

**ГЕНРИ
ДЖЕЙМС**

THE PORTRAIT
OF A LADY —
VOLUME 2

Генри Джеймс

The Portrait of a Lady — Volume 2

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Содержание

CHAPTER XXVIII	5
CHAPTER XXIX	9
CHAPTER XXX	14
CHAPTER XXXI	17
CHAPTER XXXII	21
CHAPTER XXXIII	25
CHAPTER XXXIV	29
CHAPTER XXXV	34
CHAPTER XXXVI	38
CHAPTER XXXVII	43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Henry James

The Portrait of a Lady — Volume 2

CHAPTER XXVIII

On the morrow, in the evening, Lord Warburton went again to see his friends at their hotel, and at this establishment he learned that they had gone to the opera. He drove to the opera with the idea of paying them a visit in their box after the easy Italian fashion; and when he had obtained his admittance—it was one of the secondary theatres—looked about the large, bare, ill-lighted house. An act had just terminated and he was at liberty to pursue his quest. After scanning two or three tiers of boxes he perceived in one of the largest of these receptacles a lady whom he easily recognised. Miss Archer was seated facing the stage and partly screened by the curtain of the box; and beside her, leaning back in his chair, was Mr. Gilbert Osmond. They appeared to have the place to themselves, and Warburton supposed their companions had taken advantage of the recess to enjoy the relative coolness of the lobby. He stood a while with his eyes on the interesting pair; he asked himself if he should go up and interrupt the harmony. At last he judged that Isabel had seen him, and this accident determined him. There should be no marked holding off. He took his way to the upper regions and on the staircase met Ralph Touchett slowly descending, his hat at the inclination of ennui and his hands where they usually were.

“I saw you below a moment since and was going down to you. I feel lonely and want company,” was Ralph’s greeting.

“You’ve some that’s very good which you’ve yet deserted.”

“Do you mean my cousin? Oh, she has a visitor and doesn’t want me. Then Miss Stackpole and Bantling have gone out to a cafe to eat an ice—Miss Stackpole delights in an ice. I didn’t think they wanted me either. The opera’s very bad; the women look like laundresses and sing like peacocks. I feel very low.”

“You had better go home,” Lord Warburton said without affectation.

“And leave my young lady in this sad place? Ah no, I must watch over her.”

“She seems to have plenty of friends.”

“Yes, that’s why I must watch,” said Ralph with the same large mock-melancholy.

“If she doesn’t want you it’s probable she doesn’t want me.”

“No, you’re different. Go to the box and stay there while I walk about.”

Lord Warburton went to the box, where Isabel’s welcome was as to a friend so honourably old that he vaguely asked himself what queer temporal province she was annexing. He exchanged greetings with Mr. Osmond, to whom he had been introduced the day before and who, after he came in, sat blandly apart and silent, as if repudiating competence in the subjects of allusion now probable. It struck her second visitor that Miss Archer had, in operatic conditions, a radiance, even a slight exaltation; as she was, however, at all times a keenly-glancing, quickly-moving, completely animated young woman, he may have been mistaken on this point. Her talk with him moreover pointed to presence of mind; it expressed a kindness so ingenious and deliberate as to indicate that she was in undisturbed possession of her faculties. Poor Lord Warburton had moments of bewilderment. She had discouraged him, formally, as much as a woman could; what business had she then with such arts and such felicities, above all with such tones of reparation—preparation? Her voice had tricks of sweetness, but why play them on *him*? The others came back; the bare, familiar, trivial opera began again. The box was large, and there was room for him to remain if he would sit a little behind and in the dark. He did so for half an hour, while Mr. Osmond remained in front, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, just behind Isabel. Lord Warburton heard nothing, and from his gloomy corner

saw nothing but the clear profile of this young lady defined against the dim illumination of the house. When there was another interval no one moved. Mr. Osmond talked to Isabel, and Lord Warburton kept his corner. He did so but for a short time, however; after which he got up and bade good-night to the ladies. Isabel said nothing to detain him, but it didn't prevent his being puzzled again. Why should she mark so one of his values—quite the wrong one—when she would have nothing to do with another, which was quite the right? He was angry with himself for being puzzled, and then angry for being angry. Verdi's music did little to comfort him, and he left the theatre and walked homeward, without knowing his way, through the tortuous, tragic streets of Rome, where heavier sorrows than his had been carried under the stars.

