleigh. Lady Greyswood, in spite of her suspense, was detached enough to be amused when her accomplice told her that “ Blake ” had said that Maurice really could ride. The two mothers thanked God for the riding—the riding would see them through. Lady Greyswood had watched Fanny narrowly in the Park, where, in the saddle, she looked no worse than lots of girls. She had no idea how Maurice got his mounts—she knew Chumleigh had none to give him ; but there were directions in which she would have encouraged him to incur almost any liability. He was evidently amused and beguiled ; he fell into comfortable attitudes on the soft cushions that were laid for him and partook with relish of the dainties that were served ; he had his fill of the theatres, of the opera—entertainments of which he was fond.

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She could see he didn't care for the sort of people he met in Ennismore Gardens, but this didn't matter : so much as that she didn't ask of him. She knew that when he should have something to tell her he would speak ; and meanwhile she pretended to be a thousand miles away. The only thing that worried her was that he had dropped photography. She said to Mrs. Knocker more than once : " Does he make love ?—that's what I want to know ! " to which this lady replied with her incongruous drollery : " My dear, how can I make out ? He's so little like Blake ! " But she added that she believed Fanny was intensely happy. Lady Greyswood had been struck with the girl's looking so, and she rejoiced to be able to declare in perfectly good faith that she thought her greatly improved. " Didn't I tell you ? " returned Mrs. Knocker to this with a certain accent of triumph. It made Lady Greyswood nervous, for she took it to mean that Fanny had had a hint from her mother of Maurice's possible intentions. She was afraid to ask her old friend directly if this were definitely true : poor Fanny's improvement was after all not a gain sufficient to make up for the cruelty that would reside in the sense of being rejected.

One day, in Queen Street, Maurice said in an abrupt, conscientious way : " You were right about Fanny Knocker—she's a remarkably clever and a thoroughly nice girl ; a fellow can really talk with her. But oh mother ! "

" Well, my dear ? "

The young man's face wore a strange smile. " Oh mother ! " he expressively, quite tragically repeated. " But it's all right ! " he presently added in a different tone, and Lady Greyswood was reassured. This confidence, however, received a shock a little later, on the evening of a day that had been

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intensely hot. A torrid wave had passed over London, and in the suffocating air the pleasures of the season had put on a purple face. Lady Greyswood, whose own fine lowness of tone no temperature could affect, knew, in her bedimmed drawing-room, exactly the detail of her son's engagements. She pitied him—*she* had managed to keep clear; she had in particular a vision of a distribution of prizes, by one of the princesses, at a big horticultural show; she saw the sweltering starers (and at what, after all?) under a huge glass roof, while there passed before her, in a blur of crimson, the glimpse of uncomfortable cheeks under an erratic white bonnet, together also with the sense that some of Jane Knocker's ideas of pleasure were of the oddest (she had such *lacunes*), and some of the ordeals to which she exposed poor Fanny singularly ill-chosen. Maurice came in, perspiring but pale (nothing could make *him* ugly!) to dress for dinner, and though he was in a great hurry he found time to pant: "Oh mother, what I'm going through for you!"

"Do you mean rushing about so—in this weather? We shall have a change to-night."

"I hope so! There are people for whom it doesn't do at all; ah, not a bit!" said Maurice with a laugh that she didn't fancy. But he went upstairs before she could think of anything to reply, and after he had dressed he passed out without speaking to her again. The next morning, on entering her room, her maid mentioned as a delicate duty that Mr. Glanvil, whose door stood wide open and whose bed was untouched, had apparently not yet come in. While, however, her ladyship was in the first freshness of meditation on this singular fact the morning's letters were brought up, and as it happened that the second envelope she glanced at was addressed in Maurice's hand she was quickly in possession of an

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explanation still more startling than his absence. He wrote from a club, at nine o'clock the previous evening, to announce that he was taking the night train for the continent. He hadn't dressed for dinner, he had dressed otherwise, and having stuffed a few things with surreptitious haste into a Gladstone bag, had slipped unperceived out of the house and into a hansom. He had sent to Ennismore Gardens, from his club, an apology—a request he should not be waited for ; and now he should just have time to get to Charing Cross. He was off he didn't know where, but he was off he did know why. " You'll know why, dear mother, too, I think," this wonderful communication continued ; " you'll know why, because I haven't deceived you. I've done what I could, but I've broken down. I felt to-day that it was no use ; there was a moment, at that beastly exhibition, when I saw it, when the question was settled. The truth rolled over me in a stifling wave. After that I made up my mind there was nothing to do but to bolt. I meant to put it off till to-morrow, and to tell you first, but while I was dressing to-day it struck me irresistibly that my true course is to break now—never to enter the house or go near her again. I was afraid of a scene with you about this. I haven't uttered a word of ' love ' to her (heaven save us !), but my position this afternoon became definitely false, and that fact prescribes the course I am taking. You shall hear from me again in a day or two. I have the greatest regard for her, but I can't bear to look at her. I don't care a bit for money, but, hang it, I *must* have beauty ! Please send me twenty pounds, *poste restante*, Boulogne."

" What I want, Jane, is to get at *this*," Lady Greyswood said, later in the day, with an austerity that was sensible even through her tears. " Does the child know, or doesn't she, what was at stake ? "

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"She hasn't an inkling of it—how should she? I recognised that it was best not to tell her—and I didn't."

On this, as Mrs. Knocker's tears had also flowed, Lady Greyswood kissed her. But she didn't believe her. Fanny herself, however, for the rest of the season, proved inscrutable. "She's a character!" Lady Greyswood reflected with admiration. In September, in Yorkshire, the girl was taken seriously ill.

III

AFTER luncheon at the Crisfords'—the big Sunday banquets of twenty people and a dozen courses—the men, lingering a little in the dining-room, dawdling among displaced chairs and dropped napkins while the ladies rustled away, ended by shuffling in casual pairs up to the studio, where coffee was served and where, presently, before the cigarettes were smoked out, Mrs. Crisford always reappeared to usher in her contingent. The studio was high and handsome, and luncheon at the Crisfords' was, in the common esteem, more amusing than almost anything else in London except dinner. It was Bohemia with excellent service—Bohemia not debtor but creditor. Upstairs the pictures, finished or nearly finished, and arranged in a shining row, gave an obviousness of topic, so that conversation could easily touch bottom. Maurice Glanvil, who had never been in the house before, looked about and wondered; he was struck with the march of civilization—the rise of the social tide. There were new notes in English life, which he caught quickly with his fresh sense; during his long absence—twenty years of France and Italy—all sorts of things had happened. In his youth, in England, artists and authors and actors—people of that general kind—were not nearly so “smart.” Maurice Glanvil was forty-nine to-day, and he thought a great deal

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of his youth. He regretted it, he missed it, he tried to beckon it back ; but the differences in London made him feel that it had gone for ever. There might perhaps be some sudden compensation in being fifty, some turn of the dim telescope, some view from the brow of the hill ; it was a round, gross, stupid number, which probably would make one pompous, make one think one's self venerable. Meanwhile at any rate it was odious to be forty-nine. Maurice observed the young now more than he had ever done ; observed them, that is, as the young. He wished he could have had a son, to be twenty with again ; his daughter was only eighteen, but fond as he was of her he couldn't live instinctively into her girlishness. It was not that there was not plenty of it, for she was simple, sweet, indefinite, without the gifts that the boy would have had, the gifts—what had become of them now?—that he himself used to have.

The youngest person present, before the ladies came in, was the young man who had sat next to Vera and whom, being on the same side of the long table, he had not had under his eye. Maurice noticed him now, noticed that he was very good-looking, fair and fresh and clean, impeccable in his straight smoothness ; also that apparently knowing none of the other guests and moving by himself about the studio with visible interest in the charming things, he had the modesty of his age and of his position. He had, however, something more besides, which had begun to prompt this observer to speak to him in order to hear the sound of his voice—a strange elusive resemblance, lost in the profile but flickering straight out of the full face, to some one Maurice had known. For a minute Glanvil was worried by it—he had a sense that a name would suddenly come to him if he should see the lips in motion ; but as he

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was on the point of laying the ghost by an experiment Mrs. Crisford led in her companions. His daughter was among them, and in company, as he was constantly anxious about her appearance and her attitude, she had at moments the faculty of drawing his attention from everything else. The poor child, the only fruit of his odd, romantic union, the *coup de foudre* of his youth, with her strangely beautiful mother, whose own mother had been a Russian and who had died in giving birth to her—his short, colourless, insignificant Vera was excessively, incorrigibly plain. She had been the disappointment of his life, but he greatly pitied her. Her want of beauty, with her antecedents, had been one of the strangest tricks of fate ; she was acutely conscious of it and, being good and docile, would have liked to please. She did sometimes, to her father's delight, in spite of everything ; she had been educated abroad, on foreign lines, near her mother's people. He had brought her to England to take her out, to do what he could for her ; but he was not unaware that in England her manners, which had been thought very pretty on the continent, would strike some persons as artificial. They were exactly what her mother's had been ; they made up to a certain extent for the want of other resemblance. An extreme solicitude at any rate as to the impression she might make was the source of his habit, in London, of watching her covertly. He tried to see at a given moment how she looked, if she were happy ; it was always with an intention of encouragement, and there was a frequent exchange between them of little invisible affectionate signs. She wore charming clothes, but she was terribly short ; in England the girls were gigantic and it was only the tallest who were noticed. Their manners, alas, had nothing to do with it—many of them indeed hadn't any manners. As soon

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as he had got near Vera he said to her, scanning her through his single glass from head to foot :

" Who is the young man who sat next you ? the one at the other end of the room."

" I don't know his name, papa—I didn't catch it."

" Was he civil—did he talk to you ? "

" Oh, a great deal, papa—about all sorts of things."

Something in the tone of her voice made him look with greater intensity and even with greater tenderness than usual into her little dim green eyes. " Then you're all right—you're getting on ? "

She gave her effusive smile—the one that perhaps wouldn't do in England. " Oh, beautifully, papa—every one's so kind."

She never complained, was a brave little optimist, full of sweet resources ; but he had detected to-day as soon as he looked at her the particular shade of her content. It made him continue, after an hesitation : " He didn't say anything about his relations—anything that could give you a clue ? "

Vera thought a moment. " Not that I can remember—unless that Mr. Crisford is painting the portrait of his mother. Ah, there it is ! " the girl exclaimed, looking across the room at a large picture on an easel, which the young man had just approached and from which their host had just removed the drapery that covered it. Maurice Glanvil had observed this drapery, and as the artist unveiled the canvas with a flourish he saw that he had been waiting for the ladies to show it, to produce a surprise, a grand effect. Every one moved toward it, and Maurice, with his daughter beside him, recognised that the production, a portrait, was striking, a great success for Crisford—the figure, down to the knees, with an extraordinary look of life, of a tall, handsome woman of middle age, in full dress, in black. Yet he saw it for the moment vaguely,

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through a preoccupation, that of a discovery which he had just made and which had recalled to him an incident of his youth—his juxtaposition, in London, at a dinner, to a girl, insurmountably charmless to him, who had fallen in love with him (so that she was nearly to die of it) within the first five minutes, before he had even spoken; as he had subsequently learned from a communication made him by his poor mother—a reminder uttered with a pointless bitterness that he had failed to understand and accompanied with unsuspected details, much later—too late, long after his marriage and shortly before her death. He said to himself that he must look out, and he wondered if poor Vera would also be insurmountably charmless to the good-looking young man. "But what a likeness, papa—what a likeness!" he heard her murmur at his elbow with suppressed excitement.

"How can you tell, my dear, if you haven't seen her?"

"I mean to the gentleman—the son."

Every one was exclaiming "How wonderfully clever—how beautiful!" and under cover of the agitation and applause Maurice Glanvil had drawn nearer the picture. The movement had brought him close to the young man of whom he had been talking with Vera and who, with his happy eyes on the painted figure, seemed to smile in acknowledgment of the artist's talent and of the sitter's charm.

"Do you know who the lady is?" Maurice said to him.

He turned his bright face to his interlocutor. "She's my mother—Mrs. Tregent. Isn't it wonderful?"

His eyes, his lips, his voice flashed a light into Glanvil's uncertainty—the tormenting resemblance

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was simply a prolonged echo of Fanny Knocker, in whose later name, precisely, he recognised the name pronounced by the young man. Maurice Glanvil stared in some bewilderment ; this stately, splendid lady, with a face so vivid that it was handsome, was what that unfortunate girl had become ? The eyes, as if they had picked him out, looked at him strangely from the canvas ; the face, with all its difference, asserted itself, and he felt himself turning as red as if he had been in the presence of the original. Young Tregent, pleased and proud, had given way to the pressing spectators, placing himself at Vera's other side ; and Maurice heard the girl exclaim to him in one of her pretty effusions : " How beautiful she must be, and how amiable ! "

" She is indeed—it's not a bit flattered." And while Maurice still stared, more and more mystified—for " flattered, flattered ! " was the unspoken solution in which he had instantly taken refuge—his neighbour continued : " I wish you could know her—you must ; she's delightful. She couldn't come here to-day—they asked her : she has people lunching at home."

" I should be so glad ; perhaps we may meet her somewhere," said Vera.

" If I ask her and if you'll let her I'm sure she'll come to see you," the young man responded. Maurice had glanced at him while the face of the portrait watched them with the oddest, the grimmest effect. He was filled with a confusion of feelings, asking himself half-a-dozen questions at once. Was young Tregent, with his attentive manner, " making up " to Vera ? was he going out of his way in answering for his mother's civility ? Little did he know what he was taking on himself ! Above all was Fanny Knocker to-day this extraordinary figure—extraordinary in the light of the early plainness that had

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made him bolt ? He became conscious of an extreme curiosity, an irresistible desire to see her.

" Oh, papa," said Vera, " Mr. Tregent's so kind ; he's so good as to promise us a visit from his mother."

The young man's friendly eyes were still on the child's face. "I'll tell her all about you. Oh, if I ask her she'll come !" he repeated.

" Does she do everything you ask her ? " the girl inquired.

" She likes to know my friends ! "

Maurice hesitated, wondering if he were in the presence of a smooth young humbug to whom compliments cost nothing, or in that of an impression really made—made by his little fluttered, unpopular Vera. He had a horror of exposing his child to risks, but his curiosity was greater than his caution. " Your mother mustn't come to us—it's our duty to go to her," he said to Mr. Tregent ; " I had the honour of knowing her—a long time ago. Her mother and mine were intimate friends. Be so good as to mention my name to her, that of Maurice Glanvil, and to tell her how glad I have been to make your acquaintance. And now, my dear child," he added to Vera, " we must take leave."

During the rest of that day it never occurred to him that there might be an awkwardness in his presenting himself, even after many years, before a person with whom he had broken as he had broken with Fanny Knocker. This was partly because he held, justly enough, that he had never committed himself, and partly because the intensity of his desire to measure with his own eyes the change represented—misrepresented perhaps—by the picture was a force greater than any embarrassment. His mother had told him that the poor girl had cruelly suffered, but there was no present intensity in that idea. With her expensive portrait, her grand air, her handsome

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son, she somehow embodied success, whereas he himself, standing for mere bereavement and disappointment, was a failure not to be surpassed. With Vera that evening he was very silent ; she saw him smoke endless cigarettes and wondered what he was thinking of. She guessed indeed, but she was too subtle a little person to attempt to fall in with his thoughts or to be willing to betray her own by asking him random questions about Mrs. Tregent. She had expressed as they came away from their luncheon-party a natural surprise at the coincidence of his having known the mother of her amusing neighbour, but the only other words that dropped from her on the subject were contained in a question that, before she went to bed, she put to him with abrupt gaiety, while she carefully placed a marker in a book she had not been reading. " When is it then that we're to call upon this wonderful old friend ? "

He looked at her through the smoke of his cigarette. " I don't know. We must wait a little, to allow her time to give some sign."

" Oh, I see ! " And Vera took leave of him with one of her sincere little kisses.

IV

HE had not long to wait for the sign from Mrs. Tregent ; it arrived the very next morning in the shape of an invitation to dinner. This invitation was immediately accepted, but a fortnight was still to intervene—a trial to Maurice Glanvil's patience. The promptitude of the demonstration gave him pleasure—it showed him no bitterness had survived. What place was there indeed for resentment, since she had married and given birth to children and thought so well of the face God had conferred on her as to wish to hand it on to her posterity ? Her husband was in Parliament, or had been—that came back to him from his mother's story. He caught himself reverting to her with a frequency that surprised him ; he was haunted by the image of that bright, strong woman on Crisford's canvas, in whom there was just enough of Fanny Knocker to put a sort of defiance into the difference. He wanted to see it again, and his opportunity was at hand in the form of a visit to Mrs. Crisford. He called on this lady, without his daughter, four days after he had lunched with her, and, finding her at home, he presently led the conversation to the portrait and to his ardent desire for another glimpse of it. Mrs. Crisford gratified this eagerness—perhaps he struck her as a possible sitter ; it was late in the afternoon and her husband was out : she led him into the

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studio. Mrs. Tregent, splendid and serene, stood there as if she had been watching for him. There was no doubt the picture was a masterpiece. Maurice had mentioned that he had known the original years before and then had lost sight of her. He questioned his hostess with artful detachment.

"What sort of a person has she become—agreeable, popular?"

"Every one adores her—she's so clever."

"Really—remarkably?"

"Extraordinarily—one of the cleverest women I've ever known, and quite one of the most charming."

Maurice looked at the portrait—at the super-subtle smile which seemed to tell him Mrs. Tregent knew they were talking about her; a kind of smile he had never expected to live to see in Fanny Knocker's eyes. Then he asked: "Has she literally become as handsome as that?"

Mrs. Crisford hesitated. "She's beautiful."

"Beautiful?" Maurice echoed.

"What shall I say? It's a peculiar charm! It's her spirit. One sees that her life has been beautiful in spite of her sorrows!" Mrs. Crisford added.

"What sorrows has she had?" Maurice coloured a little as soon as he had spoken.

"Oh, lots of deaths. She has lost her husband; she has lost several children."

"Ah, that's new to me. Was her marriage happy?"

"It must have been for Mr. Tregent. If it wasn't for her, no one ever knew."

"But she has a son," said Maurice.

"Yes, the only one—such a dear. She thinks all the world of him."

At this moment a message was brought to Mrs. Crisford, and she asked to be excused while she went to say a word to some one who was waiting. Maurice

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Glanvil in this way was left alone for five minutes with the intensity of the presence evoked by the artist. He found himself agitated, excited by it: the face of the portrait was so intelligent and conscious that as he stood there he felt as if some strange communication had taken place between his being and Mrs. Tregent's. The idea made him nervous: he moved about the room and ended by turning his back. Mrs. Crisford reappeared, but he soon took leave of her; and when he had got home (he had settled himself in South Kensington, in a little undiscriminated house which he had hated from the first), he learned from his daughter that she had had a visit from young Tregent. He had asked first for Mr. Glanvil and then, in the second instance, for herself, telling her when admitted, as if to attenuate his possible indiscretion, that his mother had charged him to try to see her even if he should not find her father. Vera had never before received a gentleman alone, and the incident had left traces of emotion. "Poor little thing!" Maurice said to himself: he always took a melancholy view of any happiness of his daughter's, tending to believe, in his pessimism, that it could only lead to some refinement of humiliation. He encouraged her, however, to talk about young Tregent, who, according to her account, had been extravagantly amusing. He had said, moreover, that his mother was tremendously impatient to renew such an old acquaintance. "Why in the world doesn't she, then?" Maurice asked himself; "why doesn't she come and see Vera?" He reflected afterwards that such an expectation was unreasonable, but it represented at the moment a kind of rebellion of his conscience. Then, as he had begun to be a little ashamed of his curiosity, he liked to think that Mrs. Tregent would have quite as much. On the morrow he knocked at her door—she lived in a

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"commodious" house in Manchester Square—and had the satisfaction, as he had chosen his time carefully, of learning that she had just come in.

Upstairs, in a high, quiet, old-fashioned drawing-room, she was before him. What he saw was a tall woman in black, in her bonnet, with a white face, smiling intensely—smiling and smiling before she spoke. He quickly perceived that she was agitated and was making an heroic effort, which would presently be successful, not to show it. But it was above all clear to him that she wasn't Fanny Knocker—was simply another person altogether. She had nothing in common with Fanny Knocker—it was impossible to meet her on the ground of any former acquaintance. What acquaintance had he ever had with this graceful, harmonious, expressive English matron, whose smile had a singular radiance? That rascal of a Crisford had done her such perfect justice that he felt as if he had before him the portrait of which the image in the studio had been the original. There were nevertheless things to be said, and they said them on either side, sinking together, with friendly exclamations and exaggerated laughs, on the sofa, where her nearness seemed the span of all the distance that separated her from the past. The phrase that hummed through everything, to his sense, was his own inarticulate "How could I have known? how could I have known?" How could he have foreseen that time and life and happiness (it was probably more than anything happiness) would transpose her into such a different key? Her whole personality revealed itself from moment to moment as something so agreeable that even after all these years he felt himself blushing for the crass stupidity of his mistake. Yes, he was turning red, and she could see it and would know why: a perception that could only constitute for her a magnificent triumph,

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a revenge. All his natural and acquired coolness, his experience of life, his habit of society, everything that contributed to make him a man of the world, were of no avail to cover his confusion. He took refuge from it almost angrily in trying to prove to himself that she had on a second look a likeness to the ugly girl he had not thought good enough—in trying to trace Fanny Knocker in her fair, ripe bloom, the fine irregularity of her features. To put his finger on the identity would make him feel better. Some of the facts of the girl's crooked face were still there—conventional beauty was absent ; but the proportions and relations had changed, and the expression and the spirit : she had accepted herself or ceased to care—had found oblivion and activity and appreciation. What Maurice mainly discovered, however, in this intenser observation was an attitude of hospitality toward himself which immediately effaced the presumption of "triumph." Vulgar vanity was far from her, and the grossness of watching her effect upon him : she was watching only the lost vision that had come back, the joy that, if for a single hour, she had found again. She herself had no measure of the alteration that struck him, and there was no substitution for her in the face that her deep eyes seemed to brush with their hovering. Presently they were talking like old friends, and before long each was in possession of the principal facts concerning the other. Many things had come and gone and the common fate had pressed them hard. Her parents were dead, and her husband and her first-born children. He, on his side, had lost his mother and his wife. They matched bereavements and compared bruises, and in the way she expressed herself there was a charm which forced him, as he wondered, to remember that Fanny Knocker had at least been intelligent.

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"I wish I could have seen your wife—you must tell me all about her," she said. "Haven't you some portraits?"

"Some poor little photographs. I'll show them to you. She was very pretty and very gentle; she was also very un-English. But she only lived a year. She wasn't clever and accomplished—like you."

"Ah, me; you don't know *me*!"

"No, but I want to—oh particularly. I'm prepared to give a good deal of time to the study."

"We must be friends," said Mrs. Tregent. "I shall take an extraordinary interest in your daughter."

"She'll be grateful for it. She's a good little reasonable thing, without a scrap of beauty."

"You care greatly for that," said Mrs. Tregent.

He hesitated a moment. "Don't you?"

She smiled at him with her basking candour. "I used to. That's my husband," she added, with an odd, though evidently accidental, inconsequence. She had reached out to a table for a photograph in a silver frame. "He was very good to me."

Maurice saw that Mr. Tregent had been many years older than his wife—a prosperous, prosaic, parliamentary person whom she couldn't impose on a man of the world. He sat an hour, and they talked of the mutilated season of their youth: he wondered at the things she remembered. In this little hour he felt his situation change—something strange and important take place: he seemed to see why he had come back to England. But there was an implication that worried him—it was in the very air, a reverberation of that old assurance of his mother's. He wished to clear the question up—it would matter for the beginning of a new friendship. Had she had any sense of injury when he took to his heels, any glimpse of the understanding on which he had begun to

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come to Ennismore Gardens? He couldn't find out to-day except by asking her, which, at their time of life, after so many years and consolations, would be legitimate and even amusing. When he took leave of her he held her hand a moment, hesitating; then he brought out:

"Did they ever tell you—a hundred years ago—that between your mother and mine there was a great question of our marrying?"

She stared—she broke into a laugh. "*Was* there?"

"Did you ever know it? Did you ever suspect it?"

She hesitated and, for the first time since he had been in the room, ceased for an instant to look straight at him. She only answered, still laughing however: "Poor dears—they were altogether too deep!"

She evidently wished to convey that she had never known. Maurice was a little disappointed: at present he would have preferred her knowledge. But as he walked home across the park, through Kensington Gardens, he felt it impossible to believe in her ignorance.

V

At the end of a month he broke out to her. "I can't get over it, it's so extraordinary—the difference between your youth and your maturity!"

"Did you expect me to be an eternal child?" Mrs. Tregent asked composedly.

"No, it isn't that." He stopped—it would be difficult to explain.

"What is it then?" she inquired, with her systematic refusal to acknowledge a complication. There was always, to Maurice Glanvil's ear, in her impenetrability to allusion, the faintest, softest glee, and it gave her on this occasion the appearance of recognising his difficulty and being amused at it. She would be excusable to be a little cold-blooded. He really knew, however, that the penalty was all in his own reflexions, for it had not taken him even a month to perceive that she was supremely, almost strangely indulgent. There was nothing he was ready to say that she might not hear, and her absence of coquetry was a remarkable rest to him.

"It isn't what I expected—it's what I didn't expect. To say exactly what I mean, it's the way you've improved."

"I've improved? I'm so glad!"

"Surely you've been aware of it—you've been conscious of the transformation."

"As an improvement? I don't know. I've been

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conscious of changes enough—of all the stages and strains and lessons of life. I've been aware of growing old, and I hold, in dissent from the usual belief, that there's no fool like a young fool. One is never, I suppose, such a fool as one *has* been, and that may count perhaps as amelioration. But I can't flatter myself that I've had two different identities. I've had to make one, such as it is, do for everything. I think I've been happier than I originally supposed I should be—and yet I had my happiness too as a girl. At all events if you were to scratch me, as they say, you'd still find——” She paused a moment, and he really hung upon her lips: there was such a charm of tone in whatever she said. “You'd still find, underneath, the blowsy girl——” With this she again checked herself and, slightly to his surprise, gave a nervous laugh.

“The blowsy girl?” he repeated, with an artlessness of interrogation that made her laugh again.

“Whom you went with that hot day to see the princess give the prizes.”

“Oh yes—that dreadful day!” he answered gravely, musingly, with the whole scene pictured by her words and without contesting the manner in which she qualified herself. It was the nearest allusion that had passed between them to that crudest conception of his boyhood, his flight from Ennismore Gardens. Almost every day for a month he had come to see her, and they had talked of a thousand things; never yet, however, had they made any explicit mention of this remote instance of premature wisdom. Moreover, if he now felt the need of going back it was not to be apologetic, to do penance; he had nothing to explain, for his behaviour, as he considered it, still struck him, given the circumstances, as natural. It was to himself indeed that explanations were owing, for he had been the one who had been

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most deceived. He liked Mrs. Tregent better than he had ever liked a woman—that is he liked her for more reasons. He had liked his poor little wife only for one, which was after all no reason at all : he had been in love with her. In spite of the charm that the renewal of acquaintance with his old friend had so unexpectedly added to his life there was a vague torment in his relation with her, the sense of a revenge (oh a very kind one !) to take, a haunting idea that he couldn't pacify. He could still feel sore at the trick that had been played him. Even after a month the curiosity with which he had approached her was not assuaged ; in a manner indeed it had only borrowed force from all she had insisted on doing for him. She was literally doing everything now ; gently, gaily, with a touch so familiar that protestations on his part would have been pedantic, she had taken his life in hand. Rich as she was she had known how to give him lessons in economy ; she had taught him how to manage in London on his means. A month ago his servants had been horrid—to-day they were the best he had ever known. For Vera she was plainly a providence—her behaviour to Vera was transcendent.

He had privately made up his mind that Vera had in truth had her *coup de foudre*—that if she had had a chance she would have laid down her little life for Arthur Tregent ; yet two circumstances, he could perceive, had helped to postpone, to attenuate even somewhat, her full consciousness of what had befallen her. One of these influences had been the prompt departure of the young man from London ; the other was simply the diversion produced by Mrs. Tregent's encompassing art. It had had immediate consequences for the child : it was like a drama in perpetual climaxes. This surprising benefactress rejoiced in her society, took her " out," treated her as

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if there were mysterious injustices to repair. Vera was agitated not a little by such a change in her life ; she had English kindred enough, uncles and aunts and cousins ; but she had felt herself lost in her father's family and was principally aware, among them, of their strangeness and their indifference. They affected her mainly as mere number and stature. Mrs. Tregent's was a performance unpromised and uninterrupted, and the girl desired to know if all English people took so generous a view of friendship. Maurice laughed at this question and, without meeting his daughter's eyes, answered in the negative. Vera guessed so many things that he didn't know what she would be guessing next. He saw her caught up to the blue like Ganymede, and surrendered her contentedly. She had been the occupation of his life, yet to Mrs. Tregent he was willing to part with her ; this lady was the only person of whom he would not have been jealous. Even in the young man's absence, moreover, Vera lived with the son of the house and breathed his air ; Manchester Square was full of him, his photograph was on every table. How often she spoke of him to his mother Maurice had no means of knowing, nor whether Mrs. Tregent encouraged such a topic ; he had reason to believe indeed that there were reserves on either side, and he felt that he could trust his old friend's prudence as much as her liberality. The attitude of forbearance from rash allusions, which was Maurice's own, could not at any rate keep Arthur from being a presence in the little drama which had begun for them all, as the older man was more and more to recognise with nervous prefigurements, on that occasion at the Crisfords'.

Arthur Tregent had gone to Ireland to spend a few weeks with an old university friend—the gentleman indeed, at Cambridge, had been his tutor—who had lately, in a district classified as “disturbed,”

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come into a bewildering heritage. He had chosen in short for a study of the agrarian question on the spot the moment of the year when London was most absorbing. Maurice Glanvil made no remark to his mother on this anomaly, and she offered him no explanation of it; they talked in fact of almost everything except Arthur. Mrs. Tregent had to her constant visitor the air of feeling that she owed him in relation to her son an apology which she had not the materials for making. It was certainly a high standard of courtesy that would suggest to her that he ought to have put himself out for these social specimens; but it was obvious that her standard was high. Maurice Glanvil smiled when he thought to what bare civility the young man would have deemed himself held had he known of a certain passage of private history. But he knew nothing—Maurice was sure of that; his reason for going away had been quite another matter. That Vera's brooding parent should have had such an insight into the young man's motives is a proof of the amount of reflexion that he devoted to him. He had not seen much of him and in truth he found him provoking, but he was haunted by the odd analogy of which he had had a glimpse on their first encounter. The late Mr. Tregent had had "interests in the north," and the care of them had naturally devolved upon his son, who by the mother's account had shown an admirable capacity for business. The late Mr. Tregent had also been actively political, and it was fondly hoped, in Manchester Square at least, that the day was not distant when his heir would, in turn and as a representative of the same respectabilities, speak reported words in debate. Maurice himself, vague about the House of Commons, had nothing to say against his making a figure there. Accordingly if these natural gifts continued to remind him of his

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own fastidiously clever youth, it was with the difference that Arthur Tregent's cleverness struck him as much the greater of the two. If the changes in England were marked this indeed was in general one of them, that the sharp young men were still sharper than of yore. When they had ability at any rate they showed it all; Maurice would never have pretended that he had shown all his. He had not cared whether any one knew it. It was not, however, this superior intensity which provoked him, and poor young Tregent could not be held responsible for his irritation. If the circumstance in which they most resembled each other was the disposition to escape from plain girls who aspired to them, such a characteristic, as embodied in the object of Vera's admiration, was purely interesting, was even amusing, to Vera's father; but it would have gratified him to be able to ascertain from Mrs. Tregent whether, to her knowledge, her son thought his child really repulsive, and what annoyed him was the fact that such an inquiry was practically impossible. Arthur was provoking in short because he had an advantage—an advantage residing in the fact that his mother's friend couldn't ask questions about him without appearing to indulge in hints and overtures. The idea of this officiousness was odious to Maurice Glanvil; so that he confined himself to meditating in silence on the happiness it would be for poor Vera to marry a beautiful young man with a fortune and a future.

Though the opportunity for this recreation—it engaged much of his time—should be counted as one of the pleasant results of his intimacy with Mrs. Tregent, yet the sense, perverse enough, that he had a ground of complaint against her subsisted even to the point of finally steadying him while he expressed his grievance. This happened in the course of one of those afternoon hours that had now become

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indispensable to him—hours of belated tea and egotistical talk in the long summer light and the chastened roar of London.

"No, it wasn't fair," he said, "and I wasn't well used—a hundred years ago. I'm sore about it now; you ought to have notified me, to have instructed me. Why didn't you, in common honesty? Why didn't my poor mother, who was so eager and shrewd? Why didn't yours? She used to talk to me. Heaven forgive me for saying it, but our mothers weren't up to the mark! You may tell me they didn't know; to which I reply that mine was universally supposed, and by me in particular, to know everything that could be known. No, it wasn't well managed, and the consequence has been this odious discovery, an awful shock to a man of my time of life and under the effect of which I now speak to you, that for a quarter of a century I've been a fool."

"What would you have wished us to do?" Mrs. Tregent asked as she gave him another cup of tea.

"Why, to have said 'Wait, wait—at any price; have patience and hold on!' They ought to have told me, *you* ought to have told me, that your conditions at that time were a temporary phase and that you would infallibly break your shell. You ought to have warned me, they ought to have warned me, that there would be wizardry in the case, that you were to be the subject, at a given moment, of a transformation absolutely miraculous. I couldn't know it by inspiration; I measured you by the common law—how could I do anything else? But it wasn't kind to leave me in error."

Maurice Glanvil treated himself without scruple to this fine ironic flight, this sophistry which eased his nerves, because though it brought him nearer than he had yet come to putting his finger, visibly to Mrs. Tregent, on the fact that he had once tried

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to believe he could marry her and had found her too ugly, their present relation was so extraordinary and his present appreciation so liberal as to make almost any freedom excusable, especially as his companion had the advantage of being to all intents and purposes a different person from the one he talked of, while he suffered the ignominy of being the same.

"There has been no miracle," said Mrs. Tregent after a moment. "I've never known anything but the common, ah the very common, law, and anything that I may have become only the common things have made me."

He shook his head. "You wore a disfiguring mask, a veil, a disguise. One fine day you dropped them all and showed the world the real creature."

"It wasn't one fine day—it was little by little."

"Well, one fine day I saw the result; the process doesn't matter. To arrive at a goal invisible from the starting-point is no doubt an incident in the life of a certain number of women. But what is absolutely unprecedented is to have traversed such a distance."

"Hadn't I a single redeeming point?" Mrs. Tregent demanded.

He hesitated a little, and while he hesitated she looked at him. Her look was but of an instant, but it told him everything, told him, in one misty moonbeam, all she had known of old. She had known perfectly—she had been as conscious of the conditions of his experiment as of the invincibility of his repugnance. Whether her mother had betrayed him didn't matter; she had read everything clear and had had to accept the cruel truth. He was touched as he had never been by that moment's communication; he was, unexpectedly, almost awe-struck, for there was something still more in it than he had guessed. "I was letting my fancy play just

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now," he answered, apologetically. "It was I who was wanting—it was I who was the idiot!"

"Don't say that. You were so kind." And here-upon Mrs. Tregent startled her visitor by bursting into tears.

She recovered herself indeed, and they forbore on that occasion, in the interest of the decorum expected of persons of their age and in their circumstances, to rake over these smouldering ashes; but such a conversation had made a difference, and from that day onward Maurice Glanvil was awake to the fact that he had been the passion of this extraordinary woman's life. He felt humiliated for an hour, but after that his pleasure was almost as great as his wonder. For wonder there was plenty of room, but little by little he saw how things had come to pass. She was not subjected to the ordeal of telling him or to the abasement of any confession, but day by day he sounded, with a purity of gratitude that renewed, in his spirit, the sources of youth, the depths of everything that her behaviour implied. Of such a studied tenderness as she showed him the roots could only be in some unspeakably sacred past. She had not to explain, she had not to clear up inconsistencies, she had only to let him be with her. She had striven, she had accepted, she had conformed, but she had thought of him every day of her life. She had taken up duties and performed them, she had banished every weakness and practised every virtue, but the still, hidden flame had never been quenched. His image had interposed, his reality had remained, and she had never denied herself the sweetness of hoping that she should see him again and that she should know him. She had never raised a little finger for it, but fortune had answered her prayer. Women were capable of these mysteries of sentiment, these intensities of fidelity, and there were

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moments in which Maurice Glanvil's heart beat strangely before a vision really so sublime. He seemed to understand now by what miracle Fanny Knocker had been beautified—the miracle of heroic docilities and accepted pangs and vanquished egotisms. It had never come in a night, but it had come by living for others. She was living for others still; it was impossible for him to see anything else at last than that she was living for him. The time of passion was over, but the time of service was long. When all this became vivid to him he felt that he couldn't recognise it enough and yet that recognition might only be tacit and, as it were, circuitous. He couldn't say to her even humorously "It's very kind of you to be in love with such a donkey," for these words would have implied somehow that he had rights—an attitude from which his renovated delicacy shrank. He bowed his head before such charity and seemed to see, moreover, that Mrs. Tregent's desire to befriend him was a feeling independent of any prospect of gain and indifferent to any chance of reward. It would be described vulgarly, after so much had come and gone, as the state of being "in love"—the state of the instinctive and the simple, which they both had left far behind; so that there was a certain sort of reciprocity which would almost constitute an insult to it.

VI

HE soared on these high thoughts till, toward the end of July (Mrs. Tregent stayed late in town—she was awaiting her son's return) he made the discovery that to some persons, perhaps indeed to many, he had all the air of being in love. This image was flashed back to him from the irreverent lips of a lady who knew and admired Mrs. Tregent and who professed amusement at his surprise, at his artless declaration that he had no idea he had made himself conspicuous. She assured him that every one was talking about him—though people after all had a tenderness for elderly romance ; and she left him divided between the acute sense that he was comical (he had a horror of that) and the pale perception of something that he could “ help ” still less. At the end of a few hours of reflexion he had sacrificed the penalty to the privilege ; he was about to be fifty, and he knew Fanny Knocker's age—no one better ; but he cared no straw for vulgar judgements and moreover could think of plenty of examples of unions admired even after longer delays. For three days he enjoyed the luxury of admitting to himself without reserve how indispensable she had become to him ; as the third drew to a close he was more nervous than really he had ever been in his life, for this was the evening on which, after many hindrances, Mrs. Tregent had agreed to dine with him. He had planned the occasion for a month—he wanted

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to show her how well he had learned from her how to live on his income. Her occupations had always interposed—she was teaching him new lessons ; but at last she gave him the joy of sitting at his table. At the evening's end he begged her to remain after the others, and he asked one of the ladies who had been present, and who was going to a pair of parties, to be so good as to take Vera away. This indeed had been arranged in advance, and when, in the discomposed drawing-room, of which the windows stood open to the summer night, he was alone with his old friend, he saw in her face that she knew it had been arranged. He saw more than this—that she knew what he was waiting to say and that if, after a visible reluctance, she had consented to come, it was in order to meet him, with whatever effort, on the ground he had chosen—meet him once and then leave it for ever. This was why, without interrupting him, but before he had finished, putting out her hand to his own, with a strange clasp of refusal, she was ready to show him, in a woeful but beautiful headshake to which nothing could add, that it was impossible at this time of day for them to marry. She stayed only a moment, but in that moment he had to accept the knowledge that by as much as it might have been of old, by so much might it never be again. After she had gone he walked up and down the drawing-room half the night. He sent the servants to bed, he blew out the candles ; the forsaken place was lighted only by the lamps in the street. He gave himself the motive of waiting for Vera to come back, but in reality he threshed about in the darkness because his cheeks had begun to burn. There was a sting for him in Mrs. Tregent's refusal, and this sting was sharper even than the disappointment of his desire. It was a reproach to his delicacy ; it made him feel as if he had been an ass for the second time. When she was young and free his

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faith had been too poor and his perceptions too dense ; he had waited to show her that he only bargained for certainties and only recognised success. He dropped into a chair at last and sat there a long time, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands, trying to cover up his humiliation, waiting for it to ebb. As the sounds of the night died away it began to come back to him that she had given him a promise to which a rich meaning could be attached. What was it that before going away she had said about Vera, in words he had been at the moment too disconcerted to take in ? Little by little he reconstructed these words with comfort ; finally, when after hearing a carriage stop at the door he hastily pulled himself together and went down to admit his daughter, the sight of the child on his threshold, as the brougham that had restored her drove away, brought them all back in their generosity.

"Have you danced ? " he asked.

She hesitated. "A little, papa."

He knew what that meant—she had danced once. He followed her upstairs in silence ; she had not wasted her time—she had had her humiliation. Ah, clearly she was too short ! Yet on the landing above, where her bedroom candle stood, she tried to be gay with him, asking him about his own party and whether the people had stayed late.

"Mrs. Tregent stayed after the others. She spoke very kindly of you."

The girl looked at her father with an anxiety that showed through her smile. "What did she say ? "

He hesitated, as Vera had done a moment before. "That you must be our compensation."

His daughter's eyes, still wondering, turned away. "What did she mean ? "

"That it's all right, darling ! " And he supplied the deficiencies of this explanation with a long kiss for good-night.

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The next day he went to see Mrs. Tregent, who wore the air of being glad to have something at once positive and pleasant to say. She announced immediately that Arthur was coming back.

"I congratulate you." Then, as they exchanged one of their looks of unreserved recognition, Maurice added: "Now it's for Vera and me to go."

"To go?"

"Without more delay. It's high time we should take ourselves off."

Mrs. Tregent was silent a moment. "Where shall you go?"

"To our old haunts, abroad. We must see some of our old friends. We shall spend six months away."

"Then what becomes of *my* months?"

"Your months?"

"Those it's all arranged she's to spend at Blankley." Blankley was Mrs. Tregent's house in Derbyshire, and she laughed as she went on: "Those that I spoke of last evening. Don't look as if we had never discussed it and settled it!"

"What shall I do without her?" Maurice Glanvil presently demanded.

"What will you do *with* her?" his hostess replied, with a world of triumphant meaning. He was not prepared to say, in the sense of her question, and he took refuge in remarking that he noted her avoidance of any suggestion that he too would be welcome in Derbyshire; which led her to continue, with unshrinking frankness: "Certainly, I don't want you a bit. Leave us alone."

"Is it safe?"

"Of course I can't absolutely answer for anything, but at least it will be safer than with *you*," said Mrs. Tregent.

Maurice Glanvil turned this over. "Does he dislike me?"

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"What an idea!"

