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TERMINATIONS

THE DEATH OF THE
LION.. THE COXON
FUND.. THE MIDDLE
YEARS.. THE ALTAR
OF THE DEAD.....

By HENRY JAMES



LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN

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NOTE.—The first two of these Tales were originally published in "The Yellow Book," the third in "Scribner's Magazine." The last appears for the first time.

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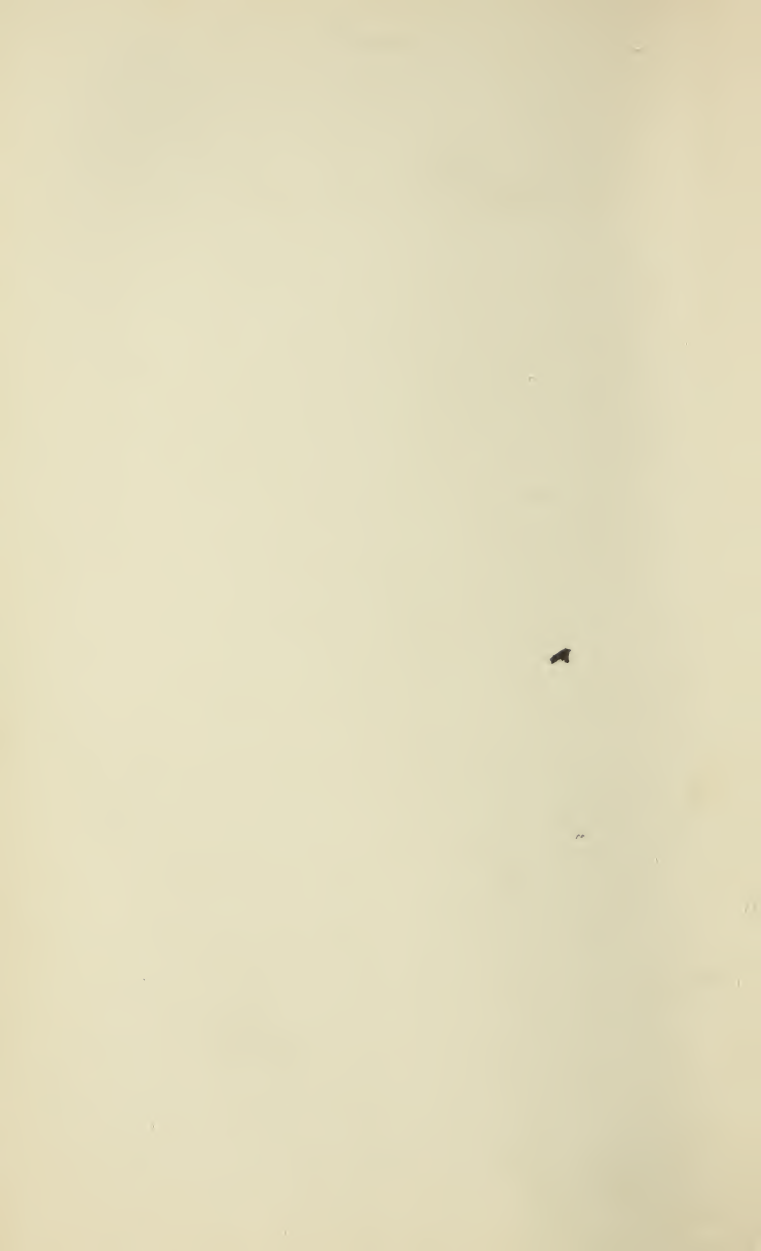
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THE DEATH OF THE LION

I

I HAD simply, I suppose, a change of heart, and it must have begun when I received my manuscript back from Mr. Pinhorn. Mr. Pinhorn was my "chief," as he was called in the office: he had accepted the high mission of bringing the paper up. This was a weekly periodical, and had been supposed to be almost past redemption when he took hold of it. It was Mr. Deedy who had let it down so dreadfully: he was never mentioned in the office now save in connection with that misdemeanour. Young as I was I had been in a manner taken over from Mr. Deedy, who had been owner as well as editor; forming part of a promiscuous lot, mainly plant and office-furniture, which poor Mrs. Deedy, in her bereavement and depression, parted with at a rough valuation. I could account for my continuity only on the supposition that I had been cheap. I rather resented the practice of fathering all flatness on my late protector, who was in his unhonoured grave; but as I had my way to make I found matter enough for complacency in being on a "staff." At the same time I was aware that I was exposed to suspicion as a product of the old lowering system. This made

me feel that I was doubly bound to have ideas, and had doubtless been at the bottom of my proposing to Mr. Pinhorn that I should lay my lean hands on Neil Paraday. I remember that he looked at me first as if he had never heard of this celebrity, who indeed at that moment was by no means in the centre of the heavens ; and even when I had knowingly explained he expressed but little confidence in the demand for any such matter. When I had reminded him that the great principle on which we were supposed to work was just to create the demand we required, he considered a moment and then rejoined : " I see ; you want to write him up."

" Call it that if you like."

" And what's your inducement ? "

" Bless my soul—my admiration ! "

Mr. Pinhorn pursed up his mouth. " Is there much to be done with him ? "

" Whatever there is, we should have it all to ourselves, for he hasn't been touched."

This argument was effective, and Mr. Pinhorn responded : " Very well, touch him." Then he added : " But where can you do it ? "

" Under the fifth rib ! "

Mr. Pinhorn stared. " Where's that ? "

" You want me to go down and see him ? " I inquired when I had enjoyed his visible search for this obscure suburb.

" I don't 'want' anything—the proposal's your own. But you must remember that that's the way

we do things *now*," said Mr. Pinhorn, with another dig at Mr. Deedy.

Unregenerate as I was, I could read the queer implications of this speech. The present owner's superior virtue as well as his deeper craft spoke in his reference to the late editor as one of that baser sort who deal in false representations. Mr. Deedy would as soon have sent me to call on Neil Paraday as he would have published a "holiday-number;" but such scruples presented themselves as mere ignoble thrift to his successor, whose own sincerity took the form of ringing door-bells and whose definition of genius was the art of finding people at home. It was as if Mr. Deedy had published reports without his young men's having, as Pinhorn would have said, really been there. I was unregenerate, as I have hinted, and I was not concerned to straighten out the journalistic morals of my chief, feeling them indeed to be an abyss over the edge of which it was better not to peer. Really to be there this time moreover was a vision that made the idea of writing something subtle about Neil Paraday only the more inspiring. I would be as considerate as even Mr. Deedy could have wished, and yet I should be as present as only Mr. Pinhorn could conceive. My allusion to the sequestered manner in which Mr. Paraday lived (which had formed part of my explanation, though I knew of it only by hearsay) was, I could divine, very much what had made Mr. Pinhorn nibble. It struck him as inconsistent with the success of his paper that any

one should be so sequestered as that. And then was not an immediate exposure of everything just what the public wanted? Mr. Pinhorn effectually called me to order by reminding me of the promptness with which I had met Miss Braby at Liverpool on her return from her fiasco in the States. Hadn't we published, while its freshness and flavour were unimpaired, Miss Braby's own version of that great international episode? I felt somewhat uneasy at this lumping of the actress and the author, and I confess that after having enlisted Mr. Pinhorn's sympathies I procrastinated a little. I had succeeded better than I wished, and I had, as it happened, work nearer at hand. A few days later I called on Lord Crouchley and carried off in triumph the most unintelligible statement that had yet appeared of his lordship's reasons for his change of front. I thus set in motion in the daily papers columns of virtuous verbiage. The following week I ran down to Brighton for a chat, as Mr. Pinhorn called it, with Mrs. Bounder, who gave me, on the subject of her divorce, many curious particulars that had not been articulated in court. If ever an article flowed from the primal fount it was that article on Mrs. Bounder. By this time, however, I became aware that Neil Paraday's new book was on the point of appearing and that its approach had been the ground of my original appeal to Mr. Pinhorn, who was now annoyed with me for having lost so many days. He bundled me off—we would at least not lose

another. I have always thought his sudden alertness a remarkable example of the journalistic instinct. Nothing had occurred, since I first spoke to him, to create a visible urgency, and no enlightenment could possibly have reached him. It was a pure case of professional *flair*—he had smelt the coming glory as an animal smells its distant prey.

II

I MAY as well say at once that this little record pretends in no degree to be a picture either of my introduction to Mr. Paraday or of certain proximate steps and stages. The scheme of my narrative allows no space for these things, and in any case a prohibitory sentiment would be attached to my recollection of so rare an hour. These meagre notes are essentially private, so that if they see the light the insidious forces that, as my story itself shows, make at present for publicity will simply have overmastered my precautions. The curtain fell lately enough on the lamentable drama. My memory of the day I alighted at Mr. Paraday's door is a fresh memory of kindness, hospitality, compassion, and of the wonderful illuminating talk in which the welcome was conveyed. Some voice of the air had taught me the right moment, the moment of his life at which an act of unexpected young allegiance might most come home. He had recently recovered from a long, grave illness. I had gone to the neighbouring inn for the night, but I spent the evening in his company, and he insisted the next day on my sleeping under his roof. I had not an indefinite

leave: Mr. Pinhorn supposed us to put our victims through on the gallop. It was later, in the office, that the dance was set to music. I fortified myself, however, as my training had taught me to do, by the conviction that nothing could be more advantageous for my article than to be written in the very atmosphere. I said nothing to Mr. Paraday about it, but in the morning, after my removal from the inn, while he was occupied in his study, as he had notified me that he should need to be, I committed to paper the quintessence of my impressions. Then thinking to commend myself to Mr. Pinhorn by my celerity, I walked out and posted my little packet before luncheon. Once my paper was written I was free to stay on, and if it was designed to divert attention from my frivolity in so doing I could reflect with satisfaction that I had never been so clever. I don't mean to deny of course that I was aware it was much too good for Mr. Pinhorn; but I was equally conscious that Mr. Pinhorn had the supreme shrewdness of recognising from time to time the cases in which an article was not too bad only because it was too good. There was nothing he loved so much as to print on the right occasion a thing he hated. I had begun my visit to Mr. Paraday on a Monday, and on the Wednesday his book came out. A copy of it arrived by the first post, and he let me go out into the garden with it immediately after breakfast. I read it from beginning to end that day, and in the evening he asked me to remain

with him the rest of the week and over the Sunday.

That night my manuscript came back from Mr. Pinhorn, accompanied with a letter, of which the gist was the desire to know what I meant by sending him such stuff. That was the meaning of the question, if not exactly its form, and it made my mistake immense to me. Such as this mistake was I could now only look it in the face and accept it. I knew where I had failed, but it was exactly where I couldn't have succeeded. I had been sent down there to be personal, and in point of fact I hadn't been personal at all: what I had sent up to London was just a little finicking, feverish study of my author's talent. Anything less relevant to Mr. Pinhorn's purpose couldn't well be imagined, and he was visibly angry at my having (at his expense, with a second-class ticket) approached the object of our arrangement only to be so deucedly distant. For myself, I knew but too well what had happened, and how a miracle—as pretty as some old miracle of legend—had been wrought on the spot to save me. There had been a big brush of wings, the flash of an opaline robe, and then, with a great cool stir of the air, the sense of an angel's having swooped down and caught me to his bosom. He held me only till the danger was over, and it all took place in a minute. With my manuscript back on my hands I understood the phenomenon better, and the reflections I made on it are what I meant, at the

beginning of this anecdote, by my change of heart. Mr. Pinhorn's note was not only a rebuke decidedly stern, but an invitation immediately to send him (it was the case to say so) the genuine article, the revealing and reverberating sketch to the promise of which—and of which alone—I owed my squandered privilege. A week or two later I recast my peccant paper, and giving it a particular application to Mr. Paraday's new book, obtained for it the hospitality of another journal, where, I must admit, Mr. Pinhorn was so far justified that it attracted not the least attention.

III

I WAS frankly, at the end of three days, a very prejudiced critic, so that one morning when, in the garden, Neil Paraday had offered to read me something I quite held my breath as I listened. It was the written scheme of another book—something he had put aside long ago, before his illness, and lately taken out again to reconsider. He had been turning it round when I came down upon him, and it had grown magnificently under this second hand. Loose, liberal, confident, it might have passed for a great gossiping, eloquent letter—the overflow into talk of an artist's amorous plan. The subject I thought singularly rich, quite the strongest he had yet treated; and this familiar statement of it, full too of fine maturities, was really, in summarised splendour, a mine of gold, a precious, independent work. I remember rather profanely wondering whether the ultimate production could possibly be so happy. His reading of the epistle, at any rate, made me feel as if I were, for the advantage of posterity, in close correspondence with him—were the distinguished person to whom it had been affectionately addressed. It was high distinction simply to be told such things. The idea he now communicated

had all the freshness, the flushed fairness of the conception untouched and untried: it was Venus rising from the sea, before the airs had blown upon her. I had never been so throbbingly present at such an unveiling. But when he had tossed the last bright word after the others, as I had seen cashiers in banks, weighing mounds of coin, drop a final sovereign into the tray, I became conscious of a sudden prudent alarm.

"My dear master, how, after all, are you going to do it?" I asked. "It's infinitely noble, but what time it will take, what patience and independence, what assured, what perfect conditions it will demand! Oh for a lone isle in a tepid sea!"

"Isn't this practically a lone isle, and aren't you, as an encircling medium, tepid enough?" he replied, alluding with a laugh to the wonder of my young admiration and the narrow limits of his little provincial home. "Time isn't what I've lacked hitherto: the question hasn't been to find it, but to use it. Of course my illness made a great hole, but I daresay there would have been a hole at any rate. The earth we tread has more pockets than a billiard-table. The great thing is now to keep on my feet."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Neil Paraday looked at me with eyes—such pleasant eyes as he had—in which, as I now recall their expression, I seem to have seen a dim imagination of his fate. He was fifty years old, and his illness had been cruel, his convalescence slow. "It isn't as if I weren't all right."

"Oh, if you weren't all right I wouldn't look at you!" I tenderly said.

We had both got up, quickened by the full sound of it all, and he had lighted a cigarette. I had taken a fresh one, and, with an intenser smile, by way of answer to my exclamation, he touched it with the flame of his match. "If I weren't better I shouldn't have thought of *that!*" He flourished his epistle in his hand.

"I don't want to be discouraging, but that's not true," I returned. "I'm sure that during the months you lay here in pain you had visitations sublime. You thought of a thousand things. You think of more and more all the while. That's what makes you, if you will pardon my familiarity, so respectable. At a time when so many people are spent you come into your second wind. But, thank God, all the same, you're better! Thank God, too, you're not, as you were telling me yesterday, 'successful.' If *you* weren't a failure, what would be the use of trying? That's my one reserve on the subject of your recovery—that it makes you 'score,' as the newspapers say. It looks well in the newspapers, and almost anything that does that is horrible. 'We are happy to announce that Mr. Paraday, the celebrated author, is again in the enjoyment of excellent health.' Somehow I shouldn't like to see it."

"You won't see it; I'm not in the least celebrated—my obscurity protects me. But couldn't you bear even to see I was dying or dead?" my companion asked.

“Dead—*passé encore*; there’s nothing so safe. One never knows what a living artist may do—one has mourned so many. However, one must make the worst of it; you must be as dead as you can.”

“Don’t I meet that condition in having just published a book?”

“Adequately, let us hope; for the book is verily a masterpiece.”

At this moment the parlour-maid appeared in the door that opened into the garden: Paraday lived at no great cost, and the frisk of petticoats, with a timorous “Sherry, sir?” was about his modest mahogany. He allowed half his income to his wife, from whom he had succeeded in separating without redundancy of legend. I had a general faith in his having behaved well, and I had once, in London, taken Mrs. Paraday down to dinner. He now turned to speak to the maid, who offered him, on a tray, some card or note, while agitated, excited, I wandered to the end of the garden. The idea of his security became supremely dear to me, and I asked myself if I were the same young man who had come down a few days before to scatter him to the four winds. When I retraced my steps he had gone into the house, and the woman (the second London post had come in) had placed my letters and a newspaper on a bench. I sat down there to the letters, which were a brief business, and then, without heeding the address, took the paper from its envelope. It was the journal of highest renown, *The Empire* of that morning. It regularly came to Paraday, but I

remembered that neither of us had yet looked at the copy already delivered. This one had a great mark on the "editorial" page, and, uncrumpling the wrapper, I saw it to be directed to my host and stamped with the name of his publishers. I instantly divined that *The Empire* had spoken of him, and I have not forgotten the odd little shock of the circumstance. It checked all eagerness and made me drop the paper a moment. As I sat there conscious of a palpitation I think I had a vision of what was to be. I had also a vision of the letter I would presently address to Mr. Pinhorn, breaking as it were with Mr. Pinhorn. Of course, however, the next minute the voice of *The Empire* was in my ears.

The article was not, I thanked heaven, a review; it was a "leader," the last of three, presenting Neil Paraday to the human race. His new book, the fifth from his hand, had been but a day or two out, and *The Empire*, already aware of it, fired, as if on the birth of a prince, a salute of a whole column. The guns had been booming these three hours in the house without our suspecting them. The big blundering newspaper had discovered him, and now he was proclaimed and anointed and crowned. His place was assigned him as publicly as if a fat usher with a wand had pointed to the topmost chair; he was to pass up and still up, higher and higher, between the watching faces and the envious sounds—away up to the daïs and the throne. The article was a date; he had taken rank at a bound—waked up a national glory. A national glory was needed, and it was an immense

convenience he was there. What all this meant rolled over me, and I fear I grew a little faint—it meant so much more than I could say “yea” to on the spot. In a flash, somehow, all was different; the tremendous wave I speak of had swept something away. It had knocked down, I suppose, my little customary altar, my twinkling tapers and my flowers, and had reared itself into the likeness of a temple vast and bare. When Neil Paraday should come out of the house he would come out a contemporary. That was what had happened: the poor man was to be squeezed into his horrible age. I felt as if he had been overtaken on the crest of the hill and brought back to the city. A little more and he would have dipped down the short cut to posterity and escaped.

IV

WHEN he came out it was exactly as if he had been in custody, for beside him walked a stout man with a big black beard, who, save that he wore spectacles, might have been a policeman, and in whom at a second glance I recognised the highest contemporary enterprise.

"This is Mr. Morrow," said Paraday, looking, I thought, rather white: "he wants to publish heaven knows what about me."

I winced as I remembered that this was exactly what I myself had wanted. "Already?" I exclaimed, with a sort of sense that my friend had fled to me for protection.

Mr. Morrow glared, agreeably, through his glasses: they suggested the electric headlights of some monstrous modern ship, and I felt as if Paraday and I were tossing terrified under his bows. I saw that his momentum was irresistible. "I was confident that I should be the first in the field," he declared. "A great interest is naturally felt in Mr. Paraday's surroundings."

"I hadn't the least idea of it," said Paraday, as if he had been told he had been snoring.

"I find he has not read the article in *The Empire*,"

Mr. Morrow remarked to me. "That's so very interesting—it's something to start with," he smiled. He had begun to pull off his gloves, which were violently new, and to look encouragingly round the little garden. As a "surrounding" I felt that I myself had already been taken in; I was a little fish in the stomach of a bigger one. "I represent," our visitor continued, "a syndicate of influential journals, no less than thirty-seven, whose public—whose publics, I may say—are in peculiar sympathy with Mr. Paraday's line of thought. They would greatly appreciate any expression of his views on the subject of the art he so brilliantly practises. Besides my connection with the syndicate just mentioned, I hold a particular commission from *The Tatler*, whose most prominent department, 'Smatter and Chatter'—I daresay you've often enjoyed it—attracts such attention. I was honoured only last week, as a representative of *The Tatler*, with the confidence of Guy Walsingham, the author of 'Obsessions.' She expressed herself thoroughly pleased with my sketch of her method; she went so far as to say that I had made her genius more comprehensible even to herself."

Neil Paraday had dropped upon the garden-bench and sat there at once detached and confused; he looked hard at a bare spot in the lawn, as if with an anxiety that had suddenly made him grave. His movement had been interpreted by his visitor as an invitation to sink sympathetically into a wicker chair that stood hard by, and as Mr. Morrow so settled himself

I felt that he had taken official possession and that there was no undoing it. One had heard of unfortunate people's having "a man in the house," and this was just what we had. There was a silence of a moment, during which we seemed to acknowledge in the only way that was possible the presence of universal fate; the sunny stillness took no pity, and my thought, as I was sure Paraday's was doing, performed within the minute a great distant revolution. I saw just how emphatic I should make my rejoinder to Mr. Pinhorn, and that having come, like Mr. Morrow, to betray, I must remain as long as possible to save. Not because I had brought my mind back, but because our visitor's last words were in my ear, I presently inquired with gloomy irrelevance if Guy Walsingham were a woman.

"Oh yes, a mere pseudonym; but convenient, you know, for a lady who goes in for the larger latitude. 'Obsessions, by Miss So-and-so,' would look a little odd, but men are more naturally indelicate. Have you peeped into 'Obsessions'?" Mr. Morrow continued sociably to our companion.

Paraday, still absent, remote, made no answer, as if he had not heard the question: a manifestation that appeared to suit the cheerful Mr. Morrow as well as any other. Imperturbably bland, he was a man of resources—he only needed to be on the spot. He had pocketed the whole poor place while Paraday and I were woolgathering, and I could imagine that he had already got his "heads." His system, at any rate, was justified by the inevitability with

which I replied, to save my friend the trouble: "Dear, no; he hasn't read it. He doesn't read such things!" I unwarily added.

"Things that are *too* far over the fence, eh?" I was indeed a godsend to Mr. Morrow. It was the psychological moment; it determined the appearance of his notebook, which, however, he at first kept slightly behind him, even as the dentist, approaching his victim, keeps the horrible forceps. "Mr. Paraday holds with the good old proprieties—I see!" And thinking of the thirty-seven influential journals, I found myself, as I found poor Paraday, helplessly gazing at the promulgation of this ineptitude. "There's no point on which distinguished views are so acceptable as on this question—raised perhaps more strikingly than ever by Guy Walsingham—of the permissibility of the larger latitude. I have an appointment, precisely in connection with it, next week, with Dora Forbes, the author of 'The Other Way Round,' which everybody is talking about. Has Mr. Paraday glanced at 'The Other Way Round'?" Mr. Morrow now frankly appealed to me. I took upon myself to repudiate the supposition, while our companion, still silent, got up nervously and walked away. His visitor paid no heed to his withdrawal; he only opened out the notebook with a more motherly pat. "Dora Forbes, I gather, takes the ground, the same as Guy Walsingham's, that the larger latitude has simply got to come. He holds that it has got to be squarely faced. Of course his sex makes him a less prejudiced witness. But

an authoritative word from Mr. Paraday—from the point of view of *his* sex, you know—would go right round the globe. He takes the line that we *haven't* got to face it?"

I was bewildered: it sounded somehow as if there were three sexes. My interlocutor's pencil was poised, my private responsibility great. I simply sat staring, however, and only found presence of mind to say: "Is this Miss Forbes a gentleman?"

Mr. Morrow hesitated an instant, smiling. "It wouldn't be 'Miss'—there's a wife!"

"I mean is she a man?"

"The wife?"—Mr. Morrow, for a moment, was as confused as myself. But when I explained that I alluded to Dora Forbes in person he informed me, with visible amusement at my being so out of it, that this was the "pen-name" of an indubitable male—he had a big red moustache. "He only assumes a feminine personality because the ladies are such popular favourites. A great deal of interest is felt in this assumption, and there's every prospect of its being widely imitated." Our host at this moment joined us again, and Mr. Morrow remarked invitingly that he should be happy to make a note of any observation the movement in question, the bid for success under a lady's name, might suggest to Mr. Paraday. But the poor man, without catching the allusion, excused himself, pleading that, though he was greatly honoured by his visitor's interest, he suddenly felt unwell and should have to

take leave of him—have to go and lie down and keep quiet. His young friend might be trusted to answer for him, but he hoped Mr. Morrow didn't expect great things even of his young friend. His young friend, at this moment, looked at Neil Paraday with an anxious eye, greatly wondering if he were doomed to be ill again; but Paraday's own kind face met his question reassuringly, seemed to say in a glance intelligible enough: "Oh, I'm not ill, but I'm scared: get him out of the house as quietly as possible." Getting newspaper-men out of the house was odd business for an emissary of Mr. Pinhorn, and I was so exhilarated by the idea of it that I called after him as he left us:

"Read the article in *The Empire*, and you'll soon be all right!"

V

"DELICIOUS my having come down to tell him of it!" Mr. Morrow ejaculated. "My cab was at the door twenty minutes after *The Empire* had been laid upon my breakfast-table. Now what have you got for me?" he continued, dropping again into his chair, from which, however, the next moment he quickly rose. "I was shown into the drawing-room, but there must be more to see—his study, his literary sanctum, the little things he has about, or other domestic objects or features. He wouldn't be lying down on his study-table? There's a great interest always felt in the scene of an author's labours. Sometimes we're favoured with very delightful peeps. Dora Forbes showed me all his table-drawers, and almost jammed my hand into one into which I made a dash! I don't ask that of you, but if we could talk things over right there where he sits I feel as if I should get the keynote."

I had no wish whatever to be rude to Mr. Morrow, I was much too initiated not to prefer the safety of other ways; but I had a quick inspiration and I entertained an insurmountable, an almost superstitious objection to his crossing the threshold of my friend's little lonely, shabby, consecrated workshop.

“No, no—we sha’n’t get at his life that way,” I said. “The way to get at his life is to—But wait a moment!” I broke off and went quickly into the house; then, in three minutes, I reappeared before Mr. Morrow with the two volumes of Paraday’s new book. “His life’s here,” I went on, “and I’m so full of this admirable thing that I can’t talk of anything else. The artist’s life’s his work, and this is the place to observe him. What he has to tell us he tells us with *this* perfection. My dear sir, the best interviewer’s the best reader.”

Mr. Morrow good-humouredly protested. “Do you mean to say that no other source of information should be open to us?”

“None other till this particular one—by far the most copious—has been quite exhausted. Have you exhausted it, my dear sir? Had you exhausted it when you came down here? It seems to me in our time almost wholly neglected, and something should surely be done to restore its ruined credit. It’s the course to which the artist himself at every step, and with such pathetic confidence, refers us. This last book of Mr. Paraday’s is full of revelations.”

“Revelations?” panted Mr. Morrow, whom I had forced again into his chair.

“The only kind that count. It tells you with a perfection that seems to me quite final all the author thinks, for instance, about the advent of the ‘larger latitude.’”

“Where does it do that?” asked Mr. Morrow,

who had picked up the second volume and was insincerely thumbing it.

“Everywhere—in the whole treatment of his case. Extract the opinion, disengage the answer—those are the real acts of homage.”

Mr. Morrow, after a minute, tossed the book away. “Ah, but you mustn’t take me for a reviewer.”

“Heaven forbid I should take you for anything so dreadful! You came down to perform a little act of sympathy, and so, I may confide to you, did I. Let us perform our little act together. These pages overflow with the testimony we want: let us read them and taste them and interpret them. You will of course have perceived for yourself that one scarcely does read Neil Paraday till one reads him aloud; he gives out to the ear an extraordinary quality, and it’s only when you expose it confidently to that test that you really get near his style. Take up your book again and let me listen, while you pay it out, to that wonderful fifteenth chapter. If you feel that you can’t do it justice, compose yourself to attention while I produce for you—I think I can!—this scarcely less admirable ninth.”