“What's the character of that gentleman?” Osmond asked of Isabel after he had retired.

“Irreproachable—don't you see it?”

“He owns about half England; that's his character,” Henrietta remarked. “That's what they call a free country!”

“Ah, he's a great proprietor? Happy man!” said Gilbert Osmond.

“Do you call that happiness—the ownership of wretched human beings?” cried Miss Stackpole. “He owns his tenants and has thousands of them. It's pleasant to own something, but inanimate objects are enough for me. I don't insist on flesh and blood and minds and consciences.”

“It seems to me you own a human being or two,” Mr. Bantling suggested jocosely. “I wonder if Warburton orders his tenants about as you do me.”

“Lord Warburton's a great radical,” Isabel said. “He has very advanced opinions.”

“He has very advanced stone walls. His park's enclosed by a gigantic iron fence, some thirty miles round,” Henrietta announced for the information of Mr. Osmond. “I should like him to converse with a few of our Boston radicals.”

“Don't they approve of iron fences?” asked Mr. Bantling.

“Only to shut up wicked conservatives. I always feel as if I were talking to *you* over something with a neat top-finish of broken glass.”

“Do you know him well, this unreformed reformer?” Osmond went on, questioning Isabel.

“Well enough for all the use I have for him.”

“And how much of a use is that?”

“Well, I like to like him.”

“Liking to like'—why, it makes a passion!” said Osmond.

“No”—she considered—“keep that for liking to *dislike*.”

“Do you wish to provoke me then,” Osmond laughed, “to a passion for *him*?”

She said nothing for a moment, but then met the light question with a disproportionate gravity. “No, Mr. Osmond; I don't think I should ever dare to provoke you. Lord Warburton, at any rate,” she more easily added, “is a very nice man.”

“Of great ability?” her friend enquired.

“Of excellent ability, and as good as he looks.”

“As good as he's good-looking do you mean? He's very good-looking. How detestably fortunate!—to be a great English magnate, to be clever and handsome into the bargain, and, by way of finishing off, to enjoy your high favour! That's a man I could envy.”

Isabel considered him with interest. “You seem to me to be always envying some one. Yesterday it was the Pope; to-day it's poor Lord Warburton.”

“My envy's not dangerous; it wouldn't hurt a mouse. I don't want to destroy the people—I only want to *be* them. You see it would destroy only myself.”

“You'd like to be the Pope?” said Isabel.

“I should love it—but I should have gone in for it earlier. But why”—Osmond reverted—“do you speak of your friend as poor?”

“Women—when they are very, very good sometimes pity men after they’ve hurt them; that’s their great way of showing kindness,” said Ralph, joining in the conversation for the first time and with a cynicism so transparently ingenious as to be virtually innocent.

“Pray, have I hurt Lord Warburton?” Isabel asked, raising her eyebrows as if the idea were perfectly fresh.

“It serves him right if you have,” said Henrietta while the curtain rose for the ballet.

Isabel saw no more of her attributive victim for the next twenty-four hours, but on the second day after the visit to the opera she encountered him in the gallery of the Capitol, where he stood before the lion of the collection, the statue of the Dying Gladiator. She had come in with her companions, among whom, on this occasion again, Gilbert Osmond had his place, and the party, having ascended the staircase, entered the first and finest of the rooms. Lord Warburton addressed her alertly enough, but said in a moment that he was leaving the gallery. “And I’m leaving Rome,” he added. “I must bid you goodbye.” Isabel, inconsequently enough, was now sorry to hear it. This was perhaps because she had ceased to be afraid of his renewing his suit; she was thinking of something else. She was on the point of naming her regret, but she checked herself and simply wished him a happy journey; which made him look at her rather unlightedly. “I’m afraid you’ll think me very ‘volatile.’ I told you the other day I wanted so much to stop.”