But the question had brought the colour to her face, and the sight of this, with her evasive answer, kindled in Maurice's heart a sudden relief, a delight almost, that was strange enough. Arthur was in opposition, plainly, and that was why he had so promptly quitted London, that was why Mrs. Tregent had refused Mr. Glanvil. The idea was an instant balm. "He'd be quite right, poor fellow!" Maurice declared. "I'll go abroad alone."

"Let me keep her six months," said Mrs. Tregent. "I'll try it—I'll try it!"

"I wouldn't interfere for the world."

"It's an immense responsibility; but I should like so to succeed."

"She's an angel!" Maurice said.

"That's what gives me courage."

"But she mustn't dream of any plot," he added.

"For what do you take me?" Mrs. Tregent exclaimed with a smile which lightened up for him intensely that far-away troubled past as to which she had originally baffled his inquiry.

The joy of perceiving in an aversion to himself a possible motive for Arthur's absence was so great in him that before he took leave of her he ventured to say to his old friend: "Does he like her at all?"

"He likes her very much."

Maurice remembered how much he had liked Fanny Knocker and been willing to admit it to his mother; but he presently observed: "Of course he can't think her in the least pretty."

"As you say, she's an angel," Mrs. Tregent rejoined.

"She would pass for one better if she were a few inches taller."

"It doesn't matter," said Mrs. Tregent.

"One must remember that in that respect, at her

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age, she won't change," Maurice pursued, wondering after he had spoken whether he had pressed upon the second pronoun.

"No, she won't change. But she's a darling!" Mrs. Tregent exclaimed; and it was in these meagre words, which were only half, however, of what passed between them, that an extraordinary offer was made and accepted. They were so ready to understand each other that no insistence and no professions now were necessary, and that Maurice Glanvil had not even broken into a murmur of gratitude at this quick revelation of his old friend's beautiful conception of a nobler remedy—the endeavour to place their union outside themselves, to make their children know the happiness they had missed. They had not needed to teach each other what they saw, what they guessed, what moved them with pity and hope, and there were transitions enough safely skipped in the simple conversation I have preserved. But what Mrs. Tregent was ready to do for him filled Maurice Glanvil, for days after this, with an even greater wonder, and it seemed to him that not till then had she fully shown him that she had forgiven him.

Six months, however, proved much more than sufficient for her attempt to test the plasticity of her son. Maurice Glanvil went abroad, but was nervous and restless, wandering from place to place, revisiting old scenes and old friends, reverting, with a conscious, an even amused incongruity, and yet with an effect that was momentarily soothing, to places at which he had stayed with his wife, but feeling all the while that he was really staking his child's happiness. It only half reassured him to feel that Vera would never know what poor Fanny Knocker had been condemned to know, for the daily contact was cruel from the moment the issue was uncertain; and it only half helped him to reflect that she was not so plain as

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Fanny, for had not Arthur Tregent given him the impression that the young man of the present was intrinsically even more difficult to please than the young man of the past ? The letters he received from Blankley conveyed no information about Arthur beyond the fact that he was at home ; only once Vera mentioned that he was " remarkably good " to her. Toward the end of November he found himself in Paris, submitting reluctantly to social accidents which put off from day to day his return to London, when, one morning in the Rue de Rivoli, he had to stop short to permit the passage of a vehicle which had emerged from the court of an hotel. It was an open cab—the day was mild and bright—with a small quantity of neat, leathery luggage, which Maurice vaguely recognised as English, stowed in the place beside the driver—luggage from which his eyes shifted straight to the occupant of the carriage, a young man with his face turned to the allurements of travel and the urbanity of farewell to bowing waiters still visible in it. The young man was so bright and so on his way, as it were, that Maurice, standing there to make room for him, felt for the instant that he too had taken a tip. The feeling became acute as he recognised that this humiliating obligation was to no less a person than Arthur Tregent. It was Arthur who was so much on his way—it was Arthur who was catching a train. He noticed his mother's friend as the cab passed into the street, and, with a quick demonstration, caused the driver to pull up. He jumped out, and under the arcade the two men met with every appearance of cordiality, but with conscious confusion. Each of them coloured perceptibly, and Maurice was angry with himself for blushing before a boy. Long afterwards he remembered how cold, and even how hard, was the handsome clearness of the young eyes that met his own in an artificial smile.

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"You here? I thought you were at Blankley."

"I left Blankley yesterday; I'm on my way to Spain."

"To Spain? How charming!"

"To join a friend there—just for a month or two."

"Interesting country—well worth seeing. Your mother's all right?"

"Oh, yes, all right. And Miss Glanvil——" Arthur Tregent went on, cheerfully.

"Vera's all right?" interrupted Maurice, with a still gayer tone.

"Every one, everything's all right!" Arthur laughed.

"Well, I mustn't keep you. *Bon voyage!*"

Maurice Glanvil, after the young man had driven on, flattered himself that in this brief interview he had suppressed every indication of surprise; but that evening he crossed the Channel, and on the morrow he went down to Blankley. "To Spain—to Spain!" the words kept repeating themselves in his ears. He, when he had taken flight in a similar conjunction, had only got, for the time, as far as Boulogne; and he was reminded afresh of the progress of the species. When he was introduced into the drawing-room at Blankley—a chintzy, flowery, friendly expanse—Mrs. Tregent rose before him alone and offered him a face that she had never shown before. She was white and she looked scared; she faltered in her movement to meet him.

"I met Arthur in Paris, so I thought I might come."

Oh, yes; there was pain in her face, and a kind of fear of him that frightened him, but their hands found each other's hands while she replied: "He went off—I didn't know it."

"But you had a letter the next morning," Maurice said.

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She stared. "How did you know that?"

"Who should know better than I? He wrote from London, explaining."

"I did what I could—I believed in it!" said Mrs. Tregent. "He was charming, for a while."

"But he broke down. She's too short, eh?" Maurice asked.

"Don't laugh; she's ill."

"What's the matter with her?"

Mrs. Tregent gave the visitor a look in which there was almost a reproach for the question. "She has had a chill; she's in bed. You must see her."

She took him upstairs and he saw his child. He remembered what his mother had told him of the grievous illness of Fanny Knocker. Poor little Vera lay there in the flush of a feverish cold which had come on the evening before. She grew worse from the effect of a complication, and for three days he was anxious about her; but even more than with his alarm he held his breath before the distress, the disappointment, the humility of his old friend. Up to this hour he had not fully measured the strength of her desire to do something for him, or the intensity of passion with which she had wished to do it in the particular way that had now broken down. She had counted on her influence with her son, on his affection and on the maternal art, and there was anguish in her compunction for her failure, for her false estimate of the possible. Maurice Glanvil reminded her in vain of the consoling fact that Vera had known nothing of any plan, and he guessed indeed the reason why this theory had no comfort. No one could be better aware than Fanny Tregent of how much girls knew who knew nothing. It was doubtless this same sad wisdom that kept her sombre when he expressed a confidence that his child would promptly recover. She herself had had a terrible fight—and yet with the physical victory,

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had she recovered ? Her apprehension for Vera was justified, for the poor girl was destined finally to forfeit even the physical victory. She got better, she got up, she quitted Blankley, she quitted England with her father, but her health had failed and a year later it gave way. Overtaken in Rome by a second illness, she succumbed ; unlike Fanny Knocker she was never to have her revenge.

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I DON'T know how much people care for my work, but they like my studio (of which indeed I am exceedingly fond myself), as they show by their inclination to congregate there at dusky hours on winter afternoons, or on long dim evenings when the place looks well with its rich combinations and low-burning lamps and the bad pictures (my own) are not particularly visible. I won't go into the question of how many of these are purchased, but I rejoice in the distinction that my invitations are never declined. Some of my visitors have been good enough to say that on Sunday evenings in particular there is no pleasanter place in Paris—where so many places are pleasant—none friendlier to easy talk and repeated cigarettes, to the exchange of points of view and the comparison of accents. The air is as international as only Parisian air can be ; women, I surmise, think they look well in it ; they come also because they fancy they are doing something Bohemian, just as many of the men come because they suppose they are doing something correct. The old heraldic cushions on the divans, embossed with rusty gold, are favourable both to expansion and to contraction—that of course of contracting parties—and the Italian brocade on the walls appeals to one's highest feelings. Music makes its home there—though I confess I am not quite the master of *that* house, and when it is going on in a truly receptive hush I enjoy the way my company leans back and gazes through the thin

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smoke of cigarettes up at the distant Tiepolo in the almost palatial ceiling. I make sure the piano, the tobacco and the tea are all of the best.

For the conversation, I leave that mostly to take care of itself. There are discussions of course and differences—sometimes even a violent circulation of sense and sound ; but I have a consciousness that beauty flourishes and that harmonies prevail in the end. I have occasionally known a visitor to be rude to me because he disliked another visitor's opinions—I had seen an old habitué slip away without bidding me good-night on the arrival of some confident specimen of *les jeunes* ; but as a general thing we have it out together on the spot—the place is really a chamber of justice, a temple of reconciliation : we understand each other if we only sit up late enough. Art protects her children in the long run—she only asks them to trust her. She is like the Catholic Church—she guarantees paradise to the faithful. Music, moreover, is a universal solvent ; though I've not an infallible ear I've a sufficient sense of the matter for that. Ah, the wounds I've known it to heal—the bridges I've known it to build—the ghosts I've known it to lay ! Though I've seen people stalk out I've never observed them not to steal back. My studio in short is the theatre of a cosmopolite drama, a comedy essentially " of character."

One of the liveliest scenes of the performance was the evening, last winter, on which I became aware that one of my compatriots—an American, my good friend Alfred Bonus—was engaged in a controversy somewhat acrimonious, on a literary subject, with Herman Heidenmayer, the young composer who had been playing to us divinely a short time before and whom I thought of neither as a disputant nor as an Englishman. I perceived in a moment that something had happened to present him in this combined char-

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I guessed the reason early, and, as may be imagined, he didn't grudge me the knowledge. He was happy and various—as little as possible the mere long-haired musicmonger. His hair was short—it was only his legs and his laughter that were long. He was fair and rosy, and his gold spectacles glittered as if in response to the example set them by his beautiful young golden beard. You would have been sure he was an artist without going so far as to decide upon his particular passion ; for you would have been

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conscious that whatever this passion might be it was acquainted with many of the others and mixed with them to its profit. Yet these discoveries had not been fully made by Alfred Bonus, whose occupation was to write letters to the American journals about the way the "boys" were coming on in Paris; for in such a case he probably would not have expected such nebulous greatness to condense at a moment's notice. Bonus is clever and critical, and a sort of self-appointed emissary or agent of the great republic. He has it at heart to prove that the Americans in Europe *do* get on—taking for granted on the part of the Americans at home an interest in this subject greater, as I often assure him, than any really felt. "Come, now, do *I* get on?" I often ask him; and I sometimes push the inquiry so far as to stammer: "And you, my dear Bonus, do *you* get on?" He is apt to look a little injured on such occasions, as if he would like to say in reply: "Don't you call it success to have Sunday evenings at which I'm a regular attendant? And can you question for a moment the figure I make at them?" It has even occurred to me that he suspects me of painting badly on purpose to spite him—that is to interfere with his favourite dogma. Therefore to spite me in return he's in the heroic predicament of refusing to admit that I'm a failure. He takes a great interest in the plastic arts, but his intensest sympathy is for literature. This sentiment is somewhat starved, as in that school the boys languish as yet on a back seat. To show what they are doing Bonus has to retreat upon the studios, but there is nothing he enjoys so much as having, when the rare chance offers, a good literary talk. He follows the French movement closely and explains it profusely to our compatriots, whom he mystifies, but who guess he's rather loose.

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I forget how his conversation with Heidenmauer began—it was, I think, some difference of opinion about one of the English poets that set them afloat. Heidenmauer knows the English poets, and the French, and the Italian, and the Spanish, and the Russian—he is a wonderful representative of that Germanism which consists in the negation of intellectual frontiers. It is the English poets that, if I'm not mistaken, he loves best, and probably the harm was done by his having happened to say so. At any rate Alfred Bonus let him have it, without due notice perhaps, which is rather Alfred's way, on the question (a favourite one with my compatriot) of the backward state of literature in England, for which after all Heidenmauer was not responsible. Bonus believes in responsibility—the responsibility of others, an attitude which tends to make some of his friends extremely secretive, though perhaps it would have been justified—as to this I'm not sure—had Heidenmauer been, under the circumstances, technically British. Before he had had time to explain that he was not, the other persons present had become aware that a kind of challenge had passed—that nation, in a sudden startled flurry, somehow found itself pitted against nation. There was much vagueness at first as to which of the nations were engaged and as to what their quarrel was about, the question coming presently to appear less simple than the spectacle (so easily conceivable) of a German's finding it hot for him in a French house, a house French enough at any rate to give countenance to the idea of his quick defeat.

How could the right cause fail of protection in any house of which Madame de Brindes and her charming daughter were so good as to be assiduous frequenters? I recollect perfectly the pale gleam of joy in the mother's handsome face when she gathered that what had happened was that a detested German was on his

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defence. She wears her eternal mourning (I admit it's immensely becoming) for a triple woe, for multiplied griefs and wrongs, all springing from the crash of the Empire, from the battlefields of 1870. Her husband fell at Sedan, her father and her brother on still darker days; both her own family and that of M. de Brindes, their general situation in life, were, as may be said, creations of the Empire, so that from one hour to the other she found herself sinking with the wreck. You won't recognise her under the name I give her, but you may none the less have admired, between their pretty lemon-coloured covers, the touching tales of Claude Lorrain. She plies an ingenious, pathetic pen and has reconciled herself to effort and privation for the sake of her daughter. I say privation, because these distinguished women are poor, receive with great modesty and have broken with a hundred of those social sanctities that are dearer to French souls than to any others. They have gone down into the market-place, and Paule de Brindes, who is three-and-twenty to-day and has a happy turn for keeping a water-colour liquid, earns a hundred francs here and there. She is not so handsome as her mother, but she has magnificent hair and what the French call a look of race, and is, or at least was till the other day, a frank and charming young woman. There is something exquisite in the way these ladies are earnestly, conscientiously modern. From the moment they accept necessities they accept them all, and poor Madame de Brindes flatters herself that she has made her dowerless daughter one of us others. The girl goes out alone, talks with young men and, although she only paints landscape, takes a free view of the *convenances*. Nothing can please either of them more than to tell them they have thrown over their superstitions. They haven't, thank heaven; and when I want to be reminded of some of the

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prettiest in the world—of a thousand fine scruples and pleasant forms, and of what grace can do for the sake of grace—I know where to go for it.

It was a part of this pious heresy—much more august in the way they presented it than some of the aspects of the old faith—that Paule should have become “engaged,” quite like a *jeune mees*, to my brilliant friend Félix Vendemer. He is such a votary of the modern that he was inevitably interested in the girl of the future and had matched one reform with another, being ready to marry without a penny, as the clearest way of expressing his appreciation, this favourable specimen of the type. He simply fell in love with Mademoiselle de Brindes and behaved, on his side, equally like one of us others, except that he begged me to ask her mother for her hand. I was inspired to do so with eloquence, and my friends were not insensible of such an opportunity to show that they now lived in the world of realities. Vendemer’s sole fortune is his genius, and he and Paule, who confessed to an answering flame, plighted their troth like a pair of young rustics or (what comes for French people to the same thing) young Anglo-Saxons. Madame de Brindes thinks such doings at bottom very vulgar ; but vulgar is what she tries hard to be, she is so convinced it is the only way to make a living. Vendemer had had at that time only the first of his successes, which was not, as you will remember—and unfortunately for Madame de Brindes—of this remunerative kind. Only a few people recognised the perfection of his little volume of verse : my acquaintance with him originated in my having been one of the few. A volume of verse was a scanty provision to marry on, so that, still like a pair of us others, the luckless lovers had to bide their time. Presently, however, came the success (again a success only with those who care for quality, not with the rough and

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ready public) of his comedy in verse at the Français. This charming work had just been taken off (it had been found not to make money), when the various parties to my little drama met Heidenmauer at my studio.

Vendemer, who has, as indeed the others have, a passion for music, was tremendously affected by hearing him play two or three of his compositions, and I immediately saw that the immitigable German quality was a morsel much less bitter for him than for the two uncompromising ladies. He went so far as to speak to Heidenmauer frankly, to thank him with effusion, an effort of which neither of the quivering women would have been capable. Vendemer was in the room the night Alfred Bonus raised his little breeze ; I saw him lean on the piano and listen with a queer face, looking, however, rather wonderingly at Heidenmauer. Before this I had noticed the instant paleness (her face was admirably expressive) with which Madame de Brindes saw her prospective son-in-law make up, as it were, to the original Teuton, whose national character was intensified to her aching mind, as it would have been to that of most Frenchwomen in her place, by his wash of English colour. A German was bad enough—but a German with English aggravations ! Her senses were too fine to give her the excuse of not feeling that his compositions were interesting, and she was capable, magnanimously, of listening to them with dropped eyes ; but (much as it ever cost her not to be perfectly courteous) she couldn't have made even the most superficial speech to him about them. Marie de Brindes could never have spoken to Herman Heidenmauer. It was a narrowness if you will, but a narrowness that to my vision was enveloped in a dense atmosphere—a kind of sunset bloom—of enriching and fortifying things. Herman Heidenmauer himself, like the man of imagina-

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tion and the lover of life that he was, would have entered into it delightedly, been charmed with it as a fine case of bigotry. This was conspicuous in Marie de Brindes : her loyalty to the national idea was that of a *dévoté* to a form of worship. She never spoke of France, but she always made me think of it, and with an authority which the women of her race seem to me to have in the question much more than the men. I daresay I'm rather in love with her, though, being considerably younger, I've never told her so—as if she would in the least mind that ! I have indeed been a little checked by a spirit of allegiance to Vendemer ; suspecting always (excuse my sophistication) that in the last analysis it is the mother's charm that he feels—or originally felt—in the daughter's. He spoke of the elder lady to me in those days with the insistence with which only a Frenchman can speak of the objects of his affection. At any rate there was always something symbolic and slightly ceremonial to me in her delicate cameo-face and her general black-robed presence : she made me think of a priestess or a mourner, of revolutions and sieges, detested treaties and ugly public things. I pitied her, too, for the strife of the elements in her—for the way she must have felt a noble enjoyment mutilated. She was too good for that, and yet she was too rigid for anything else ; and the sight of such dismal perversions made me hate more than ever the stupid terms on which nations have organised their intercourse.

When she gathered that one of my guests was simply cramming it down the throat of another that the English literary mind was not even literary, she turned away with a vague shrug and a pitiful look at her daughter for the taste of people who took their pleasure so poorly : the truth in question would be so obvious that it was not worth making a scene

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about. Madame de Brindes evidently looked at any scene between the English and the Americans as a quarrel proceeding vaguely from below stairs—a squabble sordidly domestic. Her almost immediate departure with her daughter operated as a lucky interruption, and I caught for the first time in the straight, spare girl, as she followed her mother, a little of the air that Vendemer had told me he found in her, the still exaltation, the brown uplifted head that we attribute, or that at any rate he made it visible to me that he attributed, to the dedicated Maid. He considered that his intended bore a striking resemblance to Jeanne d'Arc, and he marched after her on this occasion like a square-shouldered armour-bearer. He reappeared, however, after he had put the ladies into a cab, and half an hour later the rest of my friends, with the sole exception of Bonus, having dispersed, he was sitting up with me in the empty studio for another *bout de causerie*. At first perhaps I was too occupied with reprimanding my compatriot to give much attention to what Vendemer might have to say; I remember at any rate that I had asked Bonus what had induced him to make so grave a blunder. He was not even yet, it appeared, aware of his blunder, so that I had to inquire by what odd chance he had taken Heidenmauer for a bigoted Briton.

"If I spoke to him as one he answered as one; that's bigoted enough," said Alfred Bonus.

"He was confused and amused at your onslaught: he wondered what fly had stung you."

"The fly of patriotism," Vendemer suggested.

"Do *you* like him—a beast of a German?" Bonus demanded.

"If he's an Englishman he isn't a German—*il faut opter*. We can hang him for the one or for the other, we can't hang him for both. I was immensely struck with those things he played."

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"They had no charm for me, or doubtless I too should have been demoralised," Alfred said. "He seemed to know nothing about Miss Brownrigg. Now Miss Brownrigg's great."

"I like the things and even the people you quarrel about, you big babies of the same breast. *C'est à se tordre!*" Vendemer declared.

"I may be very abject, but I *do* take an interest in the American novel," Alfred rejoined.

"I hate such expressions: there's no such thing as the American novel."

"Is there by chance any such thing as the French?"

"*Pas davantage*—for the artist himself: how can you ask? I don't know what is meant by French art and English art and American art: those seem to me mere cataloguers' and reviewers' and tradesmen's names, representing preoccupations utterly foreign to the artist. Art is art in every country, and the novel (since Bonus mentions that) is the novel in every tongue, and hard enough work they have to live up to that privilege, without our adding another muddle to the problem. The reader, the consumer may call things as he likes, but we leave him to his little amusements." I suggested that we were all readers and consumers; which only made Vendemer continue: "Yes, and only a small handful of us have the ghost of a palate. But you and I and Bonus are of the handful."

"What do you mean by the handful?" Bonus inquired.

Vendemer hesitated a moment. "I mean the few intelligent people, and even the few people who are not——" He paused again an instant, long enough for me to request him not to say what they were "not," and then went on: "People in a word who have the honour to live in the only country worth living in."

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"And pray what country is that?"

"The land of dreams—the country of art."

"Oh, the land of dreams! I live in the land of realities!" Bonus exclaimed. "What do you all mean then by chattering so about *le roman russe*?"

"It's a convenience—to identify the work of three or four, *là-bas*, because we're so far from it. But do you see them *writing* '*le roman russe*'?"

"I happen to know that that's exactly what they want to do, some of them," said Bonus.

"Some of the idiots, then! There are plenty of those everywhere. Anything born under that silly star is sure not to count."

"Thank God I'm not an artist!" said Bonus.

"Dear Alfred's a critic," I explained.

"And I'm not ashamed of my country," he subjoined.

"Even a critic perhaps may be an artist," Vendemer mused.

"Then as the great American critic Bonus may be the great American artist," I went on.

"Is that what you're supposed to give us—'American' criticism?" Vendemer asked, with dismay in his expressive, ironic face. "Take care, take care, or it will be more American than critical, and then where will *you* be? However," he continued, laughing and with a change of tone, "I may see the matter in too lurid a light, for I've just been favoured with a judgement conceived in the purest spirit of our own national genius." He looked at me a moment and then he remarked: "That dear Madame de Brindes doesn't approve of my attitude."

"Your attitude?"

"Toward your German friend. She let me know it when I went down stairs with her—told me I was much too cordial, that I must observe myself."

"And what did you reply to that?"

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"I answered that the things he had played were extraordinarily beautiful."

"And how did she meet that?"

"By saying that he's an enemy of our country."

"She had you there," I rejoined.

"Yes, I could only reply '*Chère madame, voyons!*'"

"That was meagre."

"Evidently, for it did no more for me than to give her a chance to declare that he can't possibly be here for any good and that he belongs to a race it's my sacred duty to loathe."

"I see what she means."

"I don't then—where artists are concerned. I said to her: '*Ah, madame, vous savez que pour moi il n'y a que l'art!*'"

"It's very exciting!" I laughed. "How could she parry that?"

"I know it, my dear child—but for *him*? That's the way she parried it. 'Very well, for him?'. I asked. 'For him there's the insolence of the victor and a secret scorn for our incurable illusions!'"

"Heidenmauer has no insolence and no secret scorn."

Vendemer was silent a moment. "Are you very sure of that?"

"Oh, I like him! He's out of all that, and far above it. But what did Mademoiselle Paule say?" I inquired.

"She said nothing—she only looked at me."

"Happy man!"

"Not a bit. She looked at me with strange eyes, in which I could read 'Go straight, my friend—go straight!' Oh, *les femmes, les femmes!*"

"What's the matter with them now?"

"They've a mortal hatred of-art!"

"It's a true, deep instinct," said Alfred Bonus.

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"But what passed further with Madame de Brindes?" I went on.

"She only got into her cab, pushing her daughter first; on which I slammed the door rather hard and came up here. *Cela m'a porté sur les nerfs.*"

"I'm afraid I haven't soothed them," Bonus said, looking for his hat. When he had found it he added: "When the English have beaten us and pocketed our *milliards* I'll forgive them; but not till then!" And with this he went off, made a little uncomfortable, I think, by Vendemer's sharper alternatives, while the young Frenchman called after him: "My dear fellow, at night all cats are grey!"

Vendemer, when we were left alone together, mooned about the empty studio awhile and asked me three or four questions about Heidenmauer. I satisfied his curiosity as well as I could, but I demanded the reason of it. The reason he gave was that one of the young German's compositions had already begun to haunt his memory; but that was a reason which, to my sense, still left something unexplained. I didn't however challenge him, before he quitted me, further than to warn him against being deliberately perverse.

"What do you mean by being deliberately perverse?" He fixed me so with his intensely living French eye that I became almost blushing conscious of a certain insincerity and, instead of telling him what I meant, tried to get off with the deplorable remark that the prejudices of Mesdames de Brindes were after all respectable. "That's exactly what makes them so odious!" cried Vendemer.

A few days after this, late in the afternoon, Herman Heidenmauer came in to see me and found the young Frenchman seated at my piano—trying to win back from the keys some echo of a passage in the *Abendlied* we had listened to on the Sunday evening.

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They met, naturally, as good friends, and Heidenmauer sat down with instant readiness and gave him again the page he was trying to recover. He asked him for his address, that he might send him the composition, and at Vendemer's request, as we sat in the firelight, played half-a-dozen other things. Vendemer listened in silence but to my surprise took leave of me before the lamp was brought in. I asked him to stay to dinner (I had already appealed to Heidenmauer to stay), but he explained that he was engaged to dine with Madame de Brindes—*à la maison* as he always called it. When he had gone Heidenmauer, with whom on departing he had shaken hands without a word, put to me the same questions about him that Vendemer had asked on the Sunday evening about the young German, and I replied that my visitor would find in a small volume of remarkable verse published by Lemerre, which I placed in his hands, much of the information he desired. This volume, which had just appeared, contained, beside a reprint of Vendemer's earlier productions, many of them admirable lyrics, the drama that had lately been played at the Français, and Heidenmauer took it with him when he left me. But he left me late, and before this occurred, all the evening, we had much talk about the French nation. In the foreign colony of Paris the exchange of opinions on this subject is one of the most inevitable and by no means the least interesting of distractions ; it furnishes occupation to people rather conscious of the burden of leisure. Heidenmauer had been little in Paris, but he was all the more open to impressions ; they evidently poured in upon him and he gave them a generous hospitality. In the diffused white light of his fine German intelligence old colours took on new tints to me, and while we spun fancies about the wonderful race around us I added to my little stock of notions about his own.

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I saw that his admiration for our neighbours was a very high tide, and I was struck with something bland and unconscious (noble and serene in its absence of precautions) in the way he let his doors stand open to it. It would have been exasperating to many Frenchmen; he looked at them through his clear spectacles with such an absence of suspicion that they might have anything to forgive him, such a thin metaphysical view of instincts and passions. He had the air of not allowing for recollections and nerves, and would doubtless give them occasion to make afresh some of their reflections on the tact of *ces gens-là*.

A couple of days after I had given him Vendemer's book he came back to tell me that he found great beauty in it. "It speaks to me—it speaks to me," he said with his air of happy proof. "I liked the songs—I liked the songs. Besides," he added, "I like the little romantic play—it has given me wonderful ideas; more ideas than anything has done for a long time. Yes—yes."

"What kind of ideas?"

"Well, this kind." And he sat down to the piano and struck the keys. I listened without more questions, and after a while I began to understand. Suddenly he said: "Do you know the words of *that*?" and before I could answer he was rolling out one of the lyrics of the little volume. The poem was strange and obscure, yet irresistibly beautiful, and he had translated it into music still more tantalising than itself. He sounded the words with his German accent, barely perceptible in English but strongly marked in French. He dropped them and took them up again; he was playing with them, feeling his way. "*This* is my idea!" he broke out; he had caught it, in one of its mystic mazes, and he rendered it with a kind of solemn freshness. There was a phrase he repeated, trying it again and again,

and while he did so he chanted the words of the song as if they were an illuminating flame, an inspiration. I was rather glad on the whole that Vendemer didn't hear what his pronunciation made of them, but as I was in the very act of rejoicing I became aware that the author of the verses had opened the door. He had pushed it gently, hearing the music ; then hearing also his own poetry he had paused and stood looking at Heidenmauer. The young German nodded and laughed and, irreflectively, spontaneously, greeted him with a friendly "*Was sagen Sie dazu ?*" I saw Vendemer change colour ; he blushed red and, for an instant, as he stood wavering, I thought he was going to retreat. But I beckoned him in and, on the divan beside me, patted a place for him to sit.

He came in but didn't take this place ; he went and stood before the fire to warm his feet, turning his back to us. Heidenmauer played and played, and after a little Vendemer turned round ; he looked about him for a seat, dropped into it and sat with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Presently Heidenmauer called out, in French, above the music : " I like your songs—I like them immensely ! " but the young Frenchman neither spoke nor moved. When, however, five minutes later Heidenmauer stopped he sprang up with an entreaty to him to go on, to go on for the love of God. "*Foilà —foilà !*" cried the musician, and with hands for an instant suspended he wandered off into mysterious worlds. He played Wagner and then Wagner again—a great deal of Wagner ; in the midst of which, abruptly, he addressed himself again to Vendemer, who had gone still further from the piano, launching to me, however, from his corner a "*Dieu, que c'est beau !*" which I saw that Heidenmauer caught. " I've a conception for an opera, you know—I'd give anything if you'd do the libretto ! " Our German

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friend laughed out, after this, with clear good nature, and the rich appeal brought Vendemer slowly to his feet again, staring at the musician across the room and turning this time perceptibly pale.

I felt there was a drama in the air, and it made me a little nervous; to conceal which I said to Heidenmauer: "What's your conception? What's your subject?"

"My conception would be realised in the subject of M. Vendemer's play—if he'll do that for me in a great lyric manner!" And with this the young German, who had stopped playing to answer me, quitted the piano and Vendemer got up to meet him. "The subject is splendid—it has taken possession of me. Will you do it with me? Will you work with me? We shall make something great!"

"Ah, you don't know what you ask!" Vendemer answered, with his pale smile.

"I do—I do: I've thought of it. It will be bad for me in my country; I shall suffer for it. They won't like it—they'll abuse me for it—they'll say of me *pis que pendre*." Heidenmauer pronounced it *bis que bendre*.

"They'll hate my libretto so?" Vendemer asked.

"Yes, your libretto—they'll say it's immoral and horrible. And they'll say *I'm* immoral and horrible for having worked with you," the young composer went on, with his pleasant healthy lucidity. "You'll injure my career. Oh yes, I shall suffer!" he joyously, exultingly cried.

"*Et moi donc!*" Vendemer exclaimed.

"Public opinion, yes. I shall also make *you* suffer—I shall nip your prosperity in the bud. All that's *des bêtises—les pêtisses*," said poor Heidenmauer. "In art there are no countries."

"Yes, art is terrible, art is monstrous," Vendemer replied, looking at the fire.

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"I love your songs—they have extraordinary beauty."

"And Vendemer has an equal taste for *your* compositions," I said to Heidenmauer.

"Tempter!" Vendemer murmured to me, with a strange look.

"*C'est juste!* I mustn't meddle—which will be all the easier as I'm dining out and must go and dress. You two make yourselves at home and fight it out here."

"Do you *leave* me?" asked Vendemer, still with his strange look.

"My dear fellow, I've only just time."

"We will dine together—he and I—at one of those characteristic places, and we will look at the matter in its different relations," said Heidenmauer.

"Then we will come back here to finish—your studio is so good for music."

"There are some things it *isn't* good for," Vendemer remarked, looking at our companion.

"It's good for poetry—it's good for truth," smiled the composer.

"You'll stay *here* and dine together," I said; "my servant can manage that."

"No, no—we'll go out and we'll walk together. We'll talk a great deal," Heidenmauer went on.

"The subject is so comprehensive," he said to Vendemer, as he lighted another cigar.

"The subject?"

"Of your drama. It's so universal."

"Ah, the universe—*il n'y a que ça!*" I laughed, to Vendemer, partly with a really amused sense of the exaggerated woe that looked out of his poetic eyes and that seemed an appeal to me not to forsake him, to throw myself into the scale of the associations he would have to stifle, and partly to encourage him, to express my conviction that two such fine minds

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couldn't in the long run be the worse for coming to an agreement. I might have been a more mocking Mephistopheles handing over his pure spirit to my literally German Faust.

When I came home at eleven o'clock I found him alone in my studio, where, evidently, for some time, he had been moving up and down in agitated thought. The air was thick with Bavarian fumes, with the reverberation of mighty music and great ideas, with the echoes of that "universe" to which I had so mercilessly consigned him. But I judged in a moment that Vendemer was in a very different phase of his evolution from the one in which I had left him. I had never seen his handsome, sensitive face so intensely illumined.

"*Ça y est—ça y est !*" he exclaimed, standing there with his hands in his pockets and looking at me.

"You've really agreed to do something together?"

"We've sworn a tremendous oath—we've taken a sacred engagement."

"My dear fellow, you're a hero."

"Wait and see! *C'est un très-grand esprit.*"

"So much the better!"

"*C'est un bien beau génie.* Ah, we've risen—we soar; *nous sommes dans les grandes espaces !*" my friend continued with his dilated eyes.

"It's very interesting—because it will cost you something."

"It will cost me everything!" said Félix Vendemer in a tone I seem to hear at this hour. "That's just the beauty of it. It's the chance of chances to testify for art—to affirm an indispensable truth."

"An indispensable truth?" I repeated, feeling myself soar too, but into the splendid vague.

"Do you know the greatest crime that can be perpetrated against it?"

"Against it?" I asked, still soaring.

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"Against the religion of art—against the love for beauty—against the search for the Holy Grail?" The transfigured look with which he named these things, the way his warm voice filled the rich room, was a revelation of the wonderful talk that had taken place.

"Do you know—for one of *us*—the really damnable, the only unpardonable, sin?"

"Tell me, so that I may keep clear of it!"

"To profane *our* golden air with the hideous invention of patriotism."

"It was a clever invention in its time!" I laughed.

"I'm not talking about its time—I'm talking about its place. It was never anything but a fifth-rate impertinence here. In art there are no countries—no idiotic nationalities, no frontiers, nor *douanes*, nor still more idiotic fortresses and bayonets. It has the unspeakable beauty of being the region in which those abominations cease, the medium in which such vulgarities simply can't live. What therefore are we to say of the brutes who wish to drag them all in—to crush to death with them all the flowers of such a garden, to shut out all the light of such a sky?" I was far from desiring to defend the "brutes" in question, though there rose before me even at that moment a sufficiently vivid picture of the way, later on, poor Vendemer would have to face them. I quickly perceived indeed that the picture was, to his own eyes, a still more crowded canvas. Félix Vendemer, in the centre of it, was an admirable, a really sublime figure. If there had been wonderful talk after I quitted the two poets the wonder was not over yet—it went on far into the night for my benefit. We looked at the prospect in many lights, turned the subject about almost every way it would go; but I am bound to say there was one relation in which we tacitly agreed to forbear to consider it. We neither

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of us uttered the name of Paule de Brindes—the outlook in that direction would be too serious. And yet if Félix Vendemer, exquisite and incorruptible artist that he was, had fallen in love with the idea of “testifying,” it was from that direction that the finest part of his opportunity to do so would proceed.

I was only too conscious of this when, within the week, I received a hurried note from Madame de Brindes, begging me as a particular favour to come and see her without delay. I had not seen Vendemer again, but I had had a characteristic call from Heidenmauer, who, though I could imagine him perfectly in a Prussian helmet, with a needle-gun, perfectly, on definite occasion, a sturdy, formidable soldier, gave me a renewed impression of inhabiting, in the expansion of his genius and the exercise of his intelligence, no land of red tape, no province smaller nor more pedantically administered than the totality of things. I was reminded afresh too that *he* foresaw no striking salon-picture, no *chic* of execution nor romance of martyrdom, or at any rate devoted very little time to the consideration of such objects. He doubtless did scant justice to poor Vendemer's attitude, though he said to me of him by the way, with his rosy deliberation: “He has good ideas—he has good ideas. The French mind has—for me—the taste of a very delightful *bonbon*!” He only measured the angle of convergence, as he called it, of their two projections. He was in short not preoccupied with the personal gallantry of their experiment; he was preoccupied with its “esthetic and harmonic basis.”

It was without her daughter that Madame de Brindes received me, when I obeyed her summons, in her scrap of a *quatrième* in the Rue de Miromesnil.

“Ah, *cher monsieur*, how could you have permitted such a horror—how could you have given it the countenance of your roof, of your influence?” There

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were tears in her eyes, and I don't think that for the moment I have ever been more touched by a reproach. But I pulled myself together sufficiently to affirm my faith as well as to disengage my responsibility. I explained that there was no horror to me in the matter, that if I was not a German neither was I a Frenchman, and that all I had before me was two young men inflamed by a great idea and nobly determined to work together to give it a great form.

"A great idea—to go over to *ces gens-là* ? "

"To go over to them ? "

"To put yourself on their side—to throw yourself into the arms of those who hate us—to fall into their abominable trap ! "

"What do you call their abominable trap ? "

"Their false *bonhomie*, the very impudence of their intrigues, their profound, scientific deceit and their determination to get the advantage of us by exploiting our generosity."

"You attribute to such a man as Heidenmauer too many motives and too many calculations. He's quite ideally superior ! "

"Oh, German idealism—we know what that means ! We've no use for their superiority ; let them carry it elsewhere—let them leave us alone. Why do they thrust themselves in upon us and set old wounds throbbing by their detested presence ? We don't go near *them*, or ever wish to hear their ugly names or behold their *visages de bois* ; therefore the most rudimentary good taste, the tact one would expect even from naked savages, might suggest to them to seek their amusements elsewhere. But *their* taste, *their* tact—I can scarcely trust myself to speak ! "

Madame de Brindes did speak, however, at considerable further length and with a sincerity of passion which left one quite without arguments. There was

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no argument to meet the fact that Vendemer's attitude wounded her, wounded her daughter, *jusqu'au fond de l'âme*, that it represented for them abysses of shame and suffering and that for himself it meant a whole future compromised, a whole public alienated. It was vain doubtless to talk of such things ; if people didn't *feel* them, if they hadn't the fibre of loyalty, the high imagination of honour, all explanations, all supplications were but a waste of noble emotion. M. Vendemer's perversity was monstrous—she had had a sickening discussion with him. What she desired of me was to make one last appeal to him, to put the solemn truth before him, to try to bring him back to sanity. It was as if he had temporarily lost his reason. It was to be made clear to him, *par exemple*, that unless he should recover it Mademoiselle de Brindes would unhesitatingly withdraw from her engagement.

"Does she *really* feel as you do ? " I asked.

"Do you think I put words into her mouth ? She feels as a *fille de France* is obliged to feel ! "

"Doesn't she love him then ? "

"She adores him. But she won't take him without his honour."

"I don't understand such refinements ! " I said.

"Oh, *vous autres* ! " cried Madame de Brindes. Then with eyes glowing through her tears she demanded : "Don't you know she knows how her father died ? " I was on the point of saying "What has that to do with it ? " but I withheld the question, for after all I could conceive that it might have something. There was no disputing about tastes, and I could only express my sincere conviction that Vendemer was profoundly attached to Mademoiselle Paule. "Then let him prove it by making her a sacrifice ! " my strenuous hostess replied ; to which I rejoined that I would repeat our conversation to him and put the

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matter before him as strongly as I could. I delayed a little to take leave, wondering if the girl would not come in—I should have been so much more content to receive her strange recantation from her own lips. I couldn't say this to Madame de Brindes ; but she guessed I meant it, and before we separated we exchanged a look in which our mutual mistrust was written—the suspicion on her side that I should not be a very passionate intercessor and the conjecture on mine that she might be misrepresenting her daughter. This slight tension, I must add, was only momentary, for I have had a chance of observing Paule de Brindes since then, and the two ladies were soon satisfied that I pitied them enough to have been eloquent.

My eloquence has been of no avail, and I have learned (it has been one of the most interesting lessons of my life) of what transcendent stuff the artist may sometimes be made. Herman Heidenmauer and Félix Vendemer are, at the hour I write, immersed in their monstrous collaboration. There were postponements and difficulties at first, and there will be more serious ones in the future, when it is a question of giving the finished work to the world. The world of Paris will stop its ears in horror, the German Empire will turn its mighty back, and the authors of what I foresee (oh, I've been treated to specimens !) as a perhaps really epoch-making musical revelation (is Heidenmauer's style rubbing off on me ?) will perhaps have to beg for a hearing in communities fatally unintelligent. It may very well be that they will not obtain any hearing at all for years. I like at any rate to think that time works for them. At present they work for themselves and for each other, amid drawbacks of several kinds. Separating after the episode in Paris, they have met again on alien soil, at a little place on the Genoese Riviera where sunshine is cheap and tobacco bad, and they live (the

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two together) for five francs a day, which is all they can muster between them. It appears that when Heidenmauer's London step-brother was informed of the young composer's unnatural alliance he instantly withdrew his subsidy. The return of it is contingent on the rupture of the unholy union and the destruction by flame of all the manuscript. The pair are very poor and the whole thing depends on their staying power. They are so preoccupied with their opera that they have no time for pot-boilers. Vendemer is in a feverish hurry, lest perhaps he should find himself chilled. There are still other details which contribute to the interest of the episode and which, for me, help to render it a most refreshing, a really great little case. It rests me, it delights me, there is something in it that makes for civilisation. In their way they are working for human happiness. The strange course taken by Vendemer (I mean his renunciation of his engagement) must moreover be judged in the light of the fact that he was really in love. Something had to be sacrificed, and what he clung to most (he's extraordinary, I admit) was the truth he had the opportunity of proclaiming. Men give up their love for advantages every day, but they rarely give it up for such discomforts.

Paule de Brindes was the less in love of the two ; I see her often enough to have made up my mind about that. But she's mysterious, she's odd ; there was at any rate a sufficient wrench in her life to make her often absent-minded. Does her imagination hover about Félix Vendemer ? A month ago, going into their rooms one day when her mother was not at home (the *bonne* had admitted me under a wrong impression), I found her at the piano, playing one of Heidenmauer's compositions—playing it without notes and with infinite expression. How had she got hold of it ? How had she learned it ?

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This was her secret—she blushed so that I didn't pry into it. But what is she doing, under the singular circumstances, with a composition of Herman Heidenmauer's? She never met him, she never heard him play but that once. It will be a pretty complication if it shall appear that the young German genius made on that occasion more than one intense impression. This needn't appear, however, inasmuch as, being naturally in terror of the discovery by her mother of such an anomaly, she may count on me absolutely not to betray her. I hadn't fully perceived how deeply susceptible she is to music. She must have a strange confusion of feelings—a dim, haunting trouble, with a kind of ache of impatience for the wonderful opera somewhere in the depths of it. Don't we live fast after all, and doesn't the old order change? Don't say art isn't mighty! I shall give you some more illustrations of it yet.