Mr. Morrow gave me a straight glance which was as hard as a blow between the eyes; he had turned rather red, and a question had formed itself in his mind which reached my sense as distinctly as if he had uttered it: “What sort of a damned fool are *you*?” Then he got up, gathering together his hat and gloves, buttoning his coat, projecting

hungrily all over the place the big transparency of his mask. It seemed to flare over Fleet Street and somehow made the actual spot distressingly humble: there was so little for it to feed on unless he counted the blisters of our stucco or saw his way to do something with the roses. Even the poor roses were common kinds. Presently his eyes fell upon the manuscript from which Paraday had been reading to me and which still lay on the bench. As my own followed them I saw that it looked promising, looked pregnant, as if it gently throbbed with the life the reader had given it. Mr. Morrow indulged in a nod toward it and a vague thrust of his umbrella. "What's that?"

"Oh, it's a plan—a secret."

"A secret!" There was an instant's silence, and then Mr. Morrow made another movement. I may have been mistaken, but it affected me as the translated impulse of the desire to lay hands on the manuscript, and this led me to indulge in a quick anticipatory grab which may very well have seemed ungraceful, or even impertinent, and which at any rate left Mr. Paraday's two admirers very erect, glaring at each other while one of them held a bundle of papers well behind him. An instant later Mr. Morrow quitted me abruptly, as if he had really carried something off with him. To reassure myself, watching his broad back recede, I only grasped my manuscript the tighter. He went to the back-door of the house, the one he had come out from, but on trying the handle he

appeared to find it fastened. So he passed round into the front garden, and by listening intently enough I could presently hear the outer gate close behind him with a bang. I thought again of the thirty-seven influential journals and wondered what would be his revenge. I hasten to add that he was magnanimous: which was just the most dreadful thing he could have been. *The Tatler* published a charming, chatty, familiar account of Mr. Paraday's "Home-life," and on the wings of the thirty-seven influential journals it went, to use Mr. Morrow's own expression, right round the globe.

VI

A WEEK later, early in May, my glorified friend came up to town, where, it may be veraciously recorded, he was the king of the beasts of the year. No advancement was ever more rapid, no exaltation more complete, no bewilderment more teachable. His book sold but moderately, though the article in *The Empire* had done unwonted wonders for it; but he circulated in person in a manner that the libraries might well have envied. His formula had been found—he was a “revelation.” His momentary terror had been real, just as mine had been—the overclouding of his passionate desire to be left to finish his work. He was far from unsociable, but he had the finest conception of being let alone that I have ever met. For the time, however, he took his profit where it seemed most to crowd upon him, having in his pocket the portable sophistries about the nature of the artist’s task. Observation too was a kind of work and experience a kind of success; London dinners were all material and London ladies were fruitful toil. “No one has the faintest conception of what I’m trying for,” he said to me, “and not many have read three pages that I’ve written; but I must dine with them first—they’ll find out why

when they've time." It was rather rude justice, perhaps; but the fatigue had the merit of being a new sort, and the phantasmagoric town was probably after all less of a battlefield than the haunted study. He once told me that he had had no personal life to speak of since his fortieth year, but had had more than was good for him before. London closed the parenthesis and exhibited him in relations; one of the most inevitable of these being that in which he found himself to Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, wife of the boundless brewer and proprietress of the universal menagerie. In this establishment, as everybody knows, on occasions when the crush is great, the animals rub shoulders freely with the spectators and the lions sit down for whole evenings with the lambs.

It had been ominously clear to me from the first that in Neil Paraday this lady, who, as all the world agreed, was tremendous fun, considered that she had secured a prime attraction, a creature of almost heraldic oddity. Nothing could exceed her enthusiasm over her capture, and nothing could exceed the confused apprehensions it excited in me. I had an instinctive fear of her which I tried without effect to conceal from her victim, but which I let her perceive with perfect impunity. Paraday heeded it, but she never did, for her conscience was that of a romping child. She was a blind, violent force, to which I could attach no more idea of responsibility than to the creaking of a sign in the wind. It was difficult to say what she conduced to but to circulation. She

was constructed of steel and leather, and all I asked of her for our tractable friend was not to do him to death. He had consented for a time to be of india-rubber, but my thoughts were fixed on the day he should resume his shape or at least get back into his box. It was evidently all right, but I should be glad when it was well over. I had a special fear—the impression was ineffaceable of the hour when, after Mr. Morrow's departure, I had found him on the sofa in his study. That pretext of indisposition had not in the least been meant as a snub to the envoy of *The Tatler*—he had gone to lie down in very truth. He had felt a pang of his old pain, the result of the agitation wrought in him by this forcing open of a new period. His old programme, his old ideal even had to be changed. Say what one would, success was a complication and recognition had to be reciprocal. The monastic life, the pious illumination of the missal in the convent cell were things of the gathered past. It didn't engender despair, but it at least required adjustment. Before I left him on that occasion we had passed a bargain, my part of which was that I should make it my business to take care of him. Let whoever would represent the interest in his presence (I had a mystical prevision of Mrs. Weeks Wimbush) I should represent the interest in his work—in other words in his absence. These two interests were in their essence opposed; and I doubt, as youth is fleeting, if I shall ever again know the intensity of joy with which I felt that in so good a cause I was willing to make myself odious.

One day, in Sloane Street, I found myself questioning Paraday's landlord, who had come to the door in answer to my knock. Two vehicles, a barouche and a smart hansom, were drawn up before the house.

"In the drawing-room, sir? Mrs. Weeks Wim-bush."

"And in the dining-room?"

"A young lady, sir — waiting: I think a foreigner."

It was three o'clock, and on days when Paraday didn't lunch out he attached a value to these subjugated hours. On which days, however, didn't the dear man lunch out? Mrs. Wimbush, at such a crisis, would have rushed round immediately after her own repast. I went into the dining-room first, postponing the pleasure of seeing how, upstairs, the lady of the barouche would, on my arrival, point the moral of my sweet solicitude. No one took such an interest as herself in his doing only what was good for him, and she was always on the spot to see that he did it. She made appointments with him to discuss the best means of economising his time and protecting his privacy. She further made his health her special business, and had so much sympathy with my own zeal for it that she was the author of pleasing fictions on the subject of what my devotion had led me to give up. I gave up nothing (I don't count Mr. Pinhorn) because I had nothing, and all I had as yet achieved was to find myself also in the menagerie. I had

dashed in to save my friend, but I had only got domesticated and wedged; so that I could do nothing for him but exchange with him over people's heads looks of intense but futile intelligence.

VII

THE young lady in the dining-room had a brave face, black hair, blue eyes, and in her lap a big volume. "I've come for his autograph," she said when I had explained to her that I was under bonds to see people for him when he was occupied. "I've been waiting half an hour, but I'm prepared to wait all day." I don't know whether it was this that told me she was American, for the propensity to wait all day is not in general characteristic of her race. I was enlightened probably not so much by the spirit of the utterance as by some quality of its sound. At any rate I saw she had an individual patience and a lovely frock, together with an expression that played among her pretty features like a breeze among flowers. Putting her book upon the table, she showed me a massive album, showily bound and full of autographs of price. The collection of faded notes, of still more faded "thoughts," of quotations, platitudes, signatures, represented a formidable purpose.

"Most people apply to Mr. Paraday by letter, you know," I said.

"Yes, but he doesn't answer. I've written three times."

"Very true," I reflected; "the sort of letter you mean goes straight into the fire."

"How do you know the sort I mean?" My interlocutress had blushed and smiled, and in a moment she added: "I don't believe he gets many like them!"

"I'm sure they're beautiful, but he burns without reading." I didn't add that I had told him he ought to.

"Isn't he then in danger of burning things of importance?"

"He would be, if distinguished men hadn't an infallible nose for nonsense."

She looked at me a moment—her face was sweet and gay. "Do *you* burn without reading, too?" she asked; in answer to which I assured her that if she would trust me with her repository I would see that Mr. Paraday should write his name in it.

She considered a little. "That's very well, but it wouldn't make me see him."

"Do you want very much to see him?" It seemed ungracious to catechise so charming a creature, but somehow I had never yet taken my duty to the great author so seriously.

"Enough to have come from America for the purpose."

I stared. "All alone?"

"I don't see that that's exactly your business; but if it will make me more appealing I'll confess that I'm quite by myself. I had to come alone or not come at all."

She was interesting ; I could imagine that she had lost parents, natural protectors—could conceive even that she had inherited money. I was in a phase of my own fortune when keeping hansoms at doors seemed to me pure swagger. As a trick of this bold and sensitive girl, however, it became romantic—a part of the general romance of her freedom, her errand, her innocence. The confidence of young Americans was notorious, and I speedily arrived at a conviction that no impulse could have been more generous than the impulse that had operated here. I foresaw at that moment that it would make her my peculiar charge, just as circumstances had made Neil Paraday. She would be another person to look after, and one's honour would be concerned in guiding her straight. These things became clearer to me later ; at the instant I had scepticism enough to observe to her, as I turned the pages of her volume, that her net had, all the same, caught many a big fish. She appeared to have had fruitful access to the great ones of the earth ; there were people moreover whose signatures she had presumably secured without a personal interview. She couldn't have worried George Washington and Friedrich Schiller and Hannah More. She met this argument, to my surprise, by throwing up the album without a pang. It wasn't even her own ; she was responsible for none of its treasures. It belonged to a girl-friend in America, a young lady in a western city. This young lady had insisted on her bringing it, to pick up more autographs : she thought

they might like to see, in Europe, in what company they would be. The "girl-friend," the western city, the immortal names, the curious errand, the idyllic faith, all made a story as strange to me, and as beguiling, as some tale in the Arabian Nights. Thus it was that my informant had encumbered herself with the ponderous tome; but she hastened to assure me that this was the first time she had brought it out. For her visit to Mr. Paraday it had simply been a pretext. She didn't really care a straw that he should write his name; what she did want was to look straight into his face.

I demurred a little. "And why do you require to do that?"

"Because I just love him!" Before I could recover from the agitating effect of this crystal ring my companion had continued: "Hasn't there ever been any face that you've wanted to look into?"

How could I tell her so soon how much I appreciated the opportunity of looking into hers? I could only assent in general to the proposition that there were certainly for every one such hankerings, and even such faces; and I felt that the crisis demanded all my lucidity, all my wisdom. "Oh, yes, I'm a student of physiognomy. Do you mean," I pursued, "that you've a passion for Mr. Paraday's books?"

"They've been everything to me and a little more beside—I know them by heart. They've completely taken hold of me. There's no author about whom I feel as I do about Neil Paraday."

"Permit me to remark then," I presently rejoined, "that you're one of the right sort."

"One of the enthusiasts? Of course I am!"

"Oh, there are enthusiasts who are quite of the wrong. I mean you're one of those to whom an appeal can be made."

"An appeal?" Her face lighted as if with the chance of some great sacrifice.

If she was ready for one it was only waiting for her, and in a moment I mentioned it. "Give up this crude purpose of seeing him. Go away without it. That will be far better."

She looked mystified; then she turned visibly pale. "Why, hasn't he any personal charm?" The girl was terrible and laughable in her bright directness.

"Ah, that dreadful word 'personal!'" I exclaimed; "we're dying of it, and you women bring it out with murderous effect. When you encounter a genius as fine as this idol of ours, let him off the dreary duty of being a personality as well. Know him only by what's best in him, and spare him for the same sweet sake."

My young lady continued to look at me in confusion and mistrust, and the result of her reflection on what I had just said was to make her suddenly break out: "Look here, sir—what's the matter with him?"

"The matter with him is that, if he doesn't look out, people will eat a great hole in his life."

She considered a moment. "He hasn't any disfigurement?"

"Nothing to speak of!"

"Do you mean that social engagements interfere with his occupations?"

"That but feebly expresses it."

"So that he can't give himself up to his beautiful imagination?"

"He's badgered, bothered, overwhelmed, on the pretext of being applauded. People expect him to give them his time, his golden time, who wouldn't themselves give five shillings for one of his books."

"Five? I'd give five thousand!"

"Give your sympathy—give your forbearance. Two-thirds of those who approach him only do it to advertise themselves."

"Why, it's too bad!" the girl exclaimed with the face of an angel. "It's the first time I was ever called crude!" she laughed.

I followed up my advantage. "There's a lady with him now who's a terrible complication, and who yet hasn't read, I am sure, ten pages that he ever wrote."

My visitor's wide eyes grew tenderer. "Then how does she talk——?"

"Without ceasing. I only mention her as a single case. Do you want to know how to show a superlative consideration? Simply avoid him."

"Avoid him?" she softly wailed.

"Don't force him to have to take account of you; admire him in silence, cultivate him at a distance and secretly appropriate his message. Do you want to know," I continued, warming to my idea,

“how to perform an act of homage really sublime?” Then as she hung on my words: “Succeed in never seeing him at all!”

“Never at all?” she pathetically gasped.

“The more you get into his writings the less you’ll want to; and you’ll be immensely sustained by the thought of the good you’re doing him.”

She looked at me without resentment or spite, and at the truth I had put before her with candour, credulity, pity. I was afterwards happy to remember that she must have recognised in my face the liveliness of my interest in herself. “I think I see what you mean.”

“Oh, I express it badly; but I should be delighted if you would let me come to see you—to explain it better.”

She made no response to this, and her thoughtful eyes fell on the big album, on which she presently laid her hands as if to take it away. “I did use to say out West that they might write a little less for autographs (to all the great poets, you know) and study the thoughts and style a little more.”

“What do they care for the thoughts and style? They didn’t even understand you. I’m not sure,” I added, “that I do myself, and I daresay that you by no means make me out.” She had got up to go, and though I wanted her to succeed in not seeing Neil Paraday I wanted her also, inconsequently, to remain in the house. I was at any rate far from desiring to hustle her off. As Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, upstairs, was still saving our friend in her own way,

I asked my young lady to let me briefly relate, in illustration of my point, the little incident of my having gone down into the country for a profane purpose and been converted on the spot to holiness. Sinking again into her chair to listen, she showed a deep interest in the anecdote. Then thinking it over gravely, she exclaimed with her odd intonation :

“Yes, but you do see him !” I had to admit that this was the case ; and I was not so prepared with an effective attenuation as I could have wished. She eased the situation off, however, by the charming quaintness with which she finally said : “ Well, I wouldn’t want him to be lonely !” This time she rose in earnest, but I persuaded her to let me keep the album to show to Mr. Paraday. I assured her I would bring it back to her myself. “ Well, you’ll find my address somewhere in it, on a paper !” she sighed resignedly, at the door.

VIII

I BLUSH to confess it, but I invited Mr. Paraday that very day to transcribe into the album one of his most characteristic passages. I told him how I had got rid of the strange girl who had brought it—her ominous name was Miss Hurter, and she lived at an hotel; quite agreeing with him moreover as to the wisdom of getting rid with equal promptitude of the book itself. This was why I carried it to Albemarle Street no later than on the morrow. I failed to find her at home, but she wrote to me and I went again: she wanted so much to hear more about Neil Paraday. I returned repeatedly, I may briefly declare, to supply her with this information. She had been immensely taken, the more she thought of it, with that idea of mine about the act of homage: it had ended by filling her with a generous rapture. She positively desired to do something sublime for him, though indeed I could see that, as this particular flight was difficult, she appreciated the fact that my visits kept her up. I had it on my conscience to keep her up; I neglected nothing that would contribute to it, and her conception of our cherished author's independence became at last as fine as his own conception. "Read him, read him," I con-

stantly repeated ; while, seeking him in his works, she represented herself as convinced that, according to my assurance, this was the system that had, as she expressed it, weaned her. We read him together when I could find time, and the generous creature's sacrifice was fed by our conversation. There were twenty selfish women, about whom I told her, who stirred her with a beautiful rage. Immediately after my first visit her sister, Mrs. Milsom, came over from Paris, and the two ladies began to present, as they called it, their letters. I thanked our stars that none had been presented to Mr. Paraday. They received invitations and dined out, and some of these occasions enabled Fanny Hurter to perform, for consistency's sake, touching feats of submission. Nothing indeed would now have induced her even to look at the object of her admiration. Once, hearing his name announced at a party, she instantly left the room by another door and then straightway quitted the house. At another time, when I was at the opera with them (Mrs. Milsom had invited me to their box) I attempted to point Mr. Paraday out to her in the stalls. On this she asked her sister to change places with her, and while that lady devoured the great man through a powerful glass, presented, all the rest of the evening, her inspired back to the house. To torment her tenderly I pressed the glass upon her, telling her how wonderfully near it brought our friend's handsome head. By way of answer she simply looked at me in charged silence, letting me see that tears

had gathered in her eyes. These tears, I may remark, produced an effect on me of which the end is not yet. There was a moment when I felt it my duty to mention them to Neil Paraday; but I was deterred by the reflection that there were questions more relevant to his happiness.

These questions indeed, by the end of the season, were reduced to a single one—the question of re-constituting, so far as might be possible, the conditions under which he had produced his best work. Such conditions could never all come back, for there was a new one that took up too much place; but some perhaps were not beyond recall. I wanted above all things to see him sit down to the subject of which, on my making his acquaintance, he had read me that admirable sketch. Something told me there was no security but in his doing so before the new factor, as we used to say at Mr. Pinhorn's, should render the problem incalculable. It only half reassured me that the sketch itself was so copious and so eloquent that even at the worst there would be the making of a small but complete book, a tiny volume which, for the faithful, might well become an object of adoration. There would even not be wanting critics to declare, I foresaw, that the plan was a thing to be more thankful for than the structure to have been reared on it. My impatience for the structure, none the less, grew and grew with the interruptions. He had, on coming up to town, begun to sit for his portrait to a young painter, Mr. Rumble, whose little game, as we also used to say

at Mr. Pinhorn's, was to be the first to perch on the shoulders of renown. Mr. Rumble's studio was a circus in which the man of the hour, and still more the woman, leaped through the hoops of his showy frames almost as electrically as they burst into telegrams and "specials." He pranced into the exhibitions on their back; he was the reporter on canvas, the Vandyke up to date, and there was one roaring year in which Mrs. Bounder and Miss Braby, Guy Walsingham and Dora Forbes proclaimed in chorus from the same pictured walls that no one had yet got ahead of him.

Paraday had been promptly caught and saddled, accepting with characteristic good-humour his confidential hint that to figure in his show was not so much a consequence as a cause of immortality. From Mrs. Wimbush to the last "representative" who called to ascertain his twelve favourite dishes, it was the same ingenuous assumption that he would rejoice in the repercussion. There were moments when I fancied I might have had more patience with them if they had not been so fatally benevolent. I hated, at all events, Mr. Rumble's picture, and had my bottled resentment ready when, later on, I found my distracted friend had been stuffed by Mrs. Wimbush into the mouth of another cannon. A young artist in whom she was intensely interested, and who had no connection with Mr. Rumble, was to show how far he could make him go. Poor Paraday, in return, was naturally to write something somewhere about the young artist. She played her

victims against each other with admirable ingenuity, and her establishment was a huge machine in which the tiniest and the biggest wheels went round to the same treadle. I had a scene with her in which I tried to express that the function of such a man was to exercise his genius—not to serve as a hoarding for pictorial posters. The people I was perhaps angriest with were the editors of magazines who had introduced what they called new features, so aware were they that the newest feature of all would be to make him grind their axes by contributing his views on vital topics and taking part in the periodical prattle about the future of fiction. I made sure that before I should have done with him there would scarcely be a current form of words left me to be sick of; but meanwhile I could make surer still of my animosity to bustling ladies for whom he drew the water that irrigated their social flowerbeds.

I had a battle with Mrs. Wimbush over the artist she protected, and another over the question of a certain week, at the end of July, that Mr. Paraday appeared to have contracted to spend with her in the country. I protested against this visit; I intimated that he was too unwell for hospitality without a *nuance*, for caresses without imagination; I begged he might rather take the time in some restorative way. A sultry air of promises, of ponderous parties, hung over his August, and he would greatly profit by the interval of rest. He had not told me he was ill again—that he had had a warning; but I had

not needed this, and I found his reticence his worst symptom. The only thing he said to me was that he believed a comfortable attack of something or other would set him up: it would put out of the question everything but the exemptions he prized. I am afraid I shall have presented him as a martyr in a very small cause if I fail to explain that he surrendered himself much more liberally than I surrendered him. He filled his lungs, for the most part, with the comedy of his queer fate: the tragedy was in the spectacles through which I chose to look. He was conscious of inconvenience, and above all of a great renouncement; but how could he have heard a mere dirge in the bells of his accession? The sagacity and the jealousy were mine, and his the impressions and the anecdotes. Of course, as regards Mrs. Wimbush, I was worsted in my encounters, for was not the state of his health the very reason for his coming to her at Prestidge? Wasn't it precisely at Prestidge that he was to be coddled, and wasn't the dear Princess coming to help her to coddle him? The dear Princess, now on a visit to England, was of a famous foreign house, and, in her gilded cage, with her retinue of keepers and feeders, was the most expensive specimen in the good lady's collection. I don't think her august presence had had to do with Paraday's consenting to go, but it is not impossible that he had operated as a bait to the illustrious stranger. The party had been made up for him, Mrs. Wimbush averred, and every one was counting on it, the dear Princess

most of all. If he was well enough he was to read them something absolutely fresh, and it was on that particular prospect the Princess had set her heart. She was so fond of genius, in *any* walk of life, and she was so used to it, and understood it so well; she was the greatest of Mr. Paraday's admirers, she devoured everything he wrote. And then he read like an angel. Mrs. Wimbush reminded me that he had again and again given her, Mrs. Wimbush, the privilege of listening to him.

I looked at her a moment. "What has he read to you?" I crudely inquired.

For a moment too she met my eyes, and for the fraction of a moment she hesitated and coloured. "Oh, all sorts of things!"

I wondered whether this were an imperfect recollection or only a perfect fib, and she quite understood my unuttered comment on her perception of such things. But if she could forget Neil Paraday's beauties she could of course forget my rudeness, and three days later she invited me, by telegraph, to join the party at Prestidge. This time she might indeed have had a story about what I had given up to be near the master. I addressed from that fine residence several communications to a young lady in London, a young lady whom, I confess, I quitted with reluctance and whom the reminder of what she herself could give up was required to make me quit at all. It adds to the gratitude I owe her on other grounds that she kindly allows me to transcribe from my letters a few of the passages in which that hateful sojourn is candidly commemorated.

IX

“I SUPPOSE I ought to enjoy the joke of what’s going on here,” I wrote, “but somehow it doesn’t amuse me. Pessimism on the contrary possesses me and cynicism solicits. I positively feel my own flesh sore from the brass nails in Neil Paraday’s social harness. The house is full of people who like him, as they mention, awfully, and with whom his talent for talking nonsense has prodigious success. I delight in his nonsense myself; why is it therefore that I grudge these happy folk their artless satisfaction? Mystery of the human heart—abyss of the critical spirit! Mrs. Wimbush thinks she can answer that question, and as my want of gaiety has at last worn out her patience she has given me a glimpse of her shrewd guess. I am made restless by the selfishness of the insincere friend—I want to monopolise Paraday in order that he may push me on. To be intimate with him is a feather in my cap; it gives me an importance that I couldn’t naturally pretend to, and I seek to deprive him of social refreshment because I fear that meeting more disinterested people may enlighten him as to my real motive. All the disinterested people here are his particular admirers and have been carefully selected as such.

There is supposed to be a copy of his last book in the house, and in the hall I come upon ladies, in attitudes, bending gracefully over the first volume. I discreetly avert my eyes, and when I next look round the precarious joy has been superseded by the book of life. There is a sociable circle or a confidential couple, and the relinquished volume lies open on its face, as if it had been dropped under extreme coercion. Somebody else presently finds it and transfers it, with its air of momentary desolation, to another piece of furniture. Every one is asking every one about it all day, and every one is telling every one where they put it last. I'm sure it's rather smudgy about the twentieth page. I have a strong impression too that the second volume is lost—has been packed in the bag of some departing guest; and yet everybody has the impression that somebody else has read to the end. You see therefore that the beautiful book plays a great part in our conversation. Why should I take the occasion of such distinguished honours to say that I begin to see deeper into Gustave Flaubert's doleful refrain about the hatred of literature? I refer you again to the perverse constitution of man.

“The Princess is a massive lady with the organisation of an athlete and the confusion of tongues of a *valet de place*. She contrives to commit herself extraordinarily little in a great many languages, and is entertained and conversed with in detachments and relays, like an institution which goes on from generation to generation or a big building contracted

for under a forfeit. She can't have a personal taste any more than, when her husband succeeds, she can have a personal crown, and her opinion on any matter is rusty and heavy and plain—made, in the night of ages, to last and be transmitted. I feel as if I ought to pay some one a fee for my glimpse of it. She has been told everything in the world and has never perceived anything, and the echoes of her education respond awfully to the rash footfall—I mean the casual remark—in the cold Valhalla of her memory. Mrs. Wimbush delights in her wit and says there is nothing so charming as to hear Mr. Paraday draw it out. He is perpetually detailed for this job, and he tells me it has a peculiarly exhausting effect. Every one is beginning—at the end of two days—to sidle obsequiously away from her, and Mrs. Wimbush pushes him again and again into the breach. None of the uses I have yet seen him put to irritate me quite so much. He looks very fagged, and has at last confessed to me that his condition makes him uneasy—has even promised me that he will go straight home instead of returning to his final engagements in town. Last night I had some talk with him about going to-day, cutting his visit short; so sure am I that he will be better as soon as he is shut up in his lighthouse. He told me that this is what he would like to do; reminding me, however, that the first lesson of his greatness has been precisely that he can't do what he likes. Mrs. Wimbush would never forgive him if he should leave her before the Princess has received the last hand. When I say

that a violent rupture with our hostess would be the best thing in the world for him he gives me to understand that if his reason assents to the proposition his courage hangs wofully back. He makes no secret of being mortally afraid of her, and when I ask what harm she can do him that she hasn't already done he simply repeats: 'I'm afraid, I'm afraid! Don't inquire too closely,' he said last night; 'only believe that I feel a sort of terror. It's strange, when she's so kind! At any rate, I would as soon overturn that piece of priceless Sèvres as tell her that I must go before my date.' It sounds dreadfully weak, but he has some reason, and he pays for his imagination, which puts him (I should hate it) in the place of others and makes him feel, even against himself, their feelings, their appetites, their motives. It's indeed inveterately against himself that he makes his imagination act. What a pity he has such a lot of it! He's too beastly intelligent. Besides, the famous reading is still to come off, and it has been postponed a day, to allow Guy Walsingham to arrive. It appears that this eminent lady is staying at a house a few miles off, which means of course that Mrs. Wimbush has forcibly annexed her. She's to come over in a day or two—Mrs. Wimbush wants her to hear Mr. Paraday.

“To-day's wet and cold, and several of the company, at the invitation of the Duke, have driven over to luncheon at Bigwood. I saw poor Paraday wedge himself, by command, into the little supplementary seat of a brougham in which the Princess

and our hostess were already ensconced. If the front glass isn't open on his dear old back perhaps he'll survive. Bigwood, I believe, is very grand and frigid, all marble and precedence, and I wish him well out of the adventure. I can't tell you how much more and more *your* attitude to him, in the midst of all this, shines out by contrast. I never willingly talk to these people about him, but see what a comfort I find it to scribble to you! I appreciate it—it keeps me warm; there are no fires in the house. Mrs. Wimbush goes by the calendar, the temperature goes by the weather, the weather goes by God knows what, and the Princess is easily heated. I have nothing but my acrimony to warm me, and have been out under an umbrella to restore my circulation. Coming in an hour ago, I found Lady Augusta Minch rummaging about the hall. When I asked her what she was looking for she said she had mislaid something that Mr. Paraday had lent her. I ascertained in a moment that the article in question is a manuscript, and I have a foreboding that it's the noble morsel he read me six weeks ago. When I expressed my surprise that he should have bandied about anything so precious (I happen to know it's his only copy—in the most beautiful hand in all the world) Lady Augusta confessed to me that she had not had it from himself, but from Mrs. Wimbush, who had wished to give her a glimpse of it as a salve for her not being able to stay and hear it read.