“Oh no; you could easily change your mind.”

“That’s what I have done.”

“*Bon voyage* then.”

“You’re in a great hurry to get rid of me,” said his lordship quite dismally.

“Not in the least. But I hate partings.”

“You don’t care what I do,” he went on pitifully.

Isabel looked at him a moment. “Ah,” she said, “you’re not keeping your promise!”

He coloured like a boy of fifteen. “If I’m not, then it’s because I can’t; and that’s why I’m going.”

“Good-bye then.”

“Good-bye.” He lingered still, however. “When shall I see you again?”

Isabel hesitated, but soon, as if she had had a happy inspiration: “Some day after you’re married.”

“That will never be. It will be after you are.”

“That will do as well,” she smiled.

“Yes, quite as well. Good-bye.”

They shook hands, and he left her alone in the glorious room, among the shining antique marbles. She sat down in the centre of the circle of these presences, regarding them vaguely, resting her eyes on their beautiful blank faces; listening, as it were, to their eternal silence. It is impossible, in Rome at least, to look long at a great company of Greek sculptures without feeling the effect of their noble quietude; which, as with a high door closed for the ceremony, slowly drops on the spirit the large white mantle of peace. I say in Rome especially, because the Roman air is an exquisite medium for such impressions. The golden sunshine mingles with them, the deep stillness of the past, so vivid yet, though it is nothing but a void full of names, seems to throw a solemn spell upon them. The blinds were partly closed in the windows of the Capitol, and a clear, warm shadow rested on the figures and made them more mildly human. Isabel sat there a long time, under the charm of their motionless grace, wondering to what, of their experience, their absent eyes were open, and how, to our ears, their alien lips would sound. The dark red walls of the room threw them into relief; the polished marble floor reflected their beauty. She had seen them all before, but her enjoyment repeated itself, and it was all the greater because she was glad again, for the time, to be alone. At last, however, her attention lapsed, drawn off by a deeper tide of life. An occasional tourist came in, stopped and stared a moment at the Dying Gladiator, and then passed out of the other door, creaking over the smooth pavement. At the end of half an hour Gilbert Osmond reappeared, apparently in advance of

his companions. He strolled toward her slowly, with his hands behind him and his usual enquiring, yet not quite appealing smile. “I’m surprised to find you alone, I thought you had company.

“So I have—the best.” And she glanced at the Antinous and the Faun.

“Do you call them better company than an English peer?”

“Ah, my English peer left me some time ago.” She got up, speaking with intention a little dryly.

Mr. Osmond noted her dryness, which contributed for him to the interest of his question. “I’m afraid that what I heard the other evening is true: you’re rather cruel to that nobleman.”

Isabel looked a moment at the vanquished Gladiator. “It’s not true. I’m scrupulously kind.”

“That’s exactly what I mean!” Gilbert Osmond returned, and with such happy hilarity that his joke needs to be explained. We know that he was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. Gilbert Osmond had a high appreciation of this particular patriciate; not so much for its distinction, which he thought easily surpassable, as for its solid actuality. He had never forgiven his star for not appointing him to an English dukedom, and he could measure the unexpectedness of such conduct as Isabel’s. It would be proper that the woman he might marry should have done something of that sort.