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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

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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, wondrous 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

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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

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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."

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"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

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her share of the winebills and the horses' fodder, down to Bertie Hammond Synge's 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."

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" 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,

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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

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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

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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.

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"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 Miss 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

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freely partook ; it seemed, from the gold ring into which his red necktie was passed to the square toecaps 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 judgement of it, a judgement 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 ;

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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 ensure 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 con-

tinued to be stupefying; there was nothing so extraordinary save the absence in connexion 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 the 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

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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

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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 connexion 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

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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

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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

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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

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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 eye-glasses, 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 Dawling'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

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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 ?"

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"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 reflexions 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

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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 disgustingly 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

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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

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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."

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"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."

GLASSES

"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

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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 !

GLASSES

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 imagina-

tion 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

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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 : " Good-bye. 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

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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 blare. "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."

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" 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 judgement 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?”

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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 misdemeanor—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

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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 reflexions, 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 glasses, 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 reflexion 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

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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

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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 disgloved 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

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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 waiting 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 judgements: they made him throb 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."

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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.

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I

"AH there, confound it!" said Bertram Braddle when he had once more frowned, so far as he could frown, over his telegram. "I *must* catch the train if I'm to have my morning clear in town. And it's a most abominable nuisance!"

"Do you mean on account of—a—*her*?" asked, after a minute's silent sympathy, the friend to whom—in the hall of the hotel, still bestrewn with the appurtenances of the newly disembarked—he had thus querulously addressed himself.

He looked hard for an instant at Henry Chilver, but the hardness was not all produced by Chilver's question. His annoyance at not being able to spend his night at Liverpool was visibly the greatest that such a privation can be conceived as producing, and might have seemed indeed to transcend the limits of its occasion. "I promised her the second day out that, no matter at what hour we should get in, I would see her up to London and save her having to take a step by herself."

"And you piled up the assurance"—Chilver somewhat irrelevantly laughed—"with each successive day!"

"Naturally—for what is there to do between New York and Queenstown but pile up? And now, with this pistol at my head"—crumpling the telegram with an angry fist, he tossed it into the wide public

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chimney-place—"I leave her to scramble through to-morrow as she can. She has to go on to Brighton and she doesn't know——" And Braddle's quickened sense of the perversity of things dropped to a moment's helpless communion with the aggravating face of his watch.

"She doesn't know——?" his friend conscientiously echoed.

"Oh, she doesn't know anything! Should you say it's too late to ask for a word with her?"

Chilver, with his eyes on the big hotel-clock, wondered. "Lateish—isn't it?—when she must have been gone this quarter of an hour to her room."

"Yes, I'm bound to say she *has* managed *that* for herself!" and Braddle stuck back his watch. "So that, as I haven't time to write, there's nothing for me but to wire her—ever so apologetically—the first thing in the morning from town."

"Surely—as for the steamer special there are now only about five minutes left."

"Good then—I join you," said Braddle with a sigh of submission. "But where's the brute who took my things? Yours went straight to the station?"

"No—they're still out there on the cab from which I set you down. And there's your chap with your stuff"—Chilver's eye had just caught the man—"he's ramming it into the lift. Collar him before it goes up." Bertram Braddle, on this, sprang forward in time; then while at an office-window that opened into an inner sanctuary he explained his case to a neatly fitted priestess whose cold eyes looked straight through nonsense, putting it before her that he should after all not require the room he had telegraphed for, his companion only turned uneasily about at a distance and made no approach to the arrested four-wheeler that, at the dock, had received both the gentlemen and their effects. "I join you—I join

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you," Braddle repeated as he brought back his larger share of these.

Chilver appeared meanwhile to have found freedom of mind for a decision. "But, my dear fellow, shall I too then go?"

Braddle stared. "Why, I thought you so eminently *had* to."

"Not if I can be of any use to you. I mean by stopping over and offering my—I admit very inferior—aid——"

"To Mrs. Damerel?" Braddle took in his friend's sudden and—as it presented itself—singularly obliging change of plan. "Ah, you want to be of use to *her*?"

"Only if it will take her off your mind till you see her again. I don't mind telling you now," Chilver courageously continued, "that I'm not positively in such a hurry. I said I'd catch the train because I thought you wanted to be alone with her."

The young men stood there now a trifle rigidly, but very expressively, face to face: Bertram Braddle, the younger but much the taller, smooth, handsome and heavy, with the composition of his dress so elaborately informal, his pleasant monocular scowl so religiously fixed, his hat so despairingly tilted, and his usual air—innocent enough, however—of looking down from some height still greater—as every one knew about the rich, the bloated Braddles—than that of his fine stature; Chilver, slight and comparatively colourless, rather sharp than bright, but with—in spite of a happy brown moustache, scantily professional, but envied by the man whose large, empty, sunny face needed, as some one had said, a little planting—no particular "looks" save those that dwelt in his intelligent eyes. "And what then did you think I wanted to do?"

"Exactly what you say. To present yourself in

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a taking light—to deepen the impression you've been at so much trouble to make. But if you don't care for my stopping——!" And tossing away the end of his cigarette with a gesture of good-humoured renouncement, Chilver moved across the marble slabs to the draughty portal that kept swinging from the street.

There were porters, travellers, other impediments in his way, and this gave Braddle an appreciable time to watch his receding back before it disappeared; the prompt consequence of which was an "I say, Chilver!" launched after him sharply enough to make him turn round before passing out. The speaker had not otherwise stirred, and the interval of space doubtless took something from the straightness of their further mute communication. This interval, the next minute, as Chilver failed to return, Braddle diminished by gaining the door in company with a porter whose arm he had seized on the way. "Take this gentleman's things off the cab and put on mine." Then as he turned to his friend: "Go and tell the young woman there that you'll have the room I've given up."

Chilver laid upon him a hand still interrogative enough not to be too grateful. "Are you very sure it's all right?"

Braddle's face simply followed for a moment, in the outer lamplight, the progress of the operation he had decreed. "Do you think I'm going to allow you to make out that I'm afraid?"

"Well, my dear chap, why shouldn't you be?" Henry Chilver, with this retort, did nothing; he only, with his hands in his pockets, let the porter and the cabman bestir themselves. "I simply wanted to be civil."

"Oh, I'll risk it!" said the younger man with a free enough laugh. "Be awfully attentive, you know."

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"Of course it won't be anything like the same thing to *her*," Chilver went on.

"Of course not, but explain. Tell her I'm wiring, writing. Do everything, in short. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, good-bye, old man." And Chilver went down with him to the rearranged cab. "So many thanks."

"Thanks?" said the other as he got in.

"I mean because I'm—hang it!—just tired enough to be glad to go to bed."

"Oh!" came rather dryly from Braddle out of the window of the cab.

"Shan't I go with you to the station?" his companion asked.

"Dear no—much obliged!"

"Well, you shall have my report!" Chilver continued.

"Ah, I shall have Mrs. Damerel's!" Braddle answered as the cab drove away.

II

THE fatigue of which Chilver had spoken sought relief for the time in a good deal of rather pointless activity, and it was not for an hour after he had taken possession of his room that he lay down to close his eyes. He moved, before this, in his narrow limits, up and down and to and fro ; he left his smaller portmanteau gaping but unpacked ; he fumbled in his dressing-bag for a book and dropped with it into a chair. But when in this position he let his attention very soon wander and his lids finally droop, it was not at all that sleep had overcome him. Something had overcome him, on the contrary, that, a quarter of an hour later, made him jump up and consult the watch he had transferred from his pocket to his bedside as his only step toward undressing. He quickly restored it to its receptacle and, catching up his hat, left the room and took his course downstairs. Here, for another quarter of an hour, he wandered, waited, looked about. He had been rather positive to his comrade on the question of Mrs. Damerel's possible, impossible, reappearance ; but his movements, for some time, could have been explained only by an unquenched imagination that, late though the hour, she might " nip " down—so in fact he mentally phrased it : well, for what ? To indulge—it was conceivable—an appetite unappeased by the five and twenty meals (Braddle had seen them all served to her

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on deck) of the rapid voyage. He kept glancing into the irresponsive coffee-room and peeping through the glass door of a smaller blank, bright apartment in which a lonely, ugly lady, hatted and coated and hugging a bundle of shawls, sat glaring into space with an anxiety of her own. When at last he returned to his room, however, it was quite with the recognition that such a person as Mrs. Damerel wouldn't at all at that hour be knocking about the hotel. On the other hand—his vigil still encouraged the reflexion—what appeared less like her than her giving them the slip, on their all leaving the dock, so unceremoniously ; making her independent dash for a good room at the inn the very moment the Customs people had passed her luggage? It was perhaps the fatiguing futility of this question that at last sent Henry Chilver to bed and to sleep.

That restorative proved the next morning to have considerably cleared and settled his consciousness. He found himself immediately aware of being in no position to say what was or was not "like" Mrs. Damerel. He knew as little about her as Braddle knew, and it was his conviction that Braddle's ignorance had kept regular step with all the rest of the conditions. These conditions were, to begin with, that, seated next her at table for the very first repast, Bertram had struck up with her a friendship of which the leaps and bounds were, in the social, the sentimental sphere, not less remarkable than those with which the great hurrying ship took its way through the sea. They were, further, that, unlike all the other women, so numerous and, in the fine weather, so "chatty," she had succeeded in incurring the acquaintance of nobody in the immense company but themselves. Three or four men had more or less made up to her, but with none of the ladies had she found it inevitable to exchange, to his observation

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—and oh, his attention, at least, had been deep!—three words. The great fact above all had been—as it now glimmered back to him—that he had studied her not so much in her own demonstrations, which had been few and passive, as in those of his absolutely alienated companion. He had been reduced to contemplation resignedly remote, since Braddle now monopolised her, and had thus seen her largely through his surprise at the constancy of Braddle's interest. The affinities hitherto—in other cases—recognised by his friend he had generally made out as of an order much less fine. There were lots of women on the ship who might easily have been supposed to be a good deal more his affair. Not one of them had, however, by any perversity corresponding with that of the connexion under his eyes, become in any degree Chilver's own. He had the feeling, on the huge crowded boat, of making the voyage in singular solitude, a solitude mitigated only by the amusement of finding Braddle so "mashed" and of wondering what would come of it. Much less, up to that moment, had come of the general American exposure than each, on their sailing westward for the more and more prescribed near view, had freely foretold to the other as the least they were likely to get off with. The near view of the big queer country had at last, this summer, imposed itself: so many other men had got it and were making it, in talk, not only a convenience but a good deal of a nuisance, that it appeared to have become, defensively, as necessary as the electric light in the flat one might wish to let; as to which the two friends, after their ten bustling weeks, had now in fact grown to feel that they could press the American button with the best.

But they had been on the whole—Chilver at least had been—disappointed in the celebrated (and were

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they not *all*, in the United States, celebrated ?) native women. He didn't quite know what he had expected : something or other, at any rate, that had not taken place. He felt as if he had carried over in his portmanteau a court-suit or a wedding-garment and were bringing it back untouched, unfolded, in creases unrelieved and almost painfully aware of themselves. They had taken lots of letters—most of them, some fellow who knew had told them, awfully good ones ; they had been to Washington and Boston and Newport and Mount Desert, walking round and round the vociferous whirlpool, but neither tumbling in nor feeling at any moment, as it appeared, at all dangerously dizzy ; so that here—in relation to Mrs. Damerel—was the oddity of an impression vertiginous only after everything might have been supposed to be well over. This lady was the first female American they had met, of almost any age, who was not celebrated ; yet she was the one who suggested most to Chilver something he now imagined himself originally to have gone forth expecting to feel. She was a person to whom they couldn't possibly have had a letter ; she had never in her life been to Newport ; she was on her way to England for the first time ; she was, in short, most inconsistently, though indeed quite unblushingly, obscure. She was only charming in a new way. It was newer, somehow, than any of the others that were so fresh. Yet what should he call it if he were trying—in a foolish flight of analysis to somebody else—to describe it ? When he asked himself this he was verily brought, from one thing to another, to recognising that it was probably in fact as old as the hills. All that was new in it was that he was in love with her ; and moreover, without in the least knowing her, so completely, so heroically, from the point of honour, had he, for all the six days, left her to poor Braddle. Well, if he should now take

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her up to town he would be a little less ignorant. He liked, naturally, to think he should be of use to her, but he flattered himself he kept the point of honour well in view. To Braddle—given Braddle's uneasiness—he should be equally of use.

III

THIS last appearance was in a short time abundantly confirmed ; not only when, in London, after the discharge of his mission, he submitted to his friend a detailed account of that happy transaction, but ten days later, on Braddle's own return from Brighton, where he had promptly put in a week—a week of which, visibly, the sole and irresistible motive was Mrs. Damerel, established there as a sequel to Chilver's attendance on her from Liverpool to Euston and from Euston, within the hour—so immediately that she got off before her other friend had had time to turn up at either station—to Victoria. This other friend passed in London, while at Brighton, the inside of a day, rapping with a familiar stick—at an hour supposedly not dedicated, in those grey courts, to profane speculation—the door of the dingy Temple chambers in which, after the most extravagant holiday of his life, Henry Chilver had found it salutary to sit and imagine himself “ reading.” But Braddle had always been, portentously, a person of free mornings—his nominal occupation that of looking after his father's “ interests,” and his actual that of spending, though quite without scandal, this personage's money, of which, luckily, there seemed an abundance. What came from him on this occasion connected itself with something that had passed between them on their previous meeting, the one

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immediately following the incident at Liverpool. Chilver had at that time been rather surprised to hear his friend suddenly bring out: "You don't then think there's anything 'off' about her?"

"Off?" Chilver could at least be perfectly vague. "Off what?"

"What's the beastly phrase? 'Off colour.' I mean do you think she's all right?"

"Are you in love with her?" Chilver after a moment demanded.

"Damn it, of course I'm in love with her!" Braddle joylessly articulated.

"Well then, doesn't that give you——?"

"Give me what?" he asked with impatience at his companion's pause.

"Well, a sort of searching light——"

"For reading her clear?" Braddle broke in. "How can you ask—as a man of the world—anything so idiotic? Where did you ever discover that being in love makes a searching light, makes anything but a most damnable and demoralising darkness? One has been in love with creatures such that one's condition has lighted nothing in the world but one's asininity. I have at any rate. And so have you!"

"No, I've never been really in love at all," said Chilver good-humouredly.

"The less credit to you then to have—in two or three cases I recall—made such a fool of yourself. I, at all events—I don't mind your knowing," Braddle went on—"am harder hit, far and away, than I've ever been. But I don't in the least pretend to place her or to have a free judgement about her. I've already—since we landed—had two letters from her, and I go down to-morrow to see her. That *may* assist me—it ought to—to make her out a little better. But I've a gruesome feeling that it won't!"

"Then how can I help you?" Chilver inquired

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with just irritation enough to make him, the next moment—though his interlocutor, interestingly worried but really most inexpert, had no answer for the question—sorry to have shown it. “If you’ve heard from her,” he continued, “did she send me a message?”

“None whatever.”

“Nor say anything about me?”

“Not a word.”

“Ah!” said Henry Chilver, while their eyes again met with some insistence. He somehow liked Mrs. Damerel’s silence after the hours he had spent with her; but his state of mind was again predominantly of not wanting Braddle to see in him any emotion. “A woman may surely be called all right, it seems to me, when she’s pretty and clever and good.”

“‘Good’?” Braddle echoed. “How do you know she’s good?”

“Why, confound you, she’s such a lady.”

“Isn’t she?” — Braddle took it up with equal promptitude and inconsequence. Then he recovered himself. “All the same, one has known ladies——!”

“Yes, one has. But she’s quite the best thing that, in the whole time, we’ve come across.”

“Oh, by a long shot. Think of those women on the ship. It’s only that she’s so poor,” Braddle added.

Chilver hesitated. “Is she so awfully?”

“She has evidently to count her shillings.”

“Well, if she had been bad she’d be rich,” Chilver returned after another silence. “So what more do you want?”

“Nothing. Nothing,” Braddle repeated.

“Good-bye, then.”

“Good-bye.”

On which the elder man had taken leave; so that what was inevitably to follow had to wait for their

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next meeting. Mrs. Damerel's victim betrayed on this second occasion still more markedly the state of a worried man, and his friend measured his unrest by his obvious need of a patient ear, a need with which Chilver's own nature, this interlocutor felt, would not in the same conditions have been acquainted. Even while he wondered, however, at the freedom his visitor used, Chilver recognised that had it been a case of more or less fatuous happiness Braddle would probably have kept the matter to himself. His host made the reflexion that *he*, on the other hand, might have babbled about a confidence, but would never have opened his mouth about a fear. Braddle's fear, like many fears, had a considerable queerness, and Chilver, in presence of it and even before a full glimpse, had begun to describe it to himself as a fixed idea. It was as if, according to Braddle, there had been something in Mrs. Damerel's history that she ought really to have told a fellow before letting him in so far.

"But how far?"

"Why, hang it, I'd marry her to-morrow."

Chilver waited a moment. "Is what you mean that she'd marry *you*?"

"Yes, blest if I don't believe she certainly would."

"You mean if you'd let her off——?"

"Yes," Braddle concurred; "the obligation of letting me know the particular thing that, whatever it is, right or wrong, I've somehow got it so tormentingly into my head that she keeps back."

"When you say 'keeps back,' do you mean that you've questioned her?"

"Oh, not about *that*!" said Braddle with beautiful simplicity.

"Then do you expect her to volunteer information——"

"That may damage her so awfully with me?"

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Braddle had taken it up intelligently, but appeared sufficiently at a loss as to what he expected. "I'm sure she knows well enough I want to know."

"I don't think I understand what you're talking about," Chilver replied after a longish stare at the fire.

"Well, about something or other in her life; some awkward passage, some beastly episode or accident; the things that do happen, that often *have* happened, to women you might think perfectly straight—come now! and that they very often quite successfully hide. You know what I'm driving at: some chapter in the book difficult to read aloud—some unlucky page she'd like to tear out. God forgive me, some slip."

Chilver, quitting the fire, had taken a turn round the room. "Is it your idea," he presently inquired, "that there may have been only *one*? I mean one 'slip.' " He pulled up long enough in front of them to give his visitor's eyes time to show a guess at possible derision, then he went on in another manner. "No, no; I really don't understand. You seem to me to see her as a column of figures each in itself highly satisfactory, but which, when you add them up, make only a total of doubt."

"That's exactly it!" Braddle spoke almost with admiration of this neat formula. "She hasn't really *any* references."

"But, my dear man, it's not as if you were engaging a housemaid."

Braddle was arrested but a moment. "It's much worse. For any one else I shouldn't mind——!"

"What I don't grasp," his companion broke in, "is your liking her so much as to 'mind' so much, without by the same stroke liking her enough not to mind at all."

Braddle took in without confusion this approach

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to subtlety. "But suppose it should be something rather awful?"

It was his confidant, rather, who was a trifle disconcerted. "Isn't it just as easy—besides being much more comfortable—to suppose there's nothing?"

"No. If it had been, don't you see that I *would* have supposed it? There's something. I don't know what there is; but there's something."

"Then ask her."

Braddle wondered. "Would *you*?"

"Oh dear, no!"

"Then *I* won't!" Braddle returned with an odd air of defiance that made his host break into a laugh. "Suppose," he continued, "she should swear there's nothing."

"The chance of that is just why it strikes me you might ask her."

"I 'might'? I thought you said one shouldn't."

"I shouldn't. But I haven't your ideas."

"Ah, but you don't know her."

Chilver hesitated. "Precisely. And what you mean is that, even if she should swear there's nothing, you wouldn't believe her?"

Braddle appeared to give a silent and even somewhat diffident assent. "There's nothing I should hate like that. I should hate it still more than being as I am. If you had seen more of her," he pursued, "you would know what I mean by her having no references. Her whole life has been so extraordinarily—so conveniently, as one might say—away from everything."

"I see—so conveniently for *her*. Beyond verification."

"Exactly; the record's inaccessible. It's all the 'great West.' We saw something of the great West, and I thought it rather *too* great. She appears to have put in a lot of California and the Sandwich

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Islands. I may be too particular, but I don't fancy a Sandwich Islands past. Even for her husband and for her little girl—for their having lived as little as for their having died—she has nothing to show. She hasn't so much as a photograph, a lock of hair or an announcement in a newspaper."

Chilver thought. "But perhaps she wouldn't naturally leave such things about the sitting-room of a Brighton lodging."

"I daresay not. But it isn't only such things. It's tremendously odd her never having even by mere chance knocked against anything or any one that one has ever heard of or could—if one should want to—get at."

Again Henry Chilver reflected. "Well, that's what struck me as especially nice, or rather as very remarkable in her—her being, with all her attraction, one of the obscure seventy millions; a mere little almost nameless tossed-up flower out of the huge mixed lap of the great American people. I mean for the charming person she is. I doubt if, after all, any other huge mixed lap——"

"Yes, if she were English, on those lines," Braddle sagaciously interrupted, "one wouldn't look at her, would one? I say, fancy her English!"

Chilver was silent a little. "What you don't like is her music."

His visitor met his eyes. "Why, it's awfully good."

"Is it? I mean her having, as you told me on the boat, given lessons."

"That certainly is not what I most like her to have done—I mean on account of some of the persons she may have given them to; but when her voice broke down she had to do something. She had sung in public—though only in concerts; but that's another thing. She lost her voice after an illness. I don't know what the illness was. It was after her husband's

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death. She plays quite wonderfully—better, she says, really, than she sang ; so she has that resource. She gave the lessons in the Sandwich Islands. She admits that, fighting for her own hand, as she says, she has kept some queer company. I've asked her for details, but she only says she'll tell me 'some day.' Well, *what* day, don't you know ? Finally she inherited a little money—she says from a distant cousin. I don't call *that* distant—setting her up. It isn't much, but it made the difference, and there she is. She says she's afraid of London ; but I don't quite see in what sense. She heard about her place at Brighton from some 'Western friends.' But how can I go and ask them ? ”

“ The Western friends ? ” said Chilver.

“ No, the people of the house—about the other people. The place is rather beastly, but it seems all right. At any rate she likes it. If there's an awful hole on earth it's Brighton, but she thinks it 'perfectly fascinating.' Now isn't that a rum note ? She's the most extraordinary mixture.”

Chilver had listened with an air of strained delicacy to this broken trickle of anguish, speaking to the point only when it appeared altogether to have ceased. “ Well, my dear man, what is it, may I ask in all sympathy, you would like me, in the circumstances, to do ? Do you want me to sound her for you ? ”

“ Don't be *too* excruciatingly funny,” Braddle after a moment replied.

“ Well then, clear the thing up.”

“ But how ? ”

“ By making her let you know the worst.”

“ And by what means—if I don't ask her ? ”

“ Simply by proposing.”

“ Marriage ? ”

“ Marriage, naturally.”

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“ You consider,” Braddle inquired, “ that that will infallibly make her speak ? ”

“ Not infallibly, but probably.”

Braddle looked all round the room. “ But if it shouldn’t ? ”

His friend took another turn about. “ Well—risk it ! ”

IV

HENRY CHILVER remained for a much longer time than he would have expected in ignorance of the effect of that admonition ; two full months elapsed without bringing him news. Something, he meanwhile reasoned, he *should* know—ought to know : it was due to him assuredly that Bertram Braddle shouldn't—quite apart from the distance travelled in the company of Mrs. Damerel—go so far even with *him* without recognising the propriety of going further. But at last, as the weeks passed, he arrived at his own estimate of a situation which had clearly nothing more to give him. It was a situation that had simply ceased to be one. Braddle was afraid and had remained afraid, just as he was ashamed and had remained ashamed. He had bolted, in his embarrassment, to Australia or the Cape ; unless indeed he had dashed off once more to America, this time perhaps in quest of his so invidious “ references.” Was he looking for tracks in the great West or listening to twaddle in the Sandwich Islands ? In any case Mrs. Damerel would be alone, and the point of honour, for Chilver himself, would have had its day. The sharpest thing in his life at present was the desire to see her again, and he considered that every hour without information made a difference for the question of avoiding her from delicacy. Finally, one morning, with the first faint winter light,

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it became vivid to him that the dictate of delicacy was positively the other way—was that, on the basis of Braddle's disappearance, he should make her some sign of recollection. He had not forgotten the address observed on one of her luggage-labels the day he had seen her up from Liverpool. Mightn't he, for instance, run down to her place that very morning? Braddle couldn't expect——! What Braddle couldn't expect, however, was lost in the suppressed sound with which, on passing into his sitting-room and taking up his fresh letters, he greeted the superscription of the last of the half-dozen just placed on his table. The envelope bore the postmark of Brighton, and if he had languished for information the very first lines—the note was only of a page—were charged with it. Braddle announced his engagement to Mrs. Damerel, spoke briefly, but with emphasis, of their great happiness and their early nuptials, and hoped very much his correspondent would be able to come down and see them for a day.

Henry Chilver, it may be stated, had, for reasons of feeling—he felt somehow so deeply refuted—to wait a certain time to answer. What had Mrs. Damerel's lover, he wondered, succeeded at last in extracting from her? She had made up her mind as to what she could safely do—she had let him know the worst and he had swallowed it down? What *was* it, the queer suppressed chapter; what was the awkward page they had agreed to tear out together? Chilver found himself envying his friend the romance of having been sustained in the special effort, the extreme sacrifice, involved in such an understanding. But he had for many days, on the whole vision, odd impatiences that were followed by odder recoveries. One of these variations was a sudden drop of the desire to be in presence of the woman for the sight of whom he had all winter consistently been yearning.

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What was most marked, however, was the shake he had vigorously to give himself on perceiving his thoughts again and again take the direction that poor Braddle had too successfully imparted to them. His curiosity about the concession she might have made to Braddle's was an assumption—without Braddle's excuses—that she had really had something to conceal till she was sure of her man. This was idiotic, because the idea was one that never would have originated with himself.

He did at last fix a day, none the less, and went down ; but there, on the spot, his imagination was, to his surprise, freshly excited by the very fact that there were no apparent signs of a drama. It was as if he could see, after all, even face to face with her, what had stirred within the man she had for a time only imperfectly subdued. Why should she have tried to be so simple—too simple ? She overdid it, she ignored too much. Clear, soft, sweet, yet not a bit silly, she might well strike a fellow as having had more history than she—what should one call it ?—owned up to. There were moments when Chilver thought he got hold of it in saying to himself that she was too clever to be merely what she was. There was something in her that, more than anything ever in any one, gratified his taste and seemed to him to testify to the happiest exercise of her own ; and such things brought up the puzzle of how so much taste could have landed her simply where she was. Where she was—well, was doubtless where she would find comfort, for the man she had accepted was now visibly at peace, even though he had not yet, as appeared, introduced her to his people. The fact of which Chilver was at last as at first most conscious was the way she succeeded in withholding from his own penetration every trace of the great question she had had out with her intended, who yet couldn't have failed—one

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would quite have defied him—to give it to her somehow that he had on two occasions allowed his tongue to betray him to the other person he most trusted. Braddle, whose taste was not his strong point, had probably mentioned this indiscretion to her as a drollery; or else she had simply questioned him, got it out of him. This made their guest a participant, but there was something beautiful and final in the curtain that, on her side, she had dropped. It never gave, all day, the faintest stir. That affected Chilver as the mark of what there might be behind.

Yet when in the evening his friend went with him to the station—for the visitor had declined to sleep and was taking the last train back—he had, after they had walked two or three times up and down the platform, the greatest mystification of all. They were smoking; there were ten minutes to spare, and they moved to and fro in silence. They had been talking all day—mainly in Mrs. Damerel's company, but the circumstance that neither spoke at present was not the less marked. Yet if Chilver was waiting for something on his host's part he could scarcely have said for what. He was aware now that if Mrs. Damerel had, as he privately phrased it, "spoken," it was scarcely to be expected that the man with a standpoint altered by a definite engagement would—at the present stage at least—repeat to him her words. He felt, however, as the fruitless moments ebbed, a trifle wronged, at all events disappointed: since he had been dragged into the business, as he always for himself expressed it, it would only have been fair to throw a sop to his conjecture. What, moreover, was Braddle himself so perversely and persistently mum for—without an allusion that should even serve as a penance—unless to draw out some advance which might help him to revert with

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an approach to grace? Chilver nevertheless made no advance, and at last as, ceasing to stroll, they stood at the open door of an empty compartment, the train was almost immediately to start. At this moment they exchanged a long, queer stare.

"Well, good-bye," said the elder man.

"Good-bye." Chilver still waited before entering the carriage, but just as he was about to give up his companion added: "You see I followed your advice. I took the risk."

"Oh—about the question we discussed?" Chilver broke now, on the instant, into friendly response. "See then how right I was."

Braddle looked up and down the train. "I don't know."

"You're not satisfied?"

"Satisfied?" Still Braddle looked away.

"With what she has told you."

Braddle faced him again. "She has told me nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. She has accepted me—that's all. Not a bit else. So you see you *weren't* so right."

"Oh—oh!" exclaimed Chilver protestingly. The guard at this moment interposing with a "Take your seats, please!" and sharply, on his entering the carriage, shutting the door on him, he continued the conversation from the window, on which he rested his elbows. During the movement his protest had changed to something else. "Ah, but won't she yet——?"

"Let me have it? I'm sure I don't know. All I can say is that nothing has come from her."

"Then it's because there *is* nothing."

"I hope so," said Braddle from the platform.

"So you see," Chilver called out as the train moved, "I *was* right!" And he leaned forth as the

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distance grew and Braddle stood motionless and grave, gaily insisting and taking leave with his waving hand. But when he drew in his head and dropped into a seat he rather collapsed, tossing his hat across the compartment and sinking back into a corner and an attitude from which, staring before him and not even lighting another cigarette, he never budged till he reached Victoria.

A fortnight later the footfall of Mrs. Damerel's intended was loud on the old staircase in the Temple and the knob of his stick louder still on the old door. "It's only that it has rather stuck in my crop," he presently explained, "that I let you leave Brighton the other day with the pretension that you had been 'right,' as you called it, about the risk—attending the particular step—that I took. I can't help it if I want you to know—for it bores me that you're so pleased—that you weren't in the least right. You were most uncommonly wrong."

"Wrong?"

"Wrong."

Chilver looked vaguely about as if suddenly in search of something, then moved with an odd general inconsequence to the window. "As the day's so fine, do you mind our getting out of this beastly stuffy place into the Gardens? We can talk there." His hat was apparently what he had been looking for, and he took it up, and with it some cigarettes. Braddle, though seemingly disconcerted by what threatened to be practically a change of subject, replied that he didn't care a hang; so that, leaving the room, they passed together down to the court and through other battered courts and crooked ways. The dim London sunshine in the great surrounded garden had a kindness, and the hum of the town was as hindered and yet as present as the faint sense of spring. The two men stopped together before a bench,

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but neither for the moment sat down. "Do you mean she *has* told you?" Chilver at last brought out.

"No—it's just what she hasn't done."

"Then how the deuce am I wrong?"

"She has admitted that there *is* something."

Chilver markedly wondered. "Something? What?"

"That's just what I want to know."

"Then you *have* asked her?"

Braddle hesitated. "I couldn't resist my curiosity, my anxiety—call it what you will. I've been too worried. I put it to her the day after you were down there."

"And how did you put it?"

"Oh, just simply, brutally, disgustingly. I said: 'Isn't there something about yourself—something or other that has happened to you—that you're keeping back?'"

Chilver was attentive, but not solemn. "Well?"

"Oh, she admitted it."

"And in what terms?"

"Well, since you really drive me to the wall, there *is* something."

Chilver continued to consider. "And is that all she says?"

"No—she says she *will* tell me."

"Ah well, then!" And Chilver spoke with a curious—in fact, a slightly ambiguous—little renewed sound of superiority.

"Yes," his friend ruefully returned, "but not, you see, for six months."

"Oh, I see! I see!" Chilver thoughtfully repeated. "So you've got to wait—which I admit perfectly that you must find rather a bore. Yet if *she's* willing," he went on with more cheer and as if still seeking a justification of his original judgement—"if *she's* willing, you see, I wasn't so much out."

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Bertram Braddle demurred. "But she isn't willing."

His interlocutor stared. "I thought you said she proposed it."

"Proposed what?"

"Why, the six months' wait—to make sure of you."

"Ah, but she'll *be* sure of me, after she has married me. The delay she asks for is not for our marriage," Braddle explained, "but only—from the date of our marriage—for the information."

"A-ah!" Chilver murmured, as if only now with a full view. "She means she'll speak when you *are* married."

"When we are. And then only on a great condition."

"How great?"

"Well, that if after the six months I still want it very much. She argues, you know, that I *shan't* want it."

"You won't then—you won't!" cried Chilver with a laugh at the odd word and passing his arm into his friend's to make him walk again. They talked and they talked; Chilver kept his companion's arm and they quite had the matter out.

"What's that, you know," Braddle asked, "but a way to get off altogether?"

"You mean for you to get off from knowing?"

"Ah no, for *her*——"

"To get off from telling? It is that, rather, of course," Chilver conceded. "But why shouldn't she get off—if you should be ready to let her?"

"Oh, but if I shouldn't be?" Braddle broke in.

"Why then, if she promises, she'll tell you."

"Yes, but by that time the knot will be tight."

"And what difference will that make if you don't mind? She argues, as you say, that after that

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amount of marriage, of experience of her, you won't care——!"

"What she does tell me may *be*?" Braddle smoked a moment in silence. "But suppose it should be one of those things——" He dropped again.

"Well, what things?"

"That a man can't like in *any* state of satisfaction."

"I don't know what things you mean."

"Come, I say—you do! Suppose it should be something really awful."

"Well, her calculation is that, awful or not," Chilver said, "she'll have sufficiently attached you to make you willing either totally to forgo her disclosure or else easily to bear it."

"Oh, I know her calculation—which is very charming as well as very clever and very brave. But my danger——"

"Oh, you think too much of your danger!"

Braddle stopped short. "*You* don't!"

Chilver, however, who had coloured, spent much of the rest of the time they remained together in assuring him that he allowed this element all its weight. Only he came back at the last to what, practically, he had come back to in their other talks. "I don't quite see why she doesn't strike you as worth almost *any* risk."

"Do you mean, that that's the way she strikes you?"

"Oh, I've not to tell you at this time of day," said Chilver, "how well I think of her."

His companion was now seated on a bench from which he himself had shortly before risen. "Ah, but I don't suppose you pretend to know her."

"No—certainly not, I admit. But I don't see how *you* should either, if you come to that."

"I don't; but it's exactly what I'm trying for,

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confound it ! Besides," Braddle pursued, " she doesn't put you the great condition."

Chilver took a few steps away ; then as he came back. " No ; she doesn't ! "

" Wait till some woman does," Braddle went on. " Then you'll see how you feel under it—then you can talk. If I wasn't so infernally fond of her," he gloomily added, " I wouldn't mind."

" Wouldn't mind what ? "

" Why, what she has been. What she has done."

" Oh ! " Chilver vaguely ejaculated.

" And I only mind now to the extent of wanting to know." On which Braddle rose from his seat with a heavy sigh. " Hang it, I've got to know, you know ! " he declared as they walked on together.

V

HENRY CHILVER learned, however, in the course of time that he had won no victory on this, after all, rather reasonable ground—learned it from Mrs. Damerel herself, who came up to town in the spring and established herself, in the neighbourhood of Kensington Square, in modest but decent quarters, where her late suitor's best friend went to pay her his respects. The great condition had, as each party saw it, been fruitlessly maintained, for neither had, under whatever pressure, found a way to give in. The most remarkable thing of all was that Chilver should so rapidly have become aware of owing his acquaintance with these facts directly to Mrs. Damerel. He had, for that matter, on the occasion of his very first call, an impression strangely new to him—the consciousness that they had already touched each other much more than any contact between them explained. They met in the air of a common knowledge, so that when, for instance, almost immediately, without precautions or approaches, she said of Bertram Braddle: "He has gone off—heaven knows where!—to find out about me," he was not in the least struck with the length of the jump. He was instantly sensible, on the contrary, of the greatest pleasure in showing by his reply that he needed no explanation. "And do you think he'll succeed?"

"I don't know. He's so clever."

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This, it seemed to Henry Chilver, was a wonderful speech, and he sat there and candidly admired her for it. There were all sorts of things in it—faint, gentle ironies and humiliaties, and above all the fact that the description was by no means exact. Poor Braddle was not, for such a measure as hers, clever, or markedly wouldn't be for such an undertaking. The words completely, on the part of the woman who might be supposed to have had a kindness for him, gave him away ; but surely that was, in the face of his attitude, a mild revenge. It seemed to Chilver that until in her little makeshift suburban drawing-room he found himself alone with Mrs. Damerel he himself had not effectively judged this position. He saw it now sharply, supremely, as the only one that had been possible to his friend, but finer still was the general state of perception, quickened to a liberal intensity, that made him so see it. He couldn't have expressed the case otherwise than by saying that poor Braddle had had to be right to be so ridiculously wrong. There might well have been, it appeared, in Mrs. Damerel's past a missing link or two ; but what was the very office of such a fact—when taken with other facts not a bit less vivid—but to give one a splendid chance to show a confidence ? Not the confidence that, as one could only put it to one's self, there had not been anything, but the confidence that, whatever there had been, one wouldn't find that one couldn't—for the sake of the rest—swallow it.

This was at bottom the great result of the first stages of Chilver's now independent, as he felt it to be, acquaintance with Mrs. Damerel—a sudden view of any, of every, dim passage, that was more than a tender acceptance of the particular obscurity, that partook really of the nature of affirmation and insistence. It all made her, with everything that for her

advantage happened to help it on, extraordinarily touching to him, clothed her in the beauty of her general admission and her general appeal. Were not this admission and this appeal enough, and could anything be imagined more ponderously clumsy, more tactless and even truculent, than to want to gouge out the bleeding details? The charming woman was, to Chilver's view, about of his own age—not altogether so young, therefore, as Braddle, which was doubtless a note, too, in the latter's embarrassment—and that evidently did give time for a certain quantity of more or less trying, of really complicating experience. There it practically was, this experience, in the character of her delicacy, in her kindly, witty, sensitive face, worn fine, too fine perhaps, but only to its increase of expression. She was neither a young fool nor an old one, assuredly; but if the intenser acquaintance with life had made the object of one's affection neither false nor hard, how could one, on the whole, since the story might be so interesting, wish it away? Mrs. Damerel's admission was so much evidence of her truth and her appeal so much evidence of her softness. She might easily have hated them both for guessing. She was at all events just faded enough to match the small assortment of Chilver's fatigued illusions—those that he had still, for occasions, in somewhat sceptical use, but that had lost their original violence of colour.

The second time he saw her alone he came back to what she had told him of Bertram Braddle. "If he should succeed—as to what you spoke of, wherever he has gone—would your engagement come on again?"

Mrs. Damerel hesitated, but she smiled. "Do you mean whether he'll be likely to wish it?"

"No," said Chilver, with something of a blush; "I mean whether you'll be."

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She still smiled. "Dear, no. I consider, you know, that I gave him his chance."

"That you seem to me certainly to have done. Everything between you, then, as I understand it, is at an end?"

"It's very good of you," said Mrs. Damerel, "to desire so much to understand it. But I never give," she laughed, "but one chance!"

Chilver met her as he could. "You evidently can't have given any one very many!"

"Oh, you know," she replied, "I don't in the least regard it as a matter of course that, many or few, they should be eagerly seized. Mr. Braddle has only behaved as almost any man in his situation would have done."

Chilver at first, on this, only lost himself a while. "Yes, almost any man. I don't consider that the smallest blame attaches to him."

"It would be too monstrous."

Again he was briefly silent, but he had his inspiration. "Yes, let us speak of him gently." Then he added: "You've answered me enough. You're free."

"Free indeed is what I feel," she replied with her light irony, "when I talk to you with this extraordinary frankness."

"Ah, the frankness is mine! It comes from the fact that from the first, through Braddle, I knew. And you knew I knew. And I knew that too. It has made something between us."

"It might have made something rather different from this," said Mrs. Damerel.

He wondered an instant. "Different from my sitting here so intimately with you?"

"I mightn't have been able to bear that. I might have hated the sight of you."

"Ah, that would have been only," said Chilver, "if you had really liked me!"

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She matched quickly enough the spirit of this. "Oh, but it wasn't so easy to like you little enough!"

"Little enough to endure me? Well, thank heaven, at any rate, we've found a sort of way!" Then he went on with real sincerity: "I feel as if our friend had tremendously helped me. Oh, how easily I want to let him down! There it is."

She breathed, after a moment, her assent in a sigh. "There it is!"

There indeed it was for several days during which this sigh frequently came back to him as a note of patience, of dignity in helpless submission, penetrating beyond any that had ever reached him. She had been put completely in his power, her good name handed over to him, by no act of her own, and in all her manner in presence of the awkward fact there was something that blinked it as little as it braved it. He wondered so hard, with this, why, even after the talk I have just reported, they were each not more embarrassed, that it could only take him a tolerably short time to discover the reason. If there was something between them it had been between them, in silence and distance, from the first, from even before the moment when his friend, on the ship, by the favour of better opportunity, had tumbled in deep and temporarily blocked, as it were, the passage. Braddle was good-looking, good-humoured, well-connected, rich; and how could she have known of the impression of the man in the background any more than the man in the background could have known of hers? If she had accepted Braddle hadn't it been just to build out, in her situation, at a stroke, the worry of an alternative that was impossible? Of himself she had seen nothing but that he was out of the question, and she had agreed for conscience, for prudence, as a safeguard and a provision, to throw in her lot with a charming, fortunate fellow who was

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extremely in love. Chilver had, in his meditations, no sooner read these things clear than he had another flash that completed the vision. Hadn't she then, however, having done so much for reason, stood out, with her intended, on the item of the great condition—made great precisely by the insistence of each—exactly because, after all, that left the door open to her imagination, her dream, her hope? Hadn't her idea been to make for Bertram—troubled herself and wavering for the result—a calculated difficulty, a real test? Oh, if there was a test, how *he* was ready to meet it! Henry Chilver's insistence would take a different line from that of his predecessor. He stood at the threshold of the door, left open indeed, so that he had only to walk over. By the end of the week he had proposed.

VI

It was at his club, one day of the following year, that he next came upon his old friend, whom he had believed, turning the matter often round, he should—in time, though the time might be long—inevitably meet again on some ground socially workable. That the time might be long had been indicated by a circumstance that came up again as soon as, fairly face to face, they fell, in spite of everything, to talking together. “Ah, you *will* speak to me then,” said Chilver, “though you don’t answer my letters!”