“‘Is that the piece he's to read,' I asked, 'when Guy Walsingham arrives?’”

“‘It’s not for Guy Walsingham they’re waiting now, it’s for Dora Forbes,’ Lady Augusta said. ‘She’s coming, I believe, early to-morrow. Meanwhile Mrs. Wimbush has found out about *him*, and is actively wiring to him. She says he also must hear him.’”

“‘You bewilder me a little,’ I replied; ‘in the age we live in one gets lost among the genders and the pronouns. The clear thing is that Mrs. Wimbush doesn’t guard such a treasure as jealously as she might.’

“‘Poor dear, she has the Princess to guard! Mr. Paraday lent her the manuscript to look over.’

“‘Did she speak as if it were the morning paper?’

“‘Lady Augusta stared—my irony was lost upon her. ‘She didn’t have time, so she gave me a chance first; because unfortunately I go to-morrow to Bigwood.’

“‘And your chance has only proved a chance to lose it?’

“‘I haven’t lost it. I remember now—it was very stupid of me to have forgotten. I told my maid to give it to Lord Dorimont—or at least to his man.’

“‘And Lord Dorimont went away directly after luncheon.’

“‘Of course he gave it back to my maid—or else his man did,’ said Lady Augusta. ‘I daresay it’s all right.’

“‘The conscience of these people is like a summer sea. They haven’t time to ‘look over’ a priceless

composition; they've only time to kick it about the house. I suggested that the 'man,' fired with a noble emulation, had perhaps kept the work for his own perusal; and her ladyship wanted to know whether, if the thing didn't turn up again in time for the session appointed by our hostess, the author wouldn't have something else to read that would do just as well. Their questions are too delightful! I declared to Lady Augusta briefly that nothing in the world can ever do so well as the thing that does best; and at this she looked a little confused and scared. But I added that if the manuscript had gone astray our little circle would have the less of an effort of attention to make. The piece in question was very long—it would keep them three hours.

“‘Three hours! Oh, the Princess will get up!’ said Lady Augusta.

“‘I thought she was Mr. Paraday's greatest admirer.’

“‘I daresay she is—she's so awfully clever. But what's the use of being a Princess——’

“‘If you can't dissemble your love?’ I asked, as Lady Augusta was vague. She said, at any rate, that she would question her maid; and I am hoping that when I go down to dinner I shall find the manuscript has been recovered.”

X

"It has not been recovered," I wrote early the next day, "and I am moreover much troubled about our friend. He came back from Bigwood with a chill and, being allowed to have a fire in his room, lay down awhile before dinner. I tried to send him to bed, and indeed thought I had put him in the way of it; but after I had gone to dress Mrs. Wimbush came up to see him, with the inevitable result that when I returned I found him under arms and flushed and feverish, though decorated with the rare flower she had brought him for his button-hole. He came down to dinner, but Lady Augusta Minch was very shy of him. To-day he's in great pain, and the advent of *ces dames*—I mean of Guy Walsingham and Dora Forbes—doesn't at all console me. It does Mrs. Wimbush however, for she has consented to his remaining in bed, so that he may be all right to-morrow for the listening circle. Guy Walsingham is already on the scene, and the doctor, for Paraday, also arrived early. I haven't yet seen the author of 'Obsessions,' but of course I've had a moment by myself with the doctor. I tried to get him to say that our invalid must go straight home—I mean to-morrow or next day; but he quite refuses to talk

about the future. Absolute quiet and warmth and the regular administration of an important remedy are the points he mainly insists on. He returns this afternoon, and I'm to go back to see the patient at one o'clock, when he next takes his medicine. It consoles me a little that he certainly won't be able to read—an exertion he was already more than unfit for. Lady Augusta went off after breakfast, assuring me that her first care would be to follow up the lost manuscript. I can see she thinks me a shocking busybody and doesn't understand my alarm, but she will do what she can, for she's a good-natured woman. 'So are they all honourable men.' That was precisely what made her give the thing to Lord Dorimont and made Lord Dorimont bag it. What use *he* has for it God only knows. I have the worst forebodings, but somehow I'm strangely without passion—desperately calm. As I consider the unconscious, the well-meaning ravages of our appreciative circle I bow my head in submission to some great natural, some universal accident; I'm rendered almost indifferent, in fact quite gay (ha-ha!) by the sense of immitigable fate. Lady Augusta promises me to trace the precious object and let me have it, through the post, by the time Paraday is well enough to play his part with it. The last evidence is that her maid did give it to his lordship's valet. One would think it was some thrilling number of *The Family Budget*. Mrs. Wimbush, who is aware of the accident, is much less agitated by it than she would doubtless be were she

not for the hour inevitably engrossed with Guy Walsingham."

Later in the day I informed my correspondent, for whom indeed I kept a sort of diary of the situation, that I had made the acquaintance of this celebrity and that she was a pretty little girl who wore her hair in what used to be called a crop. She looked so juvenile and so innocent that if, as Mr. Morrow had announced, she was resigned to the larger latitude, her superiority to prejudice must have come to her early. I spent most of the day hovering about Neil Paraday's room, but it was communicated to me from below that Guy Walsingham, at Prestidge, was a success. Towards evening I became conscious somehow that her superiority was contagious, and by the time the company separated for the night I was sure that the larger latitude had been generally accepted. I thought of Dora Forbes and felt that he had no time to lose. Before dinner I received a telegram from Lady Augusta Minch. "Lord Dorimont thinks he must have left bundle in train—inquire." How could I inquire—if I was to take the word as command? I was too worried and now too alarmed about Neil Paraday. The doctor came back, and it was an immense satisfaction to me to feel that he was wise and interested. He was proud of being called to so distinguished a patient, but he admitted to me that night that my friend was gravely ill. It was really a relapse, a recrudescence of his old malady. There could be no question of moving him: we must at

any rate see first, on the spot, what turn his condition would take. Meanwhile, on the morrow, he was to have a nurse. On the morrow the dear man was easier, and my spirits rose to such cheerfulness that I could almost laugh over Lady Augusta's second telegram: "Lord Dorimont's servant been to station—nothing found. Push inquiries." I did laugh, I am sure, as I remembered this to be the mystic scroll I had scarcely allowed poor Mr. Morrow to point his umbrella at. Fool that I had been: the thirty-seven influential journals wouldn't have destroyed it, they would only have printed it. Of course I said nothing to Paraday.

When the nurse arrived she turned me out of the room, on which I went downstairs. I should premise that at breakfast the news that our brilliant friend was doing well excited universal complacency, and the Princess graciously remarked that he was only to be commiserated for missing the society of Miss Collop. Mrs. Wimbush, whose social gift never shone brighter than in the dry decorum with which she accepted this fizzle in her fireworks, mentioned to me that Guy Walsingham had made a very favourable impression on her Imperial Highness. Indeed I think every one did so, and that, like the money-market or the national honour, her Imperial Highness was constitutionally sensitive. There was a certain gladness, a perceptible bustle in the air, however, which I thought slightly anomalous in a house where a great author lay critically ill. "*Le roy est mort—vive le roy:*" I was reminded that

another great author had already stepped into his shoes. When I came down again after the nurse had taken possession I found a strange gentleman hanging about the hall and pacing to and fro by the closed door of the drawing-room. This personage was florid and bald ; he had a big red moustache and wore showy knickerbockers—characteristics all that fitted into my conception of the identity of Dora Forbes. In a moment I saw what had happened : the author of “The Other Way Round” had just alighted at the portals of Prestidge, but had suffered a scruple to restrain him from penetrating further. I recognised his scruple when, pausing to listen at his gesture of caution, I heard a shrill voice lifted in a sort of rhythmic, uncanny chant. The famous reading had begun, only it was the author of “Obsessions” who now furnished the sacrifice. The new visitor whispered to me that he judged something was going on that he oughtn’t to interrupt.

“Miss Collop arrived last night,” I smiled, “and the Princess has a thirst for the *inédit*.”

Dora Forbes lifted his bushy brows. “Miss Collop?”

“Guy Walsingham, your distinguished *confrère*—or shall I say your formidable rival?”

“Oh!” growled Dora Forbes. Then he added : “Shall I spoil it if I go in?”

“I should think nothing could spoil it!” I ambiguously laughed.

Dora Forbes evidently felt the dilemma ; he gave an irritated crook to his moustache. “*Shall I go in?*” he presently asked.

We looked at each other hard a moment ; then I expressed something bitter that was in me, expressed it in an infernal "Do!" After this I got out into the air, but not so fast as not to hear, when the door of the drawing-room opened, the disconcerted drop of Miss Collop's public manner : she must have been in the midst of the larger latitude. Producing with extreme rapidity, Guy Walsingham has just published a work in which amiable people who are not initiated have been pained to see the genius of a sister-novelist held up to unmistakable ridicule ; so fresh an exhibition does it seem to them of the dreadful way men have always treated women. Dora Forbes, it is true, at the present hour, is immensely pushed by Mrs. Wimbush, and has sat for his portrait to the young artists she protects, sat for it not only in oils but in monumental alabaster.

What happened at Prestidge later in the day is of course contemporary history. If the interruption I had whimsically sanctioned was almost a scandal, what is to be said of that general dispersal of the company which, under the doctor's rule, began to take place in the evening ? His rule was soothing to behold, small comfort as I was to have at the end. He decreed in the interest of his patient an absolutely soundless house and a consequent break-up of the party. Little country practitioner as he was, he literally packed off the Princess. She departed as promptly as if a revolution had broken out, and Guy Walsingham emigrated with her. I was kindly

permitted to remain, and this was not denied even to Mrs. Wimbush. The privilege was withheld indeed from Dora Forbes; so Mrs. Wimbush kept her latest capture temporarily concealed. This was so little, however, her usual way of dealing with her eminent friends that a couple of days of it exhausted her patience, and she went up to town with him in great publicity. The sudden turn for the worse her afflicted guest had, after a brief improvement, taken on the third night raised an obstacle to her seeing him before her retreat; a fortunate circumstance doubtless, for she was fundamentally disappointed in him. This was not the kind of performance for which she had invited him to Prestidge, or invited the Princess. Let me hasten to add that none of the generous acts which have characterised her patronage of intellectual and other merit have done so much for her reputation as her lending Neil Paraday the most beautiful of her numerous homes to die in. He took advantage to the utmost of the singular favour. Day by day I saw him sink, and I roamed alone about the empty terraces and gardens. His wife never came near him, but I scarcely noticed it: as I paced there with rage in my heart I was too full of another wrong. In the event of his death it would fall to me perhaps to bring out in some charming form, with notes, with the tenderest editorial care, that precious heritage of his written project. But where *was* that precious heritage, and were both the author and the book to have been snatched from us? Lady Augusta wrote me that she had done all

she could and that poor Lord Dorimont, who had really been worried to death, was extremely sorry. I couldn't have the matter out with Mrs. Wimbush, for I didn't want to be taunted by her with desiring to aggrandise myself by a public connection with Mr. Paraday's sweepings. She had signified her willingness to meet the expense of all advertising, as indeed she was always ready to do. The last night of the horrible series, the night before he died, I put my ear closer to his pillow.

"That thing I read you that morning, you know."

"In your garden that dreadful day? Yes!"

"Won't it do as it is?"

"It would have been a glorious book."

"It *is* a glorious book," Neil Paraday murmured.

"Print it as it stands—beautifully."

"Beautifully!" I passionately promised.

It may be imagined whether, now that he is gone, the promise seems to me less sacred. I am convinced that if such pages had appeared in his lifetime the Abbey would hold him to-day. I have kept the advertising in my own hands, but the manuscript has not been recovered. It's impossible, and at any rate intolerable, to suppose it can have been wantonly destroyed. Perhaps some hazard of a blind hand, some brutal ignorance has lighted kitchen-fires with it. Every stupid and hideous accident haunts my meditations. My undiscourageable search for the lost treasure would make a long chapter. Fortunately I have a devoted asso-

ciate in the person of a young lady who has every day a fresh indignation and a fresh idea, and who maintains with intensity that the prize will still turn up. Sometimes I believe her, but I have quite ceased to believe myself. The only thing for us, at all events, is to go on seeking and hoping together; and we should be closely united by this firm tie even were we not at present by another.

THE COXON FUND

I

“THEY’VE got him for life !” I said to myself that evening on my way back to the station ; but later, alone in the compartment (from Wimbledon to Waterloo, before the glory of the District Railway) I amended this declaration in the light of the sense that my friends would probably after all not enjoy a monopoly of Mr. Saltram. I won’t pretend to have taken his vast measure on that first occasion, but I think I had achieved a glimpse of what the privilege of his acquaintance might mean for many persons in the way of charges accepted. He had been a great experience, and it was this perhaps that had put me into the frame of foreseeing how we should all, sooner or later, have the honour of dealing with him as a whole. Whatever impression I then received of the amount of this total, I had a full enough vision of the patience of the Mulvilles. He was staying with them all the winter : Adelaide dropped it in a tone which drew the sting from the temporary. These excellent people might indeed have been content to give the circle of hospitality a diameter of six months ; but if they didn’t say that he was staying for the summer as well it was only because this was more than they ventured to

hope. I remember that at dinner that evening he wore slippers, new and predominantly purple, of some queer carpet-stuff; but the Mulvilles were still in the stage of supposing that he might be snatched from them by higher bidders. At a later time they grew, poor dears, to fear no snatching; but theirs was a fidelity which needed no help from competition to make them proud. Wonderful indeed as, when all was said, you inevitably pronounced Frank Saltram, it was not to be overlooked that the Kent Mulvilles were in their way still more extraordinary: as striking an instance as could easily be encountered of the familiar truth that remarkable men find remarkable conveniences.

They had sent for me from Wimbledon to come out and dine, and there had been an implication in Adelaide's note (judged by her notes alone she might have been thought silly) that it was a case in which something momentous was to be determined or done. I had never known them not be in a "state" about somebody, and I daresay I tried to be droll on this point in accepting their invitation. On finding myself in the presence of their latest revelation I had not at first felt ^{irreverence} droop—and, thank heaven, I have never been absolutely deprived of that alternative in Mr. Saltram's company. I saw, however (I hasten to declare it), that compared to this specimen their other phoenixes had been birds of inconsiderable feather, and I afterwards took credit to myself for not having even in primal bewilderments made a mistake about the essence of the man

He had an incomparable gift ; I never was blind to it—it dazzles me at present. It dazzles me perhaps even more in remembrance than in fact, for I'm not unaware that for a subject so magnificent the imagination goes to some expense, inserting a jewel here and there or giving a twist to a plume. How the art of portraiture would rejoice in this figure if the art of portraiture had only the canvas ! Nature, in truth, had largely rounded it, and if memory, hovering about it, sometimes holds her breath, this is because the voice that comes back was really golden.

Though the great man was an inmate and didn't dress, he kept dinner on this occasion waiting, and the first words he uttered on coming into the room were a triumphant announcement to Mulville that he had found out something. Not catching the allusion and gaping doubtless a little at his face, I privately asked Adelaide what he had found out. I shall never forget the look she gave me as she replied : " Everything ! " She really believed it. At that moment, at any rate, he had found out that the mercy of the Mulvilles was infinite. He had previously of course discovered, as I had myself for that matter, that their dinners were *soignés*. Let me not indeed, in saying this, neglect to declare that I shall falsify my counterfeit if I seem to hint that there was in his nature any ounce of calculation. He took whatever came, but he never plotted for it, and no man who was so much of an absorbent can ever have been so little of a parasite. He had a system of the universe, but he had no system of sponging—that

was quite hand-to-mouth. He had fine, gross, easy senses, but it was not his good-natured appetite that wrought confusion. If he had loved us for our dinners we could have paid with our dinners, and it would have been a great economy of finer matter. I make free in these connections with the plural possessive because if I was never able to do what the Mulvilles did, and people with still bigger houses and simpler charities, I met, first and last, every demand of reflection, of emotion—particularly perhaps those of gratitude and of resentment. No one, I think, paid the tribute of giving him up so often, and if it's rendering honour to borrow wisdom I have a right to talk of my sacrifices. He yielded lessons as the sea yields fish—I lived for a while on this diet. Sometimes it almost appeared to me that his massive, monstrous failure—if failure after all it was—had been intended for my private recreation. He fairly pampered my curiosity; but the history of that experience would take me too far. This is not the large canvas I just now spoke of, and I would not have approached him with my present hand had it been a question of all the features. Frank Saltram's features, for artistic purposes, are verily the anecdotes that are to be gathered. Their name is legion, and this is only one, of which the interest is that it concerns even more closely several other persons. Such episodes, as one looks back, are the little dramas that made up the innumerable facets of the big drama—which is yet to be reported.

II

It is furthermore remarkable that though the two stories are distinct—my own, as it were, and this other—they equally began, in a manner, the first night of my acquaintance with Frank Saltram, the night I came back from Wimbledon so agitated with a new sense of life that, in London, for the very thrill of it, I could only walk home. Walking and swinging my stick, I overtook, at Buckingham Gate, George Gravener, and George Gravener's story may be said to have begun with my making him, as our paths lay together, come home with me for a talk. I duly remember, let me parenthesise, that it was still more that of another person, and also that several years were to elapse before it was to extend to a second chapter. I had much to say to him, none the less, about my visit to the Mulvilles, whom he more indifferently knew, and I was at any rate so amusing that for long afterwards he never encountered me without asking for news of the old man of the sea. I hadn't said Mr. Saltram was old, and it was to be seen that he was of an age to outweather George Gravener. I had at that time a lodging in Ebury Street, and Gravener was staying at his brother's empty house

in Eaton Square. At Cambridge, five years before, even in our devastating set, his intellectual power had seemed to me almost awful. Some one had once asked me privately, with blanched cheeks, what it was then that after all such a mind as that left standing. "It leaves itself!" I could recollect devoutly replying. I could smile at present at this reminiscence, for even before we got to Ebury Street I was struck with the fact that, save in the sense of being well set up on his legs, George Gravener had actually ceased to tower. The universe he laid low had somehow bloomed again—the usual eminences were visible. I wondered whether he had lost his humour, or only, dreadful thought, had never had any—not even when I had fancied him most Aristophanesque. What was the need of appealing to laughter, however, I could enviously inquire, where you might appeal so confidently to measurement? Mr. Saltram's queer figure, his thick nose and hanging lip, were fresh to me: in the light of my old friend's fine cold symmetry they presented mere success in amusing as the refuge of conscious ugliness. Already, at hungry twenty-six, Gravener looked as blank and parliamentary as if he were fifty and popular. In my scrap of a residence (he had a worldling's eye for its futile conveniencies, but never a comrade's joke) I sounded Frank Saltram in his ears; a circumstance I mention in order to note that even then I was surprised at his impatience of my enlivenment. As he had never before heard of

the personage, it took indeed the form of impatience of the preposterous Mulvilles, his relation to whom, like mine, had had its origin in an early, a childish intimacy with the young Adelaide, the fruit of multiplied ties in the previous generation. When she married Kent Mulville, who was older than Gravener and I and much more amiable, I gained a friend, but Gravener practically lost one. We were affected in different ways by the form taken by what he called their deplorable social action—the form (the term was also his) of nasty second-rate gush. I may have held in my *for intérieur* that the good people at Wimbledon were beautiful fools, but when he sniffed at them I couldn't help taking the opposite line, for I already felt that even should we happen to agree it would always be for reasons that differed. It came home to me that he was admirably British as, without so much as a sociable sneer at my bookbinder, he turned away from the serried rows of my little French library.

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

“Clear 'enough' is just what it isn't,” I replied; “if it only were!” That ejaculation on my part must have been the beginning of what was to be later a long ache for final frivolous rest. Gravener was profound enough to remark after a moment that in the first place he couldn't be anything but a Dissenter, and when I answered that the very note of his fascination was his extraordinary speculative

breadth, my friend retorted that there was no cad like your cultivated cad and that I might depend upon discovering (since I had had the levity not already to have inquired) that my shining light proceeded, a generation back, from a Methodist cheesemonger. I confess I was struck with his insistence, and I said, after reflection: "It may be—I admit it may be; but why on earth are you so sure?"—asking the question mainly to lay him the trap of saying that it was because the poor man didn't dress for dinner. He took an instant to circumvent my trap and come blandly out the other side.

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

"A real gentleman, my dear fellow—that's so soon said!"

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

"I might feel injured," I answered, "if I didn't reflect that they don't rave about *me*."

"Don't be too sure! I'll grant that he's a gentle-

man," Gravener presently added, "if you'll admit that he's a scamp."

"I don't know which to admire most, your logic or your benevolence."

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

"I think they were struck with something he had published."

"I can fancy the dreary thing!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why, on what I began by boring you with—his extraordinary mind."

"As exhibited in his writings?"

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

"And what is it all about?"

"My dear fellow, don't ask me! About everything!" I pursued, reminding myself of poor Adelaide. "About his ideas of things," I then more charitably added. "You must have heard him to know what I mean—it's unlike anything that ever *was* heard." I coloured, I admit, I overcharged a little, for such a picture was an anticipation of Saltram's later development and still more of my fuller acquaintance with him. However, I really expressed, a little lyrically perhaps, my actual imagination of him when I proceeded to declare that, in a cloud of tradition, of legend, he might very well go down to posterity as the greatest of all great talkers. Before we parted George Gravener demanded why such a row should be made about a chatterbox the more and why he should be pampered and pensioned. The greater the wind-bag the greater the calamity. Out of proportion to everything else on earth had come to be this wagging of the tongue. We were drenched with talk—our wretched age was dying of it. I differed from him here sincerely, only going so far as to concede, and

gladly, that we were drenched with sound. It was not however the mere speakers who were killing us—it was the mere stammerers. Fine talk was as rare as it was refreshing—the gift of the gods themselves, the one starry spangle on the ragged cloak of humanity. How many men were there who rose to this privilege, of how many masters of conversation could he boast the acquaintance? Dying of talk?—why, we were dying of the lack of it! Bad writing wasn't talk, as many people seemed to think, and even good wasn't always to be compared to it. From the best talk indeed the best writing had something to learn. I fancifully added that we too should peradventure be gilded by the legend, should be pointed at for having listened, for having actually heard. Gravener, who had glanced at his watch and discovered it was midnight, found to all this a response beautifully characteristic of him.

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

pleasantry so far failed to mollify him that he promptly added that to the rule he had just enunciated there was absolutely no exception.

“None whatever?”

“None whatever.”

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

III

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

mother) and one large one. By the time the Saltrams, of different sizes, were all maintained, we had pretty well poured out the oil that might have lubricated the machinery for enabling the most original of men to appear to maintain them.

It was I, the other time, who had been forced into the breach, standing up there for an odious lamplit moment to explain to half a dozen thin benches, where the earnest brows were virtuously void of anything so cynical as a suspicion, that we couldn't put so much as a finger on Mr. Saltram. There was nothing to plead but that our scouts had been out from the early hours and that we were afraid that on one of his walks abroad—he took one, for meditation, whenever he was to address such a company—some accident had disabled or delayed him. The meditative walks were a fiction, for he never, that any one could discover, prepared anything but a magnificent prospectus; so that his circulars and programmes, of which I possess an almost complete collection, are the solemn ghosts of generations never born. I put the case, as it seemed to me, at the best; but I admit I had been angry, and Kent Mulville was shocked at my want of public optimism. This time therefore I left the excuses to his more practised patience, only relieving myself in response to a direct appeal from a young lady next whom, in the hall, I found myself sitting. My position was an accident, but if it had been calculated the reason would scarcely have eluded an observer of the fact that no one else in the room had an approach to

an appearance. Our philosopher's "tail" was deplorably limp. This visitor was the only person who looked at her ease, who had come a little in the spirit of adventure. She seemed to carry amusement in her handsome young head, and her presence quite gave me the sense of a sudden extension of Saltram's sphere of influence. He was doing better than we hoped, and he had chosen such an occasion, of all occasions, to succumb to heaven knew which of his infirmities. The young lady produced an impression of auburn hair and black velvet, and had on her other hand a companion of obscurer type, presumably a waiting-maid. She herself might perhaps have been a foreign countess, and before she spoke to me I had beguiled our sorry interval by thinking that she brought vaguely back the first page of some novel of Madame Sand. It didn't make her more fathomable to perceive in a few minutes that she could only be an American; it simply engendered depressing reflections as to the possible check to contributions from Boston. She asked me if, as a person apparently more initiated, I would recommend further waiting, and I replied that if she considered I was on my honour I would privately deprecate it. Perhaps she didn't; at any rate something passed between us that led us to talk until she became aware that we were almost the only people left. I presently discovered that she knew Mrs. Saltram, and this explained in a manner the miracle. The brotherhood of the friends of the husband was as nothing to the brotherhood, or perhaps I should say

the sisterhood, of the friends of the wife. Like the Kent Mulvilles I belonged to both fraternities, and even better than they I think I had sounded the abyss of Mrs. Saltram's wrongs. She bored me to extinction, and I knew but too well how she had bored her husband ; but she had those who stood by her, the most efficient of whom were indeed the handful of poor Saltram's backers. They did her liberal justice, whereas her mere patrons and partisans had nothing but hatred for our philosopher. I am bound to say it was we, however—we of both camps, as it were—who had always done most for her.

I thought my young lady looked rich—I scarcely knew why ; and I hoped she had put her hand in her pocket. But I soon discovered that she was not a fine fanatic—she was only a generous, irresponsible inquirer. She had come to England to see her aunt, and it was at her aunt's she had met the dreary lady we had all so much on our mind. I saw she would help to pass the time when she observed that it was a pity this lady wasn't intrinsically more interesting. That was refreshing, for it was an article of faith in Mrs. Saltram's circle—at least among those who scorned to know her horrid husband—that she was attractive on her merits. She was really a very common person, as Saltram himself would have been if he hadn't been a prodigy. The question of vulgarity had no application to him, but it was a measure that his wife kept challenging you to apply. I hasten to add that the consequences

of your doing so were no sufficient reason for his having left her to starve. "He doesn't seem to have much force of character," said my young lady; at which I laughed out so loud that my departing friends looked back at me over their shoulders as if I were making a joke of their discomfiture. My joke probably cost Saltram a subscription or two, but it helped me on with my interlocutress. "She says he drinks like a fish," she sociably continued, "and yet she admits that his mind is wonderfully clear." It was amusing to converse with a pretty girl who could talk of the clearness of Saltram's mind. I expected her next to say that she had been assured he was awfully clever. I tried to tell her—I had it almost on my conscience—what was the proper way to regard him; an effort attended perhaps more than ever on this occasion with the usual effect of my feeling that I wasn't after all very sure of it. She had come to-night out of high curiosity—she had wanted to find out this proper way for herself. She had read some of his papers and hadn't understood them; but it was at home, at her aunt's, that her curiosity had been kindled—kindled mainly by his wife's remarkable stories of his want of virtue. "I suppose they ought to have kept me away," my companion dropped, "and I suppose they would have done so if I hadn't somehow got an idea that he's fascinating. In fact Mrs. Saltram herself says he is."

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

My young lady raised her fine eyebrows. "Do you mean in his bad faith?"

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

"The humiliation?"

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

"You don't look humiliated a bit, and if you did I should let you off, disappointed as I am; for the mysterious quality you speak of is just the quality I came to see."

"Oh, you can't 'see' it!" I exclaimed.

"How then do you get at it?"