CHAPTER XXIX

Ralph Touchett, in talk with his excellent friend, had rather markedly qualified, as we know, his recognition of Gilbert Osmond's personal merits; but he might really have felt himself illiberal in the light of that gentleman's conduct during the rest of the visit to Rome. Osmond spent a portion of each day with Isabel and her companions, and ended by affecting them as the easiest of men to live with. Who wouldn't have seen that he could command, as it were, both tact and gaiety?—which perhaps was exactly why Ralph had made his old-time look of superficial sociability a reproach to him. Even Isabel's invidious kinsman was obliged to admit that he was just now a delightful associate. His good humour was imperturbable, his knowledge of the right fact, his production of the right word, as convenient as the friendly flicker of a match for your cigarette. Clearly he was amused—as amused as a man could be who was so little ever surprised, and that made him almost applaudive. It was not that his spirits were visibly high—he would never, in the concert of pleasure, touch the big drum by so much as a knuckle: he had a mortal dislike to the high, ragged note, to what he called random ravings. He thought Miss Archer sometimes of too precipitate a readiness. It was pity she had that fault, because if she had not had it she would really have had none; she would have been as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm. If he was not personally loud, however, he was deep, and during these closing days of the Roman May he knew a complacency that matched with slow irregular walks under the pines of the Villa Borghese, among the small sweet meadow-flowers and the mossy marbles. He was pleased with everything; he had never before been pleased with so many things at once. Old impressions, old enjoyments, renewed themselves; one evening, going home to his room at the inn, he wrote down a little sonnet to which he prefixed the title of “Rome Revisited.” A day or two later he showed this piece of correct and ingenious verse to Isabel, explaining to her that it was an Italian fashion to commemorate the occasions of life by a tribute to the muse.

He took his pleasures in general singly; he was too often—he would have admitted that—too sorely aware of something wrong, something ugly; the fertilising dew of a conceivable felicity too seldom descended on his spirit. But at present he was happy—happier than he had perhaps ever been in his life, and the feeling had a large foundation. This was simply the sense of success—the most agreeable emotion of the human heart. Osmond had never had too much of it; in this respect he had the irritation of satiety, as he knew perfectly well and often reminded himself. “Ah no, I've not been spoiled; certainly I've not been spoiled,” he used inwardly to repeat. “If I do succeed before I die I shall thoroughly have earned it.” He was too apt to reason as if “earning” this boon consisted above all of covertly aching for it and might be confined to that exercise. Absolutely void of it, also, his career had not been; he might indeed have suggested to a spectator here and there that he was resting on vague laurels. But his triumphs were, some of them, now too old; others had been too easy. The present one had been less arduous than might have been expected, but had been easy—that is had been rapid—only because he had made an altogether exceptional effort, a greater effort than he had believed it in him to make. The desire to have something or other to show for his “parts”—to show somehow or other—had been the dream of his youth; but as the years went on the conditions attached to any marked proof of rarity had affected him more and more as gross and detestable; like the swallowing of mugs of beer to advertise what one could “stand.” If an anonymous drawing on a museum wall had been conscious and watchful it might have known this peculiar pleasure of being at last and all of a sudden identified—as from the hand of a great master—by the so high and so unnoticed fact of style. His “style” was what the girl had discovered with a little help; and now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. She should do the thing *for* him, and he would not have waited in vain.

Shortly before the time fixed in advance for her departure this young lady received from Mrs. Touchett a telegram running as follows: “Leave Florence 4th June for Bellaggio, and take you if you

have not other views. But can't wait if you dawdle in Rome." The dawdling in Rome was very pleasant, but Isabel had different views, and she let her aunt know she would immediately join her. She told Gilbert Osmond that she had done so, and he replied that, spending many of his summers as well as his winters in Italy, he himself would loiter a little longer in the cool shadow of Saint Peter's. He would not return to Florence for ten days more, and in that time she would have started for Bellaggio. It might be months in this case before he should see her again. This exchange took place in the large decorated sitting-room occupied by our friends at the hotel; it was late in the evening, and Ralph Touchett was to take his cousin back to Florence on the morrow. Osmond had found the girl alone; Miss Stackpole had contracted a friendship with a delightful American family on the fourth floor and had mounted the interminable staircase to pay them a visit. Henrietta contracted friendships, in travelling, with great freedom, and had formed in railway-carriages several that were among her most valued ties. Ralph was making arrangements for the morrow's journey, and Isabel sat alone in a wilderness of yellow upholstery. The chairs and sofas were orange; the walls and windows were draped in purple and gilt. The mirrors, the pictures had great flamboyant frames; the ceiling was deeply vaulted and painted over with naked muses and cherubs. For Osmond the place was ugly to distress; the false colours, the sham splendour were like vulgar, bragging, lying talk. Isabel had taken in hand a volume of Ampere, presented, on their arrival in Rome, by Ralph; but though she held it in her lap with her finger vaguely kept in the place she was not impatient to pursue her study. A lamp covered with a drooping veil of pink tissue-paper burned on the table beside her and diffused a strange pale rosiness over the scene.