Braddle showed a strange countenance, partly accounted for by the fact that he was brown, seasoned, a trifle battered and had almost grown thin. But he had still his good monocular scowl, on the strength of which—it was really so much less a threat than a positive appeal from a supersubtle world—any old friend, recognising it again, would take almost anything from him. Yes indeed, quite anything, Chilver felt after they had been a few minutes together: he had become so quickly conscious of pity, of all sorts of allowances, and this had already operated as such a quickener of his private happiness. He had immediately proposed that they should look for a quiet corner, and they had found one in the smoking-room, always empty in the middle of the afternoon. Here it seemed to him that Braddle showed him what he himself had escaped.

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He had escaped being as *he* was—that was it: “as *he* was” was a state that covered now, to Chilver’s sense, such vast spaces of exclusion and privation. It wasn’t exactly that he was haggard or ill; his case was perhaps even not wholly clear to him, and he had still all the rest of his resources; but he was miserably afloat, and he could only be for Chilver the big, sore, stupid monument of his irretrievable mistake. “Did you write me more than once?” he finally asked.

“No—but once. But I thought it, I’m bound to say, an awfully good letter, and you took no notice of it, you know, whatever. You never returned me a word.”

“I know,” said Braddle, smoking hard and looking away; “it reached me at Hawaii. It *was*, I dare say, as good a letter as such a letter could be. I remember—I remember: all right; thanks. But I couldn’t answer it. I didn’t like it, and yet I couldn’t trust myself to tell you so in the right way. So I let it alone.”

“And we’ve therefore known nothing whatever about you.”

Braddle sat jogging his long foot. “What is it you’ve wanted to know?”

The question made Chilver feel a little foolish. What *was* it, after all? “Well, what had become of you, and that sort of thing. I supposed,” he added, “that you might be feeling as you say, and there was a lot, in connexion with you, of course I myself felt, for me to think about. I even hesitated a good deal to write to you at all, and I waited, you remember, don’t you? till after my marriage. I don’t know what your state of mind may be to-day, but you’ll never, my dear chap, get a ‘rise’ out of me. I bear you no grudge.”

His companion, at this, looked at him again. “Do you mean for what I said——?”

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"What you said——?"

"About *her*."

"Oh no—I mean for the way you've treated us."

"How do you know how I've treated you?"

Braddle asked.

"Ah, I only pretend to speak of what I do know! Your not coming near us. You've been in the Sandwich Islands?" Chilver went on after a pause.

"Oh yes."

"And in California?"

"Yes—all over the place."

"All the while you've been gone?"

"No, after a time I gave it up. I've been round the world—in extraordinary holes."

"And have you come back to England," Chilver asked, "to stay a while?"

"I don't know—I don't know!" his friend replied with some impatience.

They kept it up, but with pauses—pauses during which, as they listened, in the big, stale, empty room, always dreary in the absence of talk and the silence of the billiard-balls just beyond—the loud tick of the clock gave their position almost as much an air of awkward penance as if they had had "lines" to do or were staying after school. Chilver wondered if it would after all practically fail, his desire that they should remain friends. His wife—beautiful creature!—would give every help, so that it would really depend on Braddle himself. It might indeed have been as an issue to the ponderation of some such question on his own part that poor Bertram suddenly exclaimed: "I see you're happy—I can make *that* out!"

He had said it in a way suggesting that it might make with him a difference for the worse, but Chilver answered none the less good-humouredly. "I'm afraid I can't pretend that I'm in the least miserable.

THE GREAT CONDITION

But is it impossible you should come and see us?—come and judge, as it were, for yourself?”

Braddle looked graver than ever. “Would it suit your wife?”

“Oh, she’s not afraid, I think!” his companion laughed. “You spoke just now,” he after a moment continued, “of something that in your absence, in your travels, you ‘gave up.’ Let me ask you frankly if you meant that you had undertaken inquiries——”

“Yes; I ‘nosed round,’ as they say out there; I looked about and tried to pick something.” Braddle spoke on a drop of his interlocutor, checked evidently by a certain hardness of defiance in his good eyes; but he couldn’t know that Chilver wished to draw him out only to be more sorry for him, hesitating simply because of the desire not to put his proceeding to him otherwise than gracefully. “Awfully low-minded, as well as idiotic, I daresay you’ll think it—but I’m not prepared to allow that it was not quite my own affair.”

“Oh, *she* knew!” said Chilver comfortably enough.

“Knew I shouldn’t find out anything? Well, I didn’t. So she was right.”

Thus they sat for a moment and seemed to smoke at her infallibility. “Do you mean anything objectionable?” Chilver presently inquired.

“Anything at all. Not a scrap. Not a trace of her passage—not an echo of her name. That, however—that I wouldn’t, that I couldn’t,” Braddle added, “you’ll have known for yourself.”

“No, I wasn’t sure.”

“Then *she* was.”

“Perhaps,” said Chilver. “But she didn’t tell me.”

His friend hesitated. “Then what *has* she told you?”

THE GREAT CONDITION

"She has told me nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," said Henry Chilver, smiling as with the enjoyment of his companion's surprise. "But do come and see us," he pursued as Braddle abruptly rose and stood—now with a gravity that was almost portentous—looking down at him.

"I'm horribly nervous. Excuse me. You make me so," the younger man declared after a pause.

Chilver, who with this had got up soothingly and still laughingly, laid a reassuring hand upon him. "Dear old man—take it easy!"

"Thanks about coming to see you," Braddle went on. "I must think of it. Give me time."

"Time? Haven't you had months?"

Braddle turned it over. "Yes; but not on seeing you this way. I'm abominably nervous, at all events. There have been things—my silence among them—which I haven't known how you'd take."

"Well, you see how."

Braddle's stare was after all rather sightless. "I see—but I don't understand. I'll tell you what you might do—you might come to *me*."

"Oh, delighted. The old place?"

"The old place." Braddle had taken out his eyeglass to wipe it, and he cocked it characteristically back. "*Our* relation's rather rum, you know."

"Yours and my wife's? Oh, most unconventional; you may depend on it she feels that herself."

Braddle kept fixing him. "Then does *she* want to crow over me?"

"To crow?" Chilver was vague. "About what?"

His interlocutor hesitated. "About having at least got *you*."

"Oh, she's naturally pleased at that; but her satisfaction's after all a thing she can keep within

THE GREAT CONDITION

bounds ; and to see you again can only, I think, remind her more than anything else of what she did lose and now misses : your general situation, your personal advantages, your connexions, expectations, magnificence."

Braddle, on this, after a lingering frown, turned away, looking at his watch and moving for a minute to the window. " When will you come ? To-night ? "

Chilver thought. " Rather late — yes. With pleasure."

His friend presently came back with an expression rather changed. " What I meant just now was what it all makes of my relation and yours—the way we go into it."

" Ah, well, that was extraordinary—the way we went into it—from the first. It was you, permit me to remark," Chilver pleasantly said, " who originally *began* going into it. Since you broke the ice I don't in the least mind its remaining broken."

" Ah, but at that time," Braddle returned, " I didn't know in the least what you were up to."

" And do I now know any more what *you* are ? However," Chilver went on, " if you imply that I haven't acted with most scrupulous fairness, we *shall*, my dear fellow, quarrel as much as you please. I pressed you hard for your own interest."

" Oh, my ' interest ' ! " his companion threw off with another move to some distance ; coming back, however, as quickly and before Chilver had time to take this up. " It's all right—I've nothing to say. Your letter was very clever and very handsome." Then, " I'm not ' up to ' anything," Braddle added with simplicity.

The simplicity just renewed his interlocutor's mirth. " In that case why shouldn't we manage ? "

" Manage ? "

" To make the best, all round, of the situation."

THE GREAT CONDITION

"I've no difficulty whatever," said Braddle, "in doing that. If I'm nervous I'm still much less so than I was before I went away. And as to my having broken off, I feel more and more how impossible it was I should have done anything else."

"I'm sure of it—so we *will* manage."

It was as if this prospect, none the less, was still not clear to Braddle. "Then as you've so much confidence I can ask you why—if what you said just now of me is true—she shouldn't have paid for me a price that she was going, after all, to find herself ready to pay for *you*."

"A price? What price?"

"Why, the one we've been talking about. That of waiving her great condition." On which, as Chilver was, a moment—though without embarrassment—silent for this explanation, his interlocutor pursued: "The condition of your waiting——"

"Ah," said Chilver, "it remained. She didn't waive it."

Oh, how Braddle looked at him! "You accepted it?"

Chilver gave a laugh at his friend's stare. "Why are you so surprised when all my urgency to *you* was to accept it and when I thought you were going to?" Bertram had flushed, and he was really astonished. "Hadn't you then known?"

"Your letter didn't say that."

"Oh, I didn't go into our terms."

"No," said Braddle with some severity, "you slurred them over. I know what you urged on me and what you thought I was going to do. I thought I was going to do it too. But at the scratch I couldn't."

"So you believed I wouldn't?"

Poor Braddle was, after all, candid enough. "At the scratch, yes; when it came—the question—to yourself, and in spite of your extraordinary preaching.

THE GREAT CONDITION

I think I took for granted that she must have done for you what she didn't do for me—that, liking you all for yourself, don't you see? and therefore so much better, she must have come round."

"For myself, better or worse, I grant you, was the only way she could like me," Chilver replied. "But she didn't come round."

"You married her *with* it?"

This was a question, however—it was in particular an emphasis—as to the interpretation of which he showed a certain reserve. "With what?"

"Why, damn it, with the condition."

"Oh yes—with the condition." It sounded, on Chilver's lips, positively gay.

"You waited?"

"I waited."

This answer produced between them for the time—and, as might be said, by its visible effect on the recipient—a hush during which poor Bertram did two or three pointless things: took up an ash-tray that was near them and vaguely examined it, then looked at the clock and at his watch, then again restlessly moved off a few steps and came back. At his watch he gave a second glare. "I say, after all—*don't* come to-night."

"You can't stand me?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you you've rather upset me. It's my abject nerves; but they'll settle down in a few days, and then I'll make you a sign. Good-bye."

"Good-bye." Chilver held a minute the hand he had put out. "Don't be too long. My secondary effect on you may perhaps be better."

"Oh, it isn't really you. I mean it's *her*."

"Talking about her? Then we'll talk of something else. You'll give me the account——"

"Oh, as I told you, there *was* no account!" Braddle

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quite artlessly broke in. Chilver laughed out again at this, and his interlocutor went on: "What's the matter is that, though it's none of my business, I can't resist a brutal curiosity—a kind of suspense."

"Suspense?" Chilver echoed with good-humoured deprecation.

"Of course I do see you're thoroughly happy."

"Thoroughly."

Braddle still waited. "Then it isn't anything——?"

"Anything?"

"To make a row about. I mean what you know."

"But I *don't* know."

"Not yet? She hasn't told you?"

"I haven't asked."

Braddle wondered. "But it's six months."

"It's seven. I've let it pass."

"Pass?" Braddle repeated with a strange sound.

"So would *you* in my place."

"Oh no, I beg your pardon!" Braddle almost exultantly declared. "But I give you a year."

"That's what *I've* given," said Chilver serenely.

His companion had a gasp. "Given *her*?"

"I bettered even, in accepting it, the great condition. I allowed her double the time."

Braddle wondered till he turned almost pale.

"Then it's because you're afraid."

"To spoil my happiness?"

"Yes—and hers."

"Well, my dear boy," said Chilver cheerfully, "it may be that."

"Unless," his friend went on, "you're—in the interest of every one, if you'll permit me the expression?—magnificently lying." Chilver's slow, good-humoured head-shake was so clearly, however, the next moment, a sufficient answer to this that the younger man could only add as dryly as he might: "You'll know when you want to."

THE GREAT CONDITION

" I shall know, doubtless, when I ask. But I feel at present that I shall never ask."

" Never ? "

" Never."

Braddle waited a moment. " Then how the devil shall *I* know ? "

Something in the tone of it renewed his companion's laughter. " Have you supposed I'd tell you ? "

" Well, you ought to, you know. And—yes—I've believed it."

" But, my good man, I can't ask for *you*."

Braddle turned it over. " Why not, when one thinks of it ? You know you owe me something."

" But—good heavens !—what ? "

" Well, some kindness. You know you've all the fun of being awfully sorry for me."

" My dear chap ! " Chilver murmured, patting his shoulder. " Well, give me time ! " he easily added.

" To the end of your year ? I'll come back *then*," said Braddle, going off.

VII

HE came back punctually enough, and one of the results of it was a talk that, a few weeks later, he had one Sunday afternoon with Mrs. Chilver, whom, till this occasion—though it was not his first visit to the house—he had not yet seen alone. It took him then but ten minutes—ten minutes of a marked but subsiding want of ease—to break out with a strong appeal to her on the question of the danger of the possible arrival of somebody else. “*Would* you mind—of course I know it’s an immense deal for me to ask—having it just said at the door that you’re not at home? I do so want really to get *at* you.”

“Oh, you needn’t be afraid of an interruption.” Mrs. Chilver seemed only amused. “No one comes to us. You see what our life is. Whom have you yet met here?”

He appeared struck with this. “Yes. Of course your living at Hammersmith—

“We have to live where we can live for tenpence a year.” He was silent at this touch, with a silence that, like an exclamation, betrayed a kind of helplessness, and she went on explaining as if positively to assist him. “Besides, we haven’t the want. And so few people know us. We’re our own company.”

“Yes—that’s just it. I never saw such a pair. It’s as if you did it on purpose. But it was to show you how I feel at last the luxury of seeing you without Chilver.”

THE GREAT CONDITION

"Ah, but I can't forbid *him* the door!" she laughed.

He kept his eyes for a minute on that of the room.
"Do you mean he *will* come in?"

"Oh, if he does it won't be to hurt you. He's not jealous."

"Well, *I* am," said the visitor frankly, "and I verily believe it's his not being—and showing it so—that partly has to do with that. If he cared I believe I shouldn't. Besides, what does it matter——?" He threshed about in his place uncomfortably.

She sat there—with all her effaced anxieties—patient and pretty. "What does what matter?"

"Why, *how* it happens—since it does happen—that he's always here."

"But you see he isn't!"

He made an eager movement. "Do you mean then we *can* talk?"

She just visibly hesitated. "He and I only want to be kind to you."

"That's just what's awful!" He fell back again. "It's the way he has kept me on and on. I mean without——" But he had another drop.

"Without what?"

Poor Braddle at last sprang up. "Do you mind my being in a horrible fidget and floundering about the room?"

She demurred, but without gravity. "Not if you don't again knock over the lamp. Do you remember the day you did that at Brighton?"

With his ambiguous frown at her he stopped short. "Yes, and how even that didn't move you."

"Well, don't presume on it again!" she laughed.

"You mean it might move you this time?" he went on.

"No; I mean that as I've now got better lamps——!"

THE GREAT CONDITION

He roamed there among her decent frugalities and, as regarded other matters as well as lamps, noted once more—as he had done on other occasions—the extreme moderation of the improvement. He had rather imagined on Chilver's part more margin. Then at last suddenly, with an effect of irrelevance: "Why *don't* people, as you say, come to you?"

"That's the kind of thing," she smiled, "you *used* to ask so much."

"Oh, too much, of course, and it's absurd my still wanting to know. It's none of my business; but, you know, nothing is if you come to that. It's your extraordinary kindness—the way you give me my head—that puts me up to things. Only you're trying the impossible—you can't keep me on. I mean without—well, what I spoke of just now. Do you mind my bringing it bang out like a brute?" he continued, stopping before her again. "Isn't it a question of either really taking me in or quite leaving me out?" As she had nothing, however, at first, for this inquiry but silence, and as her face made her silence charming, his appeal suddenly changed. "Do you mind my going on like this?"

"I don't mind anything. You want, I judge, some help. What help can I give you?"

He dropped, at this, straight into his chair again. "There you are! You pitied me even from the first—regularly beforehand. You're so confoundedly superior"—he almost sufficiently joked. "Of course I know all our relations are most extraordinary, but I think yours and mine is the strangest—unless it be yours and Chilver's."

"Let us say it's his and *yours*, and have done with it," she smiled.

"Do you know what I came back then for?—I mean the second time, *this* time?"

"Why, to see *me*, I've all these days supposed."

THE GREAT CONDITION

"Well," said Braddle with a slight hesitation, "it was, to that extent, to show my confidence."

But she also hesitated. "Your confidence in what?"

He had still another impatience, with the force of which he again changed his place. "Am I giving him away? How much do you know?"

In the air of his deep unrest her soft stillness—lending itself, but only by growing softer—had little by little taken on a beauty. "I'm trying to follow you—to understand. I know of your meeting with Henry last year at a club."

"Ah then, if he gave me away——!"

"I gathered rather, I seem to remember, from what he mentioned to me, that he must rather have given me too. But I don't in the least mind."

"Well, what passed between us then," said Braddle, "is why I came back. He made me, if I should wait, a sort of promise——"

"Oh"—she took him up—"I don't think he was conscious of anything like a promise. He said at least nothing to me of that." With which, as Braddle's face had exceedingly fallen, "But I know what you then wanted and what you still want to know," she added.

On this, for a time, they sat there with a long look. "I would rather have had it from *him*," he said at last.

"It would certainly have been more natural," she intelligently returned. "But he has given you no chance to press him again?"

"None—and with an evident intention: seeing me only with you."

"Well, at the present moment he doesn't see you at all. Nor me either!" Mrs. Chilver added as if to cover something in the accent of her former phrase. "But if he has avoided close quarters with you it has been not to disappoint you."

THE GREAT CONDITION

"He won't, after all, tell me?"

"He can't. He has nothing to tell."

Poor Braddle showed at this what his disappointment could be. "He has not even yet asked you?"

"Not even yet—after fifteen months. But don't be hard on him," she pleaded. "*You* wouldn't."

"For all this time?" Braddle spoke almost with indignation at the charge. "My dear lady—rather!"

"No, no," she gently insisted, "not even to tell *him*."

"He told you then," Braddle demanded, "that I thought he ought, if on no other grounds, to ask just *in order* to tell me?"

"Oh dear, no. He only told me he had met you, and where you had been. We don't speak of his 'asking,'" she explained.

"Don't you?" Her visitor stared.

"Never."

"Then how have you known——?"

"What you want so much? Why, by having seen it in you before—and just *how* much—and seeing it now. I've been feeling all along," she said, "how you must have argued."

"Oh, we didn't argue!"

"I think *you* did."

He had slowly got up—now less actively but not less intensely nervous—and stood there heedless of this and rather differently looking at her. "He never talks with you of his asking?"

"Never," she repeated.

"And you still stick to it that *I* wouldn't?"

She hesitated. "Have talked of it?"

"Have asked."

She was beautiful as she smiled up at him. "It would have been a little different. *You* would have talked."

He remained there a little in silence; what he

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might have done seemed so both to separate them and to hold them together. "And Chilver, you feel, will now never ask?"

"Never now."

He seemed to linger for conviction. "If he was going to, you mean, he would have done it——"

"Yes"—she was prompt—"the moment his time was up."

"I see"—and, turning away, he moved slowly about. "So you're safe?"

"Safe."

"And I'm just where I was!" he oddly threw off.

"I'm amazed again," Mrs. Chilver said, "at your so clinging to it that you would have had the benefit of his information."

It was a remark that pulled him up as if something like a finer embarrassment had now come to him. "I've only in mind his information as to the fact that he had made you speak."

"And what good would *that* have done you?"

"Without the details?"—he was indeed thinking.

"I like your expressions!" said Mrs. Chilver.

"Yes—aren't they hideous?" He had jerked out his glass and, with a returning flush, appeared to affect to smile over it. But the drop of his glass showed something in each of his eyes that, though it might have come from the rage, came evidently—to his companion's vision at least—from the more pardonable pain, of his uncertainty. "But there we are!"

The manner in which these last words reached her had clearly to do with her finally leaving her place, watching him meanwhile as he wiped his glass. "Yes—there we are. He did tell me," she went on, "that you had told him where you had been and that you could pick up nothing——"

"Against you?" he broke in. "Not a beggarly word."

THE GREAT CONDITION

"And you tried hard?"

"I worked like a nigger. It was no use."

"But say you had succeeded—what," she asked, "was your idea?"

"Why, not to have had the thing any longer between us."

He brought this out with such simplicity that she stared. "But if it had been——?"

"Yes?"—the way she hung fire made him eager.

"Well—something you would have loathed."

"Is it?"—he almost sprang at her. "For pity's sake, *what* is it?" he broke out in a key that now filled the room supremely with the strange soreness of his yearning for his justification.

She kept him waiting, after she had taken this in, but another instant. "You would rather, you say, have had it from *him*——"

"But I must take it as I can get it? Oh, anyhow!" he fairly panted.

"Then with a condition."

It threw him back into a wail that was positively droll. "Another?"

"This one," she dimly smiled, "is comparatively easy. You must promise me with the last solemnity——"

"Yes!"

"On the sacred honour of a gentleman——"

"Yes!"

"To repeat to no one whatever what you now have from me."

Thus completely expressed, the condition checked him but a moment. "Very well!"

"You promise?"

"On the sacred honour of a gentleman."

"Then I invite you to make the inference most directly suggested by the vanity of your researches."

He looked about him. "The inference?"

THE GREAT CONDITION

"As to what a fault may have been that it's impossible to find out."

He got hold as he could. "It may have been hidden."

"Then anything hidden, from so much labour, so well——"

"May not have existed?" he stammered after she had given him time to take something from her deep eyes. He glared round and round with it—seemed to have it on his hands before the world. "Then what did you mean——?"

"Ah, sir, what did *you*? You invented my past."

"Do you mean you *hadn't* one?" cried Bertram Braddle.

"None I would have mentioned to you. It was *you* who brought it up."

He appealed, in his stupefaction, to the immensity of the vacancy itself. "There's *nothing*?"

She made no answer for a moment, only looking, while he dropped hard on her sofa, so far away that her eyes might have been fixed on the blue Pacific. "There's the upshot of your inquiry."

He followed her, while she moved before him, from his place. "What did you then so intensely keep back?"

"What did *you*," she asked as she paused, "so intensely put forward? I kept back what you have from me now."

"*This*," he gasped from the depths of his collapse, "is what you would have told me?"

"If, as my loyal husband, you had brought it up again. But you wouldn't!" she once more declared.

"And I should have gone on thinking——"

"Yes," she interrupted—"that you were, for *not* bringing it up, the most delicate and most generous of men."

It seemed all to roll over him and sweep him down,

THE GREAT CONDITION

but he gave, in his swift passage, a last clutch. "You consent to let *him* think you——?"

"He thinks me what he finds me!" said Mrs. Chilver.

Braddle got up from the sofa, looking about for his hat and stick; but by the time he had reached the door with them he rose again to the surface. "I too, then, am to leave him his idea——?"

"Well, of what?" she demanded as he faltered.

"Of your—whatever you called it."

"I called it nothing. You relieved me of the question of the name."

He gloomily shook his head. "You see to what end! Chilver, at any rate," he said, "has his view, and to that extent has a name for it."

"Only to the extent of having the one you gave him."

"Well, what I gave him he took!" Braddle, with returning spirit, declared. "What I suggested—God forgive me!—he believed."

"Yes—that he might make his sacrifice. You speak," said Mrs. Chilver, "of his idea. His sacrifice is his idea. And his idea," she added, "is his happiness."

"His sacrifice of your reputation?"

"Well—to whom?"

"To *me*," said Bertram Braddle. "Do you expect me now to permit that?"

Mrs. Chilver serenely enough considered. "I shall protect his happiness, which is above all his vision of his own attitude, and I don't see how you can prevent this save by breaking your oath."

"Oh, my oath!" And he prolonged the groan of his resentment.

It evidently—what he felt—made her sorry for him, and she spoke in all kindness. "It's only your punishment!" she sighed after him as he departed.

THE GIVEN CASE

I

BARTON REEVE waited, with outward rigour and inward rage, till every one had gone : there was in particular an objectionable, travelled, superior young man—a young man with a long neck and bad shoes, especially great on Roumania—whom he was determined to outstay. He could only wonder the while whether he most hated designed or unconscious unpleasantness. It was a Sunday afternoon, the time in the week when, for some subtle reason, “such people”—Reeve freely generalised them—most take liberties. But even when the young man had disappeared there still remained Mrs. Gorton, Margaret Hamer’s sister and actual hostess—it was with this lady that Miss Hamer was at present staying. He was sustained, however, as he had been for half an hour previous, by the sense that the charming girl knew perfectly he had something to say to her and was trying covertly to help him. “Only hang on : leave the rest to me”—something of that sort she had already conveyed to him. He left it to her now to get rid of her sister, and was struck by the wholly natural air with which she soon achieved this feat. It was not absolutely hidden from him that if he had not been so insanely in love he might like her for herself. As it was, he could only like her for Mrs. Despard. Mrs. Gorton was dining out, but Miss Hamer was not ; that promptly turned up, with the

THE GIVEN CASE

effect of bringing on, for the former lady, the question of time to dress. She still remained long enough to say over and over that it *was* time. Meanwhile, a little awkwardly, they hung about by the fire. Mrs. Gorton looked at her pretty shoe on the fender, but Barton Reeve and Miss Hamer were on their feet as if to declare that they were fixed.

"You're dining all alone?" he said to the girl.

"Women never dine alone," she laughed. "When they're alone they don't dine."

Mrs. Gorton looked at her with an expression of which Reeve became aware: she was so handsome that, but for its marked gravity, it might have represented the pleasure and pride of sisterhood. But just when he most felt such complacency to be natural his hostess rather sharply mystified him. "She won't *be* alone—more's the pity!" Mrs. Gorton spoke with more intention than he could seize, and the next moment he was opening the door for her.

"I shall have a cup of coffee and a biscuit—and also, propped up before me, Gardiner's *Civil War*. Don't you always read when you dine alone?" Miss Hamer asked as he came back.

Women were strange—he was not to be drawn in that direction. She had been showing him for an hour that she knew what he wanted; yet now that he had got his chance—which she moreover had given him—she looked as innocent as the pink face in the oval frame above the chimney. It took him, however, but a moment to see more: her innocence was her answer to the charge with which her sister had retreated, a charge into which, the next minute, her conscious blankness itself helped him to read a sense. Margaret Hamer was never alone, because Phil Mackern was always—But it was none of *his* business! She lingered there on the rug, and it somehow passed between them before anything else was done

THE GIVEN CASE

that he quite recognised that. After the point was thus settled he took his own affair straight up. "You know why I'm here. It's because I believe you can help me."

"Men always think that. They think every one can 'help' them but themselves."

"And what do women think?" Barton Reeve asked with some asperity. "It might be a little of a light for me if you were able to tell me *that*. What do they think a man is made of? What does *she* think——?"

A little embarrassed, Margaret looked round her, wishing to show she could be kind and patient, yet making no movement to sit down. Mrs. Gorton's allusion was still in the air—it had just affected their common comfort. "I know what you mean. You assume she tells me everything."

"I assume that you're her most intimate friend. I don't know to whom else to turn."

The face the girl now took in was smooth-shaven and fine, a face expressing penetration up to the limit of decorum. It was full of the man's profession—passionately legal. Barton Reeve was certainly concerned with advice, but not with taking it. "What particular thing," she asked, "do you want me to do?"

"Well, to make her see what she's doing to me. From you she'll take it. She won't take it from me. She doesn't believe me—she thinks I'm 'prejudiced.' But she'll believe you."

Miss Hamer smiled, but not with cruelty. "And whom shall I believe?"

"Ah, that's not kind of you!" Barton Reeve returned; after which, for a moment, as he stood there sombre and sensitive, something visibly came to him that completed his thought, but that he hesitated to produce. Presently, as if to keep it back, he turned away with a jerk. He knew all

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about the girl herself—the woman of whom they talked had, out of the fulness of her own knowledge, told him ; he knew what would have given him a right to say : “ Oh, come ; don’t pretend I’ve to reveal to *you* what the dire thing makes of us ! ” He moved across the room and came back—felt himself even at this very moment, in the grip of his passion, shaken as a rat by a terrier. But just that was what he showed by his silence. As he rejoined her by the chimney-piece he was extravagantly nervous. “ Oh Lord, Lord ! ” he at last simply exclaimed.

“ I believe you—I believe you,” she replied. “ But *she* really does too.”

“ Then why does she treat me so ?—it’s a refinement of perversity and cruelty. She never gives me an inch but she takes back the next day ten yards ; never shows me a gleam of sincerity without making up for it as soon as possible by something that leaves me in no doubt of her absolute heartless coquetry. Of whom the deuce is she afraid ? ”

His companion hesitated. “ You perhaps might remember once in a while that she has a husband.”

“ Do I ever forget it for an instant ? Isn’t my life one long appeal to her to get rid of him ? ”

“ Ah,” said his friend as if she knew all about it, “ getting rid of husbands isn’t so easy ! ”

“ I beg your pardon ”—Reeve spoke with much more gravity and a still greater competence—“ there’s every facility for it when the man’s a proved brute and the woman an angel whom, for three years, he has not troubled himself so much as to look at.”

“ Do you think,” Miss Hamer inquired, “ that, even for an angel, extreme intimacy with another angel—such another as you : angels of a feather flock together !—positively adds to the facility ? ”

Barton could perfectly meet her. “ It adds to the reason—that’s what it adds to ; and the reason is

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the facility. I only know one way," he went on, " of showing her I want to marry her. I can't show it by never going near her."

" But need you also show Colonel Despard ? "

" Colonel Despard doesn't care a rap ! "

" He cares enough to have given her all this time nothing whatever—for divorcing him, if you mean that—to take hold of."

" I do mean that," Barton Reeve declared ; " and I must ask you to believe that I know what I'm talking about. He hates her enough for any perversity, but he has given her exactly what is necessary. Enough's as good as a feast ! "

Miss Hamer looked away—looked now at the clock ; but it was none the less apparent that she understood. " Well—she of course has a horror of that. I mean of doing anything herself."

" Then why does she go so far ? "

Margaret still looked at the clock. " So far—— ? "

" With me, month after month, in every sort of way ! "

Moving away from the fire, she gave him an irrelevant smile. " Though I *am* to be alone, my time's up."

He kept his eyes on her. " Women don't feed for themselves, but they do dress, eh ? "

" I must go to my room."

" But that isn't an answer to my question."

She thought a moment. " About poor Kate's going so far ? I thought your complaint was of her not going far enough."

" It all depends," said Reeve impatiently, " upon her having some truth in her. She shouldn't do what she does if she doesn't care for me."

" She does care for you," said the girl.

" Well then, damn it, she should do much more ! "

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Miss Hamer put out her hand. " Good-bye. I'll speak to her."

Reeve held her fast. " She does care for me ? "

She hesitated but an instant. " Far too much. It's excessively awkward."

He still detained her, pressing her with his sincerity, almost with his crudity. " That's exactly why I've come to you." Then he risked : " *You* know—— ! " But he faltered.

" I know what ? "

" Why, what it is."

She threw back her head, releasing herself. " To be impertinent ? Never ! " She fairly left him—the man was in the hall to let him out ; and he walked away with a sense not diminished, on the whole, of how viciously fate had seasoned his draught. Yet he believed Margaret Hamer *would* speak for him. She had a kind of nobleness.

II

AT Pickenham, on the Saturday night, it came round somehow to Philip Mackern that Barton Reeve was to have been of the party, and that Mrs. Despard's turning up without him—so it was expressed—had somewhat disconcerted their hostess. This, in the smoking-room, made him silent more to think than to listen—he knew whom *he* had “turned up” without. The next morning, among so many, there were some who went to church; Mackern always went now because Miss Hamer had told him she wished it. He liked it, moreover, for the time: it was an agreeable symbol to him of the way his situation made him “good.” Besides, he had a plan; he knew what Mrs. Despard would do; *her* situation made her good too. The morning, late in May, was bright, and the walk, though short, charming; they all straggled, in vivid twos and threes, across the few fields—passing stiles and gates, drawing out, scattering their colour over the green, as if they had the “tip” for some new sport. Mrs. Despard, with two companions, was one of the first; Mackern himself, as it happened, quitted the house by the side of Lady Orville, who, before they had gone many steps, completed the information given him the night before.

“That’s just the sort of thing Kate Despard’s always up to. I’m too tired of her!”

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Phil Mackern wondered. "But do you mean she prevented him——?"

"I asked her only to make him come—it was *him* I wanted. But she's a goose: she hasn't the courage——"

"Of her reckless passion?" Mackern asked as his companion's candour rather comically dropped.

"Of her ridiculous flirtation. She doesn't know what she wants—she's in and out of her hole like a frightened mouse. On knowing she's invited he immediately accepts, and she encourages him in the fond thought of the charming time they'll have. Then at the eleventh hour she finds it will never do. It will be too 'marked'! Marked it would certainly have been," Lady Orville pursued. "But there would have been a remedy!"

"For *her* to have stayed away?"

Her ladyship waited. "What horrors you make me say!"

"Well," Mackern replied, "I'm glad she came. I particularly want her."

"You?—what have *you* to do with her? You're as bad as she!" his hostess added; quitting him, however, for some other attention, before he had need to answer.

He sought no second companion—he had matter for thought as he went on; but he reached the door of the church before Mrs. Despard had gone in, and he observed that when, glancing back, she saw him pass the gate, she immediately waited for him. She had turned off a little into the churchyard, and as he came up he was struck with the prettiness that, beneath the old grey tower and among the crooked headstones, she presented to the summer morning.

"It's just to say, before any one else gets hold of you, that I want you, when we come out, to walk home with me. I want most particularly to speak to you."

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"*Comme cela se trouve !*" Mackern laughed. "That's exactly what I want to do to you !"

"Oh, I warn you that you won't like it ; but you will have, all the same, to take it !" Mrs. Despard declared. "In fact, it's why I came," she added.

"To speak to *me* ?"

"Yes, and you needn't attempt to look innocent and interesting. You know perfectly what it's about !" With which she passed into church.

It scarce prepared the young man for his devotions ; he thought more of what it might be about—whether he knew or not—than he thought of what, ostensibly, he had come for. He was not seated near Mrs. Despard, but he appropriated her, after service, before they had left the place ; and then, on the walk back, took care they should be quite by themselves. She opened fire with a promptitude clearly intended to deprive him of every advantage.

"Don't you think it's about time, you know, to let Margaret Hamer alone ?"

He found his laugh again a resource. "Is that what you came down to say to me ?"

"I suppose what you mean is that in that case I might as well have stayed at home. But I can assure you," Mrs. Despard continued, "that if you don't care for her, I at least do. I'd do anything for her !"

"Would you ?" Philip Mackern asked. "Then, for God's sake, try to induce her to show me some frankness and reason. Knowing that you know all about it and that I should find you here, that's what determined me. And I find you talking to me," he went on, "about giving her up. How *can* I give her up ? What do you mean by my not caring for her ? Don't I quite sufficiently show—and to the point absolutely of making a public fool of myself—that I don't care for anything else in life ?"

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Mrs. Despard, slightly to his surprise and pacing beside him a moment in silence, seemed arrested by this challenge. But she presently found her answer. "That's not the way, you know, to get on at the Treasury."

"I don't pretend it is; and it's just one of the things that I thought of asking you to bring home to her better than any one else can. She plays the very devil with my work. She makes me hope just enough to be all upset, and yet never, for an hour, enough to be—well, what you may call made strong; enough to know where I am."

"You're where you've no business to be—that's where you are," said Mrs. Despard. "You've no right whatever to persecute a girl who, to listen to you, will have to do something that she doesn't want, and that would be most improper if she did."

"You mean break off——?"

"I mean break off—with Mr. Grove-Stewart."

"And why shouldn't she?"

"Because they've been engaged three years."

"And could there be a better reason?" Philip Mackern asked with heat. "A man who's engaged to a girl three years without marrying her—what sort of a man is that, and what tie to him is she, or is any one else, bound to recognise?"

"He's an extremely nice person," Mrs. Despard somewhat sententiously replied, "and he's to return from India—and not to go back, you know—this autumn at latest."

"Then that's all the more reason for my acting successfully before he comes—for my insisting on an understanding without the loss of another week."

The young man, who was tall and straight, had squared his shoulders and, throwing back his massive,

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fair head, appeared to proclaim to earth and air the justice of his cause. Mrs. Despard, for an instant, answered nothing, but, as if to take account of his manner, she presently stopped short. "I think I ought to express to you my frank belief that for you, Mr. Mackern, there can be nothing but loss. I'm sorry for you, to a certain point ; but you happen to have got hold of a girl who's incapable of anything dishonourable." And with this—as if *that* were settled—she resumed her walk.

Mackern, however, stood quite still—only too glad of the opportunity for emphasis given him by their pause ; so that after a few steps she turned round. "Do you know that that's exactly on what I wanted to appeal to you ? Is she the woman to chuck me now ? "

Mrs. Despard, all face and figure in the mild brightness, looked at him across the grass and appeared to give some extension to the question of what, in general at least, a woman might be the woman to do. "Now ? "

"Now. After all she has done."

Mrs. Despard, however, wouldn't hear of what Margaret Hamer had done ; she only walked straight off again, shaking everything away as Mackern overtook her. "Leave her alone—leave her alone ! "

He held his tongue for some minutes, but he swished the air with his stick in a way that made her presently look at him. She found him positively pale, and he looked away from her. "You should have given me that advice," he remarked with dry derision, "a good many weeks ago ! "

"Well, it's never too late to mend ! " she retorted with some vivacity.

"I beg your pardon. It's often too late—altogether too late. And as for 'mending,' " Mackern went on

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almost sternly, "you know as well as I that if I *had*—in time, or anything of that sort—tried to back out or pull up, you would have been the first to make her out an injured innocent and declare I had shamefully used her."

This proposition took, as appeared, an instant or two to penetrate Mrs. Despard's consciousness; but when it had fairly done so it produced, like a train of gunpowder, an audible report. "Why, you strange, rude man!"—she fairly laughed for indignation. "Permit me not to answer you: I can't discuss any subject with you in that key."

They had reached a neat white gate and paused for Mackern to open it; but, with his hand on the top, he only held it a little, fixing his companion with insistence and seemingly in full indifference to her protest. "Upon my soul, the way women treat men——!"

"Well?" she demanded, while he gasped as if it were more than he could express.

"It's too execrable! There's only one thing for her to do." He clearly wished to show he was not to be humbugged.

"And what wonderful thing is that?"

"There's only one thing for *any* woman to do," he pursued with an air of conscious distinctness, "when she has drawn a man on to believe there's nothing she's not ready for."

Mrs. Despard waited; she watched, over the gate, the gambols, in the next field, of a small white lamb. "Will you kindly let me pass?" she then asked.

But he went on as if he had not heard her. "It's to make up to him for what she has cost him. It's simply to do everything."

Mrs. Despard hesitated. "Everything?" she then vaguely asked.

"Everything," Mackern said as he opened the gate.

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" *Won't* you help me ? " he added more appealingly as they got into the next field.

" No." She was as distinct as himself. She followed with her eyes the little white lamb. She dismissed the subject. " You're simply wicked."

III

BARTON REEVE, of a Sunday, sometimes went for luncheon to his sister, who lived in Great Cumberland Place, and this particular Sunday was so fine that, from the Buckingham Palace Road, he walked across the Park. There, in the eastern quarter, he encountered many persons who appeared, on the return from church, to have assembled to meet each other and who had either disposed themselves on penny chairs or were passing to and fro near the Park Lane palings. The sitters looked at the walkers, the walkers at the sitters, and Barton Reeve, with his sharp eyes, at every one. Thus it was that he presently perceived, under a spreading tree, Miss Hamer and her sister, who, however, though in possession of chairs, were not otherwise engaged. He went straight up to them, and, while he stood talking, they were approached by another friend, an elderly intimate, as it seemed, of Mrs. Gorton's, whom he recognised as one of the persons so trying to his patience the day of his long wait in her drawing-room. Barton Reeve looked very hard at the younger lady, and was perfectly conscious of the effect he produced of always reminding her that there was a subject between them. He was, on the other hand, probably not aware of the publicity that his manner struck his alert young friend as conferring on this circumstance, nor of the degree in which, as an illustration of his intensity about his

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own interests, his candour appeared to her comic. What *was* comic, on his part, was the excessive frankness—clever man though he was—of his assumption that he finely, quite disinterestedly, extended their subject by this very looking of volumes. She and her affairs figured in them all, and there was a set of several in a row by the time that, laughing in spite of herself, she now said to him : “ Will you take me a little walk ? ” He left her in no doubt of his alacrity, and in a moment Mrs. Gorton’s visitor was in her chair and our couple away from the company and out in the open.

“ I want you to know,” the girl immediately began, “ that I’ve said what I could for you—that I say it whenever I can. But I’ve asked you to speak to me now just because you mustn’t be under any illusion or flatter yourself that I’m doing——” she hesitated, for his attention had made her stop short—“ well, what I’m not. I may as well tell you, at any rate,” she added, “ that I do maturely consider she cares for you. But what will you have ? She’s a woman of duty.”

“ Duty ? What do you mean by duty ? ”

Barton Reeve’s irritation at this name had pierced the air with such a sound that Margaret Hamer looked about for a caution. But they were in an empty circle—a wide circle of smutty sheep. She showed a slight prevision of embarrassment—even of weariness : she had hoped for an absence of that. “ You know what I mean. What else is there to mean ? I mean Colonel Despard.”

“ Was it her duty to Colonel Despard to be as consciously charming to me as if there had been no such person alive ? Has she explained to you that ? ” he demanded.

“ She hasn’t explained to me anything—I don’t need it,” said the girl with some spirit. “ I’ve only explained to *her*.”

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"Well?"—he was almost peremptory.

She didn't mind it. "Well, her excuse—for her false position, I mean—is really a perfectly good one." Miss Hamer had been standing, but with this she walked on. "She found she—what do you call it?—liked you."

"Then what's the matter?"

"Why, that she didn't know how much you'd like her, how far you'd—what do you call it?—'go.' It's odious to be talking of such things, I think," she pursued; "and I assure you I wouldn't do it for other people—for any one but you and her. It makes it all sound so vulgar. She didn't think you cared—on the contrary. Then when she began to see, she had got in too deep."

"She had made my life impossible to me without her? She certainly has 'got in' to that extent," said Barton Reeve, "and it's precisely my contention. Can you pretend for her that to have found out that she has done this leaves open to her, in common decency, any but the one course?"

"I don't pretend anything!" his companion replied with some confusion and still more impatience. "I'm bound to say I don't see what responsibility you're trying to fix on me."

He just cast about him, making little wild jerks with his stick. "I'm not trying anything and you're awfully good to me. I daresay my predicament makes me a shocking bore—makes me in fact ridiculous. But I don't speak to you only because you're her friend—her friend, and therefore not indifferent to the benefit for her of what, take it altogether, I have to offer. It's because I feel so sure of how, in her place, you would generously, admirably take your own line."

"Heaven forbid I should ever be in her place!" Margaret exclaimed with a laugh in which it pleased

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Reeve, at the moment, to discover a world of dissimulation.