"You don't! You mustn't suppose he's good-looking," I added.

"Why, his wife says he's lovely!"

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

"Yes, his great eyes," said my young lady attentively. She had evidently heard all about his great

eyes—the *beaux yeux* for which alone we had really done it all.

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

My companion appeared to reflect on this, and after a moment she inquired: “Do you call him a real gentleman?”

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

My promptitude surprised her a little, but I quickly felt that it was not to Gravener I was now talking. “Do you say that because he’s—what do you call it in England?—of humble extraction?”

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

“But isn’t it an awful drawback?”

“Awful—quite awful.”

“I mean isn’t it positively fatal?”

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

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

“Your questions are formidable, but I’m glad you put them. I was thinking of his noble intellect.

His vices, as you say, have been much exaggerated : they consist mainly after all in one comprehensive defect."

"A want of will?"

"A want of dignity."

"He doesn't recognise his obligations?"

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

"And how much do they come to?"

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

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

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

“And what would his talk just have been?”

I was conscious of some ineffectiveness as well perhaps as of a little impatience as I replied: “The exhibition of a splendid intellect.” My young lady looked not quite satisfied at this, but as I was not prepared for another question I hastily pursued: “The sight of a great suspended, swinging crystal, huge, lucid, lustrous, a block of light, flashing back every impression of life and every possibility of thought!” This gave her something to think about till we had passed out to the dusky porch of the hall, in front of which the lamps of a quiet brougham were almost the only thing Saltram’s treachery hadn’t extinguished. I went with her to the door of her carriage, out of which she leaned a moment after she had thanked me and taken her seat. Her smile even in the darkness was pretty. “I do want to see that crystal!”

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

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

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

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

IV

MRS. SALTRAM made a great affair of her right to be informed where her husband had been the second evening he failed to meet his audience. She came to me to ascertain, but I couldn't satisfy her, for in spite of my ingenuity I remained in ignorance. It was not till much later that I found this had not been the case with Kent Mulville, whose hope for the best never twirled his thumbs more placidly than when he happened to know the worst. He had known it on the occasion I speak of—that is immediately after. He was impenetrable then, but he ultimately confessed. What he confessed was more than I shall venture to confess to-day. It was of course familiar to me that Saltram was incapable of keeping the engagements which, after their separation, he had entered into with regard to his wife, a deeply wronged, justly resentful, quite irreproachable and insufferable person. She often appeared at my chambers to talk over his lapses, for if, as she declared, she had washed her hands of him, she had carefully preserved the water of this ablution and she handed it about for inspection. She had arts of her own of exciting one's impatience, the most infallible of which was perhaps her assumption that

we were kind to her because we liked her. In reality her personal fall had been a sort of social rise, for there had been a moment when, in our little conscientious circle, her desolation almost made her the fashion. Her voice was grating and her children ugly ; moreover she hated the good Mulvilles, whom I more and more loved. They were the people who by doing most for her husband had in the long run done most for herself ; and the warm confidence with which he had laid his length upon them was a pressure gentle compared with her stiffer persuadability. I am bound to say he didn't criticise his benefactors, though practically he got tired of them ; she, however, had the highest standards about eleemosynary forms. She offered the odd spectacle of a spirit puffed up by dependence, and indeed it had introduced her to some excellent society. She pitied me for not knowing certain people who aided her and whom she doubtless patronised in turn for their luck in not knowing me. I daresay I should have got on with her better if she had had a ray of imagination—if it had occasionally seemed to occur to her to regard Saltram's manifestations in any other manner than as separate subjects of woe. They were all flowers of his nature, pearls strung on an endless thread ; but she had a stubborn little way of challenging them one after the other, as if she never suspected that he *had* a nature, such as it was, or that deficiencies might be organic ; the irritating effect of a mind incapable of a generalisation. One might doubtless have overdone the idea that there

was a general exemption for such a man ; but if this had happened it would have been through one's feeling that there could be none for such a woman.

I recognised her superiority when I asked her about the aunt of the disappointed young lady : it sounded like a sentence from a phrase-book. She triumphed in what she told me and she may have triumphed still more in what she withheld. My friend of the other evening, Miss Anvoy, had but lately come to England ; Lady Coxon, the aunt, had been established here for years in consequence of her marriage with the late Sir Gregory of that ilk. She had a house in the Regent's Park, a Bath-chair and a fernery ; and above all she had sympathy. Mrs. Saltram had made her acquaintance through mutual friends. This vagueness caused me to feel how much I was out of it and how large an independent circle Mrs. Saltram had at her command. I should have been glad to know more about the disappointed young lady, but I felt that I should know most by not depriving her of her advantage, as she might have mysterious means of depriving me of my knowledge. For the present, moreover, this experience was arrested, Lady Coxon having in fact gone abroad, accompanied by her niece. The niece, besides being immensely clever, was an heiress, Mrs. Saltram said ; the only daughter and the light of the eyes of some great American merchant, a man, over there, of endless indulgences and dollars. She had pretty clothes and pretty manners, and she had, what was prettier still, the great thing of all. The

great thing of all for Mrs. Saltram was always sympathy, and she spoke as if during the absence of these ladies she might not know where to turn for it. A few months later indeed, when they had come back, her tone perceptibly changed: she alluded to them, on my leading her up to it, rather as to persons in her debt for favours received. What had happened I didn't know, but I saw it would take only a little more or a little less to make her speak of them as thankless subjects of social countenance—people for whom she had vainly tried to do something. I confess I saw that it would not be in a mere week or two that I should rid myself of the image of Ruth Anvoy, in whose very name, when I learnt it, I found something secretly to like. I should probably neither see her nor hear of her again: the knight's widow (he had been mayor of Clockborough) would pass away and the heiress would return to her inheritance. I gathered with surprise that she had not communicated to his wife the story of her attempt to hear Mr. Saltram, and I founded this reticence on the easy supposition that Mrs. Saltram had fatigued by over-pressure the spring of the sympathy of which she boasted. The girl at any rate would forget the small adventure, be distracted, take a husband; besides which she would lack opportunity to repeat her experiment.

We clung to the idea of the brilliant course, delivered without an accident, that, as a lecturer, would still make the paying public aware of our great mind; but the fact remained that in the case of an

inspiration so unequal there was treachery, there was fallacy at least, in the very conception of a series. In our scrutiny of ways and means we were inevitably subject to the old convention of the synopsis, the syllabus, partly of course not to lose the advantage of his grand free hand in drawing up such things; but for myself I laughed at our play-bills even while I stickled for them. It was indeed amusing work to be scrupulous for Frank Saltram, who also at moments laughed about it, so far as the comfort of a sigh so unstudied as to be cheerful might pass for such a sound. He admitted with a candour all his own that he was in truth only to be depended on in the Mulvilles' drawing-room. "Yes," he suggestively conceded, "it's there, I think, that I am at my best; quite late, when it gets toward eleven—and if I've not been too much worried." We all knew what too much worry meant; it meant too enslaved for the hour to the superstition of sobriety. On the Saturdays I used to bring my portmanteau, so as not to have to think of eleven o'clock trains. I had a bold theory that as regards this temple of talk and its altars of cushioned chintz, its pictures and its flowers, its large fireside and clear lamplight, we might really arrive at something if the Mulvilles would only charge for admission. But here it was that the Mulvilles shamelessly broke down; as there is a flaw in every perfection, this was the inexpugnable refuge of their egotism. They declined to make their saloon a market, so that Saltram's golden words continued to be the only

coin that rang there. It can have happened to no man, however, to be paid a greater price than such an enchanted hush as surrounded him on his greatest nights. The most profane, on these occasions, felt a presence; all minor eloquence grew dumb. Adelaide Mulville, for the pride of her hospitality, anxiously watched the door or stealthily poked the fire. I used to call it the music-room, for we had anticipated Bayreuth. The very gates of the kingdom of light seemed to open and the horizon of thought to flash with the beauty of a sunrise at sea.

In the consideration of ways and means, the sittings of our little board, we were always conscious of the creak of Mrs. Saltram's shoes. She hovered, she interrupted, she almost presided, the state of affairs being mostly such as to supply her with every incentive for inquiring what was to be done next. It was the pressing pursuit of this knowledge that, in concatenations of omnibuses and usually in very wet weather, led her so often to my door. She thought us spiritless creatures with editors and publishers; but she carried matters to no great effect when she personally pushed into back-shops. She wanted all moneys to be paid to herself: they were otherwise liable to such strange adventures. They trickled away into the desert, and they were mainly at best, alas, but a slender stream. The editors and the publishers were the last people to take this remarkable thinker at the valuation that has now pretty well come to be established. The former were half distraught between the desire to "cut"

him and the difficulty of finding a crevice for their shears; and when a volume on this or that portentous subject was proposed to the latter they suggested alternative titles which, as reported to our friend, brought into his face the noble blank melancholy that sometimes made it handsome. The title of an unwritten book didn't after all much matter, but some masterpiece of Saltram's may have died in his bosom of the shudder with which it was then convulsed. The ideal solution, failing the fee at Kent Mulville's door, would have been some system of subscription to projected treatises with their non-appearance provided for—provided for, I mean, by the indulgence of subscribers. The author's real misfortune was that subscribers were so wretchedly literal. When they tastelessly inquired why publication had not ensued I was tempted to ask who in the world had ever been so published. Nature herself had brought him out in voluminous form, and the money was simply a deposit on borrowing the work.

V

I WAS doubtless often a nuisance to my friends in those years; but there were sacrifices I declined to make, and I never passed the hat to George Gravener. I never forgot our little discussion in Ebury Street, and I think it stuck in my throat to have to make to him the admission I had made so easily to Miss Anvoy. It had cost me nothing to confide to this charming girl, but it would have cost me much to confide to the friend of my youth, that the character of the "real gentleman" was not an attribute of the man I took such pains for. Was this because I had already generalised to the point of perceiving that women are really the unfastidious sex? I knew at any rate that Gravener, already quite in view but still hungry and frugal, had naturally enough more ambition than charity. He had sharp aims for stray sovereigns, being in view most from the tall steeple of Clockborough. His immediate ambition was to wholly occupy the field of vision of that smokily-seeing city, and all his movements and postures were calculated for this angle. The movement of the hand to the pocket had thus to alternate gracefully with the posture of the hand on the heart. He talked to Clockborough in short

only less beguilingly than Frank Saltram talked to his electors ; with the difference in our favour, however, that we had already voted and that our candidate had no antagonist but himself. He had more than once been at Wimbledon—it was Mrs. Mulville's work, not mine—and, by the time the claret was served, had seen the god descend. He took more pains to swing his censer than I had expected, but on our way back to town he forestalled any little triumph I might have been so artless as to express by the observation that such a man was—a hundred times! —a man to use and never a man to be used by. I remember that this neat remark humiliated me almost as much as if virtually, in the fever of broken slumbers, I hadn't often made it myself. The difference was that on Gravener's part a force attached to it that could never attach to it on mine. He was able to use people—he had the machinery ; and the irony of Saltram's being made showy at Clockborough came out to me when he said, as if he had no memory of our original talk and the idea were quite fresh to him : “I hate his type, you know, but I'll be hanged if I don't put some of those things in. I can find a place for them : we might even find a place for the fellow himself.” I myself should have had some fear, not, I need scarcely say, for the “things” themselves, but for some other things very near them—in fine for the rest of my eloquence.

Later on I could see that the oracle of Wimbledon was not in this case so appropriate as he would

have been had the politics of the gods only coincided more exactly with those of the party. There was a distinct moment when, without saying anything more definite to me, Gravener entertained the idea of annexing Mr. Saltram. Such a project was delusive, for the discovery of analogies between his body of doctrine and that pressed from headquarters upon Clockborough—the bottling, in a word, of the air of those lungs for convenient public uncorking in corn-exchanges—was an experiment for which no one had the leisure. The only thing would have been to carry him massively about, paid, caged, clipped; to turn him on for a particular occasion in a particular channel. Frank Saltram's channel, however, was essentially not calculable, and there was no knowing what disastrous floods might have ensued. For what there would have been to do *The Empire*, the great newspaper, was there to look to; but it was no new misfortune that there were delicate situations in which *The Empire* broke down. In fine there was an instinctive apprehension that a clever young journalist commissioned to report upon Mr. Saltram might never come back from the errand. No one knew better than George Gravener that that was a time when prompt returns counted double. If he therefore found our friend an exasperating waste of orthodoxy it was because he was, as he said, up in the clouds, not because he was down in the dust. He would have been a real enough gentleman if he could have helped to put in a

real gentleman. Gravener's great objection to the actual member was that he was not one.

Lady Coxon had a fine old house, a house with "grounds," at Clockborough, which she had let; but after she returned from abroad I learned from Mrs. Saltram that the lease had fallen in and that she had gone down to resume possession. I could see the faded red livery, the big square shoulders, the high-walled garden of this decent abode. As the rumble of dissolution grew louder the suitor would have pressed his suit, and I found myself hoping that the politics of the late Mayor's widow would not be such as to enjoin upon her to ask him to dinner; perhaps indeed I went so far as to hope that they would be such as to put all countenance out of the question. I tried to focus the page, in the daily airing, as he perhaps even pushed the Bath-chair over somebody's toes. I was destined to hear, however, through Mrs. Saltram (who, I afterwards learned, was in correspondence with Lady Coxon's housekeeper) that Gravener was known to have spoken of the habitation I had in my eye as the pleasantest thing at Clockborough. On his part, I was sure, this was the voice not of envy but of experience. The vivid scene was now peopled, and I could see him in the old-time garden with Miss Anvoy, who would be certain, and very justly, to think him good-looking. It would be too much to say that I was troubled by this evocation; but I seem to remember the relief, singular enough, of feeling it suddenly

brushed away by an annoyance really much greater ; an annoyance the result of its happening to come over me about that time with a rush that I was simply ashamed of Frank Saltram. There were limits after all, and my mark at last had been reached.

I had had my disgusts, if I may allow myself to-day such an expression ; but this was a supreme revolt. Certain things cleared up in my mind, certain values stood out. It was all very well to have an unfortunate temperament ; there was nothing so unfortunate as to have, for practical purposes, nothing else. I avoided George Gravener at this moment and reflected that at such a time I should do so most effectually by leaving England. I wanted to forget Frank Saltram—that was all. I didn't want to do anything in the world to him but that. Indignation had withered on the stalk, and I felt that one could pity him as much as one ought only by never thinking of him again. It wasn't for anything he had done to me ; it was for something he had done to the Mulvilles. Adelaide cried about it for a week, and her husband, profiting by the example so signally given him of the fatal effect of a want of character, left the letter unanswered. The letter, an incredible one, addressed by Saltram to Wimbledon during a stay with the Pudneys at Ramsgate, was the central feature of the incident, which, however, had many features, each more painful than whichever other we compared it with. The Pudneys had behaved shock-

ingly, but that was no excuse. Base ingratitude, gross indecency—one had one's choice only of such formulas as that the more they fitted the less they gave one rest. These are dead aches now, and I am under no obligation, thank heaven, to be definite about the business. There are things which if I had had to tell them—well, I wouldn't have told my story.

I went abroad for the general election, and if I don't know how much, on the Continent, I forgot, I at least know how much I missed, him. At a distance, in a foreign land, ignoring, abjuring, unlearning him, I discovered what he had done for me. I owed him, oh unmistakably, certain noble conceptions; I had lighted my little taper at his smoky lamp, and lo, it continued to twinkle. But the light it gave me just showed me how much more I wanted. I was pursued of course by letters from Mrs. Saltram, which I didn't scruple not to read, though I was duly conscious that her embarrassments would now be of the gravest. I sacrificed to propriety by simply putting them away, and this is how, one day as my absence drew to an end, my eye, as I rummaged in my desk for another paper, was caught by a name on a leaf that had detached itself from the packet. The allusion was to Miss Anvoy, who, it appeared, was engaged to be married to Mr. George Gravener; and the news was two months old. A direct question of Mrs. Saltram's had thus remained unanswered—she had inquired of me in a postscript what sort of man this Mr. Gravener might be. This Mr.

Gravener had been triumphantly returned for Clockborough, in the interest of the party that had swept the country, so that I might easily have referred Mrs. Saltram to the journals of the day. But when I at last wrote to her that I was coming home and would discharge my accumulated burden by seeing her, I remarked in regard to her question that she must really put it to Miss Anvoy.

VI

I HAD almost avoided the general election, but some of its consequences, on my return, had smartly to be faced. The season, in London, began to breathe again and to flap its folded wings. Confidence, under the new Ministry, was understood to be reviving, and one of the symptoms, in the social body, was a recovery of appetite. People once more fed together, and it happened that, one Saturday night, at somebody's house, I fed with George Gravenor. When the ladies left the room I moved up to where he sat and offered him my congratulation. "On my election?" he asked after a moment; whereupon I feigned, jocosely, not to have heard of his election and to be alluding to something much more important, the rumour of his engagement. I daresay I coloured, however, for his political victory had momentarily passed out of my mind. What was present to it was that he was to marry that beautiful girl; and yet his question made me conscious of some discomposure—I had not intended to put that before everything. He himself indeed ought gracefully to have done so, and I remember thinking the whole man was in this assumption that in expressing my sense of what he had won I had

fixed my thoughts on his "seat." We straightened the matter out, and he was so much lighter in hand than I had lately seen him that his spirits might well have been fed from a double source. He was so good as to say that he hoped I should soon make the acquaintance of Miss Anvoy, who, with her aunt, was presently coming up to town. Lady Coxon, in the country, had been seriously unwell, and this had delayed their arrival. I told him I had heard the marriage would be a splendid one; on which, brightened and humanised by his luck, he laughed and said: "Do you mean for *her*?" When I had again explained what I meant he went on: "Oh, she's an American, but you'd scarcely know it; unless, perhaps," he added, "by her being used to more money than most girls in England, even the daughters of rich men. That wouldn't in the least do for a fellow like me, you know, if it wasn't for the great liberality of her father. He really has been most kind, and everything is quite satisfactory." He added that his eldest brother had taken a tremendous fancy to her and that during a recent visit at Coldfield she had nearly won over Lady Maddock. I gathered from something he dropped later that the free-handed gentleman beyond the seas had not made a settlement, but had given a handsome present and was apparently to be looked to, across the water, for other favours. People are simplified alike by great contentments and great yearnings, and whether or no it was Gravener's directness that begot my own I seem to recall that

in some turn taken by our talk he almost imposed it on me as an act of decorum to ask if Miss Anvoy had also by chance expectations from her aunt. My inquiry drew out that Lady Coxon, who was the oddest of women, would have in any contingency to act under her late husband's will, which was odder still, saddling her with a mass of queer obligations complicated with queer loopholes. There were several dreary people, Coxon cousins, old maids, to whom she would have more or less to minister. Gravener laughed, without saying no, when I suggested that the young lady might come in through a loophole; then suddenly, as if he suspected that I had turned a lantern on him, he exclaimed quite dryly: "That's all rot—one is moved by other springs!"

A fortnight later, at Lady Coxon's own house, I understood well enough the springs one was moved by. Gravener had spoken of me there as an old friend, and I received a gracious invitation to dine. The knight's widow was again indisposed—she had succumbed at the eleventh hour; so that I found Miss Anvoy bravely playing hostess, without even Gravener's help, inasmuch as, to make matters worse, he had just sent up word that the House, the insatiable House, with which he supposed he had contracted for easier terms, positively declined to release him. I was struck with the courage, the grace and gaiety of the young lady left to deal unaided with the possibilities of the Regent's Park. I did what I could to help her to keep them down,

or up, after I had recovered from the confusion of seeing her slightly disconcerted at perceiving in the guest introduced by her intended the gentleman with whom she had had that talk about Frank Saltram. I had at that moment my first glimpse of the fact that she was a person who could carry a responsibility ; but I leave the reader to judge of my sense of the aggravation, for either of us, of such a burden when I heard the servant announce Mrs. Saltram. From what immediately passed between the two ladies I gathered that the latter had been sent for post-haste to fill the gap created by the absence of the mistress of the house. "Good!" I exclaimed, "she will be put by *me*;" and my apprehension was promptly justified. Mrs. Saltram taken in to dinner, and taken in as a consequence of an appeal to her amiability, was Mrs. Saltram with a vengeance. I asked myself what Miss Anvoy meant by doing such things, but the only answer I arrived at was that Gravener was verily fortunate. She had not happened to tell him of her visit to Upper Baker Street, but she would certainly tell him to-morrow ; not indeed that this would make him like any better her having had the simplicity to invite such a person as Mrs. Saltram on such an occasion. I reflected that I had never seen a young woman put such ignorance into her cleverness, such freedom into her modesty ; this, I think, was when, after dinner, she said to me frankly, with almost jubilant mirth : "Oh, you don't admire Mrs. Saltram ?" Why should I ? This was

truly an innocent maiden. I had briefly to consider before I could reply that my objection to the lady in question was the objection often formulated in regard to persons met at the social board—I knew all her stories. Then, as Miss Anvoy remained momentarily vague, I added: "About her husband."

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

"None for me. Oh, novelty would be pleasant!"

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

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

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

"You mean Gravener won't let you?"

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

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

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

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

"I thought Mr. Saltram had thrown the Mulvilles over."

"Utterly. But that won't prevent his being

planted there again, to bloom like a rose, within a month or two."

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

"They're tremendously worth it. You mustn't miss them."

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

"Another? There are about thirty!" I exclaimed, turning away and feeling Mrs. Saltram's little eyes in my back. A few days after this I heard that Gravener's marriage was near at hand—was settled for Whitsuntide; but as I had received no invitation I doubted it, and presently there came to me in fact the report of a postponement. Something was the matter; what was the matter was supposed to be that Lady Coxon was now critically ill. I had called on her after my dinner in the Regent's Park, but I had neither seen her nor seen Miss Anvoy. I forget to-day the exact order in which, at this period, certain incidents occurred and the particular stage at which it suddenly struck me, making me catch my breath a little, that the progression, the acceleration was for all the world that of a drama. This was probably rather late in the day, and the exact order doesn't matter. What had already occurred was some accident determining a

more patient wait. George Gravener, whom I met again, in fact told me as much, but without signs of perturbation. Lady Coxon had to be constantly attended to, and there were other good reasons as well. Lady Coxon had to be so constantly attended to that on the occasion of a second attempt in the Regent's Park I equally failed to obtain a sight of her niece. I judged it discreet under the circumstances not to make a third ; but this didn't matter, for it was through Adelaide Mulville that the side-wind of the comedy, though I was at first unwitting, began to reach me. I went to Wimbledon at times because Saltram was there, and I went at others because he was not. The Pudneys, who had taken him to Birmingham, had already got rid of him, and we had a horrible consciousness of his wandering roofless, in dishonour, about the smoky Midlands, almost as the injured Lear wandered on the storm-lashed heath. His room, upstairs, had been lately done up (I could hear the crackle of the new chintz) and the difference only made his smirches and bruises, his splendid tainted genius, the more tragic. If he wasn't barefoot in the mire he was sure to be unconventionally shod. These were the things Adelaide and I, who were old enough friends to stare at each other in silence, talked about when we didn't speak. When we spoke it was only about the brilliant girl George Gravener was to marry, whom he had brought out the other Sunday. I could see that this presentation had been happy, for Mrs. Mulville commemorated it in the only way in

which she ever expressed her confidence in a new relation. "She likes me—she likes me": her native humility exulted in that measure of success. We all knew for ourselves how she liked those who liked her, and as regards Ruth Anvoy she was more easily won over than Lady Maddock.

VII

ONE of the consequences, for the Mulvilles, of the sacrifices they made for Frank Saltram was that they had to give up their carriage. Adelaide drove gently into London in a one-horse greenish thing, an early Victorian landau, hired, near at hand, imaginatively, from a broken-down jobmaster whose wife was in consumption—a vehicle that made people turn round all the more when her pensioner sat beside her in a soft white hat and a shawl, one of her own. This was his position and I daresay his costume when on an afternoon in July she went to return Miss Anvoy's visit. The wheel of fate had now revolved, and amid silences deep and exhaustive, compuncions and condonations alike unutterable, Saltram was reinstated. Was it in pride or in penance that Mrs. Mulville began immediately to drive him about? If he was ashamed of his ingratitude she might have been ashamed of her forgiveness; but she was incorrigibly capable of liking him to be seen strikingly seated in the landau while she was in shops or with her acquaintance. However, if he was in the pillory for twenty minutes in the Regent's Park (I mean at Lady Coxon's door, while her companion paid her call) it was not for

the further humiliation of any one concerned that she presently came out for him in person, not even to show either of them what a fool she was that she drew him in to be introduced to the clever young American. Her account of the introduction I had in its order, but before that, very late in the season, under Gravener's auspices, I met Miss Anvoy at tea at the House of Commons. The member for Clockborough had gathered a group of pretty ladies, and the Mulvilles were not of the party. On the great terrace, as I strolled off a little with her, the guest of honour immediately exclaimed to me: "I've seen him, you know—I've seen him!" She told me about Saltram's call.

"And how did you find him?"

"Oh, so strange!"

"You didn't like him?"

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

"You want to do that?"

She was silent a moment. "Immensely."

We stopped; I fancied she had become aware Gravener was looking at us. She turned back toward the knot of the others, and I said: "Dislike him as much as you will—I see you are bitten."

"Bitten?" I thought she coloured a little.

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

"I hope I sha'n't die of anything before I've seen more of Mrs. Mulville." I rejoiced with her over plain Adelaide, whom she pronounced the loveliest

woman she had met in England; but before we separated I remarked to her that it was an act of mere humanity to warn her that if she should see more of Frank Saltram (which would be likely to follow on any increase of acquaintance with Mrs. Mulville) she might find herself flattening her nose against the clear, hard pane of an eternal question—that of the relative importance of virtue. She replied that this was surely a subject on which one took everything for granted; whereupon I admitted that I had perhaps expressed myself ill. What I referred to was what I had referred to the night we met in Upper Baker Street—the importance relative (relative to virtue) of other gifts. She asked me if I called virtue a gift—as if it were handed to us in a parcel on our birthday; and I declared that this very inquiry showed me the problem had already caught her by the skirt. She would have help, however, help that I myself had once had, in resisting its tendency to make one cross.

“What help do you mean?”

“That of the member for Clockborough.”

She stared, smiled, then exclaimed: “Why, my idea has been to help *him!*”

She *had* helped him—I had his own word for it that at Clockborough her bedevilment of the voters had really put him in. She would do so doubtless again and again, but I heard the very next month that this fine faculty had undergone a temporary eclipse. News of the catastrophe first came to me

from Mrs. Saltram, and it was afterwards confirmed at Wimbledon: poor Miss Anvoy was in trouble—great disasters in America had suddenly summoned her home. Her father, in New York, had had reverses—lost so much money that it was really provoking as showing how much he had had. It was Adelaide who told me that she had gone off alone at less than a week's notice.

“Alone? Gravener has permitted that?”

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

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

at me, but this didn't prevent my asking her what had been the result, that afternoon in the Regent's Park, of her taking our friend to see Miss Anvoy.

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

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

Mrs. Mulville was silent an instant. "It was everything one could wish."

Something in her tone made me laugh. "Do you mean she gave him something?"

"Well, since you ask me!"

"Right there—on the spot?"

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

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

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

"Straight out of her pocket?"

"Out of the drawer of a table at which she had been writing. She just slipped the folded notes into my hand. He wasn't looking; it was while he was going back to the carriage. Oh," said Adelaide reassuringly, "I dole it out!" The dear practical soul thought my agitation, for I confess I was agitated, had reference to the administration of the money. Her disclosure made me for a moment

muse violently, and I daresay that during that moment I wondered if anything else in the world makes people so indelicate as unselfishness. I uttered, I suppose, some vague synthetic cry, for she went on as if she had had a glimpse of my inward amaze at such episodes. "I assure you, my dear friend, he was in one of his happy hours."