"You say you'll come back; but who knows?" Gilbert Osmond said.

"I think you're much more likely to start on your voyage round the world. You're under no obligation to come back; you can do exactly what you choose; you can roam through space."

"Well, Italy's a part of space," Isabel answered. "I can take it on the way."

"On the way round the world? No, don't do that. Don't put us in a parenthesis—give us a chapter to ourselves. I don't want to see you on your travels. I'd rather see you when they're over. I should like to see you when you're tired and satiated," Osmond added in a moment. "I shall prefer you in that state."

Isabel, with her eyes bent, fingered the pages of M. Ampere. "You turn things into ridicule without seeming to do it, though not, I think, without intending it. You've no respect for my travels—you think them ridiculous."

"Where do you find that?"

She went on in the same tone, fretting the edge of her book with the paper-knife. "You see my ignorance, my blunders, the way I wander about as if the world belonged to me, simply because—because it has been put into my power to do so. You don't think a woman ought to do that. You think it bold and ungraceful."

"I think it beautiful," said Osmond. "You know my opinions—I've treated you to enough of them. Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art? You looked rather shocked at first; but then I told you that it was exactly what you seemed to me to be trying to do with your own."

She looked up from her book. "What you despise most in the world is bad, is stupid art."

"Possibly. But yours seem to me very clear and very good."

"If I were to go to Japan next winter you would laugh at me," she went on.

Osmond gave a smile—a keen one, but not a laugh, for the tone of their conversation was not jocose. Isabel had in fact her solemnity; he had seen it before. "You have one!"

"That's exactly what I say. You think such an idea absurd."

"I would give my little finger to go to Japan; it's one of the countries I want most to see. Can't you believe that, with my taste for old lacquer?"

"I haven't a taste for old lacquer to excuse me," said Isabel.

“You’ve a better excuse—the means of going. You’re quite wrong in your theory that I laugh at you. I don’t know what has put it into your head.”

“It wouldn’t be remarkable if you did think it ridiculous that I should have the means to travel when you’ve not; for you know everything and I know nothing.”

“The more reason why you should travel and learn,” smiled Osmond. “Besides,” he added as if it were a point to be made, “I don’t know everything.”

Isabel was not struck with the oddity of his saying this gravely; she was thinking that the pleasantest incident of her life—so it pleased her to qualify these too few days in Rome, which she might musingly have likened to the figure of some small princess of one of the ages of dress overmuffled in a mantle of state and dragging a train that it took pages or historians to hold up—that this felicity was coming to an end. That most of the interest of the time had been owing to Mr. Osmond was a reflexion she was not just now at pains to make; she had already done the point abundant justice. But she said to herself that if there were a danger they should never meet again, perhaps after all it would be as well. Happy things don’t repeat themselves, and her adventure wore already the changed, the seaward face of some romantic island from which, after feasting on purple grapes, she was putting off while the breeze rose. She might come back to Italy and find him different—this strange man who pleased her just as he was; and it would be better not to come than run the risk of that. But if she was not to come the greater the pity that the chapter was closed; she felt for a moment a pang that touched the source of tears. The sensation kept her silent, and Gilbert Osmond was silent too; he was looking at her. “Go everywhere,” he said at last, in a low, kind voice; “do everything; get everything out of life. Be happy,—be triumphant.”

“What do you mean by being triumphant?”