"You're already there—I say, come!" the young man had it on his tongue's end to reply. But he stopped himself in time, and felt extraordinarily delicate and discreet. "I don't say it's the easiest one in the world; but here I stand, after all—and I'm not supposed to be such an ass—ready to give her every conceivable assistance." His friend, at this, replied nothing; but he presently spoke again. "What has she invented, at Pickenham, to-day, but to keep me from coming?"

"Is Kate to-day at Pickenham?" Miss Hamer inquired.

Barton Reeve, in his acuteness, caught something in the question—an energy of profession of ignorance—in which he again saw depths. It presented Pickenham and whomsoever might be there as such a blank that he felt quite forced to say: "I rather imagined—till I spied you just now—that you would have gone."

"Well, you see I haven't." With which our young lady paused again, turning on him more frankly. It struck him that, as from a conscious effort, she had a heightened colour. "You must know far better than I what she feels, but I repeat it to you, once for all, as, the last time I saw her, she gave it me. I said just now she hadn't explained, but she did explain that." The girl just faltered, but she brought it out. "She can't divorce. And if she can't, you know, she can't!"

"I never heard such twaddle," Barton Reeve declared. "As if a woman with a husband who hates her so he would like to kill her couldn't obtain any freedom——!" And he gave such a passionate whirl of his stick that it flew straight away from him.

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His companion waited till he had picked it up. "Ah, but there's freedom and freedom."

"She can do anything on all the wide earth she likes." He had gone on as if not hearing her, and, lost in the vastness of his meaning, he absolutely glared a while at the distance. "But she's afraid!"

Miss Hamer, in her turn, stared at the way he sounded it; then she gave a vague laugh. "How you say that!"

Barton Reeve said it again—said it with rage and scorn. "She's afraid, she's afraid!"

Margaret continued to look at him; then she turned away. "Yes—she is."

"Well, who wouldn't be?" came to her, as a reply, across the grass. Mrs. Gorton, with two gentlemen now, rejoined them.

IV

ON hearing from Mrs. Despard that she must see him, Philip Mackern's action was immediate: she had named the morrow for his call, but he knocked at her door, on the chance, an hour after reading her note. The footman demurred, but at the same moment Barton Reeve, taking his departure, appeared in the hall, and Mackern instantly appealed to him.

"She *is* at home, I judge—isn't she?" The young man was so impatient that it was only afterwards he took into account a queerness of look on Reeve's part—a queerness that seemed to speak of a different crisis and that indeed something in his own face might, to his friend's eyes, remarkably have matched. Like two uneasy Englishmen, at any rate, they somehow passed each other, and when, a minute later, in the drawing-room, Mrs. Despard, who, with her back presented, was at the window, turned about at the sound of his name, she showed him an expression in which nothing corresponded to that of her other visitor. It may promptly be mentioned that, even through what followed, this visitor's presence was, to Mackern's sense, still in the air; only it was also just one of the things ministering, for our friend, to the interest of retrospect that such a fact—the fact that Mrs. Despard could be so "wonderful"—conveyed a reminder of the superior organisation of women. "I know you said to-morrow," he quickly

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began ; " but I'll come to-morrow too. Is it bad or good ? " he went on—" I mean what you have to tell me. Even if I just know it's bad, I believe I can wait—if you haven't time now."

" I haven't time, at all, now," Mrs. Despard replied very sweetly. " I can only give you two minutes—my dressmaker's waiting. But it isn't bad," she added.

" Then it's good ? " he eagerly asked.

" Oh, I haven't the least idea you'll think it so ! But it's because it's exactly what I myself have been wanting and hoping that I wrote to you. It strikes me that the sooner you know the better. I've just heard from Bombay—from Amy Warden."

" Amy Warden ? " Philip Mackern wondered.

" John Grove-Stewart's sister—the nice one. He comes home immediately—doesn't wait till the autumn. So there you are ! " said Mrs. Despard.

Philip Mackern looked straight at the news, with which she now presented herself as brilliantly illuminated. " I don't see that I'm anywhere but where I've always been. I haven't expected anything of his absence that I shan't expect of his presence."

Mrs. Despard thought a moment, but with perfect serenity. " Have you expected quite fatally to compromise her ? "

He gave her question an equal consideration. " To compromise her ? "

" That's what you are doing, you know—as deliberately as ever you can."

Again the young man thought. They were in the middle of the room—she had not asked him to sit down. " Quite fatally, you say ? "

" Well, she has just one chance to save herself."

Mackern, whom Mrs. Despard had already, more than once, seen turn pale under the emotion of which she could touch the spring, gave her again—and with

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it a smile that struck her as strange—this sign of sensibility. “Yes—she may have only one chance. But it’s such a good one!” he laughed. “What is Mr. Grove-Stewart coming home for?”

“Because it has reached him that the whole place is filled with the wonder of her conduct. Amy Warden thinks that, as so intimate a friend, I should hear what he has decided to do. She takes for granted, I suppose—though she doesn’t say it—that I’ll let Margaret know.”

Philip Mackern looked at the ceiling. “She doesn’t know yet?”

Mrs. Despard hesitated. “I suppose he means it as a surprise.”

“So you won’t tell her?”

“On the contrary—I shall tell her immediately. But I thought it best to tell you first.”

“I’m extremely obliged to you,” said Philip Mackern.

“Of course you hate me—but I don’t care!” Mrs. Despard declared. “You’ve made her talk about in India—you may be proud!”

Once more Philip Mackern considered. “I’m not at all proud—but I think I’m very glad.”

“I think you’re very horrible then. But I’ve said what I wanted. Good-bye.” Mrs. Despard had nodded at the footman, who, returning, had announced her carriage. He had left, on retiring, the door open, and as she followed him to go to her room her visitor went out with her. She gave Mackern, on the landing, a last word. “Her one chance is to marry him as soon as he arrives.”

Mackern’s strange smile, in his white face, was now fixed. “Her one chance, dear lady, is to marry *me*.”

His hostess, suddenly flushing on this, showed a passion that startled him. “Stuff!” she crudely cried, and turned away with such impatience that,

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quitting her, he passed half downstairs. But she more quickly turned back to him ; calling his name, she came to the top, while, checked, he looked up at her. Then she spoke with a particular solemnity. " To marry you, Mr. Mackern "—it was quite portentous—" will be the very worst thing for her good name."

The young man stood staring, then frankly emulated his friend. " Rubbish ! " he rang out as he swiftly descended.

V

" MRS. GORTON has come in ? "

" No, miss ; but Mrs. Despard is here. She said she'd wait for you."

" Then I'm not at home to any one." Margaret Hamer went straight upstairs and found her visitor in the smaller drawing-room, not seated, erect before the fireplace and with the air of having for some time restlessly paced and turned. Mrs. Despard hailed her with an instant cry.

" It has come at last ! "

" Do you mean you've seen your husband ? "

" He dropped on me to-day—out of the blue. He came in just before luncheon. If the house is his own—— ! " And Mrs. Despard, who, as with the first relief to her impatience, had flung herself, to emphasise her announcement on the sofa, gave a long, sombre sigh.

" If the house is his own he can come when he likes ? " Standing before her and looking grave and tired, Margaret Hamer showed interest, but kept expression down. " And yet you were so splendidly sure," she continued, " that he wouldn't come ! "

" I wasn't sure—I see now I wasn't ; I only tried to convince myself. I knew—at the back of my head—that he probably *was* in England ; I felt in all my bones—six weeks ago, you know—that he would really have returned and, in his own infamous, under-

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hand way, would be somewhere looking out. He told me to-day about ninety distinct lies. I don't know how he has kept so dark, but he has been at one of the kind of places he likes—some fourth-rate watering-place."

Margaret waited a moment. "With any one?"

"I don't know. I don't care." This time, for emphasis, Mrs. Despard jumped up and, wandering, like a caged creature, to a distance, stopped before a glass and gave a touch or two to the position of her hat. "It makes no difference. Nothing makes any."

Her friend, across the room, looked at her with a certain blankness. "Of what does he accuse you?"

"Of nothing whatever," said Mrs. Despard, turning round. "Not of the least little thing!" she sighed, coming back.

"Then he made no scene?"

"No—it was too awful."

Again the girl faltered. "Do you mean he was——?"

"I mean he was dreadful. I mean I can't bear it."

"Does he want to come back?"

"Immediately and for ever. 'Beginning afresh,' he calls it. Fancy," the poor woman cried, rueful and wide-eyed as with a vision of more things than she could name—"fancy beginning afresh!" Once more, in her fidget, appalled, she sank into the nearest seat.

This image of a recommencement had just then, for both ladies, in all the circumstances, a force that filled the room—that seemed for a little fairly to make a hush. "But if he can't oblige you?" Margaret presently returned.

Mrs. Despard sat sombre. "He *can* oblige me."

"Do you mean by law?"

"Oh," she wailed, "I mean by everything! By my having been the fool——!" She dropped to her intolerable sense of it.

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Margaret watched her an instant. "Oh, if you say it of yourself!"

Mrs. Despard gave one of her springs. "And don't *you* say it?"

Margaret met her eyes, but changed colour. "Say it of you?"

"Say it of *yourself*."

They fixed each other a while; it was deep—it was even hard. "Yes," said the girl at last. But she turned away.

Her companion's eyes followed her as she moved; then Mrs. Despard broke out. "Do you mean you're not going to keep faith?"

"What faith do you *call* faith?"

"You know perfectly what I call faith for *you*, and in how little doubt, from the first, I've left you about it!"

This reply had been sharp enough to jerk the speaker for a moment, as by the toss of her head, out of her woe, but Margaret met it at first only by showing her again a face that enjoined patience and pity. They continued to look indeed, each out of her peculiar distress, more things than they found words for. "I don't know," Margaret Hamer finally said. "I have time—I've a little; I've more than you—that's what makes me so sorry for you. I've been very possibly the direst idiot—I'll admit anything you like; though I won't pretend I see now how it could have been different. It couldn't—it couldn't. I don't know, I don't know," she wearily, mechanically repeated. There was something in her that had surrendered by this time all the importance of her personal question; she wished to keep it back or to get rid of it. "Don't, at any rate, think one is selfish and all taken up. I'm perfectly quiet—it's only about you I'm nervous. You're worse than I, dear," she added with a dim smile.

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But Mrs. Despard took it more than gravely. "Worse?"

"I mean you've more to think of. And perhaps even *he's* worse."

Mrs. Despard thought again. "He's terrible."

Her companion hesitated—she had perhaps mistaken the allusion. "I don't mean your husband."

Mrs. Despard *had* mistaken the allusion, but she carried it off. "Barton Reeve is terrible. It's more than I deserve."

"Well, he really cares. There it is."

"Yes, there it is!" Mrs. Despard echoed. "And much *that* helps me!"

They hovered about, but shifting their relation now and each keeping something back. "When are you to see him again?" Margaret asked.

This time Mrs. Despard knew whom she meant. "Never—never again. What I may feel for him—what I may feel for myself—has nothing to do with it. Never as long as I live!" Margaret's visitor declared. "You don't believe it?" she, however, the next moment demanded.

"I don't believe it. You know how I've always liked him. But what has *that* to do with it either?" the girl almost incoherently continued. "I don't believe it—no," she repeated. "I don't want to make anything harder for you, but you won't find it so easy."

"I shan't find anything easy, and I must row my own boat. But not seeing him will be the least impossibility."

Margaret looked away. "Well!"—she spoke at last vaguely and conclusively.

Something in her tone so arrested her friend that she found herself suddenly clutched by the arm. "Do you mean to say you'll see Mr. Mackern?"

"I don't know."

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"Then *I* do!" Mrs. Despard pronounced with energy. "You're lost."

"Ah!" wailed Margaret with the same wan detachment.

"Yes, simply lost!" It rang out—would have rung out indeed too loud had it not caught itself just in time. Mrs. Gorton at that moment opened the door.

VI

MRS. DESPARD at last came down—he had been sure it would be but a question of time. Barton Reeve had, to this end, presented himself, on the Sunday morning, early : he had allowed a margin for difficulty. He was armed with a note of three lines, which, on the butler's saying to him that she was not at home, he simply, in a tone before which even a butler prompted and primed must quail, requested him to carry straight up. Then unannounced and unaccompanied, not knowing in the least whom he should find, he had taken, for the hundredth time in four months, his quick course to the drawing-room, where emptiness, as it proved, reigned, but where, notwithstanding, he felt, at the end of an hour, rather more than less in possession. To express it, to put it to her, to put it to any one, would perhaps have been vain and vulgar ; but the whole assurance on which he had proceeded was his sense that, on the spot, he had, to a certain point, an effect. He was enough on the spot from the moment she knew he was, and she would know it—know it by divination, as she had often before shown how extraordinarily she knew things—even if that pompous ass had not sent up his note. To what point his effect would prevail in the face of the biggest obstacle he had yet had to deal with was exactly what he had come to find out. It was enough, to begin with, that he did, after a weary wait, draw her—draw her

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in spite of everything : he felt that as he at last heard her hand on the door-knob. He heard it indeed pause as well as move—pause while he himself kept perfectly still. During this minute, it must be added, he looked straight at the ugliest of the whole mixed row of possibilities. Something had yielded—yes ; but what had yielded was quite most probably not her softness. It might well be her hardness. Her hardness was her love of the sight of her own effect.

Dressed for church, though it was now much too late, she was more breathless than he had ever seen her ; in spite of which, beginning immediately, he gave her not a moment. " I make a scandal, your letter tells me—I make it, you say, even before the servants, whom you appear to have taken in the most extraordinary way into your confidence. You greatly exaggerate—but even suppose I do : let me assure you frankly that I care not one rap. What you've done you've done, and I'm here in spite of your letter—and in spite of anything, of everything, any one else may say—on the perfectly solid ground of your having irretrievably done it. Don't talk to me," Reeve went on, " about your husband and new complications : to do that now is horribly unworthy of you and quite the sort of thing that adds—well, you know what—to injury. There isn't a single complication that there hasn't always been and that we haven't, on the whole, completely mastered and put in its place. There was nothing in your husband that prevented, from the first hour we met, your showing yourself, and every one else you chose, what you could do with me. What you could do you did systematically and without a scruple—without a pang of real compunction or a movement of real retreat."

Mrs. Despard had not come down unprepared, and her impenetrable face now announced it. She was even strong enough to speak softly—not to meet

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anger with anger. Yet she was also clearly on her defence. "If I was kind to you—if I had the frankness and confidence to let it be seen I liked you—it's because I thought I was safe."

"Safe?" Barton Reeve echoed. "Yes, I've no doubt you did! And how safe did you think *I* was? Can't you give me some account of the attention you gave to *that*?" She looked at him without reply to his challenge, but the full beauty of her silent face had only, as in two or three still throbs, to come out, to affect him suddenly with all the force of a check. The plea of her deep, pathetic eyes took the place of the admission that his passion vainly desired to impose upon her. They broke his resentment down; all his tenderness welled up with the change; it came out in supplication. "I can't look at you and believe any ill of you. I feel for you everything I ever felt, and that we're committed to each other by a power that not even death can break. How can you look at *me* and not know to what depths I'm yours? You've the finest, sweetest chance that ever a woman had!"

She waited a little, and the firmness in her face, the intensity of her effort to possess herself, settled into exaltation, at the same time that she might have struck a spectator as staring at some object of fear. "I see my chance—I see it; but I don't see it as you see it. You must forgive me. My chance is not *that* chance. It has come to me—God knows why!—but in the hardest way of all. I made a great mistake—I recognise it."

"So *I* must pay for it?" Barton Reeve asked.

She continued to look at him with her protected dread. "We both did—so we must both pay."

"Both? I beg your pardon," said the young man: "I utterly deny it—I made no mistake whatever. I'm just where I was—and everything else is. Everything but you!"

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She looked away from him, but going on as if she had not heard him. "We must do our duty—when once we see it. I didn't know—I didn't understand. But now I do. It's when one's eyes are opened—that the wrong is wrong." Not as a lesson got by heart, not as a trick rehearsed in her room, but delicately, beautifully, step by step, she made it out for herself—and for him so far as he would take it. "I can only follow the highest line." Then, after faltering a moment, "We must thank God," she said, "it isn't worse. My husband's here," she added with a sufficient strangeness of effect.

But Barton Reeve accepted the mere fact as relevant. "Do you mean he's in the house?"

"Not at this moment. He's on the river—for the day. But he comes back to-morrow."

"And he has been here since Friday?" She was silent, on this, so long that her visitor continued: "It's none of my business?"

Again she hesitated, but at last she replied, "Since Friday."

"And you hate him as much as ever?"

This time she spoke out: "More."

Reeve made, with a sound irrepressible and scarce articulate, a motion that was a sort of dash at her. "Ah, my *own* own!"

But she retreated straight before him, checking him with a gesture of horror, her first outbreak of emotion. "Don't touch me!" He turned, after a minute, away; then, like a man dazed, looked, without sight, about for something. It proved to be his hat, which he presently went and took up. "Don't talk, don't talk—you're not *in* it!" she continued. "You speak of 'paying,' but it's I who pay." He reached the door and, having opened it, stood with his hand on the knob and his eyes on her face. She was far away, at the most distant of the

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windows. "I shall never care for any one again," she kept on.

Reeve had dropped to something deeper than resentment; more abysmal, even, it seemed to him, than renouncement or despair. But all he did was slowly to shake his helpless head at her. "I've no words for you."

"It doesn't matter. Don't think of me."

He was closing the door behind him, but, still hearing her voice, kept it an instant. "I'm all right!"—that was the last that came to him as he drew the door to.

VII

" I ONLY speak of the given case," Philip Mackern said ; " that's the only thing I have to do with, and on what I've expressed to you of the situation it has made for me I don't yield an inch."

Mrs. Gorton, to whom, in her own house, he had thus, in defence, addressed himself, was in a flood of tears which rolled, however, in their current not a few hard grains of asperity. " You're *always* speaking of it, and it acts on my nerves, and I don't know what you mean by it, and I don't care, and I think you're horrible. The case is like any other case that can be mended if people will behave decently."

Philip Mackern moved slowly about the room ; impatience and suspense were in every step he took. but he evidently had himself well in hand and he met his hostess with studied indulgence. She had made her appearance, in advance, to prepare him for her sister, who had agreed by letter to see him, but who, through a detention on the line, which she had wired from Bath to explain, had been made late for the appointment she was on her way back to town to keep. Margaret Hamer had gone home precipitately—to Devonshire—five days before, the day after her last interview with Mrs. Despard ; on which had ensued, with the young man, whom she had left London without seeing, a correspondence resulting in her present return. She had forbidden him, in

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spite of his insistence, either to come down to her at her mother's or to be at Paddington to meet her, and had finally, arriving from these places, but just alighted in Manchester Square, where, while he awaited her, Mackern's restless measurement of the empty drawing-room had much in common with the agitation to which, in a similar place, his friend Barton Reeve had already been condemned. Mrs. Gorton, emerging from a deeper retreat, had at last, though not out of compassion, conferred on him her company ; she left him from the first instant in no doubt of the spirit in which she approached him. Margaret was at last almost indecently there, Margaret was upstairs, Margaret was coming down ; but he would render the whole family an inestimable service by quietly taking up his hat and departing without further parley. Philip Mackern, whose interest in this young lady was in no degree whatever an interest in other persons connected with her, only transferred his hat from the piano to the window-seat and put it kindly to Mrs. Gorton that such a departure would be, if the girl had come to take leave of him, a brutality, and if she had come to do anything else an imbecility. His inward attitude was that his interlocutress was an insufferable busybody : he took his stand, he considered, upon admirable facts ; Margaret Hamer's age and his own—twenty-six and thirty-two—her independence, her intelligence, his career, his prospects, his general and his particular situation, his income, his extraordinary merit, and perhaps even his personal appearance. He left his sentiments, in this private estimate, out of account—he was almost too proud to mention them even to himself. Yet he found, after the first moment, that he had to mention them to Mrs. Gorton.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, "by my 'always' speaking of anything whatever that's

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between your sister and me ; for I must remind you that this is the third time, at most, that we've had any talk of the matter. If I did, however, touch, to you, last month, on what I hold that a woman is, in certain circumstances—circumstances that, mind you, would never have existed without her encouragement, her surrender—bound in honour to do, it was because you yourself, though I daresay you didn't know with what realities you were dealing, called my attention precisely to the fact of the 'given case.' It isn't always, it isn't often, given, perhaps—but when it is one knows it. And it's given now if it ever was in the world," Mackern still, with his suppression of violence, but with an emphasis the more distinct for its peculiar amenity, asserted as he resumed his pacing.

Mrs. Gorton watched him a moment through such traces of tears as still resisted the extreme freedom of her pocket-handkerchief. "Admit then as much as you like that you've been a pair of fools and criminals"—the poor woman went far: "what business in the world have you to put the whole responsibility on her?"

Mackern pulled up short ; nothing could exceed the benevolence of his surprise. "On 'her' ? Why, don't I absolutely take an equal share of it ? "

"Equal ? Not a bit ! You're not engaged to any one else."

"Oh, thank heaven, no ! " said Philip Mackern with a laugh of questionable discretion and instant effect.

His companion's cheek assumed a deeper hue and her eyes a drier light. "You cause her to be outrageously talked about, and then have the assurance to come and prate to us of 'honour' ! "

Mackern turned away again—again he measured his cage. "What is there I'm not ready to make

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good ? ”—and he gave, as he passed, a hard, anxious smile.

Mrs. Gorton said nothing for a moment ; then she spoke with an accumulation of dignity. “ I think you both—if you want to know—absolutely improper persons, and if I had had my wits about me I would have declined, in time, to lend my house again to any traffic that might take place between you. But you’re hatefully here, to my shame, and the wretched creature, whom I myself got off, has come up, and the fat’s on the fire, and it’s too late to prevent it. It’s not too late, however, just to say this : that if you’ve come, and if you intend, to bully and brow-beat her—— ”

“ Well ? ” Philip Mackern asked.

She had faltered and paused, and the next moment he saw why. The door had opened without his hearing it—Margaret Hamer stood and looked at them. He made no movement ; he only, after a minute, held her eyes long enough to fortify him, as it were, in his attempted intensity of stillness. He felt already as if some process, something complex and exquisite, were going on that a sound, that a gesture might spoil. But his challenge to Mrs. Gorton was still in the air, and she apparently, on her vision of her sister, had seen something pass. She fixed the girl and she fixed Mackern ; then, highly flushed and moving to the door, she answered him. “ Why, you’re a brute and a coward ! ” With which she banged the door behind her.

The way the others met without speech or touch was extraordinary, and still more singular perhaps the things that, in their silence, Philip Mackern thought. There was no freedom of appeal for him—he instantly felt that ; there was neither burden nor need. He wondered Margaret didn’t notice in some way what Mrs. Gorton had said : there was a

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strangeness in her not, on one side or the other, taking that up. There was a strangeness as well, he was perfectly aware, in his finding himself surprised and even, for ten seconds, as it happened, mercilessly disappointed, at her not looking quite so "badly" as her encounter with a grave crisis might have been entitled to present her. She looked beautiful, perversely beautiful: he couldn't indeed have said just how directly his presumption of visible ravage was to have treated her handsome head. Meanwhile, as she carried this handsome head—in a manner he had never quite seen her carry it before—to the window and stood looking blindly out, there deepened in him almost to quick anguish the fear even of breathing upon the hour they had reached. That she had come back to him, to whatever end, was somehow in itself so divine a thing that lips and hands were gross to deal with it. What, moreover, in the extremity of a man's want, had he not already said? They were simply shut up there with their moment, and he, at least, felt it throb and throb in the hush.

At last she turned round. "He will never, never understand that I can have been so base."

Mackern awkwardly demurred. "Base?"

"Letting you, from the first, make, to me, such a difference."

"I don't think you could help it." He was still awkward.

"How can he believe that? How can he admit it?"

She asked it too wofully to expect a reply, but the young man thought a moment. "You can't look to me to speak for him"—he said it as feeling his way and without a smile. "He should have looked out for himself."

"He trusted me. He trusted me," she repeated.

"So did I—so did I."

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"Yes. Yes." She looked straight at him, as if tasting all her bitterness. "But I pity him so that it kills me!"

"And only him?"—and Philip Mackern came nearer. "It's perfectly simple," he went on. "I'll abide by that measure. It shall be the one you pity most."

She kept her eyes on him till she burst into tears. "Pity *me*—pity *me*!"

He drew her to him and held her close and long, and even at that high moment it was perhaps the deepest thing in his gratitude that he did pity her.

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I

THE friend who kindly took me to the first night of poor Windon's first—which was also poor Windon's last : it was removed as fast as, at an unlucky dinner, a dish of too perceptible a presence—also obligingly pointed out to me the notabilities in the house. So it was that we came round, just opposite, to a young lady in the front row of the balcony—a young lady in mourning so marked that I rather wondered to see her at a place of pleasure. I daresay my surprise was partly produced by my thinking her face, as I made it out at the distance, refined enough to aid a little the contradiction. I remember at all events dropping a word about the manners and morals of London—a word to the effect that, for the most part, elsewhere, people so bereaved as to be so becraped were bereaved enough to stay at home. We recognised of course, however, during the wait, that nobody ever did stay at home ; and, as my companion proved vague about my young lady, who was yet somehow more interesting than any other as directly in range, we took refuge in the several theories that might explain her behaviour. One of these was that she had a sentiment for Windon which could override superstitions ; another was that her scruples had been mastered by an influence discernible on the spot. This was nothing less than the spell of a gentleman beside her, whom I had at first mentally disconnected

from her on account of some visibility of difference. He was not, as it were, quite good enough to have come with her ; and yet he was strikingly handsome, whereas she, on the contrary, would in all likelihood have been pronounced almost occultly so. That was what, doubtless, had led me to put a question about her ; the fact of her having the kind of distinction that is quite independent of beauty. Her friend, on the other hand, whose clustering curls were fair, whose moustache and whose fixed monocular glass particularly, if indescribably, matched them, and whose expanse of white shirt and waistcoat had the air of carrying out and balancing the scheme of his large white forehead—her friend had the kind of beauty that is quite independent of distinction. That he was her friend—and very much—was clear from his easy imagination of all her curiosities. He began to show her the company, and to do much better in this line than my own companion did for me, inasmuch as he appeared even to know who we ourselves were. That gave a propriety to my finding, on the return from a dip into the lobby in the first *entr'acte*, that the lady beside me was at last prepared to identify him. I, for my part, knew too few people to have picked up anything. She mentioned a friend who had edged in to speak to her and who had named the gentleman opposite as Lord Yarracome.

Somehow I questioned the news. “ It sounds like the sort of thing that’s too good to be true.”

“ Too good ? ”

“ I mean he’s too much like it.”

“ Like what ? Like a lord ? ”

“ Well, like the name, which is expressive, and—yes—even like the dignity. Isn’t that just what lords are usually not ? ” I didn’t, however, pause for a reply, but inquired further if his lordship’s companion might be regarded as his wife.

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" Dear, no. She's Miss Delavoy."

I forget how my friend had gathered this—not from the informant who had just been with her ; but on the spot I accepted it, and the young lady became vividly interesting. " The daughter of the great man ? "

" What great man ? "

" Why, the wonderful writer, the immense novelist : the one who died last year." My friend gave me a look that led me to add : " Did you never hear of him ? " and, though she professed inadvertence, I could see her to be really so vague that—perhaps a trifle too sharply—I afterwards had the matter out with her. Her immediate refuge was in the question of Miss Delavoy's mourning. It was for *him*, then, her illustrious father ; though that only deepened the oddity of her coming so soon to the theatre, and coming with a lord. My companion spoke as if the lord made it worse, and, after watching the pair a moment with her glass, observed that it was easy to see he could do anything he liked with his young lady. I permitted her, I confess, but little benefit from this diversion, insisting on giving it to her plainly that I didn't know what we were coming to and that there was in the air a gross indifference to which perhaps more almost than anything else the general density on the subject of Delavoy's genius testified. I even let her know, I am afraid, how scant, for a supposedly clever woman, I thought the grace of these *lacunæ* ; and I may as well immediately mention that, as I have had time to see, we were not again to be just the same allies as before my explosion. This was a brief, thin flare, but it expressed a feeling, and the feeling led me to concern myself for the rest of the evening, perhaps a trifle too markedly, with Lord Yarracome's victim. She was the image of a nearer approach, of a personal view : I mean in

respect to my great artist, on whose consistent aloofness from the crowd I needn't touch, any more than on his patience in going his way and attending to his work, the most unadvertised, unreported, uninter-viewed, unphotographed, uncriticised of all originals. Was he not the man of the time about whose private life we delightfully knew least? The young lady in the balcony, with the stamp of her close relation to him in her very dress, was a sudden opening into that region. I borrowed my companion's glass; I treated myself, in this direction—yes, I was momentarily gross—to an excursion of some minutes. I came back from it with the sense of something gained; I felt as if I had been studying Delavoy's own face, no portrait of which I had ever met. The result of it all, I easily recognised, would be to add greatly to my impatience for the finished book he had left behind, which had not yet seen the light, which was announced for a near date, and as to which rumour—I mean of course only in the particular warm air in which it lived at all—had already been sharp. I went out after the second act to make room for another visitor—they buzzed all over the place—and when I rejoined my friend she was primed with rectifications.

"He isn't Lord Yarracome at all. He's only Mr. Beston."

I fairly jumped; I see, as I now think, that it was as if I had read the future in a flash of lightning.

"Only——? The mighty editor?"

"Yes, of the celebrated *Cynosure*." My interlocutress was determined this time not to be at fault.

"He's always at first nights."

"What a chance for me, then," I replied, "to judge of my particular fate!"

"Does that depend on Mr. Beston?" she inquired; on which I again borrowed her glass and went deeper into the subject.

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"Well, my literary fortune does. I sent him a fortnight ago the best thing I've ever done. I've not as yet had a sign from him, but I can perhaps make out in his face, in the light of his type and expression, some little portent or promise." I did my best, but when after a minute my companion asked what I discovered I was obliged to answer "Nothing!" The next moment I added: "He won't take it."

"Oh, I hope so!"

"That's just what I've been doing." I gave back the glass. "Such a face is an abyss."

"Don't you think it handsome?"

"Glorious. Gorgeous. Immense. Oh, I'm lost! What does Miss Delavoy think of it?" I then articulated.

"Can't you see?" My companion used her glass. "She's under the charm—she has succumbed. How else can he have dragged her here in her state?" I wondered much, and indeed her state seemed happy enough, though somehow, at the same time, the pair struck me as not in the least matching. It was only for half a minute that my friend made them do so by going on: "It's perfectly evident. She's not a daughter, I should have told you, by the way—she's only a sister. They've struck up an intimacy in the glow of his having engaged to publish from month to month the wonderful book that, as I understand you, her brother has left behind."

That was plausible, but it didn't bear another look. "Never!" I at last returned. "Daughter or sister, that fellow won't touch him."

"Why in the world——?"

"Well, for the same reason that, as you'll see, he won't touch *me*. It's wretched, but we're too good for him." My explanation did as well as another, though it had the drawback of leaving me to find another for Miss Delavoy's enslavement. I was not

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to find it that evening, for as poor Windon's play went on we had other problems to meet, and at the end our objects of interest were lost to sight in the general blinding blizzard. The affair was a bitter "frost," and if we were all in our places to the last everything else had disappeared. When I got home it was to be met by a note from Mr. Beston accepting my article almost with enthusiasm, and it is a proof of the rapidity of my fond revulsion that before I went to sleep, which was not till ever so late, I had excitedly embraced the prospect of letting him have, on the occasion of Delavoy's new thing, my peculiar view of the great man. I must add that I was not a little ashamed to feel I had made a fortune the very night Windon had lost one.

II

MR. BESTON really proved, in the event, most kind, though his appeal, which promised to become frequent, was for two or three quite different things before it came round to my peculiar view of Delavoy. It in fact never addressed itself at all to that altar, and we met on the question only when, the posthumous volume having come out, I had found myself wound up enough to risk indiscretions. By this time I had twice been with him and had had three or four of his notes. They were the barest bones, but they phrased, in a manner, a connexion. This was not a triumph, however, to bring me so near to him as to judge of the origin and nature of his relations with Miss Delavoy. That his magazine would, after all, publish no specimens was proved by the final appearance of the new book at a single splendid bound. The impression it made was of the deepest—it remains the author's highest mark ; but I heard, in spite of this, of no emptying of table-drawers for Mr. Beston's benefit. What the book is we know still better to-day, and perhaps even Mr. Beston does ; but there was no approach at the time to a general rush, and I therefore of course saw that if he was thick with the great man's literary legatee—as I, at least, supposed her—it was on some basis independent of his bringing anything out. Nevertheless he quite rose to the idea of my study, as I called it, which I put before him in a brief interview.

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" You ought to have something. That thing has brought him to the front with a leap——! "

" The front ? What do you call the front ? "

He had laughed so good-humouredly that I could do the same. " Well, the front is where you and I are." I told him my paper was already finished.

" Ah then, you must write it again."

" Oh, but look at it first——! "

" You must write it again," Mr. Beston only repeated. Before I left him, however, he had explained a little. " You must see his sister."

" I shall be delighted to do that."

" She's a great friend of mine, and my having something may please her—which, though my first, my only duty is to please my subscribers and shareholders, is a thing I should rather like to do. I'll take from you something of the kind you mention, but only if she's favourably impressed by it."

I just hesitated, and it was not without a grain of hypocrisy that I artfully replied : " I would much rather *you* were ! "

" Well, I shall be if she is." Mr. Beston spoke with gravity. " She can give you a good deal, don't you know ?—all sorts of leads and glimpses. She naturally knows more about him than any one. Besides, she's charming herself."

To dip so deep could only be an enticement ; yet I already felt so saturated, felt my cup so full, that I almost wondered what was left to me to learn, almost feared to lose, in greater waters, my feet and my courage. At the same time I welcomed without reserve the opportunity my patron offered, making as my one condition that if Miss Delavoy assented he would print my article as it stood. It was arranged that he should tell her that I would, with her leave, call upon her, and I begged him to let her know in

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advance that I was prostrate before her brother. He had all the air of thinking that he should have put us in a relation by which *The Cynosure* would largely profit, and I left him with the peaceful consciousness that if I had baited my biggest hook he had opened his widest mouth. I wondered a little, in truth, how he could care enough for Delavoy without caring more than enough, but I may at once say that I was, in respect to Mr. Beston, now virtually in possession of my point of view. This had revealed to me an intellectual economy of the rarest kind. There was not a thing in the world—with a single exception, on which I shall presently touch—that he valued for itself, and not a scrap he knew about anything save whether or no it would do. To “do” with Mr. Beston, was to do for *The Cynosure*. The wonder was that he could know that of things of which he knew nothing else whatever.

There are a hundred reasons, even in this most private record, which, from a turn of mind so unlike Mr. Beston's, I keep exactly for a love of the fact in itself: there are a hundred confused delicacies, operating however late, that hold my hand from any motion to treat the question of the effect produced on me by first meeting with Miss Delavoy. I say there are a hundred, but it would better express my sense perhaps to speak of them all in the singular. Certain it is that one of them embraces and displaces the others. It was not the first time, and I daresay it was not even the second, that I grew sure of a shyness on the part of this young lady greater than any exhibition in such a line that my kindred constitution had ever allowed me to be clear about. My own diffidence, I may say, kept me in the dark so long that my perception of hers had to be retroactive—to go back and put together and, with an element of relief, interpret and fill out. It failed, inevitably, to

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operate in respect to a person in whom the infirmity of which I speak had none of the awkwardness, the tell-tale anguish, that makes it as a rule either ridiculous or tragic. It was too deep, too still, too general—it was perhaps even too proud. I must content myself, however, with saying that I have in all my life known nothing more beautiful than the faint, cool morning-mist of confidence less and less embarrassed in which it slowly evaporated. We have made the thing all out since, and we understand it all now. It took her longer than I measured to believe that a man without her particular knowledge could make such an approach to her particular love. The approach was made in my paper, which I left with her on my first visit and in which, on my second, she told me she had not an alteration to suggest. She said of it what I had occasionally, to an artist, heard said, or said myself, of a likeness happily caught : that to touch it again would spoil it, that it had “ come ” and must only be left. It may be imagined that after such a speech I was willing to wait for anything ; unless indeed it be suggested that there could be then nothing more to wait for. A great deal more, at any rate, seemed to arrive, and it was all in conversation about Delavoy that we ceased to be hindered and hushed. The place was still full of him, and in everything there that spoke to me I heard the sound of his voice. I read his style into everything—I read it into his sister. She was surrounded by his relics, his possessions, his books ; all of which were not many, for he had worked without material reward : this only, however, made each more charged, somehow, and more personal. He had been her only devotion, and there were moments when she might have been taken for the guardian of a temple or a tomb. That was what brought me nearer than I had got even in my paper ; the sense

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that it was he, in a manner, who had made her, and that to be with her was still to be with himself. It was not only that I could talk to him so ; it was that he listened and that he also talked. Little by little and touch by touch she built him up to me ; and then it was, I confess, that I felt, in comparison, the shrinkage of what I had written. It grew faint and small—though indeed only for myself ; it had from the first, for the witness who counted so much more, a merit that I have ever since reckoned the great good fortune of my life, and even, I will go so far as to say, a fine case of inspiration. I hasten to add that this case had been preceded by a still finer. Miss Delavoy had made of her brother the year before his death a portrait in pencil that was precious for two rare reasons. It was the only representation of the sort in existence, and it was a work of curious distinction. Conventional but sincere, highly finished and smaller than life, it had a quality that, in any collection, would have caused it to be scanned for some signature known to the initiated. It was a thing of real vision, yet it was a thing of taste, and as soon as I learned that our hero, sole of his species, had succeeded in never, save on this occasion, sitting, least of all to a photographer, I took the full measure of what the studied strokes of a pious hand would some day represent for generations more aware of John Delavoy than, on the whole, his own had been. My feeling for them was not diminished, moreover, by learning from my young lady that Mr. Beston, who had given them some attention, had signified that, in the event of his publishing an article, he would like a reproduction of the drawing to accompany it. The " pictures " in *The Cynosure* were in general a marked chill to my sympathy : I had always held that, like good wine, honest prose needed, as it were, no bush. I took them as a sign that if good wine, as we

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know, is more and more hard to meet, the other commodity was becoming as scarce. The bushes, at all events, in *The Cynosure*, quite planted out the text ; but my objection fell in the presence of Miss Delavoy's sketch, which already, in the forefront of my study, I saw as a flower in the coat of a bridegroom.

I was obliged just after my visit to leave town for three weeks and was, in the country, surprised at their elapsing without bringing me a proof from Mr. Beston. I finally wrote to ask of him an explanation of the delay ; for which in turn I had again to wait so long that before I heard from him I received a letter from Miss Delavoy, who, thanking me as for a good office, let me know that our friend had asked her for the portrait. She appeared to suppose that I must have put in with him some word for it that availed more expertly than what had passed on the subject between themselves. This gave me occasion, on my return to town, to call on her for the purpose of explaining how little as yet, unfortunately, she owed me. I am not indeed sure that it didn't quicken my return. I knocked at her door with rather a vivid sense that if Mr. Beston had her drawing I was yet still without my proof. My privation was the next moment to feel a sharper pinch, for on entering her apartment I found Mr. Beston in possession. Then it was that I was fairly confronted with the problem given me from this time to solve. I began at that hour to look it straight in the face. What I in the first place saw was that Mr. Beston was "making up" to our hostess ; what I saw in the second—what at any rate I believed I saw—was that she had come a certain distance to meet him ; all of which would have been simple and usual enough had not the very things that gave it such a character been exactly the things I should least have expected.

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Even this first time, as my patron sat there, I made out somehow that in that position at least he was sincere and sound. Why should this have surprised me? Why should I immediately have asked myself how he would make it pay? He was there because he liked to be, and where was the wonder of his liking? There was no wonder in my own, I felt, so that my state of mind must have been already a sign of how little I supposed we could like the same things. This even strikes me, on looking back, as an implication sufficiently ungraceful of the absence on Miss Delavoy's part of direct and designed attraction. I daresay indeed that Mr. Beston's subjection would have seemed to me a clearer thing if I had not had by the same stroke to account for his friend's. She liked him, and I grudged her that, though with the actual limits of my knowledge of both parties I had literally to invent reasons for its being a perversity, I could only in private treat it as one, and this in spite of Mr. Beston's notorious power to please. He was the handsomest man in "literary" London, and, controlling the biggest circulation—a body of subscribers as vast as a conscript army—he represented in a manner the modern poetry of numbers. He was in love, moreover, or he thought he was; that flushed with a general glow the large surface he presented. This surface, from my quiet corner, struck me as a huge tract, a sort of particoloured map, a great spotted social chart. He abounded in the names of things, and his mind was like a great staircase at a party—you heard them bawled at the top. He ought to have liked Miss Delavoy because *her* name, so announced, sounded well, and I grudged him, as I grudged the young lady, the higher motive of an intelligence of her charm. It was a charm so fine and so veiled that if she had been a piece of prose or of verse I was sure he would never have

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discovered it. The oddity was that, as the case stood, he had seen she would "do." I too had seen it, but then I was a critic : these remarks will sadly have miscarried if they fail to show the reader how much of one.

III

I MENTIONED my paper and my disappointment, but I think it was only in the light of subsequent events that I could fix an impression of his having, at the moment, looked a trifle embarrassed. He smote his brow and took out his tablets ; he deplored the accident of which I complained, and promised to look straight into it. An accident it could only have been, the result of a particular pressure, a congestion of work. Of course he had had my letter and had fully supposed it had been answered and acted on. My spirits revived at this, and I almost thought the incident happy when I heard Miss Delavoy herself put a clear question.

“ It won’t be for April, then, which was what I had hoped ? ”

It was what *I* had hoped, goodness knew, but if I had had no anxiety I should not have caught the low, sweet ring of her own. It made Mr. Beston’s eyes fix her a moment, and, though the thing has as I write it a fatuous air, I remember thinking that he must at this instant have seen in her face almost all his contributor saw. If he did he couldn’t wholly have enjoyed it ; yet he replied genially enough : “ I’ll put it into June.”

“ Oh, June ! ” our companion murmured in a manner that I took as plaintive—even as exquisite.

Mr. Beston had got up. I had not promised myself

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to sit him out, much less to drive him away ; and at this sign of his retirement I had a sense still dim, but much deeper, of being literally lifted by my check. Even before it was set up my article was somehow operative, so that I could look from one of my companions to the other and quite magnanimously smile. " June will do very well."

" Oh, if *you* say so——! " Miss Delavoy sighed and turned away.

" We must have time for the portrait ; it will require great care," Mr. Beston said.

" Oh, please be sure it has the greatest ! " I eagerly returned.

But Miss Delavoy took this up, speaking straight to Mr. Beston. " I attach no importance to the portrait. My impatience is all for the article."

" The article's very neat. It's very neat," Mr. Beston repeated. " But your drawing's our great prize."