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

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

"You say Saltram was very fine?"

"Beyond everything. He surprised even me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Of illustration? Indeed I do!”

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

“On what great question, dear lady, hasn’t he been right?”

“Of what other great men can you equally say it? I mean that he has never, but *never*, had a deviation?” Mrs. Mulville exultantly demanded.

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

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

I meditated a moment. “Did he wear his shawl?”

“His shawl?” She had not even noticed.

“I mean yours.”

“He looked very nice, and you know he’s really

clean. Miss Anvoy used such a remarkable expression—she said his mind is like a crystal!”

I pricked up my ears. “A crystal?”

“Suspended in the moral world—swinging and shining and flashing there. She’s monstrously clever, you know.”

I reflected again. “Monstrously!”

VIII

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

“ Ah, Miss Anvoy's in America ? ”

“ Her father has got into a horrid hole, lost no end of money.”

I hesitated, after expressing due concern, but I

presently said: "I hope that raises no objection to your marriage."

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

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

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

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

He gave me a cold glance, asking me what had put Mrs. Saltram into my head, and I replied that she was unfortunately never out of it. I happened to remember the wonderful accounts she had given me of the kindness Lady Coxon had

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

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

"And you want me to pronounce between you? I pronounce in advance for Miss Anvoy."

"In advance—that's quite right. That's how I pronounced when I asked her to marry me. But my story will interest you only so far as your mind is not made up." Gravener puffed his cigarette a minute and then continued: "Are you familiar with the idea of the Endowment of Research?"

"Of Research?" I was at sea for a moment.

"I give you Lady Coxon's phrase. She has it on the brain."

"She wishes to endow——?"

"Some earnest and disinterested seeker," Gravener

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

"Her earnest, disinterested seeker ?"

"The flower that blushes unseen for want of the pecuniary independence necessary to cause the light that is in it to shine upon the human race. The individual, in a word, who, having the rest of the machinery, the spiritual, the intellectual, is most hampered in his search."

"His search for what ?"

"For Moral Truth. That's what Sir Gregory calls it."

I burst out laughing. "Delightful, munificent Sir Gregory! It's a charming idea."

"So Miss Anvoy thinks."

"Has she a candidate for the Fund?"

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

"Talk that, as you've so interestingly intimated, has landed you in a disagreement."

"She considers there's something in it," Gravener said.

"And you consider there's nothing?"

"It seems to me a puerility fraught with consequences inevitably grotesque and possibly immoral. To begin with, fancy the idea of constituting an endowment without establishing a tribunal—a bench of competent people, of judges."

"The sole tribunal is Lady Coxon?"

"And any one she chooses to invite."

"But she has invited you."

"I'm not competent—I hate the thing. Besides, she hasn't. The real history of the matter, I take it, is that the inspiration was originally Lady Coxon's own, that she infected him with it, and that the flattering option left her is simply his tribute to her beautiful, her aboriginal enthusiasm. She came to England forty years ago, a thin transcendental Bostonian, and even her odd, happy, frumpy Clockborough marriage never really materialised her.

She feels indeed that she has become very British—as if that, as a process, as a *Werden*, were conceivable; but it's precisely what makes her cling to the notion of the 'Fund'—cling to it as to a link with the ideal."

"How can she cling if she's dying?"

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

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

"It goes back to his family, if she hasn't made some other disposition of it."

"She may do that, then—she may divert it?"

"Her hands are not tied. The proof is that three months ago she offered to make it over to her niece."

"For Miss Anvoy's own use?"

"For Miss Anvoy's own use—on the occasion of her prospective marriage. She was discouraged—the earnest seeker required so earnest a search. She was afraid of making a mistake; every one she

could think of seemed either not earnest enough or not poor enough. On the receipt of the first bad news about Mr. Anvoy's affairs she proposed to Ruth to make the sacrifice for her. As the situation in New York got worse she repeated her proposal."

"Which Miss Anvoy declined?"

"Except as a formal trust."

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

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

"And you blame her for that?" I asked with an excited smile.

My tone was not harsh, but he coloured a little and there was a queer light in his eye. "My dear fellow, if I 'blamed' the young lady I'm engaged to, I shouldn't immediately say so even to so old a friend as you." I saw that some deep discomfort, some restless desire to be sided with, reassuringly, approvingly mirrored, had been at the bottom of his drifting so far, and I was genuinely touched by his confidence. It was inconsistent with his habits; but being troubled about a woman was not, for him, a habit: that itself was an inconsistency. George Gravener could stand straight enough before any other combination of forces. It amused me to think that the combination he had succumbed to had an American accent, a transcendental aunt and an insolvent father; but all my old loyalty to him mustered to meet this unexpected hint that I could

help him. I saw that I could from the insincere tone in which he pursued: "I've criticised her of course, I've contended with her, and it has been great fun." It clearly couldn't have been such great fun as to make it improper for me presently to ask if Miss Anvoy had nothing at all settled upon herself. To this he replied that she had only a trifle from her mother—a mere four hundred a year, which was exactly why it would be convenient to him that she shouldn't decline, in the face of this total change in her prospects, an accession of income which would distinctly help them to marry. When I inquired if there were no other way in which so rich and so affectionate an aunt could cause the weight of her benevolence to be felt, he answered that Lady Coxon was affectionate indeed, but was scarcely to be called rich. She could let her project of the Fund lapse for her niece's benefit, but she couldn't do anything else. She had been accustomed to regard her as tremendously provided for, and she was up to her eyes in promises to anxious Coxons. She was a woman of an inordinate conscience, and her conscience was now a distress to her, hovering round her bed in irreconcilable forms of resentful husbands, portionless nieces and undiscoverable philosophers.

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

He began to gather up his papers. "Who can

set a limit to the ingenuity of an extravagant woman?"

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

IX

THE thing I had been most sensible of in that talk with George Gravener was the way Saltram's name kept out of it. It seemed to me at the time that we were quite pointedly silent about him; but afterwards it appeared more probable there had been on my companion's part no conscious avoidance. Later on I was sure of this, and for the best of reasons—the simple reason of my perceiving more completely that, for evil as well as for good, he said nothing to Gravener's imagination. Gravener was not afraid of him; he was too much disgusted with him. No more was I, doubtless, and for very much the same reason. I treated my friend's story as an absolute confidence; but when before Christmas, by Mrs. Saltram, I was informed of Lady Coxon's death without having had news of Miss Anvoy's return, I found myself taking for granted that we should hear no more of these nuptials, in which I now recognised an element incongruous from the first. I began to ask myself how people who suited each other so little could please each other so much. The charm was some material charm, some affinity exquisite doubtless, yet superficial; some surrender to youth and beauty and passion, to

force and grace and fortune, happy accidents and easy contacts. They might dote on each other's persons, but how could they know each other's souls? How could they have the same prejudices, how could they have the same horizon? Such questions, I confess, seemed quenched but not answered when, one day in February, going out to Wimbledon, I found our young lady in the house. A passion that had brought her back across the wintry ocean was as much of a passion as was necessary. No impulse equally strong indeed had drawn George Gravener to America; a circumstance on which, however, I reflected only long enough to remind myself that it was none of my business. Ruth Anvoy was distinctly different, and I felt that the difference was not simply that of her being in mourning. Mrs. Mulville told me soon enough what it was: it was the difference between a handsome girl with large expectations and a handsome girl with only four hundred a year. This explanation indeed did not wholly content me, not even when I learned that her mourning had a double cause—learned that poor Mr. Anvoy, giving way altogether, buried under the ruins of his fortune and leaving next to nothing, had died a few weeks before.

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

“Hasn't the House just met?” said Adelaide. Then she added: “I gather that her having come is exactly a sign that the marriage is a little shaky.

If it were certain, a self-respecting girl like Ruth would have waited for him over there."

I noted that they were already Ruth and Adelaide, but what I said was: "Do you mean that she has returned to make it a certainty?"

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

"Do you mean that you're disappointed because you judge that Miss Anvoy is?"

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

“He’ll be all the better this evening,” I added after a moment. “What particular importance do you attach to the idea of her being impressed ?”

Adelaide turned her mild, pale eyes on me as if she were amazed at my levity. “Why, the importance of her being as happy as *we* are !”

I’m afraid that at this my levity increased. “Oh, that’s a happiness almost too great to wish a person !” I saw she had not yet in her mind what I had in mine, and at any rate the visitor’s actual bliss was limited to a walk in the garden with Kent Mulville. Later in the afternoon I also took one, and I saw nothing of Miss Anvoy till dinner, at which we were without the company of Saltram, who had caused it to be reported that he was indisposed, lying down. This made us, most of us—for there were other friends present—convey to each other in silence some of the unutterable things which in those years our eyes had inevitably acquired the art of expressing. If an American inquirer had not been there we would have expressed them otherwise, and Adelaide would have pretended not to hear. I had seen her, before the very fact, abstract herself nobly ; and I knew that more than once, to keep it from the servants, managing, dissimulating cleverly, she had helped her husband to carry him bodily to his room. Just recently he had been so wise and so deep and so high that I had begun to get nervous—

to wonder if by chance there were something behind it, if he were kept straight for instance by the knowledge that the hated Pudneys would have more to tell us if they chose. He was lying low, but unfortunately it was common wisdom with us that the biggest splashes took place in the quietest pools. We should have had a merry life indeed if all the splashes had sprinkled us as refreshingly as the waters we were even then to feel about our ears. Kent Mulville had been up to his room, but had come back with a face that told as few tales as I had seen it succeed in telling on the evening I waited in the lecture-room with Miss Anvoy. I said to myself that our friend had gone out, but I was glad that the presence of a comparative stranger deprived us of the dreary duty of suggesting to each other, in respect of his errand, edifying possibilities in which we didn't ourselves believe. At ten o'clock he came into the drawing-room with his waistcoat much awry but his eyes sending out great signals. It was precisely with his entrance that I ceased to be vividly conscious of him. I saw that the crystal, as I had called it, had begun to swing, and I had need of my immediate attention for Miss Anvoy.

Even when I was told afterwards that he had, as we might have said to-day, broken the record, the manner in which that attention had been rewarded relieved me of a sense of loss. I had of course a perfect general consciousness that something great was going on: it was a little like having been etherised to hear Herr Joachim play. The old

music was in the air ; I felt the strong pulse of thought, the sink and swell, the flight, the poise, the plunge ; but I knew something about one of the listeners that nobody else knew, and Saltram's monologue could reach me only through that medium. To this hour I'm of no use when, as a witness, I'm appealed to (for they still absurdly contend about it) as to whether or no on that historic night he was drunk ; and my position is slightly ridiculous, for I have never cared to tell them what it really was I was taken up with. What I got out of it is the only morsel of the total experience that is quite my own. The others were shared, but this is incommunicable. I feel that now, I'm bound to say, in even thus roughly evoking the occasion, and it takes something from my pride of clearness. However, I shall perhaps be as clear as is absolutely necessary if I remark that she was too much given up to her own intensity of observation to be sensible of mine. It was plainly not the question of her marriage that had brought her back. I greatly enjoyed this discovery and was sure that had that question alone been involved she would have remained away. In this case doubtless Gravener would, in spite of the House of Commons, have found means to rejoin her. It afterwards made me uncomfortable for her that, alone in the lodging Mrs. Mulville had put before me as dreary, she should have in any degree the air of waiting for her fate ; so that I was presently relieved at hearing of her having gone to stay at Coldfield. If she was in

England at all while the engagement stood the only proper place for her was under Lady Maddock's wing. Now that she was unfortunate and relatively poor, perhaps her prospective sister-in-law would be wholly won over. There would be much to say, if I had space, about the way her behaviour, as I caught gleams of it, ministered to the image that had taken birth in my mind, to my private amusement, as I listened to George Gravener in the railway-carriage. I watched her in the light of this queer possibility—a formidable thing certainly to meet—and I was aware that it coloured, extravagantly perhaps, my interpretation of her very looks and tones. At Wimbledon for instance it had seemed to me that she was literally afraid of Saltram, in dread of a coercion that she had begun already to feel. I had come up to town with her the next day and had been convinced that, though deeply interested, she was immensely on her guard. She would show as little as possible before she should be ready to show everything. What this final exhibition might be on the part of a girl perceptibly so able to think things out I found it great sport to forecast. It would have been exciting to be approached by her, appealed to by her for advice; but I prayed to heaven I mightn't find myself in such a predicament. If there was really a present rigour in the situation of which Gravener had sketched for me the elements she would have to get out of her difficulty by herself. It was not I who had launched her and it was not I who could help

her. I didn't fail to ask myself why, since I couldn't help her, I should think so much about her. It was in part my suspense that was responsible for this ; I waited impatiently to see whether she wouldn't have told Mrs. Mulville a portion at least of what I had learned from Gravener. But I saw Mrs. Mulville was still reduced to wonder what she had come out again for if she hadn't come as a conciliatory bride. That she had come in some other character was the only thing that fitted all the appearances. Having for family reasons to spend some time that spring in the west of England, I was in a manner out of earshot of the great oceanic rumble (I mean of the continuous hum of Saltram's thought) and my uneasiness tended to keep me quiet. There was something I wanted so little to have to say that my prudence surmounted my curiosity. I only wondered if Ruth Anvoy talked over the idea of the Coxon Fund with Lady Maddock, and also somewhat why I didn't hear from Wimbledon. I had a reproachful note about something or other from Mrs. Saltram, but it contained no mention of Lady Coxon's niece, on whom her eyes had been much less fixed since the recent untoward events.

X

ADELAIDE'S silence was fully explained later ; it was practically explained when in June, returning to London, I was honoured by this admirable woman with an early visit. As soon as she appeared I guessed everything, and as soon as she told me that darling Ruth had been in her house nearly a month I exclaimed : "What in the name of maidenly modesty is she staying in England for ?"

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

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

Adelaide hesitated. "She says you know." Then on my also hesitating she added : "A condition he makes."

"The Coxon Fund?" I cried.

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

“Ah, but so little! Do you mean she has accepted the trust?”

“In the most splendid spirit—as a duty about which there can be no two opinions.” Then said Adelaide after an instant: “Of course she’s thinking of Mr. Saltram.”

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

“Awful?”

Why, to have anything to do with such an idea oneself.”

“I’m sure you needn’t!” Mrs. Mulville gave a slight toss of her head.

“He isn’t good enough!” I went on; to which she responded with an ejaculation almost as lively as mine had been. This made me, with genuine, immediate horror, exclaim: “You haven’t influenced her, I hope!” and my emphasis brought back the blood with a rush to poor Adelaide’s face. She declared while she blushed (for I had frightened her again) that she had never influenced anybody and that the girl had only seen and heard and judged for herself. *He* had influenced her, if I would, as he did every one who had a soul: that word, as we knew, even expressed feebly the power of the things he said to haunt the mind. How could she, Adelaide, help it if Miss Anvoy’s mind was haunted? I demanded with a groan what right a pretty girl engaged to a rising M.P. had to *have* a mind; but

the only explanation my bewildered friend could give me was that she was so clever. She regarded Mr. Saltram naturally as a tremendous force for good. She was intelligent enough to understand him and generous enough to admire.

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

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

"And Gravener does, if not *his* own; and that's the whole difficulty?"

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

"The Endowment is a conception superficially sublime, but fundamentally ridiculous."

"Are you repeating Mr. Gravener's words?" Adelaide asked.

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

"Ruth doesn't insist on that," said Mrs. Mulville;

“and it’s, for her, exactly this technical weakness that constitutes the force of the moral obligation.”

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

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

“And that’s why you didn’t write?”

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

I considered a little. "Why on earth does she want to see me?"

"To talk with you, naturally, about Mr. Saltram."

"As a subject for the prize?" This was hugely obvious, and I presently exclaimed: "I think I'll sail to-morrow for Australia."

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

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

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

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

"A scandal?" Mrs. Mulville dolorously echoed.

"Is Miss Anvoy prepared for that?"

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

"So do you!" I laughed as she went off.

That girl at Wimbledon, on the Thursday afternoon, more than justified my apprehensions. I recognised fully now the cause of the agitation she

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

man of monumental bronze. He was like a jelly without a mould, he had to be embanked ; and that was precisely the source of her interest in him and the ground of her project. She put her project boldly before me : there it stood in its preposterous beauty. She was as willing to take the humorous view of it as I could be : the only difference was that for her the humorous view of a thing was not necessarily prohibitive, was not paralysing.

Moreover she professed that she couldn't discuss with me the primary question—the moral obligation : that was in her own breast. There were things she couldn't go into—injunctions, impressions she had received. They were a part of the closest intimacy of her intercourse with her aunt, they were absolutely clear to her ; and on questions of delicacy, the interpretation of a fidelity, of a promise, one had always in the last resort to make up one's mind for oneself. It was the idea of the application to the particular case, such a splendid one at last, that troubled her, and she admitted that it stirred very deep things. She didn't pretend that such a responsibility was a simple matter ; if it had been she wouldn't have attempted to saddle me with any portion of it. The Mulvilles were sympathy itself ; but were they absolutely candid ? Could they indeed be, in their position—would it even have been to be desired ? Yes, she had sent for me to ask no less than that of me—whether there was anything dreadful kept back. She made no allusion whatever to George Gravener

—I thought her silence the only good taste and her gaiety perhaps a part of the very anxiety of that discretion, the effect of a determination that people shouldn't know from herself that her relations with the man she was to marry were strained. All the weight, however, that she left me to throw was a sufficient implication of the weight that he had thrown in vain. Oh, she knew the question of character was immense, and that one couldn't entertain any plan for making merit comfortable without running the gauntlet of that terrible procession of interrogation-points which, like a young ladies' school out for a walk, hooked their uniform noses at the tail of governess Conduct. But were we absolutely to hold that there was never, never, never an exception, never, never, never an occasion for liberal acceptance, for clever charity, for suspended pedantry—for letting one side, in short, outbalance another? When Miss Anvoy threw off this inquiry I could have embraced her for so delightfully emphasising her unlikeness to Mrs. Saltram. "Why not have the courage of one's forgiveness," she asked, "as well as the enthusiasm of one's adhesion?"

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

She considered this remark an instant with her eyes on mine, and I divined that it struck her I might possibly intend it as a reference to some

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

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

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

XI

I WAS unable, this time, to stay to dinner : such, at any rate, was the plea on which I took leave. I desired in truth to get away from my young lady, for that obviously helped me not to pretend to satisfy her. How *could* I satisfy her? I asked myself—how could I tell her how much had been kept back? I didn't even know, and I certainly didn't desire to know. My own policy had ever been to learn the least about poor Saltram's weaknesses—not to learn the most. A great deal that I had in fact learned had been forced upon me by his wife. There was something even irritating in Miss Anvoy's crude conscientiousness, and I wondered why, after all, she couldn't have let him alone and been content to entrust George Gravener with the purchase of the good house. I was sure he would have driven a bargain, got something excellent and cheap. I laughed louder even than she, I temporised, I failed her; I told her I must think over her case. I professed a horror of responsibilities and twitted her with her own extravagant passion for them. It was not really that I was afraid of the scandal, the moral discredit for the Fund; what troubled me most was a feeling of a different order. Of course, as the

beneficiary of the Fund was to enjoy a simple life-interest, as it was hoped that new beneficiaries would arise and come up to new standards, it would not be a trifle that the first of these worthies should not have been a striking example of the domestic virtues. The Fund would start badly, as it were, and the laurel would, in some respects at least, scarcely be greener from the brows of the original wearer. That idea, however, was at that hour, as I have hinted, not the source of anxiety it ought perhappas to have been, for I felt less the irregularity of Saltram's getting the money than that of this exalted young woman's giving it up. I wanted her to have it for herself, and I told her so before I went away. She looked graver at this than she had looked at all, saying she hoped such a preference wouldn't make me dishonest.

It made me, to begin with, very restless—made me, instead of going straight to the station, fidget a little about that many-coloured Common which gives Wimbledon horizons. There was a worry for me to work off, or rather keep at a distance, for I declined even to admit to myself that I had, in Miss Anvoy's phrase, been saddled with it. What could have been clearer indeed than the attitude of recognising perfectly what a world of trouble the Coxon Fund would in future save us, and of yet liking better to face a continuance of that trouble than see, and in fact contribute to, a deviation from attainable bliss in the life of two other persons in whom I was deeply interested?

Suddenly, at the end of twenty minutes, there was projected across this clearness the image of a massive, middle-aged man seated on a bench, under a tree, with sad, far-wandering eyes and plump white hands folded on the head of a stick—a stick I recognised, a stout gold-headed staff that I had given him in throbbing days. I stopped short as he turned his face to me, and it happened that for some reason or other I took in as I had perhaps never done before the beauty of his rich blank gaze. It was charged with experience as the sky is charged with light, and I felt on the instant as if we had been overspanned and conjoined by the great arch of a bridge or the great dome of a temple. Doubtless I was rendered peculiarly sensitive to it by something in the way I had been giving him up and sinking him. While I met it I stood there smitten, and I felt myself responding to it with a sort of guilty grimace. This brought back his attention in a smile which expressed for me a cheerful, weary patience, a bruised, noble gentleness. I had told Miss Anvoy that he had no dignity, but what did he seem to me, all unbuttoned and fatigued as he waited for me to come up, if he didn't seem unconcerned with small things, didn't seem in short majestic? There was majesty in his mere unconsciousness of our little conferences and puzzlements over his maintenance and his reward.

After I had sat by him a few minutes I passed my arm over his big soft shoulder (wherever you

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

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

"They enclosed it to me, to be delivered. They doubtless explain to you that they hadn't your address."

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

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

It was another chapter, I felt, of the history of their lamentable quarrel with her husband, the episode in which, vindictively, disingenuously as they themselves had behaved, one had to admit that he had put himself more grossly in the wrong than at any moment of his life. He had begun by insulting the matchless Mulvilles for these more specious protectors, and then, according to his wont at the end of a few months, had dug a still deeper ditch for his aberration than the chasm left yawning behind. The chasm at Wimbledon was now blessedly closed; but the Pudneys, across their persistent gulf, kept up the nastiest fire. I never doubted they had a strong case, and I had been from the first for not defending him—reasoning that if they were not contradicted they would perhaps subside. This was above all what I wanted, and I so far prevailed that I did arrest the correspondence in time to save our little circle an infliction heavier than it perhaps would have borne. I knew, that is I divined, that their allegations had gone as yet only as far as their courage, conscious as they were in their own virtue of an exposed place in which Saltram could have planted a blow. It was a question with them whether a man who had himself so much to cover up would dare his blow; so that these vessels of rancour were in a manner afraid of each other. I judged that on the day the Pudneys should cease for some

reason or other to be afraid they would treat us to some revelation more disconcerting than any of its predecessors. As I held Mr. Saltram's letter in my hand it was distinctly communicated to me that the day had come—they had ceased to be afraid. "I don't want to know the worst," I presently declared.

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

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

"So they tell me—to Miss Anvoy."

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

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

"And why should that prevent?"

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

Still I didn't understand; then it flashed upon me. "You mean they might intercept it? How

can you imply anything so base?" I indignantly demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

I burst out laughing, and I fear my laugh may have had an effect of impertinence.

"Especially to Miss Anvoy, who's so easily shocked? Why do such things concern *her*?" I asked, much at a loss.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

movement, at any rate, with which, in solitude, I transferred the whole thing, unopened, from my pocket to a drawer which I double-locked would have amounted for an initiated observer to some such promise.

XII

MRS. SALTRAM left me drawing my breath more quickly and indeed almost in pain—as if I had just perilously grazed the loss of something precious. I didn't quite know what it was—it had a shocking resemblance to my honour. The emotion was the livelier doubtless in that my pulses were still shaken with the rejoicing with which, the night before, I had rallied to the rare analyst, the great intellectual adventurer and pathfinder. What had dropped from me like a cumbersome garment as Saltram appeared before me in the afternoon on the heath was the disposition to haggle over his value. Hang it, one had to choose, one had to put that value somewhere ; so I would put it really high and have done with it. Mrs. Mulville drove in for him at a discreet hour—the earliest she could suppose him to have got up ; and I learned that Miss Anvoy would also have come had she not been expecting a visit from Mr. Gravener. I was perfectly mindful that I was under bonds to see this young lady, and also that I had a letter to deliver to her ; but I took my time, I waited from day to day. I left Mrs. Saltram to deal as her apprehensions should prompt with the Pudneys. I knew at last what I meant—I

had ceased to wince at my responsibility. I gave this supreme impression of Saltram time to fade if it would ; but it didn't fade, and, individually, it has not faded even now. During the month that I thus invited myself to stiffen again, Adelaide Mulville, perplexed by my absence, wrote to me to ask why I *was* so stiff. At that season of the year I was usually oftener with them. She also wrote that she feared a real estrangement had set in between Mr. Gravener and her sweet young friend—a state of things only partly satisfactory to her so long as the advantage accruing to Mr. Saltram failed to disengage itself from the merely nebulous state. She intimated that her sweet young friend was, if anything, a trifle too reserved ; she also intimated that there might now be an opening for another clever young man. There never was the slightest opening, I may here parenthesise, and of course the question can't come up to-day. These are old frustrations now. Ruth Anvoy has not married, I hear, and neither have I. During the month, toward the end, I wrote to George Gravener to ask if, on a special errand, I might come to see him, and his answer was to knock the very next day at my door. I saw he had immediately connected my inquiry with the talk we had had in the railway carriage, and his promptitude showed that the ashes of his eagerness were not yet cold. I told him there was something I thought I ought in candour to let him know—I recognised the obligation his friendly confidence had laid upon me.

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

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

"Discouraging?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Taking one form of public recognition with another, it seems to me on the whole I could bear it. When I see the compliments that *are* paid right and left, I ask myself why this one shouldn't take its course. This therefore is what you're entitled to

have looked to me to mention to you. I have some evidence that perhaps would be really dissuasive, but I propose to invite Miss Anvoy to remain in ignorance of it."

"And to invite me to do the same?"

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

"And you don't mean to?"

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

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

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

"Why is it sent through you?"

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

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

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

"No, I'm not," he slowly brought out. "But we're perfectly good friends."

"Such good friends that you will again become prospective husband and wife if the obstacle in your path be removed?"

"Removed?" Gravener anxiously repeated.

"If I give Miss Anvoy the letter I speak of she may drop her project."

"Then for God's sake give it!"

"I'll do so if you're ready to assure me that her dropping it would now presumably bring about your marriage."

"I'd marry her the next day!" my visitor cried.

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

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

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

She reflected for a period which was probably of the briefest, but which was long enough to make me nervous. "Have you brought it with you?"

"No indeed. It's at home, locked up."

There was another great silence, and then she said: "Go back and destroy it."