“Well, doing what you like.”

“To triumph, then, it seems to me, is to fail! Doing all the vain things one likes is often very tiresome.”

“Exactly,” said Osmond with his quiet quickness. “As I intimated just now, you’ll be tired some day.” He paused a moment and then he went on: “I don’t know whether I had better not wait till then for something I want to say to you.”

“Ah, I can’t advise you without knowing what it is. But I’m horrid when I’m tired,” Isabel added with due inconsequence.

“I don’t believe that. You’re angry, sometimes—that I can believe, though I’ve never seen it. But I’m sure you’re never ‘cross.’”

“Not even when I lose my temper?”

“You don’t lose it—you find it, and that must be beautiful.” Osmond spoke with a noble earnestness. “They must be great moments to see.”

“If I could only find it now!” Isabel nervously cried.

“I’m not afraid; I should fold my arms and admire you. I’m speaking very seriously.” He leaned forward, a hand on each knee; for some moments he bent his eyes on the floor. “What I wish to say to you,” he went on at last, looking up, “is that I find I’m in love with you.”

She instantly rose. “Ah, keep that till I am tired!”

“Tired of hearing it from others?” He sat there raising his eyes to her. “No, you may heed it now or never, as you please. But after all I must say it now.” She had turned away, but in the movement she had stopped herself and dropped her gaze upon him. The two remained a while in this situation, exchanging a long look—the large, conscious look of the critical hours of life. Then he got up and came near her, deeply respectful, as if he were afraid he had been too familiar. “I’m absolutely in love with you.”

He had repeated the announcement in a tone of almost impersonal discretion, like a man who expected very little from it but who spoke for his own needed relief. The tears came into her eyes: this time they obeyed the sharpness of the pang that suggested to her somehow the slipping of a fine

bolt—backward, forward, she couldn't have said which. The words he had uttered made him, as he stood there, beautiful and generous, invested him as with the golden air of early autumn; but, morally speaking, she retreated before them—facing him still—as she had retreated in the other cases before a like encounter. “Oh don't say that, please,” she answered with an intensity that expressed the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide. What made her dread great was precisely the force which, as it would seem, ought to have banished all dread—the sense of something within herself, deep down, that she supposed to be inspired and trustful passion. It was there like a large sum stored in a bank—which there was a terror in having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out.

“I haven't the idea that it will matter much to you,” said Osmond. “I've too little to offer you. What I have—it's enough for me; but it's not enough for you. I've neither fortune, nor fame, nor extrinsic advantages of any kind. So I offer nothing. I only tell you because I think it can't offend you, and some day or other it may give you pleasure. It gives me pleasure, I assure you,” he went on, standing there before her, considerately inclined to her, turning his hat, which he had taken up, slowly round with a movement which had all the decent tremor of awkwardness and none of its oddity, and presenting to her his firm, refined, slightly ravaged face. “It gives me no pain, because it's perfectly simple. For me you'll always be the most important woman in the world.”

Isabel looked at herself in this character—looked intently, thinking she filled it with a certain grace. But what she said was not an expression of any such complacency. “You don't offend me; but you ought to remember that, without being offended, one may be incommoded, troubled.” “Incommoded,” she heard herself saying that, and it struck her as a ridiculous word. But it was what stupidly came to her.

“I remember perfectly. Of course you're surprised and startled. But if it's nothing but that, it will pass away. And it will perhaps leave something that I may not be ashamed of.”

“I don't know what it may leave. You see at all events that I'm not overwhelmed,” said Isabel with rather a pale smile. “I'm not too troubled to think. And I think that I'm glad I leave Rome tomorrow.”

“Of course I don't agree with you there.”

“I don't at all *know* you,” she added abruptly; and then she coloured as she heard herself saying what she had said almost a year before to Lord Warburton.

“If you were not going away you'd know me better.”

“I shall do that some other time.”

“I hope so. I'm very easy to know.”

“No, no,” she emphatically answered—“there you're not sincere. You're not easy to know; no one could be less so.”