" Your great prize," our young lady replied, " can only be the thing that tells most about my brother."

" Well, that's the case with your picture," Mr. Beston protested.

" How can you say that ? My picture tells nothing in the world but that he never sat for another."

" Which is precisely the enormous and final fact ! " I laughingly exclaimed.

Mr. Beston looked at me as if in uncertainty and just the least bit in disapproval ; then he found his tone. " It's the big fact for *The Cynosure*. I shall leave you in no doubt of *that* ! " he added, to Miss Delavoy, as he went away.

I was surprised at his going, but I inferred that, from the pressure at the office, he had no choice ; and I was at least not too much surprised to guess the meaning of his last remark to have been that our hostess must expect a handsome draft. This allusion

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had so odd a grace on a lover's lips that, even after the door had closed, it seemed still to hang there between Miss Delavoy and her second visitor. Naturally, however, we let it gradually drop; she only said with a kind of conscious quickness: "I'm really very sorry for the delay." I thought her beautiful as she spoke, and I felt that I had taken with her a longer step than the visible facts explained. "Yes, it's a great bore. But to an editor—one doesn't show it."

She seemed amused. "Are they such queer fish?"

I considered. "You know the great type."

"Oh, I don't know Mr. Beston as an editor."

"As what, then?"

"Well, as what you call, I suppose, a man of the world. A very kind, clever one."

"Of course *I* see him mainly in the saddle and in the charge—at the head of his hundred of thousands. But I mustn't undermine him," I added, smiling, "when he's doing so much for me."

She appeared to wonder about it. "Is it really a great deal?"

"To publish a thing like that? Yes—as editors go. They're all tarred with the same brush."

"Ah, but he has immense ideas. He goes in for the best in all departments. That's his own phrase. He has often assured me that he'll never stoop."

"He wants none but 'first-class stuff.' That's the way he has expressed it to *me*; but it comes to the same thing. It's our great comfort. He's charming."

"He's charming," my friend replied; and I thought for the moment we had done with Mr. Beston. A rich reference to him, none the less, struck me as flashing from her very next words—words that she uttered without appearing to have noticed any I had pronounced in the interval. "Does no one, then, really care for my brother?"

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I was startled by the length of her flight. " Really care ? "

" No one but you ? Every month your study doesn't appear is at this time a kind of slight."

" I see what you mean. But of course *we're* serious."

" Whom do you mean by ' we ? ' "

" Well, you and me."

She seemed to look us all over and not to be struck with our mass. " And no one else ? No one else is serious ? "

" What I should say is that no one *feels* the whole thing, don't you know ? as much."

Miss Delavoy hesitated. " Not even so much as Mr. Beston ? " And her eyes, as she named him, waited, to my surprise, for my answer.

I couldn't quite see why she returned to him, so that my answer was rather lame. " Don't ask me too many things ; else there are some *I* shall have to ask."

She continued to look at me ; after which she turned away. " Then I won't—for I don't understand him." She turned away, I say, but the next moment had faced about with a fresh, inconsequent question. " Then why in the world has he cooled off ? "

" About my paper ? *Has* he cooled ? Has he shown you that otherwise ? " I asked.

" Than by his delay ? Yes, by silence—and by worse."

" What do you call worse ? "

" Well, to say of it—and twice over—what he said just now."

" That it's very ' neat ? ' You don't think it is ? " I laughed.

" I don't say it " ; and with that she smiled. " My brother might hear ! "

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Her tone was such that, while it lingered in the air, it deepened, prolonging the interval, whatever point there was in this ; unspoken things therefore had passed between us by the time I at last brought out : " He hasn't read me ! It doesn't matter," I quickly went on ; " his relation to what I may do or not do is, for his own purposes, quite complete enough without that."

She seemed struck with this. " Yes, his relation to almost anything is extraordinary."

" His relation to everything ! " It rose visibly before us and, as we felt, filled the room with its innumerable, indistinguishable objects. " Oh, it's the making of him ! "

She evidently recognised all this, but after a minute she again broke out : " You say he hasn't read you and that it doesn't matter. But has he read my brother ? Doesn't *that* matter ? "

I waved away the thought. " For what do you take him, and why in the world should it ? He knows perfectly what he wants to do, and his postponement is quite in your interest. The reproduction of the drawing——"

She took me up. " I hate the drawing ! "

" So do I," I laughed, " and I rejoice in there being something on which we can feel so together ! "

IV

WHAT may further have passed between us on this occasion loses, as I try to recall it, all colour in the light of a communication that I had from her four days later. It consisted of a note in which she announced to me that she had heard from Mr. Beston in terms that troubled her: a letter from Paris—he had dashed over on business—abruptly proposing that she herself should, as she quoted, give him something; something that her intimate knowledge of the subject—which was of course John Delavoy—her rare opportunities for observation and study, would make precious, would make as unique as the work of her pencil. He appealed to her to gratify him in this particular, exhorted her to sit right down to her task, reminded her that to tell a loving sister's tale was her obvious, her highest duty. She confessed to mystification and invited me to explain. Was this sudden perception of her duty a result on Mr. Beston's part of any difference with myself? Did he want two papers? Did he want an alternative to mine? Did he want hers as a supplement or as a substitute? She begged instantly to be informed if anything had happened to mine. To meet her request I had first to make sure, and I repaired on the morrow to Mr. Beston's office in the eager hope that he was back from Paris. This hope was crowned; he had crossed in the night and

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was in his room ; so that on sending up my card I was introduced to his presence, where I promptly broke ground by letting him know that I had had even yet no proof.

" Oh, yes ! about Delavoy. Well, I've rather expected you, but you must excuse me if I'm brief. My absence has put me back ; I've returned to arrears. Then from Paris I meant to write to you, but even there I was up to my neck. I think, too, I've instinctively held off a little. You won't like what I have to say—you *can't* ! " He spoke almost as if I might wish to prove I could. " The fact is, you see, your thing won't do. No—not even a little."

Even after Miss Delavoy's note it was a blow, and I felt myself turn pale. " Not even a little ? Why, I thought you wanted it so ! "

Mr. Beston just perceptibly braced himself. " My dear man, we didn't want *that* ! We couldn't do it. I've every desire to be agreeable to you, but we really couldn't."

I sat staring. " What in the world's the matter with it ? "

" Well, it's impossible. That's what's the matter with it."

" Impossible ? " There rolled over me the ardent hours and a great wave of the feeling that I had put into it.

He hung back but an instant—he faced the music. " It's indecent."

I could only wildly echo him. " Indecent ? Why, it's absolutely, it's almost to the point of a regular chill, expository. What in the world is it but critical ? "

Mr. Beston's retort was prompt. " Too critical by half ! That's just where it is. It says too much."

" But what it says is all about its subject."

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"I daresay, but I don't think we want quite so much about its subject."

I seemed to swing in the void and I clutched, fallaciously, at the nearest thing. "What you do want, then—what is *that* to be about?"

"That's for you to find out—it's not my business to tell you."

It was dreadful, this snub to my happy sense that I *had* found out. "I thought you wanted John Delavoy. I've simply stuck to him."

Mr. Beston gave a dry laugh. "I should think you had!" Then after an instant he turned oracular. "Perhaps we wanted him—perhaps we didn't. We didn't at any rate want indelicacy."

"Indelicacy?" I almost shrieked. "Why, it's pure portraiture."

"'Pure,' my dear fellow, just begs the question. It's most objectionable—that's what it is. For portraiture of *such* things, at all events, there's no place in our scheme."

I speculated. "Your scheme for an account of Delavoy?"

Mr. Beston looked as if I trifled. "Our scheme for a successful magazine."

"No place, do I understand you, for criticism? No place for the great figures——? If you don't want too much detail," I went on, "I recall perfectly that I was careful not to go into it. What I tried for was a general vivid picture—which I really supposed I arrived at. I boiled the man down—I gave the three or four leading notes. *Them* I did try to give with some intensity."

Mr. Beston, while I spoke, had turned about and, with a movement that confessed to impatience and even not a little, I thought, to irritation, fumbled on his table among a mass of papers and other objects; after which he had pulled out a couple of drawers.

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Finally he fronted me anew with my copy in his hand, and I had meanwhile added a word about the disadvantage at which he placed me. To have made me wait was unkind ; but to have made me wait for such news—— ! I ought at least to have been told it earlier. He replied to this that he had not at first had time to read me, and, on the evidence of my other things, had taken me pleasantly for granted : he had only been enlightened by the revelation of the proof. What he had fished out of his drawer was, in effect, not my manuscript, but the " galleys " that had never been sent me. The thing was all set up there, and my companion, with eyeglass and thumb, dashed back the sheets and looked up and down for places. The proof-reader, he mentioned, had so waked him up with the blue pencil that he had no difficulty in finding them. They were all in his face when he again looked at me. " Did you candidly think that we were going to print this ? "

All my silly young pride in my performance quivered as if under the lash. " Why the devil else should I have taken the trouble to write it ? If you're not going to print it, why the devil did you ask me for it ? "

" I didn't ask you. You proposed it yourself. "

" You jumped at it ; you quite agreed you ought to have it : it comes to the same thing. So indeed you ought to have it. It's too ignoble, your not taking up such a man. "

He looked at me hard. " I *have* taken him up. I do want something about him, and I've got his portrait there—coming out beautifully. "

" Do you mean you've taken him up, " I inquired, " by asking for something of his sister ? Why, in that case, do you speak as if I had forced on you the question of a paper ? If you want one you want one. "

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Mr. Beston continued to sound me. "How do you know what I've asked of his sister?"

"I know what Miss Delavoy tells me. She let me know it as soon as she had heard from you."

"Do you mean that you've just seen her?"

"I've not seen her since the time I met you at her house; but I had a note from her yesterday. She couldn't understand your appeal—in the face of knowing what I've done myself."

Something seemed to tell me at this instant that she had not yet communicated with Mr. Beston, but that he wished me not to know she hadn't. It came out still more in the temper with which he presently said: "I want what Miss Delavoy can do, but I don't want this kind of thing!" And he shook my proof at me as if for a preliminary to hurling it.

I took it from him, to show I anticipated his violence, and, profoundly bewildered, I turned over the challenged pages. They grinned up at me with the proof-reader's shocks, but the shocks, as my eye caught them, bloomed on the spot like flowers. I didn't feel abased—so many of my good things came back to me. "What on earth do you seriously mean? This thing isn't bad. It's awfully good—it's beautiful."

With an odd movement he plucked it back again, though not indeed as if from any new conviction. He had had after all a kind of contact with it that had made it a part of his stock. "I daresay it's clever. For the kind of thing it is, it's as beautiful as you like. It's simply not *our* kind." He seemed to break out afresh. "Didn't you know more——?"

I waited. "More what?"

He in turn did the same. "More everything. More about Delavoy. The whole point was that I thought you did."

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I fell back in my chair. "You think my article shows ignorance? I sat down to it with the sense that I knew more than any one."

Mr. Beston restored it again to my hands. "You've kept that pretty well out of sight then. Didn't you get anything out of *her*? It was simply for that I addressed you to her."

I took from him with this, as well, a silent statement of what it had not been for. "I got everything in the wide world I could. We almost worked together, but what appeared was that all her own knowledge, all her own view, quite fell in with what I had already said. There appeared nothing to subtract or to add."

He looked hard again, not this time at me, but at the document in my hands. "You mean she has gone into all that—seen it just as it stands there?"

"If I've still," I replied, "any surprise left, it's for the surprise your question implies. You put our heads together, and you've surely known all along that they've remained so. She told me a month ago that she had immediately let you know the good she thought of what I had done."

Mr. Beston very candidly remembered, and I could make out that if he flushed as he did so it was because what most came back to him was his own simplicity. "I see. That must have been why I trusted you—sent you, without control, straight off to be set up. But now that I see you——!" he went on.

"You're surprised at her indulgence?"

Once more he snatched at the record of my rashness—once more he turned it over. Then he read out two or three paragraphs. "Do you mean she has gone into all that?"

"My dear sir, what do you take her for? There wasn't a line we didn't thresh out, and our talk

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wouldn't for either of us have been a bit interesting if it hadn't been really frank. Have you to learn at this time of day," I continued, "what her feeling is about her brother's work? She's not a bit stupid. She has a kind of worship for it."

Mr. Beston kept his eyes on one of my pages. "She passed her life with him and was extremely fond of him."

"Yes, and she has the point of view and no end of ideas. She's tremendously intelligent."

Our friend at last looked up at me, but I scarce knew what to make of his expression. "Then she'll do me exactly what I want."

"Another article, you mean, to replace mine?"

"Of a totally different sort. Something the public *will* stand." His attention reverted to my proof, and he suddenly reached out for a pencil. He made a great dash against a block of my prose and placed the page before me. "Do you pretend to me they'll stand *that*?"

"That" proved, as I looked at it, a summary of the subject, deeply interesting, and treated, as I thought, with extraordinary art, of the work to which I gave the highest place in my author's array. I took it in, sounding it hard for some hidden vice, but with a frank relish, in effect, of its lucidity; then I answered: "If they won't stand it, what will they stand?"

Mr. Beston looked about and put a few objects on his table to rights. "They won't stand anything." He spoke with such pregnant brevity as to make his climax stronger. "And quite right too! *I'm* right, at any rate; I can't plead ignorance. I know where I am, and I want to stay there. That single page would have cost me five thousand subscribers."

"Why, that single page is a statement of the very essence——!"

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He turned sharp round at me. "Very essence of what?"

"Of my very topic, damn it."

"Your very topic is John Delavoy."

"And what's *his* very topic? Am I not to attempt to utter it? What under the sun else am I writing about?"

"You're not writing in *The Cynosure* about the relations of the sexes. With those relations, with the question of sex in any degree, I should suppose you would already have seen that we have nothing whatever to do. If you want to know what our public won't stand, there you have it."

I seem to recall that I smiled sweetly as I took it. "I don't know, I think, what you mean by those phrases, which strike me as too empty and too silly, and of a nature therefore to be more deplored than any, I'm positive, that I use in my analysis. I don't use a single one that even remotely resembles them. I simply try to express my author, and if your public won't stand his being expressed, mention to me kindly the source of its interest in him."

Mr. Beston was perfectly ready. "He's all the rage with the clever people—that's the source. The interest of the public is whatever a clever article may make it."

"I don't understand you. How can an article be clever, to begin with, and how can it make anything of anything, if it doesn't avail itself of material?"

"There *is* material, which I'd hoped you'd use. Miss Delavoy has lots of material. I don't know what she has told you, but I know what she has told *me*." He hung fire but an instant. "Quite lovely things."

"And have you told *her*——?"

"Told her what?" he asked as I paused.

"The lovely things you've just told me."

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Mr. Beston got up ; folding the rest of my proof together, he made the final surrender with more dignity than I had looked for. " You can do with this what you like." Then as he reached the door with me : " Do you suppose that I talk with Miss Delavoy on such subjects ? " I answered that he could leave that to me—I shouldn't mind so doing ; and I recall that before I quitted him something again passed between us on the question of her drawing. " What we want," he said, " is just the really nice thing, the pleasant, right thing to go with it. That drawing's going to take ! "

V

A FEW minutes later I had wired to our young lady that, should I hear nothing from her to the contrary, I would come to her that evening. I had other affairs that kept me out ; and on going home I found a word to the effect that though she should not be free after dinner she hoped for my presence at five o'clock : a notification betraying to me that the evening would, by arrangement, be Mr. Beston's hour and that she wished to see me first. At five o'clock I was there, and as soon as I entered the room I perceived two things. One of these was that she had been highly impatient ; the other was that she had not heard, since my call on him, from Mr. Beston, and that her arrangement with him therefore dated from earlier. The tea-service was by the fire—she herself was at the window ; and I am at a loss to name the particular revelation that I drew from this fact of her being restless on general grounds. My telegram had fallen in with complications at which I could only guess ; it had not found her quiet ; she was living in a troubled air. But her wonder leaped from her lips. " He does want two ? "

I had brought in my proof with me, putting it in my hat and my hat on a chair. " Oh, no—he wants only one, only yours."

Her wonder deepened. " He won't print—— ? "

" My poor old stuff ! He returns it with thanks."

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"Returns it? When he had accepted it!"

"Oh, that doesn't prevent—when he doesn't like it."

"But he does; he did. He liked it to *me*. He called it 'sympathetic.'"

"He only meant that *you* are—perhaps even that I myself am. He hadn't read it then. He read it but a day or two ago, and horror seized him."

Miss Delavoy dropped into a chair. "Horror?"

"I don't know how to express to you the fault he finds with it." I had gone to the fire, and I looked to where it peeped out of my hat; my companion did the same, and her face showed the pain she might have felt, in the street, at sight of the victim of an accident. "It appears it's indecent."

She sprang from her chair. "To describe my brother?"

"As *I've* described him. That, at any rate, is how my account sins. What I've said is unprintable." I leaned against the chimney-piece with a serenity of which, I admit, I was conscious; I rubbed it in and felt a private joy in watching my influence.

"Then what *have* you said?"

"You know perfectly. You heard my thing from beginning to end. You said it was beautiful."

She remembered as I looked at her; she showed all the things she called back. "It *was* beautiful." I went over and picked it up; I came back with it to the fire. "It was the best thing ever said about him," she went on. "It was the finest and truest."

"Well, then——!" I exclaimed.

"But what have you done to it since?"

"I haven't touched it since."

"You've put nothing else in?"

"Not a line—not a syllable. Don't you remember how you warned me against spoiling it? It's of the thing we read together, liked together, went over and

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over together ; it's of this dear little serious thing of good sense and good faith"—and I held up my roll of proof, shaking it even as Mr. Beston had shaken it—" that he expresses that opinion."

She frowned at me with an intensity that, though bringing me no pain, gave me a sense of her own. " Then that's why he has asked *me*—— ? "

" To do something instead. But something pure. You, he hopes, won't be indecent."

She sprang up, more mystified than enlightened ; she had pieced things together, but they left the question gaping. " Is he mad ? What is he talking about ? "

" Oh, *I* know—now. Has he specified what he wants of you ? "

She thought a moment, all before me. " Yes—to be very ' personal.' "

" Precisely. You mustn't speak of the work."

She almost glared. " Not speak of it ? "

" That's indecent."

" My brother's work ? "

" To speak of it."

She took this from me as she had not taken anything. " Then how can I speak of him at all ?—how can I articulate ? He *was* his work."

" Certainly he was. But that's not the kind of truth that will stand in Mr. Beston's way. Don't you know what he means by wanting you to be personal ? "

In the way she looked at me there was still for a moment a dim desire to spare him—even perhaps a little to save him. None the less, after an instant, she let herself go. " Something horrible ? "

" Horrible ; so long, that is, as it takes the place of something more honest and really so much more clean. He wants—what do they call the stuff ?—anecdotes, glimpses, gossip, chat ; a picture of his

'home life,' domestic habits, diet, dress, arrangements—all his little ways and little secrets, and even, to better it still, all your own, your relations with him, your feelings about him, his feelings about *you*: both his and yours, in short, about anything else you can think of. Don't you see what I mean?" She saw so well that, in the dismay of it, she grasped my arm an instant, half as if to steady herself, half as if to stop me. But she couldn't stop me. "He wants you just to write round and round that portrait."

She was lost in the reflexions I had stirred, in apprehensions and indignations that slowly surged and spread; and for a moment she was unconscious of everything else. "What portrait?"

"Why, the beautiful one you did. The beautiful one you gave him."

"Did I give it to him? Oh, yes!" It came back to her, but this time she blushed red, and I saw what had occurred to her. It occurred, in fact, at the same instant to myself. "Ah, *par exemple*," she cried, "he shan't have it!"

I couldn't help laughing. "My dear young lady, unfortunately he *has* got it!"

"He shall send it back. He shan't use it."

"I'm afraid he *is* using it," I replied. "I'm afraid he *has* used it. They've begun to work on it."

She looked at me almost as if I were Mr. Beston. "Then they must stop working on it." Something in her decision somehow thrilled me. "Mr. Beston must send it straight back. Indeed I'll wire to him to bring it to-night."

"Is he coming to-night?" I ventured to inquire.

She held her head very high. "Yes, he's coming to-night. It's most happy!" she bravely added, as if to forestall any suggestion that it could be anything else.

I thought a moment; first about that, then about

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something that presently made me say : " Oh, well, if he brings it back——! "

She continued to look at me. " Do you mean you doubt his doing so ? "

I thought again. " You'll probably have a stiff time with him."

She made, for a little, no answer to this but to sound me again with her eyes ; our silence, however, was carried off by her then abruptly turning to her tea-tray and pouring me out a cup. " Will you do me a favour ? " she asked as I took it.

" Any favour in life."

" Will you be present ? "

" Present ? "—I failed at first to imagine.

" When Mr. Beston comes."

It was so much more than I had expected that I of course looked stupid in my surprise. " This evening—here ? "

" This evening—here. Do you think my request very strange ? "

I pulled myself together. " How can I tell when I'm so awfully in the dark ? "

" In the dark—— ? " She smiled at me as if I were a person who carried such lights !

" About the nature, I mean, of your friendship."

" With Mr. Beston ? " she broke in. Then in the wonderful way that women say such things : " It has always been so pleasant."

" Do you think it will be pleasant for *me* ? " I laughed.

" Our friendship ? I don't care whether it is or not ! "

" I mean what you'll have out with him—for of course you *will* have it out. Do you think it will be pleasant for *him* ? "

" To find you here—or to see you come in ? I don't feel obliged to think. This is a matter in

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which I now care for no one but my brother—for nothing but his honour. I stand only on that."

I can't say how high, with these words, she struck me as standing, nor how the look that she gave me with them seemed to make me spring up beside her. We were at this elevation together a moment. "I'll do anything in the world you say."

"Then please come about nine."

That struck me as so tantamount to saying "And please therefore go this minute" that I immediately turned to the door. Before I passed it, however, I gave her time to ring out clear: "I know what I'm about!" She proved it the next moment by following me into the hall with the request that I would leave her my proof. I placed it in her hands, and if she knew what she was about I wondered, outside, what *I* was.

VI

I DARESAY it was the desire to make this out that, in the evening, brought me back a little before my time. Mr. Beston had not arrived, and it's worth mentioning—for it was rather odd—that while we waited for him I sat with my hostess in silence. She spoke of my paper, which she had read over—but simply to tell me she had done so ; and that was practically all that passed between us for a time at once so full and so quiet that it struck me neither as short nor as long. We felt, in the matter, so indivisible that we might have been united in some observance or some sanctity—to go through something decorously appointed. Without an observation we listened to the door-bell, and, still without one, a minute later, saw the person we expected stand there and show his surprise. It was at me he looked as he spoke to her.

“ I'm not to see you alone ? ”

“ Not just yet, please,” Miss Delavoy answered. “ Of what has suddenly come between us this gentleman is essentially a part, and I really think he'll be less present if we speak before him than if we attempt to deal with the question without him.” Mr. Beston was amused, but not enough amused to sit down, and we stood there while, for the third time, my proof-sheets were shaken for emphasis. “ I've been reading these over,” she said as she held them up.

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Mr. Beston, on what he had said to me of them, could only look grave ; but he tried also to look pleasant, and I foresaw that, on the whole, he would really behave well. " They're remarkably clever."

" And yet you wish to publish instead of them something from so different a hand ? "

He smiled now very kindly. " If you'll only let me have it ! *Won't* you let me have it ? I'm sure you know exactly the thing I want."

" Oh, perfectly ! "

" I've tried to give her an idea of it," I threw in.

Mr. Beston promptly saw his way to make this a reproach to me. " Then, after all, you had one yourself ? "

" I think I couldn't have kept so clear of it if I hadn't had ! " I laughed.

" I'll write you something," Miss Delavoy went on, " if you'll print this as it stands." My proof was still in her keeping.

Mr. Beston raised his eyebrows. " Print two ? Whatever do I want with two ? What do I want with the wrong one if I can get the beautiful right ? "

She met this, to my surprise, with a certain gaiety. " It's a big subject—a subject to be seen from different sides. Don't you want a full, a various treatment ? Our papers will have nothing in common."

" I should hope not ! " Mr. Beston said good-humouredly. " You have command, dear lady, of a point of view too good to spoil. It so happens that your brother has been really less handled than any one, so that there's a kind of obscurity about him, and in consequence a kind of curiosity, that it seems to me quite a crime not to work. There's just the perfection, don't you know ? of a little sort of mystery—a tantalising *demi-jour*." He continued to smile at her as if he thoroughly hoped to kindle her, and

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it was interesting at that moment to get this vivid glimpse of his conception.

I could see it quickly enough break out in Miss Delavoy, who sounded for an instant almost assenting. "And you want the obscurity and the mystery, the tantalising *demi-jour*, cleared up?"

"I want a little lovely, living thing! Don't be perverse," he pursued, "don't stand in your own light and in your brother's and in this young man's—in the long run, and in mine too and in every one's: just let us have him out as no one but you can bring him and as, by the most charming of chances and a particular providence, he has been kept all this time just on purpose for you to bring. Really, you know"—his vexation *would* crop up—"one could howl to see such good stuff wasted!"

"Well," our young lady returned, "that holds good of one thing as well as of another. I can never hope to describe or express my brother as these pages describe and express him; but, as I tell you, approaching him from a different direction, I promise to do my very best. Only, my condition remains."

Mr. Beston transferred his eyes from her face to the little bundle in her hand, where they rested with an intensity that made me privately wonder if it represented some vain vision of a snatch defeated in advance by the stupidity of his having suffered my copy to be multiplied. "My printing that?"

"Your printing this."

Mr. Beston wavered there between us: I could make out in him a vexed inability to keep us as distinct as he would have liked. But he was triumphantly light. "It's impossible. Don't be a pair of fools!"

"Very well, then," said Miss Delavoy; "please send me back my drawing."

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"Oh dear, no!" Mr. Beston laughed. "Your drawing we must have at any rate."

"Ah, but I forbid you to use it! This gentleman is my witness that my prohibition is absolute."

"Was it to be your witness that you sent for the gentleman? You take immense precautions!" Mr. Beston exclaimed. Before she could retort, however, he came back to his strong point. "Do you coolly ask of me to sacrifice ten thousand subscribers?"

The number, I noticed, had grown since the morning, but Miss Delavoy faced it boldly. "If you do, you'll be well rid of them. They must be ignoble, your ten thousand subscribers."

He took this perfectly. "You dispose of them easily! Ignoble or not, what I have to do is to keep them and if possible add to their number; not to get rid of them."

"You'd rather get rid of my poor brother instead?"

"I don't get rid of him. I pay him a signal attention. Reducing it to the least, I publish his portrait."

"His portrait—the only one worth speaking of? Why, you turn it out with horror."

"Do you call the only one worth speaking of that misguided effort?" And, obeying a restless impulse, he appeared to reach for my tribute; not, I think, with any conscious plan, but with a vague desire in some way again to point his moral with it.

I liked immensely the motion with which, in reply to this, she put it behind her: her gesture expressed so distinctly her vision of her own lesson. From that moment, somehow, they struck me as forgetting me, and I seemed to see them as they might have been alone together; even to see a little what, for each, had held and what had divided them. I remember how, at this, I almost held my breath, effacing myself to let them go, make them show me

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whatever they might. "It's the only one," she insisted, "that tells, about its subject, anything that's any one's business. If you really want John Delavoy, there he is. If you don't want him, don't insult him with an evasion and a pretence. Have at least the courage to say that you're afraid of him!"

I figured Mr. Beston here as much incommoded; but all too simply, doubtless, for he clearly held on, smiling through flushed discomfort and on the whole bearing up. "Do you think I'm afraid of *you*?" He might forget me, but he would have to forget me a little more to yield completely to his visible impulse to take her hand. It was visible enough to herself to make her show that she declined to meet it, and even that his effect on her was at last distinctly exasperating. Oh, how I saw at that moment that in the really touching good faith of his personal sympathy he didn't measure his effect! If he had done so he wouldn't have tried to rush it, to carry it off with tenderness. He dropped to that now so rashly that I was in truth sorry for him. "You *could* do so gracefully, so naturally what we want. What we want, don't you see? is perfect taste. I know better than you do yourself how perfect yours would be. I always know better than people do themselves." He jested and pleaded, getting in, benightedly, deeper. Perhaps I didn't literally hear him ask in the same accents if she didn't care for him at all, but I distinctly saw him look as if he were on the point of it, and something, at any rate, in a lower tone, dropped from him that he followed up with the statement that if she did even just a little she would help him.

VII

SHE made him wait a deep minute for her answer to this, and that gave me time to read into it what he accused her of failing to do. I recollect that I was startled at their having come so far, though I was reassured, after a little, by seeing that he had come much the furthest. I had now I scarce know what amused sense of knowing our hostess so much better than he. "I think you strangely inconsequent," she said at last. "If you associate with—what you speak of—the idea of help, does it strike you as helping *me* to treat in that base fashion the memory I most honour and cherish?" As I was quite sure of what he spoke of I could measure the force of this challenge. "Have you never discovered, all this time, that my brother's work is my pride and my joy?"

"Oh, my dear thing!"—and Mr. Beston broke into a cry that combined in the drollest way the attempt to lighten his guilt with the attempt to deprecate hers. He let it just flash upon us that, should he be pushed, he would show as—well, scandalised.

The tone in which Miss Delavoy again addressed him offered a reflexion of this gleam. "Do you know what my brother would think of you?"

He was quite ready with his answer, and there was no moment in the whole business at which I thought so well of him. "I don't care a hang what your brother would think!"

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"Then why do you wish to commemorate him?"

"How can you ask so innocent a question? It isn't for *him*."

"You mean it's for the public?"

"It's for the magazine," he said with a noble simplicity.

"The magazine is the public," it made me so far forget myself as to suggest.

"You've discovered it late in the day! Yes," he went on to our companion, "I don't in the least mind saying I don't care. I don't—I don't!" he repeated with a sturdiness in which I somehow recognised that he was, after all, a great editor. He looked at me a moment as if he even guessed what I saw, and, not unkindly, desired to force it home. "I don't care for anybody. It's not my business to care. That's not the way to run a magazine. Except of course as a mere man!"—and he added a smile for Miss Delavoy. He covered the whole ground again. "Your reminiscences would make a talk!"

She came back from the greatest distance she had yet reached. "My reminiscences?"

"To accompany the head." He must have been as tender as if I had been away. "Don't I see how you'd do them?"

She turned off, standing before the fire and looking into it; after which she faced him again. "If you'll publish our friend here, I'll do them."

"Why are you so awfully wound up about our friend here?"

"Read his article over—with a little intelligence—and your question will be answered."

Mr. Beston glanced at me and smiled as if with a loyal warning; then, with a good conscience, he let me have it. "Oh, damn his article!"

I was struck with her replying exactly what I should have replied if I had not been so detached.

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“ Damn it as much as you like, but publish it.” Mr. Beston, on this, turned to me as if to ask me if I had not heard enough to satisfy me : there was a visible offer in his face to give me more if I insisted. This amounted to an appeal to me to leave the room at least for a minute ; and it was perhaps from the fear of what might pass between us that Miss Delavoy once more took him up. “ If my brother’s as vile as you say——! ”

“ Oh, I don’t say *he’s* vile ! ” he broke in.

“ You only say *I* am ! ” I commented.

“ You’ve entered so into him,” she replied to me, “ that it comes to the same thing. And Mr. Beston says further that out of this unmentionableness he wants somehow to make something—some money or some sensation.”

“ My dear lady,” said Mr. Beston, “ it’s a very great literary figure ! ”

“ Precisely. You advertise yourself with it because it’s a very great literary figure, and it’s a very great literary figure because it wrote very great literary things that you wouldn’t for the world allow to be intelligibly or critically named. So you bid for the still more striking tribute of an intimate picture—an unveiling of God knows what !—without even having the pluck or the logic to say on what ground it is that you go in for naming him at all. Do you know, dear Mr. Beston,” she asked, “ that you make me very sick ? I count on receiving the portrait,” she concluded, “ by to-morrow evening at latest.”

I felt, before this speech was over, so sorry for her interlocutor that I was on the point of asking her if she mightn’t finish him without my help. But I had lighted a flame that was to consume me too, and I was aware of the scorch of it while I watched Mr. Beston plead frankly, if tacitly, that, though there

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was something in him not to be finished, she must yet give him a moment and let him take his time to look about him at pictures and books. He took it with more coolness than I ; then he produced his answer. " You shall receive it to-morrow morning if you'll do what I asked the last time." I could see more than he how the last time had been overlaid by what had since come up ; so that, as she opposed a momentary blank, I felt almost a coarseness in his recall of it with an " Oh, you know—you know ! "

Yes, after a little she knew, and I need scarcely add that I did. I felt, in the oddest way, by this time, that she was conscious of my penetration and wished to make me, for the loss now so clearly beyond repair, the only compensation in her power. This compensation consisted of her showing me that she was indifferent to my having guessed the full extent of the privilege that, on the occasion to which he alluded, she had permitted Mr. Beston to put before her. The balm for my wound was therefore to see what she resisted. She resisted Mr. Beston in more ways than one. " And if I don't do it ? " she demanded.

" I'll simply keep your picture ! "

" To what purpose if you don't use it ? "

" To keep it *is* to use it," Mr. Beston said.

" He has only to keep it long enough," I added, and with the intention that may be imagined, " to bring you round, by the mere sense of privation, to meet him on the other ground."

Miss Delavoy took no more notice of this speech than if she had not heard it, and Mr. Beston showed that he had heard it only enough to show, more markedly, that he followed her example. " I'll do anything, I'll do everything for you in life," he declared to her, " but publish such a thing as that."

She gave in all decorum to this statement the

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minute of concentration that belonged to it ; but her analysis of the matter had for sole effect to make her at last bring out, not with harshness, but with a kind of wondering pity : “ I think you’re really very dreadful ! ”

“ In what esteem then, Mr. Beston,” I asked, “ do you hold John Delavoy’s work ? ”

He rang out clear. “ As the sort of thing that’s out of our purview ! ” If for a second he had hesitated it was partly, I judge, with just resentment at my so directly addressing him, and partly, though he wished to show our friend that he fairly faced the question, because experience had not left him in such a case without two or three alternatives. He had already made plain indeed that he mostly preferred the simplest.

“ Wonderful, wonderful purview ! ” I quite sincerely, or at all events very musingly, exclaimed.

“ Then, if you could ever have got one of his novels——? ” Miss Delavoy inquired.

He smiled at the way she put it ; it made such an image of the attitude of *The Cynosure*. But he was kind and explicit. “ There isn’t one that wouldn’t have been beyond us. We could never have run him. We could never have handled him. We could never, in fact, have touched him. We should have dropped to—oh, Lord ! ” He saw the ghastly figure he couldn’t name—he brushed it away with a shudder.

I turned, on this, to our companion. “ I wish awfully you’d do what he asks ! ” She stared an instant, mystified ; then I quickly explained to which of his requests I referred. “ I mean I wish you’d do the nice familiar chat about the sweet home-life. You might make it inimitable, and, upon my word, I’d give you for it the assistance of my general lights. The thing is—don’t you see ?—that it would put Mr. Beston in a grand position. Your

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position would be grand," I hastened to add as I looked at him, "because it would be so admirably false." Then, more seriously, I felt the impulse even to warn him. "I don't think you're quite aware of what you'd make it. Are you really quite conscious?" I went on with a benevolence that struck him, I was presently to learn, as a depth of fatuity.

He was to show once more that he was a rock. "Conscious? Why should I be? Nobody's conscious."

He was splendid; yet before I could control it I had risked the challenge of a "Nobody?"

"Who's anybody? The public isn't!"

"Then why are you afraid of it?" Miss Delavoy demanded.

"Don't ask him that," I answered; "you expose yourself to his telling you that, if the public isn't anybody, that's still more the case with your brother."

Mr. Beston appeared to accept as a convenience this somewhat inadequate protection; he at any rate under cover of it again addressed us lucidly. "There's only one false position—the one you seem so to wish to put me in."

I instantly met him. "That of losing——?"

"That of losing——!"

"Oh, fifty thousand—yes. And they wouldn't see anything the matter——?"

"With the position," said Mr. Beston, "that you qualify, I neither know nor care why, as false." Suddenly, in a different tone, almost genially, he continued: "For what do you take them?"

For what indeed?—but it didn't signify. "It's enough that I take *you*—for one of the masters." It's literal that as he stood there in his florid beauty and complete command I felt his infinite force, and, with a gush of admiration, wondered how, for our

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young lady, there could be at such a moment another man. "We represent different sides," I rather lamely said. However, I picked up. "It isn't a question of where we are, but of what. You're not on a side—you *are* a side. You're the right one. What a misery," I pursued, "for us not to be 'on' you!"

His eyes showed me for a second that he yet saw how our not being on him did just have for it that it could facilitate such a speech; then they rested afresh on Miss Delavoy, and that brought him back to firm ground. "I don't think you can imagine how it will come out."

He was astride of the portrait again, and presently again she had focussed him. "If it does come out——!" she began, poor girl; but it was not to take her far.

"Well, if it does——?"

"He means what will you do then?" I observed, as she had nothing to say.

"Mr. Beston will see," she at last replied with a perceptible lack of point.

He took this up in a flash. "My dear young lady, it's *you* who'll see; and when you've seen you'll forgive me. Only wait till you do!" He was already at the door, as if he quite believed in what he should gain by the gain, from this moment, of time. He stood there but an instant—he looked from one of us to the other. "It will be a ripping little thing!" he remarked; and with that he left us gaping.

VIII

THE first use I made of our rebound was to say with intensity : " What *will* you do if he does ? "

" Does publish the picture ? " There was an instant charm to me in the privacy of her full collapse and the sudden high tide of our common defeat. " What *can* I ? It's all very well ; but there's nothing to be done. I want never to see him again. There's only something," she went on, " that *you* can do."

" Prevent him ?—get it back ? I'll do, be sure, my utmost ; but it will be difficult without a row."

" What do you mean by a row ? " she asked.

" I mean it will be difficult without publicity. I don't think we want publicity."

She turned this over. " Because it will advertise him ? "

" His magnificent energy. Remember what I just now told him. He's the right side."

" And we're the wrong ! " she laughed. " We mustn't make that known—I see. But, all the same, save my sketch ! "

I held her hands. " And if I do ? "

" Ah, get it back first ! " she answered, ever so gently and with a smile, but quite taking them away.

I got it back, alas ! neither first nor last ; though indeed at the end this was to matter, as I thought and as I found, little enough. Mr. Beston rose to his

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full height and was not to abate an inch even on my offer of another article on a subject notoriously unobjectionable. The only portrait of John Delavoy was going, as he had said, to take, and nothing was to stand in its way. I besieged his office, I waylaid his myrmidons, I haunted his path, I poisoned, I tried to flatter myself, his life ; I wrote him at any rate letters by the dozen and showed him up to his friends and his enemies. The only thing I didn't do was to urge Miss Delavoy to write to her solicitors or to the newspapers. The final result, of course, of what I did and what I didn't was to create, on the subject of the sole copy of so rare an original, a curiosity that, by the time *The Cynosure* appeared with the reproduction, made the month's sale, as I was destined to learn, take a tremendous jump. The portrait of John Delavoy, prodigiously "paragraphed" in advance and with its authorship flushing through, was accompanied by a page or two, from an anonymous hand, of the pleasantest, liveliest comment. The press was genial, the success immense, current criticism had never flowed so full, and it was universally felt that the handsome thing had been done. The process employed by Mr. Beston had left, as he had promised, nothing to be desired ; and the sketch itself, the next week, arrived in safety, and with only a smutch or two, by the post. I placed my article, naturally, in another magazine, but was disappointed, I confess, as to what it discoverably did in literary circles for its subject. This ache, however, was muffled. There was a worse victim than I, and there was consolation of a sort in our having out together the question of literary circles. The great orb of *The Cynosure*, wasn't that a literary circle ? By the time we had fairly to face this question we had achieved the union that—at least for resistance or endurance—is supposed to be strength.

THE THIRD PERSON

I

WHEN, a few years since, two good ladies, previously not intimate nor indeed more than slightly acquainted, found themselves domiciled together in the small but ancient town of Marr, it was as a result, naturally, of special considerations. They bore the same name and were second cousins ; but their paths had not hitherto crossed ; there had not been coincidence of age to draw them together ; and Miss Frush, the more mature, had spent much of her life abroad. She was a bland, shy, sketching person, whom fate had condemned to a monotony—triumphing over variety—of Swiss and Italian *pensions* ; in any one of which, with her well-fastened hat, her gauntlets and her stout boots, her camp-stool, her sketch-book, her Tauchnitz novel, she would have served with peculiar propriety as a frontispiece to the natural history of the English old maid. She would have struck you indeed, poor Miss Frush, as so happy an instance of the type that you would perhaps scarce have been able to equip her with the dignity of the individual. This was what she enjoyed, however, for those brought nearer—a very insistent identity, once even of prettiness, but which now, blanched and bony, timid and inordinately queer, with its utterance all vague interjection and its aspect all eyeglass and teeth, might be acknowledged without inconvenience and deplored without reserve. Miss Amy, her kins-

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woman, who, ten years her junior, showed a different figure—such as, oddly enough, though formed almost wholly in English air, might have appeared much more to betray a foreign influence—Miss Amy was brown, brisk and expressive : when really young she had even been pronounced showy. She had an innocent vanity on the subject of her foot, a member which she somehow regarded as a guarantee of her wit, or at least of her good taste. Even had it not been pretty she flattered herself it would have been shod : she would never—no, never, like Susan—have given it up. Her bright brown eye was comparatively bold, and she had accepted Susan once for all as a frump. She even thought her, and silently deplored her as, a goose. But she was none the less herself a lamb.

They had benefited, this innocuous pair, under the will of an old aunt, a prodigiously ancient gentlewoman, of whom, in her later time, it had been given them, mainly by the office of others, to see almost nothing ; so that the little property they came in for had the happy effect of a windfall. Each, at least, pretended to the other that she had never dreamed—as in truth there had been small encouragement for dreams in the sad character of what they now spoke of as the late lady's " dreadful *entourage*." Terrorised and deceived, as they considered, by her own people, Mrs. Frush was scantily enough to have been counted on for an act of almost inspired justice. The good luck of her husband's nieces was that she had really outlived, for the most part, their ill-wishers and so, at the very last, had died without the blame of diverting fine Frush property from fine Frush use. Property quite of her own she had done as she liked with ; but she had pitied poor expatriated Susan and had remembered poor unhusbanded Amy, though lumping them together perhaps a little roughly in

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her final provision. Her will directed that, should no other arrangement be more convenient to her executors, the old house at Marr might be sold for their joint advantage. What befell, however, in the event, was that the two legatees, advised in due course, took an early occasion—and quite without concert—to judge their prospects on the spot. They arrived at Marr, each on her own side, and they were so pleased with Marr that they remained. So it was that they met : Miss Amy, accompanied by the office-boy of the local solicitor, presented herself at the door of the house to ask admittance of the caretaker. But when the door opened it offered to sight not the caretaker, but an unexpected, unexpecting lady in a very old waterproof, who held a long-handled eyeglass very much as a child holds a rattle. Miss Susan, already in the field, roaming, prying, meditating in the absence on an errand of the woman in charge, offered herself in this manner as in settled possession ; and it was on that idea that, through the eyeglass, the cousins viewed each other with some penetration even before Amy came in. Then at last when Amy did come in it was not, any more than Susan, to go out again.