I went back, but I didn't destroy it till after

Saltram's death, when I burnt it unread. The Pudneys approached her again pressingly, but, prompt as they were, the Coxon Fund had already become an operative benefit and a general amaze: Mr. Saltram, while we gathered about, as it were, to watch the manna descend, was already drawing the magnificent income. He drew it as he had always drawn everything, with a grand abstracted gesture. Its magnificence, alas, as all the world now knows, quite quenched him; it was the beginning of his decline. It was also naturally a new grievance for his wife, who began to believe in him as soon as he was blighted, and who at this hour accuses us of having bribed him, on the whim of a meddling American, to renounce his glorious office, to become, as she says, like everybody else. The very day he found himself able to publish he wholly ceased to produce. This deprived us, as may easily be imagined, of much of our occupation, and especially deprived the Mulvilles, whose want of self-support I never measured till they lost their great inmate. They have no one to live on now. Adelaide's most frequent reference to their destitution is embodied in the remark that dear far-away Ruth's intentions were doubtless good. She and Kent are even yet looking for another prop, but no one presents a true sphere of usefulness. They complain that people are self-sufficing. With Saltram the fine type of the child of adoption was scattered, the grander, the elder style. They have got their carriage back, but what's an empty carriage? In short

I think we were all happier as well as poorer before ; even including George Gravener, who, by the deaths of his brother and his nephew, has lately become Lord Maddock. His wife, whose fortune clears the property, is criminally dull ; he hates being in the upper House, and he has not yet had high office. But what are these accidents, which I should perhaps apologise for mentioning, in the light of the great eventual boon promised the patient by the rate at which the Coxon Fund must be rolling up ?

THE MIDDLE YEARS

I

THE April day was soft and bright, and poor Dencombe, happy in the conceit of reasserted strength, stood in the garden of the hotel, comparing, with a deliberation in which, however, there was still something of languor, the attractions of easy strolls. He liked the feeling of the south, so far as you could have it in the north, he liked the sandy cliffs and the clustered pines, he liked even the colourless sea. "Bournemouth as a health-resort" had sounded like a mere advertisement, but now he was reconciled to the prosaic. The sociable country postman, passing through the garden, had just given him a small parcel, which he took out with him, leaving the hotel to the right and creeping to a convenient bench that he knew of, a safe recess in the cliff. It looked to the south, to the tinted walls of the Island, and was protected behind by the sloping shoulder of the down. He was tired enough when he reached it, and for a moment he was disappointed; he was better, of course, but better, after all, than what? He should never again, as at one or two great moments of the past, be better than himself. The infinite of life had gone, and what was left of the dose was a small

glass engraved like a thermometer by the apothecary. He sat and stared at the sea, which appeared all surface and twinkle, far shallower than the spirit of man. It was the abyss of human illusion that was the real, the tideless deep. He held his packet, which had come by book-post, unopened on his knee, liking, in the lapse of so many joys (his illness had made him feel his age), to know that it was there, but taking for granted there could be no complete renewal of the pleasure, dear to young experience, of seeing one's self "just out." Dencombe, who had a reputation, had come out too often and knew too well in advance how he should look.

His postponement associated itself vaguely, after a little, with a group of three persons, two ladies and a young man, whom, beneath him, straggling and seemingly silent, he could see move slowly together along the sands. The gentleman had his head bent over a book and was occasionally brought to a stop by the charm of this volume, which, as Dencombe could perceive even at a distance, had a cover alluringly red. Then his companions, going a little further, waited for him to come up, poking their parasols into the beach, looking around them at the sea and sky and clearly sensible of the beauty of the day. To these things the young man with the book was still more clearly indifferent; lingering, credulous, absorbed, he was an object of envy to an observer from whose connection with literature all such artlessness had faded. One of the ladies was large and mature; the other had

the spareness of comparative youth and of a social situation possibly inferior. The large lady carried back Dencombe's imagination to the age of crinoline ; she wore a hat of the shape of a mushroom, decorated with a blue veil, and had the air, in her aggressive amplitude, of clinging to a vanished fashion or even a lost cause. Presently her companion produced from under the folds of a mantle a limp, portable chair which she stiffened out and of which the large lady took possession. This act, and something in the movement of either party, instantly characterised the performers—they performed for Dencombe's recreation—as opulent matron and humble dependant. What, moreover, was the use of being an approved novelist if one couldn't establish a relation between such figures ; the clever theory, for instance, that the young man was the son of the opulent matron, and that the humble dependant, the daughter of a clergyman or an officer, nourished a secret passion for him ? Was that not visible from the way she stole behind her protectress to look back at him ?—back to where he had let himself come to a full stop when his mother sat down to rest. His book was a novel ; it had the catchpenny cover, and while the romance of life stood neglected at his side he lost himself in that of the circulating library. He moved mechanically to where the sand was softer, and ended by plumping down in it to finish his chapter at his ease. The humble dependant, discouraged by his remoteness, wandered, with a

martyred droop of the head, in another direction, and the exorbitant lady, watching the waves, offered a confused resemblance to a flying-machine that had broken down.

When his drama began to fail Dencombe remembered that he had, after all, another pastime. Though such promptitude on the part of the publisher was rare, he was already able to draw from its wrapper his "latest," perhaps his last. The cover of "The Middle Years" was duly meretricious, the smell of the fresh pages the very odour of sanctity; but for the moment he went no further—he had become conscious of a strange alienation. He had forgotten what his book was about. Had the assault of his old ailment, which he had so fallaciously come to Bournemouth to ward off, interposed utter blankness as to what had preceded it? He had finished the revision of proof before quitting London, but his subsequent fortnight in bed had passed the sponge over colour. He couldn't have chanted to himself a single sentence, couldn't have turned with curiosity or confidence to any particular page. His subject had already gone from him, leaving scarcely a superstition behind. He uttered a low moan as he breathed the chill of this dark void, so desperately it seemed to represent the completion of a sinister process. The tears filled his mild eyes; something precious had passed away. This was the pang that had been sharpest during the last few years—the sense of ebbing time, of shrinking opportunity; and now he felt not so much

that his last chance was going as that it was gone indeed. He had done all that he should ever do, and yet he had not done what he wanted. This was the laceration—that practically his career was over : it was as violent as a rough hand at his throat. He rose from his seat nervously, like a creature hunted by a dread ; then he fell back in his weakness and nervously opened his book. It was a single volume ; he preferred single volumes and aimed at a rare compression. He began to read, and little by little, in this occupation, he was pacified and reassured. Everything came back to him, but came back with a wonder, came back, above all, with a high and magnificent beauty. He read his own prose, he turned his own leaves, and had, as he sat there with the spring sunshine on the page, an emotion peculiar and intense. His career was over, no doubt, but it was over, after all, with *that*.

He had forgotten during his illness the work of the previous year ; but what he had chiefly forgotten was that it was extraordinarily good. He lived once more into his story and was drawn down, as by a siren's hand, to where, in the dim underworld of fiction, the great glazed tank of art, strange silent subjects float. He recognised his motive and surrendered to his talent. Never, probably, had that talent, such as it was, been so fine. His difficulties were still there, but what was also there, to his perception, though probably, alas ! to nobody's else, was the art that in most cases had surmounted

them. In his surprised enjoyment of this ability he had a glimpse of a possible reprieve. Surely its force was not spent—there was life and service in it yet. It had not come to him easily, it had been backward and roundabout. It was the child of time, the nursling of delay; he had struggled and suffered for it, making sacrifices not to be counted, and now that it was really mature was it to cease to yield, to confess itself brutally beaten? There was an infinite charm for Dencombe in feeling as he had never felt before that diligence *vincit omnia*. The result produced in his little book was somehow a result beyond his conscious intention: it was as if he had planted his genius, had trusted his method, and they had grown up and flowered with this sweetness. If the achievement had been real, however, the process had been manful enough. What he saw so intensely to-day, what he felt as a nail driven in, was that only now, at the very last, had he come into possession. His development had been abnormally slow, almost grotesquely gradual. He had been hindered and retarded by experience, and for long periods had only groped his way. It had taken too much of his life to produce too little of his art. The art had come, but it had come after everything else. At such a rate a first existence was too short—long enough only to collect material; so that to fructify, to use the material, one must have a second age, an extension. This extension was what poor Dencombe sighed for. As he turned the last leaves

of his volume he murmured: "Ah for another go!—ah for a better chance!"

The three persons he had observed on the sands had vanished and then reappeared; they had now wandered up a path, an artificial and easy ascent, which led to the top of the cliff. Dencombe's bench was half-way down, on a sheltered ledge, and the large lady, a massive, heterogeneous person, with bold black eyes and kind red cheeks, now took a few moments to rest. She wore dirty gauntlets and immense diamond ear-rings; at first she looked vulgar, but she contradicted this announcement in an agreeable off-hand tone. While her companions stood waiting for her she spread her skirts on the end of Dencombe's seat. The young man had gold spectacles, through which, with his finger still in his red-covered book, he glanced at the volume, bound in the same shade of the same colour, lying on the lap of the original occupant of the bench. After an instant Dencombe understood that he was struck with a resemblance, had recognised the gilt stamp on the crimson cloth, was reading "The Middle Years," and now perceived that somebody else had kept pace with him. The stranger was startled, possibly even a little ruffled, to find that he was not the only person who had been favoured with an early copy. The eyes of the two proprietors met for a moment, and Dencombe borrowed amusement from the expression of those of his competitor, those, it might even be inferred, of his admirer. They confessed to some resentment—

they seemed to say: "Hang it, has he got it *already*?—Of course he's a brute of a reviewer!" Dencombe shuffled his copy out of sight while the opulent matron, rising from her repose, broke out: "I feel already the good of this air!"

"I can't say I do," said the angular lady. "I find myself quite let down."

"I find myself horribly hungry. At what time did you order lunch?" her protectress pursued.

The young person put the question by. "Doctor Hugh always orders it."

"I ordered nothing to-day—I'm going to make you diet," said their comrade.

"Then I shall go home and sleep. *Qui dort dine!*"

"Can I trust you to Miss Vernham?" asked Doctor Hugh of his elder companion.

"Don't I trust *you*?" she archly inquired.

"Not too much!" Miss Vernham, with her eyes on the ground, permitted herself to declare. "You must come with us at least to the house," she went on, while the personage on whom they appeared to be in attendance began to mount higher. She had got a little out of ear-shot; nevertheless Miss Vernham became, so far as Dencombe was concerned, less distinctly audible to murmur to the young man: "I don't think you realise all you owe the Countess!"

Absently, a moment, Doctor Hugh caused his gold-rimmed spectacles to shine at her.

"Is that the way I strike you? I see—I see!"

"She's awfully good to us," continued Miss Vernham, compelled by her interlocutor's immovability to stand there in spite of his discussion of private matters. Of what use would it have been that Dencombe should be sensitive to shades had he not detected in that immovability a strange influence from the quiet old convalescent in the great tweed cape? Miss Vernham appeared suddenly to become aware of some such connection, for she added in a moment: "If you want to sun yourself here you can come back after you've seen us home."

Doctor Hugh, at this, hesitated, and Dencombe, in spite of a desire to pass for unconscious, risked a covert glance at him. What his eyes met this time, as it happened, was on the part of the young lady a queer stare, naturally vitreous, which made her aspect remind him of some figure (he couldn't name it) in a play or a novel, some sinister governess or tragic old maid. She seemed to scrutinise him, to challenge him, to say, from general spite: "What have you got to do with us?" At the same instant the rich humour of the Countess reached them from above: "Come, come, my little lambs, you should follow your old *bergère!*" Miss Vernham turned away at this, pursuing the ascent, and Doctor Hugh, after another mute appeal to Dencombe and a moment's evident demur, deposited his book on the bench, as if to keep his place or even as a sign that he would return, and bounded without difficulty up the rougher part of the cliff.

Equally innocent and infinite are the pleasures of observation and the resources engendered by the habit of analysing life. It amused poor Dencombe, as he dawdled in his tepid air-bath, to think that he was waiting for a revelation of something at the back of a fine young mind. He looked hard at the book on the end of the bench, but he wouldn't have touched it for the world. It served his purpose to have a theory which should not be exposed to refutation. He already felt better of his melancholy; he had, according to his old formula, put his head at the window. A passing Countess could draw off the fancy when, like the elder of the ladies who had just retreated, she was as obvious as the giantess of a caravan. It was indeed general views that were terrible; short ones, contrary to an opinion sometimes expressed, were the refuge, were the remedy. Doctor Hugh couldn't possibly be anything but a reviewer who had understandings for early copies with publishers or with newspapers. He reappeared in a quarter of an hour, with visible relief at finding Dencombe on the spot, and the gleam of white teeth in an embarrassed but generous smile. He was perceptibly disappointed at the eclipse of the other copy of the book; it was a pretext the less for speaking to the stranger. But he spoke notwithstanding; he held up his own copy and broke out pleadingly:

“*Do* say, if you have occasion to speak of it, that it's the best thing he has done yet!”

Dencombe responded with a laugh: "Done yet" was so amusing to him, made such a grand avenue of the future. Better still, the young man took *him* for a reviewer. He pulled out "The Middle Years" from under his cape, but instinctively concealed any tell-tale look of fatherhood. This was partly because a person was always a fool for calling attention to his work. "Is that what you're going to say yourself?" he inquired of his visitor.

"I'm not quite sure I shall write anything. I don't, as a regular thing—I enjoy in peace. But it's awfully fine."

Dencombe debated a moment. If his interlocutor had begun to abuse him he would have confessed on the spot to his identity, but there was no harm in drawing him on a little to praise. He drew him on with such success that in a few moments his new acquaintance, seated by his side, was confessing candidly that Dencombe's novels were the only ones he could read a second time. He had come the day before from London, where a friend of his, a journalist, had lent him his copy of the last—the copy sent to the office of the journal and already the subject of a "notice" which, as was pretended there (but one had to allow for "swagger") it had taken a full quarter of an hour to prepare. He intimated that he was ashamed for his friend, and in the case of a work demanding and repaying study, of such inferior manners; and, with his fresh appreciation and inexplicable wish to express it, he speedily became for poor Dencombe a remarkable, a delight-

ful apparition. Chance had brought the weary man of letters face to face with the greatest admirer in the new generation whom it was supposable he possessed. The admirer, in truth, was mystifying, so rare a case was it to find a bristling young doctor—he looked like a German physiologist—enamoured of literary form. It was an accident, but happier than most accidents, so that Dencombe, exhilarated as well as confounded, spent half an hour in making his visitor talk while he kept himself quiet. He explained his premature possession of "The Middle Years" by an allusion to the friendship of the publisher, who, knowing he was at Bournemouth for his health, had paid him this graceful attention. He admitted that he had been ill, for Doctor Hugh would infallibly have guessed it; he even went so far as to wonder whether he mightn't look for some hygienic "tip" from a personage combining so bright an enthusiasm with a presumable knowledge of the remedies now in vogue. It would shake his faith a little perhaps to have to take a doctor seriously who could take *him* so seriously, but he enjoyed this gushing modern youth and he felt with an acute pang that there would still be work to do in a world in which such odd combinations were presented. It was not true, what he had tried for renunciation's sake to believe, that all the combinations were exhausted. They were not, they were not—they were infinite: the exhaustion was in the miserable artist.

Doctor Hugh was an ardent physiologist, saturated with the spirit of the age—in other words he had

just taken his degree ; but he was independent and various, he talked like a man who would have preferred to love literature best. He would fain have made fine phrases, but nature had denied him the trick. Some of the finest in "The Middle Years" had struck him inordinately, and he took the liberty of reading them to Dencombe in support of his plea. He grew vivid, in the balmy air, to his companion, for whose deep refreshment he seemed to have been sent ; and was particularly ingenuous in describing how recently he had become acquainted, and how instantly infatuated, with the only man who had put flesh between the ribs of an art that was starving on superstitions. He had not yet written to him—he was deterred by a sentiment of respect. Dencombe at this moment felicitated himself more than ever on having never answered the photographers. His visitor's attitude promised him a luxury of intercourse, but he surmised that a certain security in it, for Doctor Hugh, would depend not a little on the Countess. He learned without delay with what variety of Countess they were concerned, as well as the nature of the tie that united the curious trio. The large lady, an Englishwoman by birth and the daughter of a celebrated baritone, whose taste, without his talent, she had inherited, was the widow of a French nobleman and mistress of all that remained of the handsome fortune, the fruit of her father's earnings, that had constituted her dower. Miss Vernham, an odd creature but an accomplished pianist, was attached to her person at a salary. The

Countess was generous, independent, eccentric; she travelled with her minstrel and her medical man. Ignorant and passionate, she had nevertheless moments in which she was almost irresistible. Dencombe saw her sit for her portrait in Doctor Hugh's free sketch, and felt the picture of his young friend's relation to her frame itself in his mind. This young friend, for a representative of the new psychology, was himself easily hypnotised, and if he became abnormally communicative it was only a sign of his real subjection. Dencombe did accordingly what he wanted with him, even without being known as Dencombe.

Taken ill on a journey in Switzerland the Countess had picked him up at an hotel, and the accident of his happening to please her had made her offer him, with her imperious liberality, terms that couldn't fail to dazzle a practitioner without patients and whose resources had been drained dry by his studies. It was not the way he would have elected to spend his time, but it was time that would pass quickly, and meanwhile she was wonderfully kind. She exacted perpetual attention, but it was impossible not to like her. He gave details about his queer patient, a "type" if there ever was one, who had in connection with her flushed obesity and in addition to the morbid strain of a violent and aimless will a grave organic disorder; but he came back to his loved novelist, whom he was so good as to pronounce more essentially a poet than many of those who went in for verse, with a zeal excited, as all his in-

discretion had been excited, by the happy chance of Dencombe's sympathy and the coincidence of their occupation. Dencombe had confessed to a slight personal acquaintance with the author of "The Middle Years," but had not felt himself as ready as he could have wished when his companion, who had never yet encountered a being so privileged, began to be eager for particulars. He even thought that Doctor Hugh's eye at that moment emitted a glimmer of suspicion. But the young man was too inflamed to be shrewd and repeatedly caught up the book to exclaim: "Did you notice this?" or "Weren't you immensely struck with that?" "There's a beautiful passage toward the end," he broke out; and again he laid his hand upon the volume. As he turned the pages he came upon something else, while Dencombe saw him suddenly change colour. He had taken up, as it lay on the bench, Dencombe's copy instead of his own, and his neighbour immediately guessed the reason of his start. Doctor Hugh looked grave an instant; then he said: "I see you've been altering the text!" Dencombe was a passionate corrector, a fingerer of style; the last thing he ever arrived at was a form final for himself. His ideal would have been to publish secretly, and then, on the published text, treat himself to the terrified revise, sacrificing always a first edition and beginning for posterity and even for the collectors, poor dears, with a second. This morning, in "The Middle Years," his pencil had pricked a dozen lights. He was amused at the effect of the young man's

reproach; for an instant it made him change colour. He stammered, at any rate, ambiguously; then, through a blur of ebbing consciousness, saw Doctor Hugh's mystified eyes. He only had time to feel he was about to be ill again—that emotion, excitement, fatigue, the heat of the sun, the solicitation of the air, had combined to play him a trick, before, stretching out a hand to his visitor with a plaintive cry, he lost his senses altogether.

Later he knew that he had fainted and that Doctor Hugh had got him home in a bath-chair, the conductor of which, prowling within hail for custom, had happened to remember seeing him in the garden of the hotel. He had recovered his perception in the transit, and had, in bed, that afternoon, a vague recollection of Doctor Hugh's young face, as they went together, bent over him in a comforting laugh and expressive of something more than a suspicion of his identity. That identity was ineffaceable now, and all the more that he was disappointed, disgusted. He had been rash, been stupid, had gone out too soon, stayed out too long. He oughtn't to have exposed himself to strangers, he ought to have taken his servant. He felt as if he had fallen into a hole too deep to descry any little patch of heaven. He was confused about the time that had elapsed—he pieced the fragments together. He had seen his doctor, the real one, the one who had treated him from the first and who had again been very kind. His servant was in and out on tiptoe, looking very wise after the fact. He said more than once some-

thing about the sharp young gentleman. The rest was vagueness, in so far as it wasn't despair. The vagueness, however, justified itself by dreams, dozing anxieties from which he finally emerged to the consciousness of a dark room and a shaded candle.

"You'll be all right again—I know all about you now," said a voice near him that he knew to be young. Then his meeting with Doctor Hugh came back. He was too discouraged to joke about it yet, but he was able to perceive, after a little, that the interest of it was intense for his visitor. "Of course I can't attend you professionally—you've got your own man, with whom I've talked and who's excellent," Doctor Hugh went on. "But you must let me come to see you as a good friend. I've just looked in before going to bed. You're doing beautifully, but it's a good job I was with you on the cliff. I shall come in early to-morrow. I want to do something for you. I want to do everything. You've done a tremendous lot for me." The young man held his hand, hanging over him, and poor Dencombe, weakly aware of this living pressure, simply lay there and accepted his devotion. He couldn't do anything less—he needed help too much.

The idea of the help he needed was very present to him that night, which he spent in a lucid stillness, an intensity of thought that constituted a reaction from his hours of stupor. He was lost, he was lost—he was lost if he couldn't be saved. He was not afraid of suffering, of death; he was not even in love with

life ; but he had had a deep demonstration of desire. It came over him in the long, quiet hours that only with "The Middle Years" had he taken his flight ; only on that day, visited by soundless processions, had he recognised his kingdom. He had had a revelation of his range. What he dreaded was the idea that his reputation should stand on the unfinished. It was not with his past but with his future that it should properly be concerned. Illness and age rose before him like spectres with pitiless eyes : how was he to bribe such fates to give him the second chance ? He had had the one chance that all men have—he had had the chance of life. He went to sleep again very late, and when he awoke Doctor Hugh was sitting by his head. There was already, by this time, something beautifully familiar in him.

"Don't think I've turned out your physician," he said ; "I'm acting with his consent. He has been here and seen you. Somehow he seems to trust me. I told him how we happened to come together yesterday, and he recognises that I've a peculiar right."

Dencombe looked at him with a calculating earnestness. "How have you squared the Countess ?"

The young man blushed a little, but he laughed. "Oh, never mind the Countess !"

"You told me she was very exacting."

Doctor Hugh was silent a moment. "So she is."

"And Miss Vernham's an *intrigante*."

"How do you know that ?"

"I know everything. One *has* to, to write decently!"

"I think she's mad," said limpid Doctor Hugh.

"Well, don't quarrel with the Countess—she's a present help to you."

"I don't quarrel," Doctor Hugh replied. "But I don't get on with silly women." Presently he added: "You seem very much alone."

"That often happens at my age. I've outlived, I've lost by the way."

Doctor Hugh hesitated; then surmounting a soft scruple: "Whom have you lost?"

"Every one."

"Ah, no," the young man murmured, laying a hand on his arm.

"I once had a wife—I once had a son. My wife died when my child was born, and my boy, at school, was carried off by typhoid."

"I wish I'd been there!" said Doctor Hugh simply.

"Well—if you're here!" Dencombe answered, with a smile that, in spite of dimness, showed how much he liked to be sure of his companion's whereabouts.

"You talk strangely of your age. You're not old."

"Hypocrite—so early!"

"I speak physiologically."

"That's the way I've been speaking for the last five years, and it's exactly what I've been saying to myself. It isn't till we *are* old that we begin to tell ourselves we're not!"

"Yet I know I myself am young," Doctor Hugh declared.

"Not so well as I!" laughed his patient, whose visitor indeed would have established the truth in question by the honesty with which he changed the point of view, remarking that it must be one of the charms of age—at any rate in the case of high distinction—to feel that one has laboured and achieved. Doctor Hugh employed the common phrase about earning one's rest, and it made poor Dencombe, for an instant, almost angry. He recovered himself, however, to explain, lucidly enough, that if he, ungraciously, knew nothing of such a balm, it was doubtless because he had wasted inestimable years. He had followed literature from the first, but he had taken a lifetime to get alongside of her. Only to-day, at last, had he begun to *see*, so that what he had hitherto done was a movement without a direction. He had ripened too late and was so clumsily constituted that he had had to teach himself by mistakes.

"I prefer your flowers, then, to other people's fruit, and your mistakes to other people's successes," said gallant Doctor Hugh. "It's for your mistakes I admire you."

"You're happy—you don't know," Dencombe answered.

Looking at his watch the young man had got up; he named the hour of the afternoon at which he would return. Dencombe warned him against committing himself too deeply, and expressed again

all his dread of making him neglect the Countess—perhaps incur her displeasure.

“I want to be like you—I want to learn by mistakes!” Doctor Hugh laughed.

“Take care you don’t make too grave a one! But do come back,” Dencombe added, with the glimmer of a new idea.

“You should have had more vanity!” Doctor Hugh spoke as if he knew the exact amount required to make a man of letters normal.

“No, no—I only should have had more time. I want another go.”

“Another go?”

“I want an extension.”

“An extension?” Again Doctor Hugh repeated Dencombe’s words, with which he seemed to have been struck.

“Don’t you know?—I want to what they call ‘live.’”

The young man, for good-bye, had taken his hand, which closed with a certain force. They looked at each other hard a moment. “You *will* live,” said Doctor Hugh.

“Don’t be superficial. It’s too serious!”

“You *shall* live!” Dencombe’s visitor declared, turning pale.

“Ah, that’s better!” And as he retired the invalid, with a troubled laugh, sank gratefully back.

All that day and all the following night he wondered if it mightn’t be arranged. His doctor came again, his servant was attentive, but it was to his confident young friend that he found himself mentally

appealing. His collapse on the cliff was plausibly explained, and his liberation, on a better basis, promised for the morrow ; meanwhile, however, the intensity of his meditations kept him tranquil and made him indifferent. The idea that occupied him was none the less absorbing because it was a morbid fancy. Here was a clever son of the age, ingenious and ardent, who happened to have set him up for connoisseurs to worship. This servant of his altar had all the new learning in science and all the old reverence in faith ; wouldn't he therefore put his knowledge at the disposal of his sympathy, his craft at the disposal of his love ? Couldn't he be trusted to invent a remedy for a poor artist to whose art he had paid a tribute ? If he couldn't, the alternative was hard : Dencombe would have to surrender to silence, unvindicated and undivined. The rest of the day and all the next he toyed in secret with this sweet futility. Who would work the miracle for him but the young man who could combine such lucidity with such passion ? He thought of the fairy-tales of science and charmed himself into forgetting that he looked for a magic that was not of this world. Doctor Hugh was an apparition, and that placed him above the law. He came and went while his patient, who sat up, followed him with supplicating eyes. The interest of knowing the great author had made the young man begin "The Middle Years" afresh, and would help him to find a deeper meaning in its pages. Dencombe had told him what he "tried for ;" with all his intelligence, on a first perusal, Doctor

Hugh had failed to guess it. The baffled celebrity wondered then who in the world *would* guess it : he was amused once more at the fine, full way with which an intention could be missed. Yet he wouldn't rail at the general mind to-day—consoling as that ever had been : the revelation of his own slowness had seemed to make all stupidity sacred.

Doctor Hugh, after a little, was visibly worried, confessing, on inquiry, to a source of embarrassment at home. “Stick to the Countess—don't mind me,” Dencombe said, repeatedly ; for his companion was frank enough about the large lady's attitude. She was so jealous that she had fallen ill—she resented such a breach of allegiance. She paid so much for his fidelity that she must have it all : she refused him the right to other sympathies, charged him with scheming to make her die alone, for it was needless to point out how little Miss Vernham was a resource in trouble. When Doctor Hugh mentioned that the Countess would already have left Bournemouth if he hadn't kept her in bed, poor Dencombe held his arm tighter and said with decision : “Take her straight away.” They had gone out together, walking back to the sheltered nook in which, the other day, they had met. The young man, who had given his companion a personal support, declared with emphasis that his conscience was clear—he could ride two horses at once. Didn't he dream, for his future, of a time when he should have to ride five hundred ? Longing equally for virtue, Dencombe replied that in that golden age no patient would pretend to have

contracted with him for his whole attention. On the part of the Countess was not such an avidity lawful? Doctor Hugh denied it, said there was no contract but only a free understanding, and that a sordid servitude was impossible to a generous spirit; he liked moreover to talk about art, and that was the subject on which, this time, as they sat together on the sunny bench, he tried most to engage the author of "The Middle Years." Dencombe, soaring again a little on the weak wings of convalescence and still haunted by that happy notion of an organised rescue, found another strain of eloquence to plead the cause of a certain splendid "last manner," the very citadel, as it would prove, of his reputation, the stronghold into which his real treasure would be gathered. While his listener gave up the morning and the great still sea appeared to wait, he had a wonderful explanatory hour. Even for himself he was inspired as he told of what his treasure would consist—the precious metals he would dig from the mine, the jewels rare, strings of pearls, he would hang between the columns of his temple. He was wonderful for himself, so thick his convictions crowded; but he was still more wonderful for Doctor Hugh, who assured him, none the less, that the very pages he had just published were already encrusted with gems. The young man, however, panted for the combinations to come, and, before the face of the beautiful day, renewed to Dencombe his guarantee that his profession would hold itself responsible for such a life. Then he suddenly clapped his hand

upon his watch-pocket and asked leave to absent himself for half an hour. Dencombe waited there for his return, but was at last recalled to the actual by the fall of a shadow across the ground. The shadow darkened into that of Miss Vernham, the young lady in attendance on the Countess; whom Dencombe, recognising her, perceived so clearly to have come to speak to him that he rose from his bench to acknowledge the civility. Miss Vernham indeed proved not particularly civil; she looked strangely agitated, and her type was now unmistakable.