“Well,” he laughed, “I said that because I know myself. It may be a boast, but I do.”

“Very likely; but you're very wise.”

“So are you, Miss Archer!” Osmond exclaimed.

“I don't feel so just now. Still, I'm wise enough to think you had better go. Good-night.”

“God bless you!” said Gilbert Osmond, taking the hand which she failed to surrender. After which he added: “If we meet again you'll find me as you leave me. If we don't I shall be so all the same.”

“Thank you very much. Good-bye.”

There was something quietly firm about Isabel's visitor; he might go of his own movement, but wouldn't be dismissed. “There's one thing more. I haven't asked anything of you—not even a thought in the future; you must do me that justice. But there's a little service I should like to ask. I shall not return home for several days; Rome's delightful, and it's a good place for a man in my state of mind. Oh, I know you're sorry to leave it; but you're right to do what your aunt wishes.”

“She doesn't even wish it!” Isabel broke out strangely.

Osmond was apparently on the point of saying something that would match these words, but he changed his mind and rejoined simply: “Ah well, it’s proper you should go with her, very proper. Do everything that’s proper; I go in for that. Excuse my being so patronising. You say you don’t know me, but when you do you’ll discover what a worship I have for propriety.”

“You’re not conventional?” Isabel gravely asked.

“I like the way you utter that word! No, I’m not conventional: I’m convention itself. You don’t understand that?” And he paused a moment, smiling. “I should like to explain it.” Then with a sudden, quick, bright naturalness, “Do come back again,” he pleaded. “There are so many things we might talk about.”

She stood there with lowered eyes. “What service did you speak of just now?”

“Go and see my little daughter before you leave Florence. She’s alone at the villa; I decided not to send her to my sister, who hasn’t at all my ideas. Tell her she must love her poor father very much,” said Gilbert Osmond gently.

“It will be a great pleasure to me to go,” Isabel answered. “I’ll tell her what you say. Once more good-bye.”

On this he took a rapid, respectful leave. When he had gone she stood a moment looking about her and seated herself slowly and with an air of deliberation. She sat there till her companions came back, with folded hands, gazing at the ugly carpet. Her agitation—for it had not diminished—was very still, very deep. What had happened was something that for a week past her imagination had been going forward to meet; but here, when it came, she stopped—that sublime principle somehow broke down. The working of this young lady’s spirit was strange, and I can only give it to you as I see it, not hoping to make it seem altogether natural. Her imagination, as I say, now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn’t cross—a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet.

CHAPTER XXX

She returned on the morrow to Florence, under her cousin's escort, and Ralph Touchett, though usually restive under railway discipline, thought very well of the successive hours passed in the train that hurried his companion away from the city now distinguished by Gilbert Osmond's preference—hours that were to form the first stage in a larger scheme of travel. Miss Stackpole had remained behind; she was planning a little trip to Naples, to be carried out with Mr. Bantling's aid. Isabel was to have three days in Florence before the 4th of June, the date of Mrs. Touchett's departure, and she determined to devote the last of these to her promise to call on Pansy Osmond. Her plan, however, seemed for a moment likely to modify itself in deference to an idea of Madame Merle's. This lady was still at Casa Touchett; but she too was on the point of leaving Florence, her next station being an ancient castle in the mountains of Tuscany, the residence of a noble family of that country, whose acquaintance (she had known them, as she said, "forever") seemed to Isabel, in the light of certain photographs of their immense crenellated dwelling which her friend was able to show her, a precious privilege. She mentioned to this fortunate woman that Mr. Osmond had asked her to take a look at his daughter, but didn't mention that he had also made her a declaration of love.

"*Ah, comme cela se trouve!*" Madame Merle exclaimed. "I myself have been thinking it would be a kindness to pay the child a little visit before I go off."

"We can go together then," Isabel reasonably said: "reasonably" because the proposal was not uttered in the spirit of enthusiasm. She had prefigured her small pilgrimage as made in solitude; she should like it better so. She was nevertheless prepared to sacrifice this mystic sentiment to her great consideration for her friend.