It would take us too far to imagine what might have happened had Mrs. Frush made it a condition of her benevolence that the subjects of it should inhabit, should live at peace together, under the roof she left them ; but certain it is that as they stood there they had at the same moment the same unprompted thought. Each became aware on the spot that the dear old house itself was exactly what she, and exactly what the other, wanted ; it met in perfection their longing for a quiet harbour and an assured future ; each, in short, was willing to take the other in order to get the house. It was therefore not sold ; it was made, instead, their own, as it stood,

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with the dead lady's extremely "good" old appurtenances not only undisturbed and undivided, but piously reconstructed and infinitely admired, the agents of her testamentary purpose rejoicing meanwhile to see the business so simplified. They might have had their private doubts—or their wives might have; might cynically have predicted the sharpest of quarrels, before three months were out, between the deluded yoke-fellows, and the dissolution of the partnership with every circumstance of recrimination. All that need be said is that such prophets would have prophesied vulgarly. The Misses Frush were not vulgar; they had drunk deep of the cup of singleness and found it prevailingly bitter; they were not unacquainted with solitude and sadness, and they recognised with due humility the supreme opportunity of their lives. By the end of three months, moreover, each knew the worst about the other. Miss Amy took her evening nap before dinner, an hour at which Miss Susan could never sleep—it was so odd; whereby Miss Susan took hers after that meal, just at the hour when Miss Amy was keenest for talk. Miss Susan, erect and unsupported, had feelings as to the way in which, in almost any posture that could pass for a seated one, Miss Amy managed to find a place in the small of her back for two out of the three sofa-cushions—a smaller place, obviously, than they had ever been intended to fit.

But when this was said all was said; they continued to have, on either side, the pleasant consciousness of a personal soil, not devoid of fragmentary ruins, to dig in. They had a theory that their lives had been immensely different, and each appeared now to the other to have conducted her career so perversely only that she should have an unfamiliar range of anecdote for her companion's ear. Miss Susan, at foreign *pensions*, had met the Russian, the

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Polish, the Danish, and even an occasional flower of the English, nobility, as well as many of the most extraordinary Americans, who, as she said, had made everything of her and with whom she had remained, often, in correspondence ; while Miss Amy, after all less conventional, at the end of long years of London, abounded in reminiscences of literary, artistic and even—Miss Susan heard it with bated breath—theatrical society, under the influence of which she had written—there, it came out !—a novel that had been anonymously published and a play that had been strikingly type-copied. Not the least charm, clearly, of this picturesque outlook at Marr would be the support that might be drawn from it for getting back, as she hinted, with “general society” bravely sacrificed, to “real work.” She had in her head hundreds of plots—with which the future, accordingly, seemed to bristle for Miss Susan. The latter, on her side, was only waiting for the wind to go down to take up again her sketching. The wind at Marr was often high, as was natural in a little old huddled, red-roofed, historic south-coast town which had once been in a manner mistress, as the cousins reminded each other, of the “Channel,” and from which, high and dry on its hilltop though it might be, the sea had not so far receded as not to give, constantly, a taste of temper. Miss Susan came back to English scenery with a small sigh of fondness to which the consciousness of Alps and Apennines only gave more of a quaver ; she had picked out her subjects and, with her head on one side and a sense that they were easier abroad, sat sucking her water-colour brush and nervously—perhaps even a little inconsistently—waiting and hesitating. What had happened was that they had, each for herself, rediscovered the country ; only Miss Amy, emergent from Bloomsbury lodgings, spoke of it as primroses

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and sunsets, and Miss Susan, rebounding from the Arno and the Reuss, called it, with a shy, synthetic pride, simply England.

The country was at any rate in the house with them as well as in the little green girdle and in the big blue belt. It was in the objects and relics that they handled together and wondered over, finding in them a ground for much inferred importance and invoked romance, stuffing large stories into very small openings and pulling every faded bell-rope that might jingle rustily into the past. They were still here in the presence, at all events, of their common ancestors, as to whom, more than ever before, they took only the best for granted. Was not the best, for that matter—the best, that is, of little melancholy, middling, disinherited Marr—seated in every stiff chair of the decent old house and stitched into the patchwork of every quaint old counterpane? Two hundred years of it squared themselves in the brown, panelled parlour, creaked patiently on the wide staircase and bloomed herbaceously in the red-walled garden. There was nothing any one had ever done or been at Marr that a Frush hadn't done it or been it. Yet they wanted more of a picture and talked themselves into the fancy of it; there were portraits—half-a-dozen, comparatively recent (they called 1800 comparatively recent), and something of a trial to a descendant who had copied Titian at the Pitti; but they were curious of detail and would have liked to people a little more thickly their backward space, to set it up behind their chairs as a screen embossed with figures. They threw off theories and small imaginations, and almost conceived themselves engaged in researches; all of which made for pomp and circumstance. Their desire was to discover something, and, emboldened by the broader sweep of wing of her companion, Miss

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Susan herself was not afraid of discovering something bad. Miss Amy it was who had first remarked, as a warning, that this was what it might all lead to. It was she, moreover, to whom they owed the formula that, had anything *very* bad ever happened at Marr, they should be sorry if a Frush hadn't been in it. This was the moment at which Miss Susan's spirit had reached its highest point : she had declared, with her odd, breathless laugh, a prolonged, an alarmed or alarming gasp, that she should really be quite ashamed. And so they rested a while ; not saying quite how far they were prepared to go in crime—not giving the matter a name. But there would have been little doubt for an observer that each supposed the other to mean that she not only didn't draw the line at murder, but stretched it so as to take in—well, gay deception. If Miss Susan could conceivably have asked whether Don Juan had ever touched at that port, Miss Amy would, to a certainty, have wanted to know by way of answer at what port he had *not* touched. It was only unfortunately true that no one of the portraits of gentlemen looked at all like him and no one of those of ladies suggested one of his victims.

At last, none the less, the cousins had a find, came upon a box of old odds and ends, mainly documentary ; partly printed matter, newspapers and pamphlets yellow and grey with time, and, for the rest, epistolary—several packets of letters, faded, scarce decipherable, but clearly sorted for preservation and tied, with sprigged ribbon of a far-away fashion, into little groups. Marr, below ground, is solidly founded—underlaid with great straddling cellars, sound and dry, that are like the groined crypts of churches and that present themselves to the meagre modern conception as the treasure-chambers of stout merchants and bankers in the old bustling

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days. A recess in the thickness of one of the walls had yielded up, on resolute investigation—that of the local youth employed for odd jobs and who had happened to explore in this direction on his own account—a collection of rusty superfluities among which the small chest in question had been dragged to light. It produced of course an instant impression and figured as a discovery ; though indeed as rather a deceptive one on its having, when forced open, nothing better to show, at the best, than a quantity of rather illegible correspondence. The good ladies had naturally had for the moment a fluttered hope of old golden guineas—a miser's hoard ; perhaps even of a hatful of those foreign coins of old-fashioned romance, ducats, doubloons, pieces of eight, as are sometimes found to have come to hiding, from over seas, in ancient ports. But they had to accept their disappointment—which they sought to do by making the best of the papers, by agreeing, in other words, to regard them as wonderful. Well, they *were*, doubtless, wonderful ; which didn't prevent them, however, from appearing to be, on superficial inspection, also rather a weary labyrinth. Baffling, at any rate, to Miss Susan's unpractised eyes, the little pale-ribboned packets were, for several evenings, round the fire, while she luxuriously dozed, taken in hand by Miss Amy ; with the result that on a certain occasion when, toward nine o'clock, Miss Susan woke up, she found her fellow-labourer fast asleep. A slightly irritated confession of ignorance of the Gothic character was the further consequence, and the upshot of this, in turn, was the idea of appeal to Mr. Patten. Mr. Patten was the vicar and was known to interest himself, as such, in the ancient annals of Marr ; in addition to which—and to its being even held a little that his sense of the affairs of the hour was sometimes sacrificed to such inquiries—he was

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a gentleman with a humour of his own, a flushed face, a bushy eyebrow and a black wide-awake worn sociably askew. "He will tell us," said Amy Frush, "if there's anything in them."

"Yet if it should be," Susan suggested, "anything we mayn't like?"

"Well, that's just what I'm thinking of," returned Miss Amy in her offhand way. "If it's anything we shouldn't know——"

"We've only to tell him not to tell us? Oh, certainly," said mild Miss Susan. She took upon herself even to give him that warning when, on the invitation of our friends, Mr. Patten came to tea and to talk things over; Miss Amy sitting by and raising no protest, but distinctly promising herself that, whatever there might be to be known, and however objectionable, she would privately get it out of their initiator. She found herself already hoping that it *would* be something too bad for her cousin—too bad for any one else at all—to know, and that it most properly might remain between them. Mr. Patten, at sight of the papers, exclaimed, perhaps a trifle ambiguously, and by no means clerically, "My eye, what a lark!" and retired, after three cups of tea, in an overcoat bulging with his spoil.

II

At ten o'clock that evening the pair separated, as usual, on the upper landing, outside their respective doors, for the night ; but Miss Amy had hardly set down her candle on her dressing-table before she was startled by an extraordinary sound, which appeared to proceed not only from her companion's room, but from her companion's throat. It was something she would have described, had she ever described it, as between a gurgle and a shriek, and it brought Amy Frush, after an interval of stricken stillness that gave her just time to say to herself " Some one under her bed ! " breathlessly and bravely back to the landing. She had not reached it, however, before her neighbour, bursting in, met her and stayed her.

" There's some one in my room ! " ❧

They held each other. " But who ? "

" A man."

" Under the bed ? "

" No—just standing there."

They continued to hold each other, but they rocked. " Standing ? Where ? How ? "

" Why, right in the middle—before my dressing-glass."

Amy's blanched face by this time matched her mate's, but its terror was enhanced by speculation.

" To look at himself ? "

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"No—with his back to it. To look at *me*," poor Susan just audibly breathed. "To keep me off," she quavered. "In strange clothes—of another age; with his head on one side."

Amy wondered. "On one side?"

"Awfully!" the refugee declared while, clinging together, they sounded each other.

This, somehow, for Miss Amy, was the convincing touch; and on it, after a moment, she was capable of the effort of darting back to close her own door. "You'll remain then with me."

"Oh!" Miss Susan wailed with deep assent; quite as if, had she been a slangy person, she would have ejaculated "Rather!" So they spent the night together; with the assumption thus marked, from the first, both that it would have been vain to confront their visitor as they didn't even pretend to each other that they would have confronted a house-breaker; and that by leaving the place at his mercy nothing worse could happen than had already happened. It was Miss Amy's approaching the door again as with intent ear and after a hush that had represented between them a deep and extraordinary interchange—it was this that put them promptly face to face with the real character of the occurrence. "Ah," Miss Susan, still under her breath, portentously exclaimed, "it isn't any one——!"

"No"—her partner was already able magnificently to take her up. "It isn't any one——"

"Who can really hurt us"—Miss Susan completed her thought. And Miss Amy, as it proved, had been so indescribably prepared that this thought, before morning, had, in the strangest, finest way, made for itself an admirable place with them. The person the elder of our pair had seen in her room was not—well, just simply was not any one in from outside. He was a different thing altogether. Miss Amy had felt

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it as soon as she heard her friend's cry and become aware of her commotion ; as soon, at all events, as she saw Miss Susan's face. That was all—and there it was. There had been something hitherto wanting, they felt, to their small state and importance ; it was present now, and they were as handsomely conscious of it as if they had previously missed it. The element in question, then, was a third person in their association, a hovering presence for the dark hours, a figure that with its head very much—too much—on one side, could be trusted to look at them out of unnatural places ; yet only, it doubtless might be assumed, to look at them. They had it at last—had what was to be had in an old house where many, too many, things had happened, where the very walls they touched and floors they trod could have told secrets and named names, where every surface was a blurred mirror of life and death, of the endured, the remembered, the forgotten. Yes ; the place was h—— but they stopped at sounding the word. And by morning, wonderful to say, they were used to it—had quite lived into it.

Not only this indeed, but they had their prompt theory. There was a connexion between the finding of the box in the vault and the appearance in Miss Susan's room. The heavy air of the past had been stirred by the bringing to light of what had so long been hidden. The communication of the papers to Mr. Patten had had its effect. They faced each other in the morning at breakfast over the certainty that their queer roused inmate was the sign of the violated secret of these relics. No matter ; for the sake of the secret they would put up with his attention ; and—this, in them, was most beautiful of all—they must, though he was such an addition to their grandeur, keep him quite to themselves. Other people might hear of what was in the letters, but they should never

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hear of *him*. They were not afraid that either of the maids should see him—he was not a matter for maids. The question indeed was whether—should he keep it up long—they themselves would find that they could really live with him. Yet perhaps his keeping it up would be just what would make them indifferent. They turned these things over, but spent the next nights together ; and on the third day, in the course of their afternoon walk, descried at a distance the vicar, who, as soon as he saw them, waved his arms violently—either as a warning or as a joke—and came more than half-way to meet them. It was in the middle—or what passed for such—of the big, bleak, blank, melancholy square of Marr ; a public place, as it were, of such an absurd capacity for a crowd ; with the great ivy-mantled choir and stopped transept of the nobly-planned church telling of how many centuries ago it had, for its part, given up growing.

“ Why, my dear ladies,” cried Mr. Patten as he approached, “ do you know what, of all things in the world, I seem to make out for you from your funny old letters ? ” Then as they waited, extremely on their guard now : “ Neither more nor less, if you please, than that one of your ancestors in the last century—Mr. Cuthbert Frush, it would seem, by name—was hanged.”

They never knew afterwards which of the two had first found composure—found even dignity—to respond. “ And pray, Mr. Patten, for what ? ”

“ Ah, that’s just what I don’t yet get hold of. But if you don’t mind my digging away ”—and the vicar’s bushy, jolly brows turned from one of the ladies to the other—“ I think I can run it to earth. They hanged, in those days, you know,” he added as if he had seen something in their faces, “ for almost any trifle ! ”

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" Oh, I hope it wasn't for a trifle ! " Miss Susan strangely tittered.

" Yes, of course one would like that, while he was about it—well, it had been, as they say," Mr. Patten laughed, " rather for a sheep than for a lamb ! "

" Did they hang at that time for a sheep ? " Miss Amy wonderingly asked.

It made their friend laugh again. " The question's whether *he* did ! But we'll find out. Upon my word, you know, I quite want to myself. I'm awfully busy, but I think I can promise you that you shall hear. You *don't* mind ? " he insisted.

" I think we could bear *anything*," said Miss Amy.

Miss Susan gazed at her, on this, as for reference and appeal. " And what is he, after all, at this time of day, *to us* ? "

Her kinswoman, meeting the eyeglass fixedly, spoke with gravity. " Oh, an ancestor's always an ancestor."

" Well said and well felt, dear lady ! " the vicar declared. " Whatever they may have done——"

" It isn't every one," Miss Amy replied, " that has them to be ashamed of."

" And we're not ashamed *yet* ! " Miss Frush jerked out.

" Let me promise you then that you shan't be. Only, for I am busy," said Mr. Patten, " give me time."

" Ah, but we want the truth ! " they cried with high emphasis as he quitted them. They were much excited now.

He answered by pulling up and turning round as short as if his professional character had been challenged. " Isn't it just in the truth—and the truth only—that I deal ? "

This they recognised as much as his love of a joke, and so they were left there together in the

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pleasant, if slightly overdone, void of the square, which wore at moments the air of a conscious demonstration, intended as an appeal, of the shrinkage of the population of Marr to a solitary cat. They walked on after a little, but they waited till the vicar was ever so far away before they spoke again; all the more that their doing so must bring them once more to a pause. Then they had a long look. "Hanged!" said Miss Amy—yet almost exultantly.

This was, however, because it was not she who had seen. "That's why his head——" but Miss Susan faltered.

Her companion took it in. "Oh, has such a dreadful twist?"

"It *is* dreadful!" Miss Susan at last dropped, speaking as if she had been present at twenty executions.

There would have been no saying, at any rate, what it didn't evoke from Miss Amy. "It breaks their neck," she contributed after a moment.

Miss Susan looked away. "That's why, I suppose, the head turns so fearfully awry. It's a most peculiar effect."

So peculiar, it might have seemed, that it made them silent afresh. "Well then, I hope he killed some one!" Miss Amy broke out at last.

Her companion thought. "Wouldn't it depend on whom——?"

"No!" she returned with her characteristic briskness—a briskness that set them again into motion.

That Mr. Patten was tremendously busy was evident indeed, as even by the end of the week he had nothing more to impart. The whole thing meanwhile came up again—on the Sunday afternoon; as the younger Miss Frush had been quite confident that, from one day to the other, it must. They went inveterately to evening church, to the

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close of which supper was postponed ; and Miss Susan, on this occasion, ready the first, patiently awaited her mate at the foot of the stairs. Miss Amy at last came down, buttoning a glove, rustling the tail of a frock and looking, as her kinswoman always thought, conspicuously young and smart. There was no one at Marr, she held, who dressed like her ; and Miss Amy, it must be owned, had also settled to this view of Miss Susan, though taking it in a different spirit. Dusk had gathered, but our frugal pair were always tardy lighters, and the grey close of day, in which the elder lady, on a high-backed hall chair, sat with hands patiently folded, had for all cheer the subdued glow—always subdued—of the small fire in the drawing-room, visible through a door that stood open. Into the drawing-room Miss Amy passed in search of the prayer-book she had laid down there after morning church, and from it, after a minute, without this volume, she returned to her companion. There was something in her movement that spoke—spoke for a moment so largely that nothing more was said till, with a quick unanimity, they had got themselves straight out of the house. There, before the door, in the cold, still twilight of the winter's end, while the church bells rang and the windows of the great choir showed across the empty square faintly red, they had it out again. But it was Miss Susan herself, this time, who had to bring it.

“ He's there ? ”

“ Before the fire—with his back to it.”

“ Well, now you see ! ” Miss Susan exclaimed with elation and as if her friend had hitherto doubted her.

“ Yes, I see—and what you mean.” Miss Amy was deeply thoughtful.

“ About his head ? ”

“ It is on one side,” Miss Amy went on. “ It makes

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him——” she considered. But she faltered as if still in his presence.

“It makes him awful!” Miss Susan murmured. “The way,” she softly moaned, “he looks at you!”

Miss Amy, with a glance, met this recognition. “Yes—doesn’t he?” Then her eyes attached themselves to the red windows of the church. “But it means something.”

“The Lord knows what it means!” her associate gloomily sighed. Then, after an instant, “Did he move?” Miss Susan asked.

“No—and I didn’t.”

“Oh, I did!” Miss Susan declared, recalling her more precipitous retreat.

“I mean I took my time. I waited.”

“To see him fade?”

Miss Amy for a moment said nothing. “He doesn’t fade. That’s *it*.”

“Oh, then you did move!” her relative rejoined.

Again for a little she was silent. “One *has* to. But I don’t know what really happened. Of course I came back to you. What I mean is that I took him thoroughly in. He’s young,” she added.

“But he’s *bad*!” said Miss Susan.

“He’s handsome!” Miss Amy brought out after a moment. And she showed herself even prepared to continue: “Splendidly.”

“‘Splendidly’!—with his neck broken and with that terrible look?”

“It’s just the look that makes him so. It’s the wonderful eyes. They mean something,” Amy Frush brooded.

She spoke with a decision of which Susan presently betrayed the effect. “And what do they mean?”

Her friend had stared again at the glimmering windows of St. Thomas of Canterbury. “That it’s time we should get to church.”

III

THE curate that evening did duty alone ; but on the morrow the vicar called and, as soon as he got into the room, let them again have it. " He was hanged for smuggling ! "

They stood there before him almost cold in their surprise and diffusing an air in which, somehow, this misdemeanour sounded out as the coarsest of all. "*Smuggling?*" Miss Susan disappointedly echoed—as if it presented itself to the first chill of their apprehension that he had then only been vulgar.

" Ah, but they hanged for it freely, you know, and I was an idiot for not having taken it, in his case, for granted. If a man swung, hereabouts, it *was* mostly for that. Don't you know it's on that we stand here to-day, such as we are—on the fact of what our bold, bad forefathers were not afraid of ? It's in the floors we walk on and under the roofs that cover us. They smuggled so hard that they never had time to do anything else ; and if they broke a head not their own it was only in the awkwardness of landing their brandy-kegs. I mean, dear ladies," good Mr. Patten wound up, " no disrespect to *your* forefathers when I tell you that—as I've rather been supposing that, like all the rest of us, you were aware—they conveniently lived by it."

Miss Susan wondered — visibly almost doubted.
" Gentlefolks ? "

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"It was the gentlefolks who were the worst."

"They must have been the bravest!" Miss Amy interjected. She had listened to their visitor's free explanation with a rapid return of colour. "And since if they lived by it they also died for it——"

"There's nothing at all to be said against them? I quite agree with you," the vicar laughed, "for all my cloth; and I even go so far as to say, shocking as you may think me, that we owe them, in our shabby little shrunken present, the sense of a bustling background, a sort of undertone of romance. They give us"—he humorously kept it up, verging perilously near, for his cloth, upon positive paradox—"our little handful of legend and our small possibility of ghosts." He paused an instant, with his lighter pulpit manner, but the ladies exchanged no look. They were in fact already, with an immense revulsion, carried quite as far away. "Every penny in the place, really, that hasn't been earned by subtler—not nobler—arts in our own virtuous time, and though it's a pity there are not more of 'em: every penny in the place was picked up, somehow, by a clever trick, and at the risk of your neck, when the backs of the king's officers were turned. It's shocking, you know, what I'm saying to you, and I wouldn't say it to every one, but I think of some of the shabby old things about us, that represent such pickings, with a sort of sneaking kindness—as of relics of our heroic age. What are we now? We were at any rate devils of fellows then!"

Susan Frush considered it all solemnly, struggling with the spell of this evocation. "But must we forget that they were wicked?"

"Never!" Mr. Patten laughed. "Thank you, dear friend, for reminding me. Only I'm worse than they!"

"But would you do it?"

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"Murder a coastguard——?" The vicar scratched his head.

"I hope," said Miss Amy rather surprisingly, "you'd defend yourself." And she gave Miss Susan a superior glance. "*I* would!" she distinctly added.

Her companion anxiously took it up. "Would you defraud the revenue?"

Miss Amy hesitated but a moment; then with a strange laugh, which she covered, however, by turning instantly away, "Yes!" she remarkably declared.

Their visitor, at this, amused and amusing, eagerly seized her arm. "Then may I count on you on the stroke of midnight to help me——?"

"To help you——?"

"To land the last new Tauchnitz."

She met the proposal as one whose fancy had kindled, while her cousin watched them as if they had suddenly improvised a drawing-room charade. "A service of danger?"

"Under the cliff—when you see the lugger stand in!"

"Armed to the teeth?"

"Yes—but invisibly. Your old waterproof——!"

"Mine is new. I'll take Susan's!"

This good lady, however, had her reserves. "Mayn't one of them, all the same—here and there—have been sorry?"

Mr. Patten wondered. "For the jobs he muffed?"

"For the wrong—as it *was* wrong—he did."

"'One' of them?" She had gone too far, for the vicar suddenly looked as if he divined in the question a reference.

They became, however, as promptly unanimous in meeting this danger, as to which Miss Susan in particular showed an inspired presence of mind.

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"Two of them!" she sweetly smiled. "May not Amy and I——?"

"Vicariously repent?" said Mr. Patten. "That depends—for the true honour of Marr—on how you show it."

"Oh, we *shan't* show it!" Miss Amy cried.

"Ah, then," Mr. Patten returned, "though atonements, to be efficient, are supposed to be public, you may do penance in secret as much as you please!"

"Well, I shall do it," said Susan Frush.

Again, by something in her tone, the vicar's attention appeared to be caught. "Have you then in view a particular form——?"

"Of atonement?" She coloured now, glaring rather helplessly, in spite of herself, at her companion. "Oh, if you're sincere you'll always find one."

Amy came to her assistance. "The way she often treats me has made her—though there's after all no harm in her—familiar with remorse. Mayn't we, at any rate," the younger lady continued, "now have our letters back?" And the vicar left them with the assurance that they should receive the bundle on the morrow.

They were indeed so at one as to shrouding their mystery that no explicit agreement, no exchange of vows, needed to pass between them; they only settled down, from this moment, to an unshared possession of their secret, an economy in the use and, as may even be said, the enjoyment of it, that was part of their general instinct and habit of thrift. It had been the disposition, the practice, the necessity of each to keep, fairly indeed to clutch, everything that, as they often phrased it, came their way; and this was not the first time such an influence had determined for them an affirmation of property in objects to which ridicule, suspicion, or some other inconvenience, might attach. It was their simple

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philosophy that one never knew of what service an odd object might *not* be ; and there were days now on which they felt themselves to have made a better bargain with their aunt's executors than was witnessed in those law-papers which they had at first timorously regarded as the record of advantages taken of them in matters of detail. They had got, in short, more than was vulgarly, more than was even shrewdly supposed—such an indescribable unearned increment as might scarce more be divulged as a dread than as a delight. They drew together, old-maidishly, in a suspicious, invidious grasp of the idea that a dread of their very own—and blissfully not, of course, that of a failure of any essential supply—might, on nearer acquaintance, positively turn to a delight.

Upon some such attempted consideration of it, at all events, they found themselves embarking after their last interview with Mr. Patten, an understanding conveyed between them in no redundancy of discussion, no flippant repetitions nor profane recurrences, yet resting on a sense of added margin, of appropriated history, of liberties taken with time and space, that would leave them prepared both for the worst and for the best. The best would be that something that would turn out to their advantage might prove to be hidden about the place ; the worst would be that they might find themselves growing to depend only too much on excitement. They found themselves amazingly reconciled, on Mr. Patten's information, to the particular character thus fixed on their visitor ; they knew by tradition and fiction that even the highwaymen of the same picturesque age were often gallant gentlemen ; therefore a smuggler, by such a measure, fairly belonged to the aristocracy of crime. When their packet of documents came back from the vicarage Miss Amy, to whom her associate continued to leave them, took them once more in hand ; but

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with an effect, afresh, of discouragement and languor—a headachy sense of faded ink, of strange spelling and crabbed characters, of allusions she couldn't follow and parts she couldn't match. She placed the tattered papers piously together, wrapping them tenderly in a piece of old figured silken stuff; then, as solemnly as if they had been archives or statutes or title-deeds, laid them away in one of the several small cupboards lodged in the thickness of the wainscoted walls. What really most sustained our friends in all ways was their consciousness of having, after all—and so contrariwise to what appeared—a man in the house. It removed them from that category of the manless into which no lady really lapses till every issue is closed. Their visitor was an issue—at least to the imagination, and they arrived finally, under provocation, at intensities of flutter in which they felt themselves so compromised by his hoverings that they could only consider with relief the fact of nobody's knowing.

The real complication indeed at first was that for some weeks after their talks with Mr. Patten the hoverings quite ceased; a circumstance that brought home to them in some degree a sense of indiscretion and indelicacy. They hadn't mentioned him, no; but they had come perilously near it, and they had doubtless, at any rate, too recklessly let in the light on old buried and sheltered things, old sorrows and shames. They roamed about the house themselves at times, fitfully and singly, when each supposed the other out or engaged; they paused and lingered, like soundless apparitions, in corners, doorways, passages, and sometimes suddenly met, in these experiments, with a suppressed start and a mute confession. They talked of him practically never; but each knew how the other thought—all the more that it was (oh yes, unmistakably!) in a manner

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different from her own. They were together, none the less, in feeling, while, week after week, he failed again to show, as if they had been guilty of blowing, with an effect of sacrilege, on old gathered silvery ashes. It frankly came out for them that, possessed as they so strangely, yet so ridiculously were, they should be able to settle to nothing till their consciousness was yet again confirmed. Whatever the subject of it might have for them of fear or favour, profit or loss, he had taken the taste from everything else. He had converted *them* into wandering ghosts. At last, one day, with nothing they could afterwards perceive to have determined it, the change came—came, as the previous splash in their stillness had come, by the pale testimony of Miss Susan.

She waited till after breakfast to speak of it—or Miss Amy, rather, waited to hear her ; for she showed during the meal the face of controlled commotion that her comrade already knew and that must, with the game loyally played, serve as preface to a disclosure. The younger of the friends really watched the elder, over their tea and toast, as if seeing her for the first time as possibly tortuous, suspecting in her some intention of keeping back what had happened. What had happened was that the image of the hanged man had reappeared in the night ; yet only after they had moved together to the drawing-room did Miss Amy learn the facts.

“ I was beside the bed—in that low chair ; about ” —since Miss Amy must know—“ to take off my right shoe. I had noticed nothing before, and had had time partly to undress—had got into my wrapper. So, suddenly—as I happened to look—there he was. And there,” said Susan Frush, “ he stayed.”

“ But where do you mean ? ”

“ In the high-backed chair, the old flowered chintz ‘ ear-chair ’ beside the chimney.”

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"All night?—and you in your wrapper?" Then as if this image almost challenged her credulity, "Why didn't you go to bed?" Miss Amy inquired.

"With a—a person in the room?" her friend wonderfully asked; adding after an instant as with positive pride: "I never broke the spell!"

"And didn't freeze to death?"

"Yes, almost. To say nothing of not having slept, I can assure you, one wink. I shut my eyes for long stretches, but whenever I opened them he was still there, and I never for a moment lost consciousness."

Miss Amy gave a groan of conscientious sympathy. "So that you're feeling now of course half dead."

Her companion turned to the chimney-glass a wan, glazed eye. "I daresay I *am* looking impossible."

Miss Amy, after an instant, found herself still conscientious. "You are." Her own eyes strayed to the glass, lingering there while she lost herself in thought. "Really," she reflected with a certain dryness, "if that's the kind of thing it's to be——!" there would seem, in a word, to be no withstanding it for either. Why, she afterwards asked herself in secret, should the restless spirit of a dead adventurer have addressed itself, in its trouble, to such a person as her queer, quaint, inefficient housemate? It was in *her*, she dumbly and somewhat sorely argued, that an unappeased soul of the old race should show a confidence. To this conviction she was the more directed by the sense that Susan had, in relation to the preference shown, vain and foolish complacencies. She had her idea of what, in their prodigious predicament, should be, as she called it, "done," and that was a question that Amy from this time began to nurse the small aggression of not so much as discussing with her. She had certainly, poor Miss Frush, a

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new, an obscure reticence, and since she wouldn't speak first she should have silence to her fill. Miss Amy, however, peopled the silence with conjectural visions of her kinswoman's secret communion. Miss Susan, it was true, showed nothing, on any particular occasion, more than usual ; but this was just a part of the very felicity that had begun to harden and uplift her. Days and nights hereupon elapsed without bringing felicity of any order to Amy Frush. If she had no emotions it was, she suspected, because Susan had them all ; and—it would have been preposterous had it not been pathetic—she proceeded rapidly to hug the opinion that Susan was selfish and even something of a sneak. Politeness, between them, still reigned, but confidence had flown, and its place was taken by open ceremonies and confessed precautions. Miss Susan looked blank but resigned ; which maintained again, unfortunately, her superior air and the presumption of her duplicity. Her manner was of not knowing where her friend's shoe pinched ; but it might have been taken by a jaundiced eye for surprise at the challenge of her monopoly. The unexpected resistance of her nerves was indeed a wonder : was that then the result, even for a shaky old woman, of shocks sufficiently repeated ? Miss Amy brooded on the rich inference that, if the first of them didn't prostrate and the rest didn't undermine, one might keep them up as easily as—well, say an unavowed acquaintance or a private commerce of letters. She was startled at the comparison into which she fell—but what was this but an intrigue like another ? And fancy Susan carrying one on ! That history of the long night hours of the pair in the two chairs kept before her—for it was always present—the extraordinary measure. Was the situation it involved only grotesque—or was it quite grimly grand ? It struck her as both ; but that was

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the case with all their situations. Would it be in herself, at any rate, to show such a front? She put herself such questions till she was tired of them. A few good moments of her own would have cleared the air. Luckily they were to come.

IV

It was on a Sunday morning in April, a day brimming over with the turn of the season. She had gone into the garden before church ; they cherished alike, with pottering intimacies and opposed theories and a wonderful apparatus of old gloves and trowels and spuds and little botanical cards on sticks, this feature of their establishment, where they could still differ without fear and agree without diplomacy, and which now, with its vernal promise, threw beauty and gloom and light and space, a great good-natured ease, into their wavering scales. She was dressed for church ; but when Susan, who had, from a window, seen her wandering, stooping, examining, touching, appeared in the doorway to signify a like readiness, she suddenly felt her intention checked. "Thank you," she said, drawing near ; " I think that, though I've dressed, I won't, after all, go. Please, therefore, proceed without me."

Miss Susan fixed her. " You're not well ? "

" Not particularly. I shall be better—the morning's so perfect—here."

" Are you really ill ? "

" Indisposed ; but not enough so, thank you, for you to stay with me."

" Then it has come on but just now ? "

" No—I felt not quite fit when I dressed. But it won't do."

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" Yet you'll stay out here ? "

Miss Amy looked about. " It will depend ! "

Her friend paused long enough to have asked what it would depend on, but abruptly, after this contemplation, turned instead and, merely throwing over her shoulder an " At least take care of yourself ! " went rustling, in her stiffest Sunday fashion, about her business. Miss Amy, left alone, as she clearly desired to be, lingered a while in the garden, where the sense of things was somehow made still more delicious by the sweet, vain sounds from the church tower ; but by the end of ten minutes she had returned to the house. The sense of things was not delicious there, for what it had at last come to was that, as they thought of each other what they couldn't say, all their contacts were hard and false. The real wrong was in what Susan thought—as to which she was much too proud and too sore to undeceive her. Miss Amy went vaguely to the drawing-room.

They sat as usual, after church, at their early Sunday dinner, face to face ; but little passed between them save that Miss Amy felt better, that the curate had preached, that nobody else had stayed away, and that everybody had asked why Amy had. Amy, hereupon, satisfied everybody by feeling well enough to go in the afternoon ; on which occasion, on the other hand—and for reasons even less luminous than those that had operated with her mate in the morning—Miss Susan remained within. Her comrade came back late, having, after church, paid visits ; and found her, as daylight faded, seated in the drawing-room, placid and dressed, but without so much as a Sunday book—the place contained whole shelves of such reading—in her hand. She looked so as if a visitor had just left her that Amy put the question : " Has any one called ? "

" Dear, no ; I've been quite alone."

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This again was indirect, and it instantly determined for Miss Amy a conviction—a conviction that, on her also sitting down just as she was and in a silence that prolonged itself, promoted in its turn another determination. The April dusk gathered, and still, without further speech, the companions sat there. But at last Miss Amy said in a tone not quite her commonest: “This morning he came—while you were at church. I suppose it must have been really—though of course I couldn’t know it—what I was moved to stay at home for.” She spoke now—out of her contentment—as if to oblige with explanations.

But it was strange how Miss Susan met her. “You stay at home for him? *I don’t!*” She fairly laughed at the triviality of the idea.

Miss Amy was naturally struck by it and after an instant even nettled. “Then why did you do so this afternoon?”

“Oh, it wasn’t for *that!*” Miss Susan lightly quavered. She made her distinction. “I *really* wasn’t well.”

At this her cousin brought it out. “But he has been with you?”

“My dear child,” said Susan, launched unexpectedly even to herself, “he’s with me so often that if I put myself out for him——!” But as if at sight of something that showed, through the twilight, in her friend’s face, she pulled herself up.

Amy, however, spoke with studied stillness. “You’ve ceased then to put yourself out? You gave me, you remember, an instance of how you once did!” And she tried, on her side, a laugh.

“Oh yes—that was at first. But I’ve seen such a lot of him since. Do you mean *you* hadn’t?” Susan asked. Then as her companion only sat looking at her: “Has this been really the first time for you—since we last talked?”

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Miss Amy for a minute said nothing. "You've actually believed me——"

"To be enjoying on your own account what I enjoy? How couldn't I, at the very least," Miss Susan cried—"so grand and strange as you must allow me to say you've struck me?"

Amy hesitated. "I hope I've sometimes struck you as decent!"

But it was a touch that, in her friend's almost amused preoccupation with the simple fact, happily fell short. "You've only been waiting for what didn't come?"

Miss Amy coloured in the dusk. "It came, as I tell you, to-day."

"Better late than never!" And Miss Susan got up.

Amy Frush sat looking. "It's because you thought you had ground for jealousy that *you've* been extraordinary?"

Poor Susan, at this, quite bounced about. "Jealousy?"

It was a tone—never heard from her before—that brought Amy Frush to her feet; so that for a minute, in the unlighted room where, in honour of the spring, there had been no fire and the evening chill had gathered, they stood as enemies. It lasted, fortunately, even long enough to give one of them time suddenly to find it horrible. "But why should we quarrel *now*?" Amy broke out in a different voice.

Susan was not too alienated quickly enough to meet it. "It is rather wretched."

"Now when we're equal," Amy went on.

"Yes—I suppose we are." Then, however, as if just to attenuate the admission, Susan had her last lapse from grace. "They say, you know, that when women do quarrel it's usually about a man."

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Amy recognised it, but also with a reserve. " Well then, let there first *be* one ! "

" And don't you call *him* —— ? "

" No ! " Amy declared and turned away, while her companion showed her a vain wonder for what she could in that case have expected. Their identity of privilege was thus established, but it is not certain that the air with which she indicated that the subject had better drop didn't press down for an instant her side of the balance. She knew that she knew most about men.

The subject did drop for the time, it being agreed between them that neither should from that hour expect from the other any confession or report. They would treat all occurrences now as not worth mentioning—a course easy to pursue from the moment the suspicion of jealousy had, on each side, been so completely laid to rest. They led their life a month or two on the smooth ground of taking everything for granted ; by the end of which time, however, try as they would, they had set up no question that—while they met as a pair of gentlewomen living together only must meet—could successfully pretend to take the place of that of Cuthbert Frush. The spring softened and deepened, reached out its tender arms and scattered its shy graces ; the earth broke, the air stirred, with emanations that were as touches and voices of the past ; our friends bent their backs in their garden and their noses over its symptoms ; they opened their windows to the mildness and tracked it in the lanes and by the hedges ; yet the plant of conversation between them markedly failed to renew itself with the rest. It was not indeed that the mildness was not within them as well as without ; all asperity, at least, had melted away ; they were more than ever pleased with their general acquisition, which, at the winter's end, seemed to give out more

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of its old secrets, to hum, however faintly, with more of its old echoes, to creak, here and there, with the expiring throb of old aches. The deepest sweetness of the spring at Marr was just in its being in this way an attestation of age and rest. The place never seemed to have lived and lingered so long as when kind nature, like a maiden blessing a crone, laid rosy hands on its grizzled head. Then the new season was a light held up to show all the dignity of the years, but also all the wrinkles and scars. The good ladies in whom we are interested changed, at any rate, with the happy days, and it finally came out not only that the invidious note had dropped, but that it had positively turned to music. The whole tone of the time made so for tenderness that it really seemed as if at moments they were sad for each other. They had their grounds at last : each found them in her own consciousness ; but it was as if each waited, on the other hand, to be sure she could speak without offence. Fortunately, at last, the tense cord snapped.

The old churchyard at Marr is still liberal ; it does its immemorial utmost to people, with names and dates and memories and eulogies, with generations fore-shortened and confounded, the high empty table at which the grand old cripple of the church looks down over the low wall. It serves as an easy thoroughfare, and the stranger finds himself pausing in it with a sense of respect and compassion for the great maimed, ivied shoulders—as the image strikes him—of stone. Miss Susan and Miss Amy were strangers enough still to have sunk down one May morning on the sun-warmed tablet of an ancient tomb and to have remained looking about them in a sort of anxious peace. Their walks were all pointless now, as if they always stopped and turned, for an unconfessed want of interest, before reaching their object.

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That object presented itself at every start as the same to each, but they had come back too often without having got near it. This morning, strangely, on the return and almost in sight of their door, they were more in presence of it than they had ever been, and they seemed fairly to touch it when Susan said at last, quite in the air and with no traceable reference : " I hope you don't mind, dearest, if I'm awfully sorry for you."

" Oh, I know it," Amy returned—" I've felt it. But what does it do for us ? " she asked.

Then Susan saw, with wonder and pity, how little resentment for penetration or patronage she had had to fear and out of what a depth of sentiment similar to her own her companion helplessly spoke. " You're sorry for *me* ? "

Amy at first only looked at her with tired eyes, putting out a hand that remained a while on her arm. " Dear old girl ! You might have told me before," she went on as she took everything in ; " though, after all, haven't we each really known it ? "

" Well," said Susan, " we've waited. We could only wait."

" Then if we've waited together," her friend returned, " that *has* helped us."

" Yes—to keep him in his place. Who would ever believe in him ? " Miss Susan wearily wondered. " If it wasn't for you and for me—— "

" Not doubting of each other ? "—her companion took her up : " yes, there wouldn't be a creature. It's lucky for us," said Miss Amy, " that we *don't* doubt."

" Oh, if we did we shouldn't be sorry."

" No—except, selfishly, for ourselves. I am, I assure you, for *my* self—it has made me older. But, luckily, at any rate, we trust each other."

" We do," said Miss Susan.

" We do," Miss Amy repeated—they lingered a

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little on that. "But except making one feel older, what has it done for one?"

"There it is!"

"And though we've kept him in his place," Miss Amy continued, "he has also kept us in ours. We've lived with it," she declared in melancholy justice. "And we wondered at first if we could!" she ironically added. "Well, isn't just what we feel now that we can't any longer?"

"No—it must stop. And I've my idea," said Susan Frush.

"Oh, I assure you I've mine!" her cousin responded.

"Then if you want to act, don't mind me."