"Excuse me if I inquire," she said, "whether it's too much to hope that you may be induced to leave Doctor Hugh alone." Then, before Dencombe, greatly disconcerted, could protest: "You ought to be informed that you stand in his light; that you may do him a terrible injury."

"Do you mean by causing the Countess to dispense with his services?"

"By causing her to disinherit him." Dencombe stared at this, and Miss Vernham pursued, in the gratification of seeing she could produce an impression: "It has depended on himself to come into something very handsome. He has had a magnificent prospect, but I think you've succeeded in spoiling it."

"Not intentionally, I assure you. Is there no hope the accident may be repaired?" Dencombe asked.

"She was ready to do anything for him. She takes great fancies, she lets herself go—it's her way.

She has no relations, she's free to dispose of her money, and she's very ill."

"I'm very sorry to hear it," Dencombe stammered.

"Wouldn't it be possible for you to leave Bourne-mouth? That's what I've come to ask of you."

Poor Dencombe sank down on his bench. "I'm very ill myself, but I'll try!"

Miss Vernham still stood there with her colourless eyes and the brutality of her good conscience. "Before it's too late, please!" she said; and with this she turned her back, in order, quickly, as if it had been a business to which she could spare but a precious moment, to pass out of his sight.

Oh, yes, after this Dencombe was certainly very ill. Miss Vernham had upset him with her rough, fierce news; it was the sharpest shock to him to discover what was at stake for a penniless young man of fine parts. He sat trembling on his bench, staring at the waste of waters, feeling sick with the directness of the blow. He was indeed too weak, too unsteady, too alarmed; but he would make the effort to get away, for he couldn't accept the guilt of interference, and his honour was really involved. He would hobble home, at any rate, and then he would think what was to be done. He made his way back to the hotel and, as he went, had a characteristic vision of Miss Vernham's great motive. The Countess hated women, of course; Dencombe was lucid about that; so the hungry pianist had no personal hopes and could only console herself with the bold conception of helping

Doctor Hugh in order either to marry him after he should get his money or to induce him to recognise her title to compensation and buy her off. If she had befriended him at a fruitful crisis he would really, as a man of delicacy, and she knew what to think of that point, have to reckon with her.

At the hotel Dencombe's servant insisted on his going back to bed. The invalid had talked about catching a train and had begun with orders to pack; after which his humming nerves had yielded to a sense of sickness. He consented to see his physician, who immediately was sent for, but he wished it to be understood that his door was irrevocably closed to Doctor Hugh. He had his plan, which was so fine that he rejoiced in it after getting back to bed. Doctor Hugh, suddenly finding himself snubbed without mercy, would, in natural disgust and to the joy of Miss Vernham, renew his allegiance to the Countess. When his physician arrived Dencombe learned that he was feverish and that this was very wrong: he was to cultivate calmness and try, if possible, not to think. For the rest of the day he wooed stupidity; but there was an ache that kept him sentient, the probable sacrifice of his "extension," the limit of his course. His medical adviser was anything but pleased; his successive relapses were ominous. He charged this personage to put out a strong hand and take Doctor Hugh off his mind—it would contribute so much to his being quiet. The agitating name, in his room, was not mentioned again, but his security was a smothered

fear, and it was not confirmed by the receipt, at ten o'clock that evening, of a telegram which his servant opened and read for him and to which, with an address in London, the signature of Miss Vernham was attached. "Beseech you to use all influence to make our friend join us here in the morning. Countess much the worse for dreadful journey, but everything may still be saved." The two ladies had gathered themselves up and had been capable in the afternoon of a spiteful revolution. They had started for the capital, and if the elder one, as Miss Vernham had announced, was very ill, she had wished to make it clear that she was proportionately reckless. Poor Dencombe, who was not reckless and who only desired that everything should indeed be "saved," sent this missive straight off to the young man's lodging and had on the morrow the pleasure of knowing that he had quitted Bournemouth by an early train.

Two days later he pressed in with a copy of a literary journal in his hand. He had returned because he was anxious and for the pleasure of flourishing the great review of "The Middle Years." Here at least was something adequate—it rose to the occasion; it was an acclamation, a reparation, a critical attempt to place the author in the niche he had fairly won. Dencombe accepted and submitted; he made neither objection nor inquiry, for old complications had returned and he had had two atrocious days. He was convinced not only that he should never again leave his bed,

so that his young friend might pardonably remain, but that the demand he should make on the patience of beholders would be very moderate indeed. Doctor Hugh had been to town, and he tried to find in his eyes some confession that the Countess was pacified and his legacy clinched; but all he could see there was the light of his juvenile joy in two or three of the phrases of the newspaper. Dencombe couldn't read them, but when his visitor had insisted on repeating them more than once he was able to shake an unintoxicated head. "Ah, no; but they would have been true of what I *could* have done!"

"What people 'could have done' is mainly what they've in fact done," Doctor Hugh contended.

"Mainly, yes; but I've been an idiot!" said Dencombe.

Doctor Hugh did remain; the end was coming fast. Two days later Dencombe observed to him, by way of the feeblest of jokes, that there would now be no question whatever of a second chance. At this the young man stared; then he exclaimed: "Why, it has come to pass—it has come to pass! The second chance has been the public's—the chance to find the point of view, to pick up the pearl!"

"Oh, the pearl!" poor Dencombe uneasily sighed. A smile as cold as a winter sunset flickered on his drawn lips as he added: "The pearl is the unwritten—the pearl is the unalloyed, the *rest*, the lost!"

From that moment he was less and less present, heedless to all appearance of what went on around

him. His disease was definitely mortal, of an action as relentless, after the short arrest that had enabled him to fall in with Doctor Hugh, as a leak in a great ship. Sinking steadily, though this visitor, a man of rare resources, now cordially approved by his physician, showed endless art in guarding him from pain, poor Dencombe kept no reckoning of favour or neglect, betrayed no symptom of regret or speculation. Yet toward the last he gave a sign of having noticed that for two days Doctor Hugh had not been in his room, a sign that consisted of his suddenly opening his eyes to ask of him if he had spent the interval with the Countess.

“The Countess is dead,” said Doctor Hugh. “I knew that in a particular contingency she wouldn’t resist. I went to her grave.”

Dencombe’s eyes opened wider. “She left you ‘something handsome’?”

The young man gave a laugh almost too light for a chamber of woe. “Never a penny. She roundly cursed me.”

“Cursed you?” Dencombe murmured.

“For giving her up. I gave her up for *you*. I had to choose,” his companion explained.

“You chose to let a fortune go?”

“I chose to accept, whatever they might be, the consequences of my infatuation,” smiled Doctor Hugh. Then, as a larger pleasantry: “A fortune be hanged! It’s your own fault if I can’t get your things out of my head.”

The immediate tribute to his humour was a long, bewildered moan; after which, for many hours, many days, Dencombe lay motionless and absent. A response so absolute, such a glimpse of a definite result and such a sense of credit worked together in his mind and, producing a strange commotion, slowly altered and transfigured his despair. The sense of cold submersion left him—he seemed to float without an effort. The incident was extraordinary as evidence, and it shed an intenser light. At the last he signed to Doctor Hugh to listen, and, when he was down on his knees by the pillow, brought him very near.

“You’ve made me think it all a delusion.”

“Not your glory, my dear friend,” stammered the young man.

“Not my glory—what there is of it! It *is* glory—to have been tested, to have had our little quality and cast our little spell. The thing is to have made somebody care. You happen to be crazy, of course, but that doesn’t affect the law.”

“You’re a great success!” said Doctor Hugh, putting into his young voice the ring of a marriage-bell.

Dencombe lay taking this in; then he gathered strength to speak once more. “A second chance—*that’s* the delusion. There never was to be but one. We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”

"If you've doubted, if you've despaired, you've always 'done' it," his visitor subtly argued.

"We've done something or other," Dencombe conceded.

"Something or other is everything. It's the feasible. It's *you!*"

"Comforter!" poor Dencombe ironically sighed.

"But it's true," insisted his friend.

"It's true. It's frustration that doesn't count."

"Frustration's only life," said Doctor Hugh.

"Yes, it's what passes." Poor Dencombe was barely audible, but he had marked with the words the virtual end of his first and only chance.

THE ALTAR OF THE DEAD

I

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

Of that benediction, however, it would have been false to say this life could really be emptied: it was still ruled by a pale ghost, it was still ordered by a sovereign presence. He had not been a man of

numerous passions, and even in all these years no sense had grown stronger with him than the sense of being bereft. He had needed no priest and no altar to make him for ever widowed. He had done many things in the world—he had done almost all things but one: he had never forgotten. He had tried to put into his existence whatever else might take up room in it, but he had never made it anything but a house of which the mistress was eternally absent. She was most absent of all on the recurrent December day that his tenacity set apart. He had no designed observance of it, but his nerves made it all their own. They always drove him forth on a long walk, for the goal of his pilgrimage was far. She had been buried in a London suburb, in a place then almost natural, but which he had seen lose one after another every feature of freshness. It was in truth during the moments he stood there that his eyes beheld the place least. They looked at another image, they opened to another light. Was it a credible future? Was it an incredible past? Whatever it was, it was an immense escape from the actual.

It is true that if there were not other dates than this there were other memories; and by the time George Stransom was fifty-five such memories had greatly multiplied. There were other ghosts in his life than the ghost of Mary Antrim. He had perhaps not had more losses than most men, but he had counted his losses more; he had not seen death more closely, but he had, in a manner, felt it more

deeply. He had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead : it had come to him tolerably early in life that there was something one had to do for them. They were there in their simplified, intensified essence, their conscious absence and expressive patience, as personally there as if they had only been stricken dumb. When all sense of them failed, all sound of them ceased, it was as if their purgatory were really still on earth : they asked so little that they got, poor things, even less, and died again, died every day, of the hard usage of life. They had no organised service, no reserved place, no honour, no shelter, no safety. Even ungenerous people provided for the living, but even those who were called most generous did nothing for the others. So, on George Stransom's part, there grew up with the years a determination that he at least would do something, do it, that is, for his own, and perform the great charity without reproach. Every man had his own, and every man had, to meet this charity, the ample resources of the soul.

It was doubtless the voice of Mary Antrim that spoke for them best ; at any rate, as the years went on, he found himself in regular communion with these alternative associates, with those whom indeed he always called in his thoughts the Others. He spared them the moments, he organised the charity. How it grew up he probably never could have told you, but what came to pass was that an altar, such as was after all within everybody's compass, lighted with perpetual candles and dedicated to these secret

rites, reared itself in his spiritual spaces. He had wondered of old, in some embarrassment, whether he had a religion ; being very sure, and not a little content, that he had not at all events the religion some of the people he had known wanted him to have. Gradually this question was straightened out for him : it became clear to him that the religion instilled by his earliest consciousness had been simply the religion of the Dead. It suited his inclination, it satisfied his spirit, it gave employment to his piety. It answered his love of great offices, of a solemn and splendid ritual, for no shrine could be more bedecked and no ceremonial more stately than those to which his worship was attached. He had no imagination about these things save that they were accessible to every one who should ever feel the need of them. The poorest could build such temples of the spirit—could make them blaze with candles and smoke with incense, make them flush with pictures and flowers. The cost, in the common phrase, of keeping them up fell entirely on the liberal heart.

II

HE had this year, on the eve of his anniversary, as it happened, an emotion not unconnected with that range of feeling. Walking home at the close of a busy day, he was arrested in the London street by the particular effect of a shop-front which lighted the dull brown air with its mercenary grin and before which several persons were gathered. It was the window of a jeweller whose diamonds and sapphires seemed to laugh, in flashes like high notes of sound, with the mere joy of knowing how much more they were "worth" than most of the dingy pedestrians staring at them from the other side of the pane. Stransom lingered long enough to suspend, in a vision, a string of pearls about the white neck of Mary Antrim, and then was kept an instant longer by the sound of a voice he knew. Next him was a mumbling old woman, and beyond the old woman a gentleman with a lady on his arm. It was from him, from Paul Creston, the voice had proceeded: he was talking with the lady of some precious object in the window. Stransom had no sooner recognised him than the old woman turned away; but simultaneously with this increase of opportunity he became aware of a strangeness which stayed him in the very act of

laying his hand on his friend's arm. It lasted only a few seconds, but a few seconds were long enough for the flash of a wild question. Was *not* Mrs. Creston dead?—the ambiguity met him there in the short drop of her husband's voice, the drop conjugal, if it ever was, and in the way the two figures leaned to each other. Creston, making a step to look at something else, came nearer, glanced at him, started and exclaimed—a circumstance the effect of which was at first only to leave Stransom staring, staring back across the months at the different face, the wholly other face the poor man had shown him last, the blurred, ravaged mask bent over the open grave by which they had stood together. Creston was not in mourning now; he detached his arm from his companion's to grasp the hand of the older friend. He coloured as well as smiled in the strong light of the shop when Stransom raised a tentative hat to the lady. Stransom had just time to see that she was pretty before he found himself gaping at a fact more portentous. "My dear fellow, let me make you acquainted with my wife."

Creston had blushed and stammered over it, but in half a minute, at the rate we live in polite society, it had practically become, for Stransom, the mere memory of a shock. They stood there and laughed and talked; Stransom had instantly whisked the shock out of the way, to keep it for private consumption. He felt himself grimacing, he heard himself exaggerating the usual, but he was conscious that he had turned slightly faint. That new woman, that

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

He felt quite determined, as he walked away,

never in his life to go near her. She was perhaps a human being, but Creston oughtn't to have shown her without precautions, oughtn't indeed to have shown her at all. His precautions should have been those of a forger or a murderer, and the people at home would never have mentioned extradition. This was a wife for foreign service or purely external use; a decent consideration would have spared her the injury of comparisons. Such were the first reflections of George Stransom's amazement; but as he sat alone that night—there were particular hours that he always passed alone—the harshness dropped from them and left only the pity. *He* could spend an evening with Kate Creston, if the man to whom she had given everything couldn't. He had known her twenty years, and she was the only woman for whom he might perhaps have been unfaithful. She was all cleverness and sympathy and charm; her house had been the very easiest in all the world and her friendship the very firmest. Without accidents he had loved her, without accidents every one had loved her: she had made the passions about her as regular as the moon makes the tides. She had been also of course far too good for her husband, but he never suspected it, and in nothing had she been more admirable than in the exquisite art with which she tried to keep every one else (keeping Creston was no trouble) from finding it out. Here was a man to whom she had devoted her life and for whom she had given it up—dying to bring into the world a child of his bed; and she had

had only to submit to her fate to have, ere the grass was green on her grave, no more existence for him than a domestic servant he had replaced. The frivolity, the indecency of it made Stransom's eyes fill ; and he had that evening a rich, almost happy sense that he alone, in a world without delicacy, had a right to hold up his head. While he smoked, after dinner, he had a book in his lap, but he had no eyes for his page : his eyes, in the swarming void of things, seemed to have caught Kate Creston's, and it was into their sad silences he looked. It was to him her sentient spirit had turned, knowing that it was of her he would think. He thought, for a long time, of how the closed eyes of dead women could still live—how they could open again, in a quiet lamplit room, long after they had looked their last. They had looks that remained, as great poets had quoted lines.

The newspaper lay by his chair—the thing that came in the afternoon and the servants thought one wanted ; without sense for what was in it he had mechanically unfolded and then dropped it. Before he went to bed he took it up, and this time, at the top of a paragraph, he was caught by five words that made him start. He stood staring, before the fire, at the "Death of Sir Acton Hague, K.C.B.," the man who, ten years earlier, had been the nearest of his friends and whose deposition from this eminence had practically left it without an occupant. He had seen him after that catastrophe, but he had not seen him for years. Standing there before the

fire he turned cold as he read what had befallen him. Promoted a short time previous to the governorship of the Westward Islands, Acton Hague had died, in the bleak honour of this exile, of an illness consequent on the bite of a poisonous snake. His career was compressed by the newspaper into a dozen lines, the perusal of which excited on George Stransom's part no warmer feeling than one of relief at the absence of any mention of their quarrel, an incident accidentally tainted at the time, thanks to their joint immersion in large affairs, with a horrible publicity. Public indeed was the wrong Stransom had, to his own sense, suffered, the insult he had blankly taken from the only man with whom he had ever been intimate ; the friend, almost adored, of his University years, the subject, later, of his passionate loyalty : so public that he had never spoken of it to a human creature, so public that he had completely overlooked it. It had made the difference for him that friendship too was all over, but it had only made just that one. The shock of interests had been private, intensely so ; but the action taken by Hague had been in the face of men. To-day it all seemed to have occurred merely to the end that George Stransom should think of him as "Hague" and measure exactly how much he himself could feel like a stone. He went cold, suddenly and horribly cold, to bed.

III

THE next day, in the afternoon, in the great grey suburb, he felt that his long walk had tired him. In the dreadful cemetery alone he had been on his feet an hour. Instinctively, coming back, they had taken him a devious course, and it was a desert in which no circling cabman hovered over possible prey. He paused on a corner and measured the dreariness; then he became aware in the gathered dusk that he was in one of those tracts of London which are less gloomy by night than by day, because, in the former case, of the civil gift of light. By day there was nothing, but by night there were lamps, and George Stransom was in a mood which made lamps good in themselves. It wasn't that they could show him anything; it was only that they could burn clear. To his surprise, however, after a while, they did show him something: the arch of a high doorway approached by a low terrace of steps, in the depth of which—it formed a dim vestibule—the raising of a curtain, at the moment he passed, gave him a glimpse of an avenue of gloom with a glow of tapers at the end. He stopped and looked up, making out that the place was a church. The thought quickly came to him that since he was tired he might rest there;

so that after a moment he had in turn pushed up the leathern curtain and gone in. It was a temple of the old persuasion, and there had evidently been a function—perhaps a service for the dead; the high altar was still a blaze of candles. This was an exhibition he always liked, and he dropped into a seat with relief. More than it had ever yet come home to him it struck him as good that there should be churches.

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

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

This idea took possession of him while, at a distance, the black-robed lady continued prostrate; he was quietly thrilled with his conception, which at last brought him to his feet in the sudden excitement of a plan. He wandered softly about the church, pausing in the different chapels, which were all, save one, applied to a special devotion. It was in this one, dark and ungarnished, that he stood longest—the length of time it took him fully to grasp the conception of gilding it with his bounty. He should snatch it from no other rites and associate it with nothing profane; he would simply take it as it should be given up to him and make it a masterpiece of splendour and a mountain of fire. Tended sacredly all the year, with the sanctifying church around it, it would always be ready for his offices. There would

be difficulties, but from the first they presented themselves only as difficulties surmounted. Even for a person so little affiliated the thing would be a matter of arrangement. He saw it all in advance, and how bright in especial the place would become to him in the intermissions of toil and the dusk of afternoons; how rich in assurance at all times, but especially in the indifferent world. Before withdrawing he drew nearer again to the spot where he had first sat down, and in the movement he met the lady whom he had seen praying and who was now on her way to the door. She passed him quickly, and he had only a glimpse of her pale face and her unconscious, almost sightless eyes. For that instant she looked faded and handsome.

This was the origin of the rites more public, yet certainly esoteric, that he at last found himself able to establish. It took a long time, it took a year, and both the process and the result would have been—for any who knew—a vivid picture of his good faith. No one did know, in fact—no one but the bland ecclesiastics whose acquaintance he had promptly sought, whose objections he had softly overridden, whose curiosity and sympathy he had artfully charmed, whose assent to his eccentric munificence he had eventually won, and who had asked for concessions in exchange for indulgences. Stransom had of course at an early stage of his inquiry been referred to the Bishop, and the Bishop had been delightfully human, the Bishop had been almost amused. Success was within sight,

at any rate, from the moment the attitude of those whom it concerned became liberal in response to liberality. The altar and the small chapel that enclosed it, consecrated to an ostensible and customary worship, were to be splendidly maintained ; all that Stransom reserved to himself was the number of his lights and the free enjoyment of his intention. When the intention had taken complete effect the enjoyment became even greater than he had ventured to hope. He liked to think of this effect when he was far from it—he liked to convince himself of it yet again when he was near. He was not often, indeed, so near as that a visit to it had not perforce something of the patience of a pilgrimage ; but the time he gave to his devotion came to seem to him more a contribution to his other interests than a betrayal of them. Even a loaded life might be easier when one had added a new necessity to it.

How much easier was probably never guessed by those who simply knew that there were hours when he disappeared and for many of whom there was a vulgar reading of what they used to call his plunges. These plunges were into depths quieter than the deep sea-caves, and the habit, at the end of a year or two, had become the one it would have cost him most to relinquish. Now they had really, his Dead, something that was indefeasibly theirs ; and he liked to think that they might, in cases, be the Dead of others, as well as that the Dead of others might be invoked there under the protection

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

The flames were gathering thick at present, for Stransom had entered that dark defile of our earthly descent in which some one dies every day. It was only yesterday that Kate Creston had flashed out her white fire; yet already there were younger stars ablaze on the tips of the tapers.. Various persons in whom his interest had not been intense drew closer to him by entering this company. He went over it, head by head, till he felt like the shepherd of a huddled flock, with all a shepherd's vision of differences imperceptible. He knew his candles apart, up to the colour of the flame, and would still have known them had their positions all been changed. To other imaginations they might stand for other things—that they should stand for something to be hushed before was all he desired; but he was intensely conscious of the personal note of each and of the distinguishable way it contributed to the concert. There were hours at which he almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connection more charming than, as it happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life. In regard to those from whom one was separated by the long curves of the globe such a connection could only be an improvement: it brought them instantly within reach. Of course there were gaps in the constellation, for Stransom knew he could only pretend to act for his own, and it was not every figure passing before his eyes into the great

obscure that was entitled to a memorial. There was a strange sanctification in death, but some characters were more sanctified by being forgotten than by being remembered. The greatest blank in the shining page was the memory of Acton Hague, of which he inveterately tried to rid himself. For Acton Hague no flame could ever rise on any altar of his.

IV

EVERY year, the day he walked back from the great graveyard, he went to church as he had done the day his idea was born. It was on this occasion, as it happened, after a year had passed, that he began to observe his altar to be haunted by a worshipper at least as frequent as himself. Others of the faithful, and in the rest of the church, came and went, appealing sometimes, when they disappeared, to a vague or to a particular recognition; but this unfailing presence was always to be observed when he arrived and still in possession when he departed. He was surprised, the first time, at the promptitude with which it assumed an identity for him—the identity of the lady whom, two years before, on his anniversary, he had seen so intensely bowed, and of whose tragic face he had had so flitting a vision. Given the time that had elapsed, his recollection of her was fresh enough to make him wonder. Of himself she had of course no impression, or rather she had none at first: the time came when her manner of transacting her business suggested to him that she had gradually guessed his call to be of the same order. She used his altar for her own purpose—he could

only hope that, sad and solitary as she always struck him, she used it for her own Dead. There were interruptions, infidelities, all on his part, calls to other associations and duties; but as the months went on he found her whenever he returned, and he ended by taking pleasure in the thought that he had given her almost the contentment he had given himself. They worshipped side by side so often that there were moments when he wished he might be sure, so straight did their prospect stretch away of growing old together in their rites. She was younger than he, but she looked as if her Dead were at least as numerous as his candles. She had no colour, no sound, no fault, and another of the things about which he had made up his mind was that she had no fortune. She was always black-robed, as if she had had a succession of sorrows. People were not poor, after all, whom so many losses could overtake; they were positively rich when they had so much to give up. But the air of this devoted and indifferent woman, who always made, in any attitude, a beautiful, accidental line, conveyed somehow to Stransom that she had known more kinds of trouble than one.

He had a great love of music and little time for the joy of it; but occasionally, when workaday noises were muffled by Saturday afternoons, it used to come back to him that there were glories. There were moreover friends who reminded him of this and side by side with whom he found himself sitting out concerts. On one of these

winter evenings, in St. James's Hall, he became aware after he had seated himself that the lady he had so often seen at church was in the place next him and was evidently alone, as he also this time happened to be. She was at first too absorbed in the consideration of the programme to heed him, but when she at last glanced at him he took advantage of the movement to speak to her, greeting her with the remark that he felt as if he already knew her. She smiled as she said "Oh yes, I recognise you;" yet in spite of this admission of their long acquaintance it was the first time he had ever seen her smile. The effect of it was suddenly to contribute more to that acquaintance than all the previous meetings had done. He hadn't "taken in," he said to himself, that she was so pretty. Later, that evening (it was while he rolled along in a hansom on his way to dine out) he added that he hadn't taken in that she was so interesting. The next morning, in the midst of his work, he quite suddenly and irrelevantly reflected that his impression of her, beginning so far back, was like a winding river that had at last reached the sea.

His work was indeed blurred a little, all that day, by the sense of what had now passed between them. It wasn't much, but it had just made the difference. They had listened together to Beethoven and Schumann; they had talked in the pauses and at the end, when at the door, to which they moved together, he had asked her if he could help

her in the matter of getting away. She had thanked him and put up her umbrella, slipping into the crowd without an allusion to their meeting yet again and leaving him to remember at leisure that not a word had been exchanged about the place in which they frequently met. This circumstance seemed to him at one moment natural enough and at another perverse. She mightn't in the least have recognised his warrant for speaking to her; and yet if she hadn't he would have judged her an underbred woman. It was odd that when nothing had really ever brought them together he should have been able successfully to assume that they were in a manner old friends—that this negative quantity was somehow more than they could express. His success, it was true, had been qualified by her quick escape, so that there grew up in him an absurd desire to put it to some better test. Save in so far as some other improbable accident might assist him, such a test could be only to meet her afresh at church. Left to himself he would have gone to church the very next afternoon, just for the curiosity of seeing if he should find her there. But he was not left to himself, a fact he discovered quite at the last, after he had virtually made up his mind to go. The influence that kept him away really revealed to him how little to himself his Dead ever left him. They reminded him that he went only for them—for nothing else in the world.