"Because you certainly won't *me*?" No, I suppose not. Well!" Amy sighed, as if, merely from this, relief had at last come. Her comrade echoed it; they remained side by side; and nothing could have had more oddity than what was assumed alike in what they had said and in what they still kept back. There would have been this at least in their favour for a questioner of their case, that each, charged dejectedly with her own experience, took, on the part of the other, the extraordinary—the ineffable, in fact—all for granted. They never named it again—as indeed it was not easy to name; the whole matter shrouded itself in personal discriminations and privacies; the comparison of notes had become a thing impossible. What was definite was that they had lived into their queer story, passed through it as through an observed, a studied, eclipse of the usual, a period of reclusion, a financial, social or moral crisis, and only desired now to live out of it again. The questioner we have been supposing might even have fancied that each, on her side, had hoped for something from it that she finally perceived it was never to give, which would have been exactly, moreover,

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the core of her secret and the explanation of her reserve. They at least, as the business stood, put each other to no test, and, if they were in fact disillusioned and disappointed, came together, after their long blight, solidly on that. It fully appeared between them that they felt a great deal older. When they got up from their sun-warmed slab, however, reminding each other of luncheon, it was with a visible increase of ease and with Miss Susan's hand drawn, for the walk home, into Miss Amy's arm. Thus the "idea" of each had continued unspoken and ungrudged. It was as if each wished the other to try her own first; from which it might have been gathered that they alike presented difficulty and even entailed expense. The great questions remained. What then did he mean? what then did he want? Absolution, peace, rest, his final reprieve—merely to say *that* saw them no further on the way than they had already come. What were they at last to do for him? What could they give him that he would take? The ideas they respectively nursed still bore no fruit, and at the end of another month Miss Susan was frankly anxious about Miss Amy. Miss Amy as freely admitted that people *must* have begun to notice strange marks in them and to look for reasons. They were changed—they must change back.

V

YET it was not till one morning at midsummer, on their meeting for breakfast, that the elder lady fairly attacked the younger's last entrenchment. "Poor, poor Susan!" Miss Amy had said to herself as her cousin came into the room; and a moment later she brought out, for very pity, her appeal. "What then is yours?"

"My idea?" It was clearly, at last, a vague comfort to Miss Susan to be asked. Yet her answer was desolate. "Oh, it's no use!"

"But how do you know?"

"Why, I tried it—ten days ago, and I thought at first it had answered. But it hasn't."

"He's back again?"

Wan, tired, Miss Susan gave it up. "Back again."

Miss Amy, after one of the long, odd looks that had now become their most frequent form of intercourse, thought it over. "And just the same?"

"Worse."

"Dear!" said Miss Amy, clearly knowing what that meant. "Then what did you do?"

Her friend brought it roundly out. "I made my sacrifice."

Miss Amy, though still more deeply interrogative, hesitated. "But of what?"

"Why, of my little all—or almost."

The "almost" seemed to puzzle Miss Amy, who,

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moreover, had plainly no clue to the property or attribute so described. "Your 'little all'?"

"Twenty pounds."

"Money?" Miss Amy gasped.

Her tone produced on her companion's part a wonder as great as her own. "What then is it yours to give?"

"My idea? It's not to *give*!" cried Amy Frush.

At the finer pride that broke out in this poor Susan's blankness flushed. "What then is it to do?"

But Miss Amy's bewilderment outlasted her reproach. "Do you mean he takes money?"

"The Chancellor of the Exchequer does—for 'conscience.'"

Her friend's exploit shone larger. "Conscience-money? You sent it to Government?" Then while, as the effect of her surprise, her mate looked too much a fool, Amy melted to kindness. "Why, you secretive old thing!"

Miss Susan presently pulled herself more together. "When your ancestor has robbed the revenue and his spirit walks for remorse——"

"You pay to get rid of him? I see—and it becomes what the vicar called his atonement by deputy. But what if it isn't remorse?" Miss Amy shrewdly asked.

"But it *is*—or it seemed to me so."

"Never to me," said Miss Amy.

Again they searched each other. "Then, evidently, with you he's different."

Miss Amy looked away. "I daresay!"

"So what is your idea?"

Miss Amy thought. "I'll tell you only if it works."

"Then, for God's sake, try it!"

Miss Amy, still with averted eyes and now looking easily wise, continued to think. "To try it I shall

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have to leave you. That's why I've waited so long." Then she fully turned, and with expression: "Can you face three days alone?"

"Oh—'alone!' I wish I ever were!"

At this her friend, as for very compassion, kissed her; for it seemed really to have come out at last—and welcome!—that poor Susan was the worse beset. "I'll do it! But I must go up to town. Ask me no questions. All I can tell you now is ——"

"Well?" Susan appealed while Amy impressively fixed her.

"It's no more remorse than *I'm* a smuggler."

"What is it then?"

"It's bravado."

An "Oh!" more shocked and scared than any that, in the whole business, had yet dropped from her, wound up poor Susan's share in this agreement, appearing as it did to represent for her a somewhat lurid inference. Amy, clearly, had lights of her own. It was by their aid, accordingly, that she immediately prepared for the first separation they had had yet to suffer; of which the consequence, two days later, was that Miss Susan, bowed and anxious, crept singly, on the return from their parting, up the steep hill that leads from the station of Marr and passed ruefully under the ruined town-gate, one of the old defences, that arches over it.

But the full sequel was not for a month—one hot August night when, under the dim stars, they sat together in their little walled garden. Though they had by this time, in general, found again—as women only can find—the secret of easy speech, nothing, for the half-hour, had passed between them: Susan had only sat waiting for her comrade to wake up. Miss Amy had taken of late to interminable dozing—as if with forfeits and arrears to recover; she might have been a convalescent from fever repairing tissue

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and getting through time. Susan Frush watched her in the warm dimness, and the question between them was fortunately at last so simple that she had freedom to think her pretty in slumber and to fear that she herself, so unguarded, presented an appearance less graceful. She was impatient, for her need had at last come, but she waited, and while she waited she thought. She had already often done so, but the mystery deepened to-night in the story told, as it seemed to her, by her companion's frequent relapses. What had been, three weeks before, the effort intense enough to leave behind such a trial of fatigue? The marks, sure enough, had shown in the poor girl that morning of the termination of the arranged absence for which not three days, but ten, without word or sign, were to prove no more than sufficient. It was at an unnatural hour that Amy had turned up, dusty, dishevelled, inscrutable, confessing for the time to nothing more than a long night-journey. Miss Susan prided herself on having played the game and respected, however tormenting, the conditions. She had her conviction that her friend had been out of the country, and she marvelled, thinking of her own old wanderings, and her present settled fears, at the spirit with which a person, who, whatever she had previously done, had not travelled, could carry off such a flight. The hour had come at last for this person to name her remedy. What determined it was that, as Susan Frush sat there, she took home the fact that the remedy was by this time not to be questioned. It had acted as her own had not, and Amy, to all appearance, had only waited for her to admit it. Well, she was ready when Amy woke—woke immediately to meet her eyes and to show, after a moment, in doing so, a vision of what was in her mind. "What *was* it now?" Susan finally said.

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" My idea ? Is it possible you've not guessed ? "

" Oh, you're deeper, much deeper," Susan sighed, " than I."

Amy didn't contradict that—seemed indeed, placidly enough, to take it for truth ; but she presently spoke as if the difference, after all, didn't matter now. " Happily for us to-day—isn't it so ?—our case is the same. I can speak, at any rate, for myself. He has left me."

" Thank God then ! " Miss Susan devoutly murmured. " For he has left *me*."

" Are you sure ? "

" Oh, I think so."

" But how ? "

" Well," said Miss Susan after an hesitation, " how are *you* ? "

Amy, for a little, matched her pause. " Ah, that's what I can't tell you. I can only answer for it that he's gone."

" Then allow me also to prefer not to explain. The sense of relief has for some reason grown strong in me during the last half-hour. That's such a comfort that it's enough, isn't it ? "

" Oh, plenty ! " The garden-side of their old house, a window or two dimly lighted, massed itself darkly in the summer night, and, with a common impulse, they gave it, across the little lawn, a long, fond look. Yes, they could be sure. " Plenty ! " Amy repeated. " He's gone."

Susan's elder eyes hovered in the same way, through her elegant glass, at his purified haunt. " He's gone. And how," she insisted, "*did* you do it ? "

" Why, you dear goose "—Miss Amy spoke a little strangely—" I went to Paris."

" To Paris ? "

" To see what I could bring back—that I mightn't,

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that I shouldn't. To do a stroke with ! " Miss Amy brought out.

But it left her friend still vague. " A stroke —— ? "

" To get through the Customs — under their nose. "

It was only with this that, for Miss Susan, a pale light dawned. " You wanted to smuggle ? *That* was your idea ? "

" It was *his*," said Miss Amy. " He wanted no ' conscience money ' spent for him," she now more bravely laughed : " it was quite the other way about — he wanted some bold deed done, of the old wild kind ; he wanted some big risk taken. And I took it." She sprang up, rebounding, in her triumph.

Her companion gasping, gazed at her. " Might they have hanged you too ? "

Miss Amy looked up at the dim stars. " If I had defended myself. But luckily it didn't come to that. What I brought in I brought " — she rang out, more and more lucid, now, as she talked — " triumphantly. To appease him — I braved them. I chanced it, at Dover, and they never knew. "

" Then you hid it —— ? "

" About my person. "

With the shiver of this Miss Susan got up, and they stood there duskily together. " It was so small ? " the elder lady wonderingly murmured.

" It was big enough to have satisfied him," her mate replied with just a shade of sharpness. " I chose it, with much thought, from the forbidden list. "

The forbidden list hung a moment in Miss Susan's eyes, suggesting to her, however, but a pale conjecture. " A Tauchnitz ? " •

Miss Amy communed again with the August stars. " It was the *spirit* of the deed that told. "

" A Tauchnitz ? " her friend insisted.

THE THIRD PERSON

Then at last her eyes again dropped, and the Misses Frush moved together to the house. "Well, he's satisfied."

"Yes, and"—Miss Susan mused a little ruefully as they went—"you got at last your week in Paris!"

THE TONE OF TIME

I

I WAS too pleased with what it struck me that, as an old, old friend, I had done for her, not to go to her that very afternoon with the news. I knew she worked late, as in general I also did ; but I sacrificed for her sake a good hour of the February daylight. She was in her studio, as I had believed she would be, where her card (" Mary J. Tredick "—not Mary Jane, but Mary Juliana) was manfully on the door ; a little tired, a little old and a good deal spotted, but with her ugly spectacles taken off, as soon as I appeared, to greet me. She kept on, while she scraped her palette and wiped her brushes, the big stained apron that covered her from head to foot and that I have often enough before seen her retain in conditions giving the measure of her renunciation of her desire to dazzle. Every fresh reminder of this brought home to me that she had given up everything but her work, and that there had been in her history some reason. But I was as far from the reason as ever. She had given up too much ; this was just why one wanted to lend a hand. I told her, at any rate, that I had a lovely job for her.

" To copy something I do like ? "

Her complaint, I knew, was that people only gave orders, if they gave them at all, for things she did not like. But this wasn't a case of copying—not at all, at least, in the common sense. " It's for a portrait—quite in the air."

THE TONE OF TIME

" Ah, you do portraits yourself ! "

" Yes, and you know how. My trick won't serve for this. What's wanted is a pretty picture."

" Then of whom ? "

" Of nobody. That is of anybody. Anybody you like."

She naturally wondered. " Do you mean I'm myself to choose my sitter ? "

" Well, the oddity is that there is to *be* no sitter."

" Whom then is the picture to represent ? "

" Why, a handsome, distinguished, agreeable man, of not more than forty, clean-shaven, thoroughly well-dressed, and a perfect gentleman."

She continued to stare. " And I'm to find him myself ? "

I laughed at the term she used. " Yes, as you ' find ' the canvas, the colours and the frame." After which I immediately explained. " I've just had the ' rummest ' visit, the effect of which was to make me think of you. A lady, unknown to me and un-introduced, turned up at my place at three o'clock. She had come straight, she let me know, without preliminaries, on account of one's high reputation—the usual thing—and of her having admired one's work. Of course I instantly saw—I mean I saw it as soon as she named her affair—that she hadn't understood my work at all. What am I good for in the world but just the impression of the given, the presented case ? I can do but the face I see."

" And do you think I can do the face I don't ? "

" No, but you see so many more. You see them in fancy and memory, and they come out, for you, from all the museums you've haunted and all the great things you've studied. I *know* you'll be able to see the one my visitor wants and to give it—what's the *crux* of the business—the tone of time."

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She turned the question over. "What does she want it for?"

"Just *for* that—for the tone of time. And, except that it's to hang over her chimney, she didn't tell me. I've only my idea that it's to represent, to symbolise, as it were, her husband, who's not alive and who perhaps never was. This is exactly what will give you a free hand."

"With nothing to go by—no photographs or other portraits?"

"Nothing."

"She only proposes to describe him?"

"Not even; she wants the picture itself to do that. Her only condition is that he be a *très-bel homme*."

She had begun at last, a little thoughtfully, to remove her apron. "Is she French?"

"I don't know. I give it up. She calls herself Mrs. Bridgenorth."

Mary wondered. "*Connais pas!* I never heard of her."

"You wouldn't."

"You mean it's not her real name?"

I hesitated. "I mean that she's a very downright fact, full of the implication that she'll pay a downright price. It's clear to me that you can ask what you like; and it's therefore a chance that I can't consent to your missing." My friend gave no sign either way, and I told my story. "She's a woman of fifty, perhaps of more, who has been pretty, and who still presents herself, with her grey hair a good deal powdered, as I judge, to carry it off, extraordinarily well. She was a little frightened and a little free; the latter because of the former. But she did uncommonly well, I thought, considering the oddity of her wish. This oddity she quite admits; she began indeed by insisting on it so in advance that I found

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myself expecting I didn't know what. She broke at moments into French, which was perfect, but no better than her English, which isn't vulgar; not more at least than that of everybody else. The things people *do* say, and the way they say them, to artists! She wanted immensely, I could see, not to fail of her errand, not to be treated as absurd; and she was extremely grateful to me for meeting her so far as I did. She was beautifully dressed and she came in a brougham."

My listener took it in; then, very quietly, "Is she respectable?" she inquired.

"Ah, there you are!" I laughed; "and how you always pick the point right out, even when one has endeavoured to diffuse a specious glamour! She's extraordinary," I pursued after an instant; "and just what she wants of the picture, I think, is to make her a little less so."

"Who is she, then? What is she?" my companion simply went on.

It threw me straightway back on one of my hobbies. "Ah, my dear, what is so interesting as life? What is, above all, so stupendous as London? There's everything in it, everything in the world, and nothing too amazing not some day to pop out at you. What is a woman, faded, preserved, pretty, powdered, vague, odd, dropping on one without credentials, but with a carriage and very good lace? What is such a person but a person who *may* have had adventures, and have made them, in one way or another, pay? They're, however, none of one's business; it's scarcely on the cards that one should ask her. I should like, with Mrs. Bridgenorth, to see a fellow ask! She goes in for propriety, the real thing. If I suspect her of being the creation of her own talents, she has clearly, on the other hand, seen a lot of life. Will you meet her?" I next demanded.

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My hostess waited. "No."

"Then you won't try?"

"Need I meet her to try?" And the question made me guess that, so far as she had understood, she began to feel herself a little taken. "It seems strange," she none the less mused, "to attempt to please her on such a basis. To attempt," she presently added, "to please her at all. It's your idea that she's not married?" she, with this, a trifle inconsequently asked.

"Well," I replied, "I've only had an hour to think of it, but I somehow already see the scene. Not immediately, not the day after, or even perhaps the year after the thing she desires is set up there, but in due process of time and on convenient opportunity, the transfiguration will occur. 'Who is that awfully handsome man?' 'That? Oh, that's an old sketch of my dear dead husband.' Because I told her—insidiously sounding her—that she would want it to look old, and that the tone of time is exactly what you're full of."

"I believe I am," Mary sighed at last.

"Then put on your hat." I had proposed to her on my arrival to come out to tea with me, and it was when left alone in the studio while she went to her room that I began to feel sure of the success of my errand. The vision that had an hour before determined me grew deeper and brighter for her while I moved about and looked at her things. There were more of them there on her hands than one liked to see; but at least they sharpened my confidence, which was pleasant for me in view of that of my visitor, who had accepted without reserve my plea for Miss Tredick. Four or five of her copies of famous portraits—ornaments of great public and private collections—were on the walls, and to see them again together was to feel at ease about my

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guarantee. The mellow manner of them was what I had had in my mind in saying, to excuse myself to Mrs. Bridgenorth, "Oh, my things, you know, look as if they had been painted to-morrow!" It made no difference that Mary's Vandykes and Gainsboroughs were reproductions and replicas, for I had known her more than once to amuse herself with doing the thing quite, as she called it, off her own bat. She had copied so bravely so many brave things that she had at the end of her brush an extraordinary bag of tricks. She had always replied to me that such things were mere clever humbug, but mere clever humbug was what our client happened to want. The thing was to let her have it—one could trust her for the rest. And at the same time that I mused in this way I observed to myself that there was already something more than, as the phrase is, met the eye in such response as I felt my friend had made. I had touched, without intention, more than one spring; I had set in motion more than one impulse. I found myself indeed quite certain of this after she had come back in her hat and her jacket. She was different—her idea had flowered; and she smiled at me from under her tense veil, while she drew over her firm, narrow hands a pair of fresh gloves, with a light distinctly new. "Please tell your friend that I'm greatly obliged to both of you and that I take the order."

"Good. And to give him all his good looks?"

"It's just to do *that* that I accept. I shall make him supremely beautiful—and supremely base."

"Base?" I just demurred.

"The finest gentleman you'll ever have seen, and the worst friend."

I wondered, as I was startled; but after an instant I laughed for joy. "Ah well, so long as he's not mine! I see we *shall* have him," I said as we went,

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for truly I had touched a spring. In fact I had touched *the* spring.

It rang, more or less, I was presently to find, all over the place. I went, as I had promised, to report to Mrs. Bridgenorth on my mission, and though she declared herself much gratified at the success of it I could see she a little resented the apparent absence of any desire on Miss Tredick's part for a preliminary conference. "I only thought she might have liked just to see me, and have imagined I might like to see *her*."

But I was full of comfort. "You'll see her when it's finished. You'll see her in time to thank her."

"And to pay her, I suppose," my hostess laughed, with an asperity that was, after all, not excessive. "Will she take very long?"

I thought. "She's so full of it that my impression would be that she'll do it off at a heat."

"She *is* full of it then?" she asked; and on hearing to what tune, though I told her but half, she broke out with admiration. "You artists are the most extraordinary people!" It was almost with a bad conscience that I confessed we indeed were, and while she said that what she meant was that we seemed to understand everything, and I rejoined that this was also what *I* meant, she took me into another room to see the place for the picture—a proceeding of which the effect was singularly to confirm the truth in question. The place for the picture—in her own room, as she called it, a boudoir at the back, overlooking the general garden of the approved modern row and, as she said, only just wanting that touch—proved exactly the place (the space of a large panel in the white woodwork over the mantel) that I had spoken of to my friend. She put it quite candidly, "Don't you see what it will

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do? ” and looked at me, wonderfully, as for a sign that I could sympathetically take from her what she didn't literally say. She said it, poor woman, so very nearly that I had no difficulty whatever. The portrait, tastefully enshrined there, of the finest gentleman one should ever have seen, would do even more for herself than it would do for the room.

I may as well mention at once that my observation of Mrs. Bridgenorth was not in the least of a nature to unseat me from the hobby I have already named. In the light of the impression she made on me life seemed quite as prodigious and London quite as amazing as I had ever contended, and nothing could have been more in the key of that experience than the manner in which everything was vivid between us and nothing expressed. We remained on the surface with the tenacity of shipwrecked persons clinging to a plank. Our plank was our concentrated gaze at Mrs. Bridgenorth's mere present. We allowed her past to exist for us only in the form of the prettiness that she had gallantly rescued from it and to which a few scraps of its identity still adhered. She was amiable, gentle, consistently proper. She gave me more than anything else the sense, simply, of waiting. She was like a house so freshly and successfully “done up” that you were surprised it wasn't occupied. She was waiting for something to happen—for somebody to come. She was waiting, above all, for Mary Tredick's work. She clearly counted that it would help her.

I had foreseen the fact—the picture was produced at a heat; rapidly, directly, at all events, for the sort of thing it proved to be. I left my friend alone at first, left the ferment to work, troubling her with no questions and asking her for no news; two or three weeks passed, and I never went near her. Then at last, one afternoon as the light was failing,

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I looked in. She immediately knew what I wanted. "Oh yes, I'm doing him."

"Well," I said, "I've respected your intensity, but I *have* felt curious."

I may not perhaps say that she was never so sad as when she laughed, but it's certain that she always laughed when she was sad. When, however, poor dear, for that matter, was she, secretly, not? Her little gasps of mirth were the mark of her worst moments. But why should she have one of these just now? "Oh, I know your curiosity!" she replied to me; and the small chill of her amusement scarcely met it. "He's coming out, but I can't show him to you yet. I must muddle it through in my own way. It has insisted on being, after all, a 'likeness,'" she added. "But nobody will ever know."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody *she* sees."

"Ah, she doesn't, poor thing," I returned, "seem to see anybody!"

"So much the better. I'll risk it." On which I felt I should have to wait, though I had suddenly grown impatient. But I still hung about, and while I did so she explained. "If what I've done is really a portrait, the conditions itself prescribed it. If I was to do the most beautiful man in the world I could do but one."

We looked at each other; then I laughed. "It can scarcely be *me*! But you're getting," I asked, "the great thing?"

"The infamy? Oh yes, please God."

It took away my breath a little, and I even for the moment scarce felt at liberty to press. But one could always be cheerful. "What I meant is the tone of time."

"Getting it, my dear man? Didn't I get it long

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ago? Don't I *show* it—the tone of time?" she suddenly, strangely sighed at me, with something in her face I had never yet seen. "I can't give it to him more than—for all these years—he was to have given it to *me*."

I scarce knew what smothered passion, what remembered wrong, what mixture of joy and pain my words had accidentally quickened. Such an effect of them could only become, for me, an instant pity, which, however, I brought out but indirectly. "It's the tone," I smiled, "in which you're speaking now."

This served, unfortunately, as something of a check. "I didn't mean to speak now." Then with her eyes on the picture, "I've said everything there. Come back," she added, "in three days. He'll be all right."

He was indeed when at last I saw him. She had produced an extraordinary thing—a thing wonderful, ideal, for the part it was to play. My only reserve, from the first, was that it was too fine for its part, that something much less "sincere" would equally have served Mrs. Bridgenorth's purpose, and that relegation to that lady's "own room"—whatever charm it was to work there—might only mean for it cruel obscurity. The picture is before me now, so that I could describe it if description availed. It represents a man of about five-and-thirty, seen only as to the head and shoulders, but dressed, the observer gathers, in a fashion now almost antique and which was far from contemporaneous with the date of the work. His high, slightly narrow face, which would be perhaps too aquiline but for the beauty of the forehead and the sweetness of the mouth, has a charm that even, after all these years, still stirs my imagination. His type has altogether a distinction that you feel to have been firmly caught and yet not vulgarly

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emphasised. The eyes are just too near together, but they are, in a wondrous way, both careless and intense, while lip, cheek, and chin, smooth and clear, are admirably drawn. Youth is still, you see, in all his presence, the joy and pride of life, the perfection of a high spirit and the expectation of a great fortune, which he takes for granted with unconscious insolence. Nothing has ever happened to humiliate or disappoint him, and if my fancy doesn't run away with me the whole presentation of him is a guarantee that he will die without having suffered. He is so handsome, in short, that you can scarcely say what he means, and so happy that you can scarcely guess what he feels.

It is of course, I hasten to add, an appreciably feminine rendering, light, delicate, vague, imperfectly synthetic—insistent and evasive, above all, in the wrong places; but the composition, none the less, is beautiful and the suggestion infinite. The grandest air of the thing struck me in fact, when first I saw it, as coming from the high artistic impertinence with which it offered itself as painted about 1850. It would have been a rare flower of refinement for that dark day. The "tone"—that of such a past as it pretended to—was there almost to excess, a brown bloom into which the image seemed mysteriously to retreat. The subject of it looks at me now across more years and more knowledge, but what I felt at the moment was that he managed to be at once a triumphant trick and a plausible evocation. He hushed me, I remember, with so many kinds of awe that I shouldn't have dreamt of asking who he was. All I said, after my first incoherences of wonder at my friend's practised skill, was: "And you've arrived at this truth without documents?"

"It depends on what you call documents."

"Without notes, sketches, studies?"

"I destroyed them years ago."

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"Then you once had them?"

She just hung fire. "I once had everything."

It told me both more and less than I had asked; enough at all events to make my next question, as I uttered it, sound even to myself a little foolish. "So that it's all memory?"

From where she stood she looked once more at her work; after which she jerked away and, taking several steps, came back to me with something new—whatever it was I had already seen—in her air and answer. "It's all *hate*!" she threw at me, and then went out of the room. It was not till she had gone that I quite understood why. Extremely affected by the impression visibly made on me, she had burst into tears but had wished me not to see them. She left me alone for some time with her wonderful subject, and I again, in her absence, made things out. He was dead—he had been dead for years; the sole humiliation, as I have called it, that he was to know had come to him in that form. The canvas held and cherished him, in any case, as it only holds the dead. She had suffered from him, it came to me, the worst that a woman can suffer, and the wound he had dealt her, though hidden, had never effectually healed. It had bled again while she worked. Yet when she at last reappeared there was but one thing to say. "The beauty, heaven knows, I see. But I don't see what you call the infamy."

She gave him a last look—again she turned away. "Oh, he was like that."

"Well, whatever he was like," I remember replying, "I wonder you can bear to part with him. Isn't it better to let her see the picture first here?"

As to this she doubted. "I don't think I want her to come."

I wondered. "You continue to object so to meet her?"

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"What good will it do? It's quite impossible I should alter him for her."

"Oh, she won't want *that*!" I laughed. "She'll adore him as he is."

"Are you quite sure of your idea?"

"That he's to figure as Mr. Bridgenorth? Well, if I hadn't been from the first, my dear lady, I should be now. Fancy, with the chance, her *not* jumping at him! Yes, he'll figure as Mr. Bridgenorth."

"Mr. Bridgenorth!" she echoed, making the sound, with her small, cold laugh, grotesquely poor for him. He might really have been a prince, and I wondered if he hadn't been. She had, at all events, a new notion. "Do you mind my having it taken to your place and letting her come to see it there?" Which—as I immediately embraced her proposal, deferring to her reasons, whatever they were—was what was speedily arranged.

II

THE next day therefore I had the picture in charge, and on the following Mrs. Bridgenorth, whom I had notified, arrived. I had placed it, framed and on an easel, well in evidence, and I have never forgotten the look and the cry that, as she became aware of it, leaped into her face and from her lips. It was an extraordinary moment, all the more that it found me quite unprepared—so extraordinary that I scarce knew at first what had happened. By the time I really perceived, moreover, more things had happened than one, so that when I pulled myself together it was to face the situation as a whole. She had recognised on the instant the subject; that came first and was irrepressibly vivid in her. Her recognition had, for the length of a flash, lighted for her the possibility that the stroke had been directed. That came second, and she flushed with it as with a blow in the face. What came third—and it was what was really most wondrous—was the quick instinct of getting both her strange recognition and her blind suspicion well in hand. She couldn't control, however, poor woman, the strong colour in her face and the quick tears in her eyes. She could only glare at the canvas, gasping, grimacing, and try to gain time. Whether in surprise or in resentment she intensely reflected, feeling more than anything else how little she might prudently show; and I was conscious even

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at the moment that nothing of its kind could have been finer than her effort to swallow her shock in ten seconds.

How many seconds she took I didn't measure ; enough, assuredly, for me also to profit. I gained more time than she, and the greatest oddity doubtless was my own private manœuvre—the quickest calculation that, acting from a mere confused instinct, I had ever made. If she had known the great gentleman represented there and yet had determined on the spot to carry herself as ignorant, all my loyalty to Mary Tredick came to the surface in a prompt counter-move. What gave me opportunity was the red in her cheek. " Why, you've known him ! "

I saw her ask herself for an instant if she mightn't successfully make her startled state pass as the mere glow of pleasure—her natural greeting to her acquisition. She was pathetically, yet at the same time almost comically, divided. Her line was so to cover her tracks that every avowal of a past connexion was a danger ; but it also concerned her safety to learn, in the light of our astounding coincidence, how far she already stood exposed. She meanwhile begged the question. She smiled through her tears. " He's too magnificent ! "

But I gave her, as I say, all too little time. " Who is he ? Who *was* he ? "

It must have been my look still more than my words that determined her. She wavered but an instant longer, panted, laughed, cried again, and then, dropping into the nearest seat, gave herself up so completely that I was almost ashamed. " Do you think I'd tell you his *name* ? " The burden of the backward years—all the effaced and ignored—lived again, almost like an accent unlearned but freshly breaking out at a touch, in the very sound of the words. These perceptions she, however, the next

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thing showed me, were a game at which two could play. She had to look at me but an instant. "Why, you really *don't* know it!"

I judged best to be frank. "I don't know it."

"Then how does *she*?"

"How do you?" I laughed. "I'm a different matter."

She sat a minute turning things round, staring at the picture. "The likeness, the likeness!" It was almost too much.

"It's so true?"

"Beyond everything."

I considered. "But a resemblance to a known individual—that wasn't what you wanted."

She sprang up at this in eager protest. "Ah, no one else would see it."

I showed again, I fear, my amusement. "No one but you and she?"

"It's her doing *him*!" She was held by her wonder. "Doesn't she, on your honour, know?"

"That his is the very head you would have liked if you had dared? Not a bit. How *should* she? She knows nothing—on my honour."

Mrs. Bridgenorth continued to marvel. "She just painted him for the kind of face——?"

"That corresponds with my description of what you wished? Precisely."

"But *how*—after so long? From memory? As a friend?"

"As a reminiscence—yes. Visual memory, you see, in our uncanny race, is wonderful. As the ideal thing, simply, for your purpose. You *are* then suited?" I after an instant added.

She had again been gazing, and at this turned her eyes on me; but I saw she couldn't speak, couldn't do more at least than sound, unutterably, "Suited!" so that I was positively not surprised

when suddenly—just as Mary had done, the power to produce this effect seeming a property of the model—she burst into tears. I feel no harsher in relating it, however I may appear, than I did at the moment, but it is a fact that while she just wept I literally had a fresh inspiration on behalf of Miss Tredick's interests. I knew exactly, moreover, before my companion had recovered herself, what she would next ask me ; and I consciously brought this appeal on in order to have it over. I explained that I had not the least idea of the identity of our artist's sitter, to which she had given me no clue. I had nothing but my impression that she had known him—known him well ; and, from whatever material she had worked, the fact of his having also been known to Mrs. Bridgenorth was a coincidence pure and simple. It partook of the nature of prodigy, but such prodigies did occur. My visitor listened with avidity and credulity. She was so far reassured. Then I saw her question come. " Well, if she doesn't dream he was ever anything to me—or what he will be now—I'm going to ask you, as a very particular favour, never to tell her. She will want to know of course exactly how I've been struck. You'll naturally say that I'm delighted, but may I exact from you that you say nothing else ? "

There was supplication in her face, but I had to think. " There are conditions I must put to you first, and one of them is also a question, only more frank than yours. Was this mysterious personage—frustrated by death—to have married you ? "

She met it bravely. " Certainly, if he had lived."

I was only amused at an artlessness in her " certainly." " Very good. But why do you wish the coincidence—"

" Kept from her ? " She knew exactly why. " Because if she suspects it she won't let me have

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the picture. Therefore," she added with decision, "you must let me pay for it on the spot."

"What do you mean by on the spot?"

"I'll send you a cheque as soon as I get home."

"Oh," I laughed, "let us understand. Why do you consider she won't let you have the picture?"

She made me wait a little for this, but when it came it was perfectly lucid. "Because she'll then see how much more I must want it."

"How much less—wouldn't it be rather, since the bargain was, as the more convenient thing, not for a likeness?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Bridgenorth with impatience, "the likeness will take care of itself. She'll put this and that together." Then she brought out her real apprehension. "She'll be jealous."

"Oh!" I laughed. But I was startled.

"She'll hate me!"

I wondered. "But I don't think she liked him."

"Don't think?" She stared at me, with her echo, over all that might be in it, then seemed to find little enough. "I say!"

It was almost comically the old Mrs. Bridgenorth. "But I gather from her that he was bad."

"Then what was *she*?"

I barely hesitated. "What were *you*?"

"That's my own business." And she turned again to the picture. "He was good enough for her to do *that* of him."

I took it in once more. "Artistically speaking, for the way it's done, it's one of the most curious things I've ever seen."

"It's a grand treat!" said poor Mrs. Bridgenorth more simply.

It was, it is really; which is exactly what made the case so interesting. "Yet I feel somehow that, as I say, it wasn't done with love."

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It was wonderful how she understood. "It was done with rage."

"Then what have you to fear?"

She knew again perfectly. "What happened when he made *me* jealous. So much," she declared, "that if you'll give me your word for silence——"

"Well?"

"Why, I'll double the money."

"Oh," I replied, taking a turn about in the excitement of our concurrence, "that's exactly what—to do a still better stroke for her—it had just come to *me* to propose!"

"It's understood then, on your oath as a gentleman?" She was so eager that practically this settled it, though I moved to and fro a little while she watched me in suspense. It vibrated all round us that she had gone out to the thing in a stifled flare, that a whole close relation had in the few minutes revived. We know it of the truly amiable person that he will strain a point for another that he wouldn't strain for himself. The stroke to put in for Mary was positively prescribed. The work represented really much more than had been covenanted, and if the purchaser chose so to value it this was her own affair. I decided. "If it's understood also on *your* word."

We were so at one that we shook hands on it. "And when may I send?"

"Well, I shall see her this evening. Say early to-morrow."

"Early to-morrow." And I went with her to her brougham, into which, I remember, as she took leave, she expressed regret that she mightn't then and there have introduced the canvas for removal. I consoled her with remarking that she couldn't have got it in—which was not quite true.

I saw Mary Tredick before dinner, and though I

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was not quite ideally sure of my present ground with her I instantly brought out my news. "She's so delighted that I felt I must in conscience do something still better for you. She's not to have it on the original terms. I've put up the price."

Mary wondered. "But to what?"

"Well, to four hundred. If you say so I'll try even for five."

"Oh, she'll never give that."

"I beg your pardon."

"After the agreement?" She looked grave. "I don't like such leaps and bounds."

"But, my dear child, they're yours. You contracted for a decorative trifle and you've produced a breathing masterpiece."

She thought. "Is that what she calls it?" Then, as having to think too, I hesitated. "What does she know?" she pursued.

"She knows she wants it."

"So much as that?"

At this I had to brace myself a little. "So much that she'll send me the cheque this afternoon, and that you'll have mine by the first post in the morning."

"Before she has even received the picture?"

"Oh, she'll send for it to-morrow." And as I was dining out and had still to dress, my time was up. Mary came with me to the door, where I repeated my assurance. "You shall receive my cheque by the first post." To which I added: "If it's little enough for a lady so much in need to pay for *any* husband, it isn't worth mentioning as the price of such a one as you've given her!"

I was in a hurry, but she held me. "Then you've felt your idea confirmed?"

"My idea?"

"That that's what I *have* given her?"

I suddenly fancied I had perhaps gone too far;

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but I had kept my cab and was already in it. "Well, put it," I called with excess of humour over the front, "that you've, at any rate, given *him* a wife!"

When on my return from dinner that night I let myself in, my first care, in my dusky studio, was to make light for another look at Mary's subject. I felt the impulse to bid him good-night, but, to my astonishment, he was no longer there. His place was a void—he had already disappeared. I saw, however, after my first surprise, what had happened—saw it, moreover, frankly, with some relief. As my servants were in bed I could ask no questions, but it was clear that Mrs. Bridgenorth, whose note, containing its cheque, lay on my table, had been after all unable to wait. The note, I found, mentioned nothing but the enclosure; but it had come by hand, and it was her silence that told the tale. Her messenger had been instructed to "act"; he had come with a vehicle, he had transferred to it canvas and frame. The prize was now therefore landed and the incident closed. I didn't altogether, the next morning, know why, but I had slept the better for the sense of these things, and as soon as my attendant came in I asked for details. It was on this that his answer surprised me. "No, sir, there was no man; she came herself. She had only a four-wheeler, but I helped her, and we got it in. It was a squeeze, sir, but she *would* take it."

I wondered. "She had a four-wheeler? and not her servant?"

"No, no, sir. She came, as you may say, single-handed."

"And not even in her brougham, which would have been larger?"

My man, with his habit, weighed it. "But *have* she a brougham, sir?"

"Why, the one she was here in yesterday."

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Then light broke. "Oh, *that* lady! It wasn't her, sir. It was Miss Tredick."

Light broke, but darkness a little followed it—a darkness that, after breakfast, guided my steps back to my friend. There, in its own first place, I met her creation; but I saw it would be a different thing meeting *her*. She immediately put down on a table, as if she had expected me, the cheque I had sent her overnight. "Yes, I've brought it away. And I can't take the money."

I found myself in despair. "You want to keep him?"

"I don't understand what has happened."

"You just back out?"

"I don't understand," she repeated, "what has happened." But what I had already perceived was, on the contrary, that she very nearly, that she in fact quite remarkably, did understand. It was as if in my zeal I had given away my case, and I felt that my test was coming. She had been thinking all night with intensity, and Mrs. Bridgenorth's generosity, coupled with Mrs. Bridgenorth's promptitude, had kept her awake. Thence, for a woman nervous and critical, imaginations, visions, questions. "Why, in writing me last night, did you take for granted it was *she* who had swooped down? Why," asked Mary Tredick, "should she swoop?"

Well, if I could drive a bargain for Mary I felt I could *a fortiori* lie for her. "Because it's her way. She does swoop. She's impatient and uncontrolled. And it's affectation for you to pretend," I said with diplomacy, "that you see no reason for her falling in love——"

"Falling in love?" She took me straight up.

"With that gentleman. Certainly. What woman wouldn't? What woman didn't? I really don't see, you know, your right to back out."

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"I won't back out," she presently returned, "if you'll answer me a question. Does she know the man represented?" Then as I hung fire: "It has come to me that she must. It would account for so much. For the strange way I feel," she went on, "and for the extraordinary sum you've been able to extract from her."

It was a pity, and I flushed with it, besides wincing at the word she used. But Mrs. Bridgenorth and I, between us, had clearly made the figure too high. "You think that, if she *had* guessed, I would naturally work it to 'extract' more?"

She turned away from me on this and, looking blank in her trouble, moved vaguely about. Then she stopped. "I see him set up there. I hear her say it. What you said she would make him pass for."

I believe I foolishly tried—though only for an instant—to look as if I didn't remember what I had said. "Her husband?"

"He wasn't."

The next minute I had risked it. "Was he yours?"

I don't know what I had expected, but I found myself surprised at her mere pacific head-shake. "No."

"Then why mayn't he have been——?"

"Another woman's? Because he died, to my absolute knowledge, unmarried." She spoke as quietly. "He had known many women, and there was one in particular with whom he became—and too long remained—ruinously intimate. She tried to make him marry her, and he was very near it. Death, however, saved him. But she was the reason——"

"Yes?" I feared again from her a wave of pain, and I went on while she kept it back. "Did you know her?"

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"She was one I wouldn't." Then she brought it out. "She was the reason he failed me." Her successful detachment somehow said all, reduced me to a flat, kind "Oh!" that marked my sense of her telling me, against my expectation, more than I knew what to do with. But it was just while I wondered how to turn her confidence that she repeated, in a changed voice, her challenge of a moment before. "Does she know the man represented?"

"I haven't the least idea." And having so acquitted myself I added, with what strikes me now as futility: "She certainly—yesterday—didn't name him."

"Only recognised him?"

"If she did she brilliantly concealed it."

"So that you got nothing from her?"

It was a question that offered me a certain advantage. "I thought you accused me of getting too much."

She gave me a long look, and I now saw everything in her face. "It's very nice—what you're doing for me, and you do it handsomely. It's beautiful—beautiful, and I thank you with all my heart. But I know."

"And what do you know?"

She went about now preparing her usual work. "What he must have been to her."

"You mean she was the person?"

"Well," she said, putting on her old spectacles, "she was one of them."

"And you accept so easily the astounding coincidence——?"

"Of my finding myself, after years, in so extraordinary a relation with her? What do you call easily? I've passed a night of torment."

"But what put it into your head——?"

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"That I had so blindly and strangely given him back to her? *You* put it—yesterday."

"And how?"

"I can't tell you. You didn't in the least mean to—on the contrary. But you dropped the seed. The plant, after you had gone," she said with a business-like pull at her easel, "the plant began to grow. I *saw* them there—in your studio—face to face."

"You were jealous?" I laughed.

She gave me through her glasses another look, and they seemed, from this moment, in their queer-ness, to have placed her quite on the other side of the gulf of time. She was firm there; she was settled; I couldn't get at her now. "I see she told you I *would* be." I doubtless kept down too little my start at it, and she immediately pursued. "You say I accept the coincidence, which is of course prodigious. But such things happen. Why shouldn't I accept it if you do?"

"*Do I?*" I smiled.

She began her work in silence, but she presently exclaimed: "I'm glad I didn't meet her!"

"I don't yet see why you wouldn't."

"Nor do I. It was an instinct."

"Your instincts"—I tried to be ironic—"are miraculous."

"They *have* to be, to meet such accidents. I must ask you kindly to tell her, when you return her gift, that now I have done the picture I find I must after all keep it for myself."

"Giving no reason?"

She painted away. "She'll know the reason."

Well, by this time I knew it too; I knew so many things that I fear my resistance was weak. If our wonderful client hadn't been his wife in fact, she was not to be helped to become his wife in fiction.

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I knew almost more than I can say, more at any rate than I could then betray. He had been bound in common mercy to stand by my friend, and he had basely forsaken her. This indeed brought up the obscure, into which I shyly gazed. "Why, even granting your theory, should you grudge her the portrait? It was painted in bitterness."

"Yes. Without that——!"

"It wouldn't have come? Precisely. Is it in bitterness, then, you'll keep it?"

She looked up from her canvas. "In what would you keep it?"

It made me jump. "Do you mean I *may*?" Then I had my idea. "I'd give you her price for it!"

Her smile through her glasses was beautiful. "And afterwards make it over to her? You shall have it when I die." With which she came away from her easel, and I saw that I was staying her work and should properly go. So I put out my hand to her. "It took—whatever you will!—to paint it," she said, "but I shall keep it in joy." I could answer nothing now—had to cease to pretend; the thing was in her hands. For a moment we stood there, and I had again the sense, melancholy and final, of her being, as it were, remotely glazed and fixed into what she had done. "He's taken from me, and for all those years he's kept. Then she herself, by a prodigy——!" She lost herself again in the wonder of it.

"Unwittingly gives him back?"

She fairly, for an instant over the marvel, closed her eyes. "Gives him back."

Then it was I saw how he would be kept! But it was the end of my vision. I could only write, ruefully enough, to Mrs. Bridgenorth, whom I never met again, but of whose death—preceding by a

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couple of years Mary Tredick's—I happened to hear. This is an old man's tale. I have inherited the picture, in the deep beauty of which, however, darkness still lurks. No one, strange to say, has ever recognised the model, but every one asks his name. I don't even know it.

THE END

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