The force of this reminder kept him away ten

days: he hated to connect the place with anything but his offices or to give a glimpse of the curiosity that had been on the point of moving him. It was absurd to weave a tangle about a matter so simple as a custom of devotion that might so easily have been daily or hourly; yet the tangle got itself woven. He was sorry, he was disappointed: it was as if a long, happy spell had been broken and he had lost a familiar security. At the last, however, he asked himself if he was to stay away for ever from the fear of this muddle about motives. After an interval neither longer nor shorter than usual he re-entered the church with a clear conviction that he should scarcely heed the presence or the absence of the lady of the concert. This indifference didn't prevent his instantly perceiving that for the only time since he had first seen her she was not on the spot. He had now no scruple about giving her time to arrive, but she didn't arrive, and when he went away still missing her he was quite profanely and consentingly sorry. If her absence made the tangle more intricate, that was only her fault. By the end of another year it was very intricate indeed; but by that time he didn't in the least care, and it was only his cultivated consciousness that had given him scruples. Three times in three months he had gone to church without finding her, and he felt that he had not needed these occasions to show him that his suspense had quite dropped. Yet it was, incongruously, not indifference, but a refinement of

delicacy that had kept him from asking the sacristan, who would of course immediately have recognised his description of her, whether she had been seen at other hours. His delicacy had kept him from asking any question about her at any time, and it was exactly the same virtue that had left him so free to be decently civil to her at the concert.

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

V

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

These things made their whole relation so impersonal that they had not the rules or reasons people found in ordinary friendships. They didn't care for the things it was supposed necessary to care for in the intercourse of the world. They ended one day (they never knew which of them expressed it first)

by throwing out the idea that they didn't care for each other. Over this idea they grew quite intimate ; they rallied to it in a way that marked a fresh start in their confidence. If to feel deeply together about certain things wholly distinct from themselves didn't constitute a safety, where was safety to be looked for ? Not lightly nor often, not without occasion nor without emotion, any more than in any other reference by serious people to a mystery of their faith ; but when something had happened to warm, as it were, the air for it, they came as near as they could come to calling their Dead by name. They felt it was coming very near to utter their thought at all. The word "they" expressed enough ; it limited the mention, it had a dignity of its own, and if, in their talk, you had heard our friends use it, you might have taken them for a pair of pagans of old alluding decently to the domesticated gods. They never knew—at least Stransom never knew—how they had learned to be sure about each other. If it had been with each a question of what the other was there for, the certitude had come in some fine way of its own. Any faith, after all, has the instinct of propagation, and it was as natural as it was beautiful that they should have taken pleasure on the spot in the imagination of a following. If the following was for each but a following of one, it had proved in the event to be sufficient. Her debt, however, of course, was much greater than his, because while she had only given him a worshipper he had given her a magnificent temple. Once she

said she pitied him for the length of his list (she had counted his candles almost as often as himself) and this made him wonder what could have been the length of hers. He had wondered before at the coincidence of their losses, especially as from time to time a new candle was set up. On some occasion some accident led him to express this curiosity, and she answered as if she was surprised that he hadn't already understood. "Oh, for me, you know, the more there are the better—there could never be too many. I should like hundreds and hundreds—I should like thousands; I should like a perfect mountain of light."

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

She hesitated as she had never hesitated. "Only One," she answered, colouring as if now he knew her innermost secret. It really made him feel that he knew less than before, so difficult was it for him to reconstitute a life in which a single experience had reduced all others to nought. His own life, round its central hollow, had been packed close enough. After this she appeared to have regretted her confession, though at the moment she spoke there had been pride in her very embarrassment. She declared to him that his own was the larger, the dearer possession—the portion one would have chosen if one had been able to choose; she assured him she could perfectly imagine some of the echoes with which his silences were peopled. He knew she couldn't: one's relation to what one had loved and

hated had been a relation too distinct from the relations of others. But this didn't affect the fact that they were growing old together in their piety. She was a feature of that piety, but even at the ripe stage of acquaintance in which they occasionally arranged to meet at a concert or to go together to an exhibition she was not a feature of anything else. The most that happened was that his worship became paramount. Friend by friend dropped away till at last there were more emblems on his altar than houses left him to enter. She was more than any other the friend who remained, but she was unknown to all the rest. Once when she had discovered, as they called it, a new star, she used the expression that the chapel at last was full.

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

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

"I mean, dear lady, my own."

He had learned after a long time that she earned money by her pen, writing under a designation that she never told him in magazines that he never saw. She knew too well what he couldn't read and what she couldn't write, and she taught him to cultivate indifference with a success that did much for their good relations. Her invisible industry was a convenience to him; it helped his contented thought of her, the thought that rested in the dignity of her

proud, obscure life, her little remunerated art and her little impenetrable home. Lost, with her obscure relative, in her dim suburban world, she came to the surface for him in distant places. She was really the priestess of his altar, and whenever he quitted England he committed it to her keeping. She proved to him afresh that women have more of the spirit of religion than men; he felt his fidelity pale and faint in comparison with hers. He often said to her that since he had so little time to live he rejoiced in her having so much; so glad was he to think she would guard the temple when he should have ceased. He had a great plan for that, which of course he told her too, a bequest of money to keep it up in undiminished state. Of the administration of this fund he would appoint her superintendent, and if the spirit should move her she might kindle a taper even for him.

“And who will kindle one even for me?” she gravely inquired.

VI

SHE was always in mourning, yet the day he came back from the longest absence he had yet made her appearance immediately told him she had lately had a bereavement. They met on this occasion as she was leaving the church, so that postponing his own entrance he instantly offered to turn round and walk away with her. She considered, then she said: "Go in now, but come and see me in an hour." He knew the small vista of her street, closed at the end and as dreary as an empty pocket, where the pairs of shabby little houses, semi-detached but indissolubly united, were like married couples on bad terms. Often, however, as he had gone to the beginning, he had never gone beyond. Her aunt was dead—that he immediately guessed, as well as that it made a difference; but when she had for the first time mentioned her number he found himself, on her leaving him, not a little agitated by this sudden liberality. She was not a person with whom, after all, one got on so very fast: it had taken him months and months to learn her name, years and years to learn her address. If she had looked, on this reunion, so much older to him, how in the world did he look to her? She had reached the period of

life that he had long since reached, when, after separations, the dreadful clockface of the friend we meet announces the hour we have tried to forget. He couldn't have said what he expected as, at the end of his waiting, he turned the corner at which, for years, he had always paused; simply not to pause was a sufficient cause for emotion. It was an event, somehow; and in all their long acquaintance there had never been such a thing. The event grew larger when, five minutes later, in the faint elegance of her little drawing-room, she quavered out some greeting which showed the measure she took of it. He had a strange sense of having come for something in particular; strange because, literally, there was nothing particular between them, nothing save that they were at one on their great point, which had long ago become a magnificent matter of course. It was true that after she had said "You can always come now, you know," the thing he was there for seemed already to have happened. He asked her if it was the death of her aunt that made the difference; to which she replied: "She never knew I knew you. I wished her not to." The beautiful clearness of her candour—her faded beauty was like a summer twilight—disconnected the words from any image of deceit. They might have struck him as the record of a deep dissimulation; but she had always given him a sense of noble reasons. The vanished aunt was present, as he looked about him, in the small complacencies of the room, the beaded velvet and the fluted moreen; and though,

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

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

He judged, wondering a good deal before he made any motion to leave her, that the difference would somehow be very great and would consist of still other things than her having let him come in. It rather chilled him, for they had been happy together as they were. He extracted from her at any rate an intimation that she should now have larger means, that her aunt's tiny fortune had come to her, so that there was henceforth only one to consume what had formerly been made to suffice for two. This was a joy to Stransom, because it had hitherto been equally impossible for him either to offer her presents or to find contentment in not doing so. It was too ugly to be at her side that way, abounding himself and yet not able to overflow—a demonstration that would have been a signally false note. Even her better situation too seemed only to draw out in a sense the loneliness of her future. It would merely help her to live more and more for their small ceremonial, at a time when he himself had begun wearily to feel that, having set it in motion, he might depart. When they had sat a

while in the pale parlour she got up and said : " This isn't *my* room : let us go into mine." They had only to cross the narrow hall, as he found, to pass into quite another air. When she had closed the door of the second room, as she called it, he felt that he had at last real possession of her. The place had the flush of life—it was expressive ; its dark red walls were articulate with memories and relics. These were simple things—photographs and water-colours, scraps of writing framed and ghosts of flowers embalmed ; but only a moment was needed to show him they had a common meaning. It was here that she had lived and worked ; and she had already told him she would make no change of scene. He saw that the objects about her mainly had reference to certain places and times ; but after a minute he distinguished among them a small portrait of a gentleman. At a distance and without their glasses his eyes were only caught by it enough to feel a vague curiosity. Presently this impulse carried him nearer, and in another moment he was staring at the picture in stupefaction and with the sense that some sound had broken from him. He was further conscious that he showed his companion a white face when he turned round on her with the exclamation : " Acton Hague ! "

She gave him back his astonishment. " Did you know him ? "

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

She coloured at this, and for a moment her

answer failed; her eyes took in everything in the place, and a strange irony reached her lips as she echoed: "Knew him?"

Then Stransom understood, while the room heaved like the cabin of a ship, that its whole contents cried out with him, that it was a museum in his honour, that all her later years had been addressed to him and that the shrine he himself had reared had been passionately converted to this use. It was all for Acton Hague that she had kneeled every day at his altar. What need had there been for a consecrated candle when he was present in the whole array? The revelation seemed to smite our friend in the face, and he dropped into a seat and sat silent. He had quickly become aware that she was shocked at the vision of his own shock, but as she sank on the sofa beside him and laid her hand on his arm he perceived almost as soon that she was unable to resent it as much as she would have liked.

VII

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

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

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

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

"Any one's, every one's life was who had the wonderful experience of knowing him. I never spoke of him," Stransom added in a moment, "because he did me—years ago—an unforgettable wrong." She was silent, and with the full effect of his presence all about them it almost startled her visitor to hear no protest escape from her. She accepted his words ; he turned his eyes to her again to see in what manner she accepted them. It was with rising tears

and an extraordinary sweetness in the movement of putting out her hand to take his own. Nothing more wonderful had ever appeared to Stransom than, in that little chamber of remembrance and homage, to see her convey with such exquisite mildness that as from Acton Hague any injury was credible. The clock ticked in the stillness—Hague had probably given it to her—and while he let her hold his hand with a tenderness that was almost an assumption of responsibility for his old pain as well as his new, Stransom after a minute broke out: “Good God, how he must have used *you!*”

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

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

“Women are not like men. They can love even where they’ve suffered.”

“Women are wonderful,” said Stransom. “But I assure you I’ve forgiven him too.”

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

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

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

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

She reflected a moment. "This is better perhaps; but as we were—it was good."

"Did it never happen that he spoke of me?" Stransom inquired.

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

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

She winced, for an instant, at the deep but unintended irony of this; but even while she did so she panted quickly: "Then in the lights on you altar——?"

"There's never a light for Acton Hague!"

She stared, with a great visible fall. "But if he's one of your Dead?"

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

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

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

"Ah, it's not true—you've *not* forgiven him!" she wailed with a passion that startled him.

He looked at her a moment. "What was it he did to you?"

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

He turned as cold as he had turned that night he read of the death of Acton Hague. "You mean that we meet no more?"

"Not as we have met—not *there*!"

He stood aghast at this snap of their great bond, at the renouncement that rang out in the word she so passionately emphasised. "But what's changed—for you?"

She hesitated, in all the vividness of a trouble that, for the first time since he had known her, made her splendidly stern. "How can you understand now when you didn't understand before?"

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

She looked at him with a larger allowance, as if she appreciated his good-nature. "How can I, then, with this new knowledge of my own, ask you to continue to live with it?"

"I set up my altar, with its multiplied meanings," Stransom began ; but she quickly interrupted him.

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

"We had simply different intentions," Stransom replied. "That, as you say, I perfectly knew, and I don't see why your intention shouldn't still sustain you."

"That's because you're generous—you can imagine and think. But the spell is broken."

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

"If I had known you had ever known him I should have taken for granted he had his candle," she presently rejoined. "What's changed, as you say, is that on making the discovery I find he never has had it. That makes *my* attitude—" she paused a moment, as if thinking how to express it, then said simply—"all wrong."

"Come once again," Stransom pleaded.

"Will you give him his candle?" she asked.

He hesitated, but only because it would sound ungracious; not because he had a doubt of his feeling. "I can't do that!" he declared at last.

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

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

"Oh, yes, come if you like. But I don't think it will do."

Stransom looked round the room once more; he felt in truth by no means sure it would do. He felt also stricken and more and more cold, and his chill was like an ague in which he had to make an effort not to shake. "I must try on my side, if you can't try on yours," he dolefully rejoined. She came out with him to the hall and into the doorway, and here he put to her the question that seemed to him the one he could least answer from his own wit. "Why have you never let me come before?"

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

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

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

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

“She didn’t know what I went for.”

“Of me then she never even heard?”

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

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

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

VIII

HE had ruthlessly abandoned her—that, of course, was what he had done. Stransom made it all out in solitude, at leisure, fitting the unmatched pieces gradually together and dealing one by one with a hundred obscure points. She had known Hague only after her present friend's relations with him had wholly terminated; obviously indeed a good while after; and it was natural enough that of his previous life she should have ascertained only what he had judged good to communicate. There were passages it was quite conceivable that even in moments of the tenderest expansion he should have withheld. Of many facts in the career of a man so in the eye of the world there was of course a common knowledge; but this lady lived apart from public affairs, and the only period perfectly clear to her would have been the period following the dawn of her own drama. A man, in her place, would have "looked up" the past—would even have consulted old newspapers. It remained singular indeed that in her long contact with the partner of her retrospect no accident had lighted a train; but there was no arguing about that; the accident had in fact come: it had simply been that security had

prevailed. She had taken what Hague had given her, and her blankness in respect of his other connections was only a touch in the picture of that plasticity Stransom had supreme reason to know so great a master could have been trusted to produce.

This picture, for a while, was all that our friend saw: he caught his breath again and again as it came over him that the woman with whom he had had for years so fine a point of contact was a woman whom Acton Hague, of all men in the world, had more or less fashioned. Such as she sat there to-day, she was ineffaceably stamped with him. Beneficent, blameless as Stransom held her, he couldn't rid himself of the sense that he had been the victim of a fraud. She had imposed upon him hugely, though she had known it as little as he. All this later past came back to him as a time grotesquely misspent. Such at least were his first reflections; after a while he found himself more divided and only, as the end of it, more troubled. He imagined, recalled, reconstituted, figured out for himself the truth she had refused to give him; the effect of which was to make her seem to him only more saturated with her fate. He felt her spirit, in the strange business, to be finer than his own in the very degree in which she might have been, in which she certainly had been, more wronged. A woman, when she was wronged, was always more wronged than a man, and there were conditions when the least she could have got off

with was more than the most he could have to endure. He was sure this rare creature wouldn't have got off with the least. He was awestruck at the thought of such a surrender—such a prostration. Moulded indeed she had been by powerful hands, to have converted her injury into an exaltation so sublime. The fellow had only had to die for everything that was ugly in him to be washed out in a torrent. It was vain to try to guess what had taken place, but nothing could be clearer than that she had ended by accusing herself. She absolved him at every point, she adored her very wounds. The passion by which he had profited had rushed back after its ebb, and now the tide of tenderness, arrested for ever at flood, was too deep even to fathom. Stransom sincerely considered that he had forgiven him; but how little he had achieved the miracle that she had achieved! His forgiveness was silence, but hers was mere unuttered sound. The light she had demanded for his altar would have broken his silence with a blare; whereas all the lights in the church were for her too great a hush.

She had been right about the difference—she had spoken the truth about the change: Stransom felt before long that he was perversely but definitely jealous. *His* tide had ebbed, not flowed; if he had “forgiven” Acton Hague, that forgiveness was a motive with a broken spring. The very fact of her appeal for a material sign, a sign that should make her dead lover equal there with the others, presented the concession to Stransom as too handsome for

the case. He had never thought of himself as hard, but an exorbitant article might easily render him so. He moved round and round this one, but only in widening circles—the more he looked at it the less acceptable it appeared. At the same time he had no illusion about the effect of his refusal ; he perfectly saw that it was the beginning of a separation. He left her alone for many days ; but when at last he called upon her again this conviction acquired a depressing force. In the interval he had kept away from the church, and he needed no fresh assurance from her to know she had not entered it. The change was complete enough : it had broken up her life. Indeed it had broken up his, for all the fires of his shrine seemed to him suddenly to have been quenched. A great indifference fell upon him, the weight of which was in itself a pain ; and he never knew what his devotion had been for him till, in that shock, it stopped like a dropped watch. Neither did he know with how large a confidence he had counted on the final service that had now failed : the mortal deception was that in this abandonment the whole future gave way.

These days of her absence proved to him of what she was capable ; all the more that he never dreamed she was vindictive or even resentful. It was not in anger she had forsaken him ; it was in absolute submission to hard reality, to crude destiny. This came home to him when he sat with her again in the room in which her late aunt's conversation lingered like the tone of a cracked piano. She tried

to make him forget how much they were estranged ; but in the very presence of what they had given up it was impossible not to be sorry for her. He had taken from her so much more than she had taken from him. He argued with her again, told her she could now have the altar to herself ; but she only shook her head with pleading sadness, begging him not to waste his breath on the impossible, the extinct. Couldn't he see that in relation to her private need the rites he had established were practically an elaborate exclusion ? She regretted nothing that had happened ; it had all been right so long as she didn't know, and it was only that now she knew too much and that from the moment their eyes were open they would simply have to conform. It had doubtless been happiness enough for them to go on together so long. She was gentle, grateful, resigned ; but this was only the form of a deep immutability. He saw that he should never more cross the threshold of the second room, and he felt how much this alone would make a stranger of him and give a conscious stiffness to his visits. He would have hated to plunge again into that well of reminders, but he enjoyed quite as little the vacant alternative.

After he had been with her three or four times it seemed to him that to have come at last into her house had had the horrid effect of diminishing their intimacy. He had known her better, had liked her in greater freedom, when they merely walked together or kneeled together. Now they only pre-

tended ; before they had been nobly sincere. They began to try their walks again, but it proved a lame imitation, for these things, from the first, beginning or ending, had been connected with their visits to the church. They had either strolled away as they came out or gone in to rest on the return. Besides, Stransom now grew weary ; he couldn't walk as of old. The omission made everything false ; it was a horrible mutilation of their lives. Our friend was frank and monotonous ; he made no mystery of his remorse and no secret of his predicament. Her response, whatever it was, always came to the same thing—an implied invitation to him to judge, if he spoke of predicaments, of how much comfort she had in hers. For him indeed there was no comfort even in complaint, for every allusion to what had befallen them only made the author of their trouble more present. Acton Hague was between them, that was the essence of the matter ; and he was never so much between them as when they were face to face. Stransom, even while he wanted to banish him, had the strangest sense of desiring a satisfaction that could come only from having accepted him. Deeply disconcerted by what he knew, he was still worse tormented by really not knowing. Perfectly aware that it would have been horribly vulgar to abuse his old friend or to tell his companion the story of their quarrel, it yet vexed him that her depth of reserve should give him no opening and should have the effect of a magnanimity greater even than his own.

He challenged himself, denounced himself, asked himself if he were in love with her that he should care so much what adventures she had had. He had never for a moment admitted that he was in love with her; therefore nothing could have surprised him more than to discover that he was jealous. What but jealousy could give a man that sore, contentious wish to have the detail of what would make him suffer? Well enough he knew indeed that he should never have it from the only person who, to-day, could give it to him. She let him press her with his sombre eyes, only smiling at him with an exquisite mercy and breathing equally little the word that would expose her secret and the word that would appear to deny his literal right to bitterness. She told nothing, she judged nothing; she accepted everything but the possibility of her return to the old symbols. Stransom divined that for her too they had been vividly individual, had stood for particular hours or particular attributes—particular links in her chain. He made it clear to himself, as he believed, that his difficulty lay in the fact that the very nature of the plea for his faithless friend constituted a prohibition; that it happened to have come from *her* was precisely the vice that attached to it. To the voice of impersonal generosity he felt sure he would have listened; he would have deferred to an advocate who, speaking from abstract justice, knowing of his omission without having known Hague, should have had the imagination to say: "Oh, remember only the best of him; pity him;

provide for him." To provide for him on the very ground of having discovered another of his turpitudes was not to pity him, but to glorify him. The more Stransom thought the more he made it out that this relation of Hague's, whatever it was, could only have been a deception finely practised. Where had it come into the life that all men saw? Why had he never heard of it, if it had had the frankness of an attitude honourable? Stransom knew enough of his other ties, of his obligations and appearances, not to say enough of his general character, to be sure there had been some infamy. In one way or another the poor woman had been coldly sacrificed. That was why, at the last as well as the first, he must still leave him out.

IX

AND yet this was no solution, especially after he had talked again to his friend of all it had been his plan that she should finally do for him. He had talked in the other days, and she had responded with a frankness qualified only by a courteous reluctance, a reluctance that touched him, to linger on the question of his death. She had then practically accepted the charge, suffered him to feel that he could depend upon her to be the eventual guardian of his shrine; and it was in the name of what had so passed between them that he appealed to her not to forsake him in his old age. She listened to him now with a sort of shining coldness and all her habitual forbearance to insist on her terms; her deprecation was even still tenderer, for it expressed the compassion of her own sense that he was abandoned. Her terms, however, remained the same, and scarcely the less audible for not being uttered; although he was sure that, secretly, even more than he, she felt bereft of the satisfaction his solemn trust was to have provided for her. They both missed the rich future, but she missed it most, because after all it was to have been entirely hers; and it was her acceptance of the loss that gave him the full

measure of her preference for the thought of Acton Hague over any other thought whatever. He had humour enough to laugh rather grimly when he said to himself: "Why the deuce does she like him so much more than she likes me?"—the reasons being really so conceivable. But even his faculty of analysis left the irritation standing, and this irritation proved perhaps the greatest misfortune that had ever overtaken him. There had been nothing yet that made him so much want to give up. He had of course by this time well reached the age of renouncement; but it had not hitherto been vivid to him that it was time to give up everything.

Practically, at the end of six months, he had renounced the friendship that was once so charming and comforting. His privation had two faces, and the face it had turned to him on the occasion of his last attempt to cultivate that friendship was the one he could look at least. This was the privation he inflicted; the other was the privation he bore. The conditions she never phrased he used to murmur to himself in solitude: "One more, one more—only just one." Certainly he was going down; he often felt it when he caught himself, over his work, staring at vacancy and giving voice to that inanity. There was proof enough besides in his being so weak and so ill. His irritation took the form of melancholy, and his melancholy that of the conviction that his health had quite failed. His altar moreover had ceased to exist; his chapel, in his dreams, was a great dark cavern. All the lights

had gone out—all his Dead had died again. He couldn't exactly see at first how it had been in the power of his late companion to extinguish them, since it was neither for her nor by her that they had been called into being. Then he understood that it was essentially in his own soul the revival had taken place, and that in the air of this soul they were now unable to breathe. The candles might mechanically burn, but each of them had lost its lustre. The church had become a void; it was his presence, her presence, their common presence, that had made the indispensable medium. If anything was wrong everything was—her silence spoiled the tune.

Then when three months were gone he felt so lonely that he went back; reflecting that as they had been his best society for years his Dead perhaps wouldn't let him forsake them without doing something more for him. They stood there, as he had left them, in their tall radiance, the bright cluster that had already made him, on occasions when he was willing to compare small things with great, liken them to a group of sea-lights on the edge of the ocean of life. It was a relief to him, after a while, as he sat there, to feel that they had still a virtue. He was more and more easily tired, and he always drove now; the action of his heart was weak and gave him none of the reassurance conferred by the action of his fancy. None the less he returned yet again, returned several times, and finally, during six months, haunted the place with a

renewal of frequency and a strain of impatience. In winter the church was unwarmed, and exposure to cold was forbidden him, but the glow of his shrine was an influence in which he could almost bask. He sat and wondered to what he had reduced his absent associate and what she now did with the hours of her absence. There were other churches, there were other altars, there were other candles; in one way or another her piety would still operate; he couldn't absolutely have deprived her of her rites. So he argued, but without contentment; for he well enough knew there was no other such rare semblance of the mountain of light she had once mentioned to him as the satisfaction of her need. As this semblance again gradually grew great to him and his pious practice more regular, there was a sharper and sharper pang for him in the imagination of her darkness; for never so much as in these weeks had his rites been real, never had his gathered company seemed so to respond and even to invite. He lost himself in the large lustre, which was more and more what he had from the first wished it to be—as dazzling as the vision of heaven in the mind of a child. He wandered in the fields of light; he passed, among the tall tapers, from tier to tier, from fire to fire, from name to name, from the white intensity of one clear emblem, of one saved soul, to another. It was in the quiet sense of having saved his souls that his deep, strange instinct rejoiced. This was no dim theological rescue, no boon of a contingent world; they were saved better

than faith or works could save them, saved for the warm world they had shrunk from dying to, for actuality, for continuity, for the certainty of human remembrance.

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

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

In March he had an illness during which he spent a fortnight in bed, and when he revived a little he was told of two things that had happened.

One was that a lady, whose name was not known to the servants (she left none) had been three times to ask about him; the other was that in his sleep, and on an occasion when his mind evidently wandered, he was heard to murmur again and again: "Just one more—just one." As soon as he found himself able to go out, and before the doctor in attendance had pronounced him so, he drove to see the lady who had come to ask about him. She was not at home; but this gave him the opportunity, before his strength should fail again, to take his way to the church. He entered the church alone; he had declined, in a happy manner he possessed of being able to decline effectively, the company of his servant or of a nurse. He knew now perfectly what these good people thought; they had discovered his clandestine connection, the magnet that had drawn him for so many years, and doubtless attached a significance of their own to the odd words they had repeated to him. The nameless lady was the clandestine connection—a fact nothing could have made clearer than his indecent haste to rejoin her. He sank on his knees before his altar, and his head fell over on his hands. His weakness, his life's weariness overtook him. It seemed to him he had come for the great surrender. At first he asked himself how he should get away; then, with the failing belief in the power, the very desire to move gradually left him. He had come, as he always came, to lose himself; the fields of light were still

there to stray in ; only this time, in straying, he would never come back. He had given himself to his Dead, and it was good : this time his Dead would keep him. He couldn't rise from his knees ; he believed he should never rise again ; all he could do was to lift his face and fix his eyes upon his lights. They looked unusually, strangely splendid, but the one that always drew him most had an unprecedented lustre. It was the central voice of the choir, the glowing heart of the brightness, and on this occasion it seemed to expand, to spread great wings of flame. The whole altar flared—it dazzled and blinded ; but the source of the vast radiance burned clearer than the rest, it gathered itself into form, and the form was human beauty and human charity—it was the far-off face of Mary Antrim. She smiled at him from the glory of heaven—she brought the glory down with her to take him. He bowed his head in submission, and at the same moment another wave rolled over him. Was it the quickening of joy to pain ? In the midst of his joy at any rate he felt his buried face grow hot as with some communicated knowledge that had the force of a reproach. It suddenly made him contrast that very rapture with the bliss he had refused to another. This breath of the passion immortal was all that other had asked ; the descent of Mary Antrim opened his spirit with a great compunctious throb for the descent of Acton Hague. It was as if Stransom had read what her eyes said to him.

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

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

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

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

“Don’t tell me!” she tenderly pleaded; “let me tell you. This afternoon, by a miracle, the sweetest of miracles, the sense of our difference left me. I was out—I was near, thinking, wandering alone,

when, on the spot, something changed in my heart. It's my confession—there it is. To come back, to come back on the instant—the idea gave me wings. It was as if I suddenly saw something—as if it all became possible. I could come for what you yourself came for : that was enough. So here I am. It's not for my own—that's over. But I'm here for *them*." And breathless, infinitely relieved by her low, precipitate explanation, she looked with eyes that reflected all its splendour at the magnificence of their altar.

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

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

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

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

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

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