That personage finely meditated. "After all, why should we both go; having, each of us, so much to do during these last hours?"

"Very good; I can easily go alone."

"I don't know about your going alone—to the house of a handsome bachelor. He has been married—but so long ago!"

Isabel stared. "When Mr. Osmond's away what does it matter?"

"They don't know he's away, you see."

"They? Whom do you mean?"

"Every one. But perhaps it doesn't signify."

"If you were going why shouldn't I?" Isabel asked.

"Because I'm an old frump and you're a beautiful young woman."

"Granting all that, you've not promised."

"How much you think of your promises!" said the elder woman in mild mockery.

"I think a great deal of my promises. Does that surprise you?"

"You're right," Madame Merle audibly reflected. "I really think you wish to be kind to the child."

"I wish very much to be kind to her."

"Go and see her then; no one will be the wiser. And tell her I'd have come if you hadn't. Or rather," Madame Merle added, "*Don't* tell her. She won't care."

As Isabel drove, in the publicity of an open vehicle, along the winding way which led to Mr. Osmond's hill-top, she wondered what her friend had meant by no one's being the wiser. Once in a while, at large intervals, this lady, whose voyaging discretion, as a general thing, was rather of the open sea than of the risky channel, dropped a remark of ambiguous quality, struck a note that sounded false. What cared Isabel Archer for the vulgar judgements of obscure people? and did Madame Merle suppose that she was capable of doing a thing at all if it had to be sneakingly done? Of course not: she must have meant something else—something which in the press of the hours that preceded her

departure she had not had time to explain. Isabel would return to this some day; there were sorts of things as to which she liked to be clear. She heard Pansy strumming at the piano in another place as she herself was ushered into Mr. Osmond's drawing-room; the little girl was "practising," and Isabel was pleased to think she performed this duty with rigour. She immediately came in, smoothing down her frock, and did the honours of her father's house with a wide-eyed earnestness of courtesy. Isabel sat there half an hour, and Pansy rose to the occasion as the small, winged fairy in the pantomime soars by the aid of the dissimulated wire—not chattering, but conversing, and showing the same respectful interest in Isabel's affairs that Isabel was so good as to take in hers. Isabel wondered at her; she had never had so directly presented to her nose the white flower of cultivated sweetness. How well the child had been taught, said our admiring young woman; how prettily she had been directed and fashioned; and yet how simple, how natural, how innocent she had been kept! Isabel was fond, ever, of the question of character and quality, of sounding, as who should say, the deep personal mystery, and it had pleased her, up to this time, to be in doubt as to whether this tender slip were not really all-knowing. Was the extremity of her candour but the perfection of self-consciousness? Was it put on to please her father's visitor, or was it the direct expression of an unspotted nature? The hour that Isabel spent in Mr. Osmond's beautiful empty, dusky rooms—the windows had been half-darkened, to keep out the heat, and here and there, through an easy crevice, the splendid summer day peeped in, lighting a gleam of faded colour or tarnished gilt in the rich gloom—her interview with the daughter of the house, I say, effectually settled this question. Pansy was really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so; she had neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent—only two or three small exquisite instincts: for knowing a friend, for avoiding a mistake, for taking care of an old toy or a new frock. Yet to be so tender was to be touching withal, and she could be felt as an easy victim of fate. She would have no will, no power to resist, no sense of her own importance; she would easily be mystified, easily crushed: her force would be all in knowing when and where to cling. She moved about the place with her visitor, who had asked leave to walk through the other rooms again, where Pansy gave her judgement on several works of art. She spoke of her prospects, her occupations, her father's intentions; she was not egotistical, but felt the propriety of supplying the information so distinguished a guest would naturally expect.

"Please tell me," she said, "did papa, in Rome, go to see Madame Catherine? He told me he would if he had time. Perhaps he had not time. Papa likes a great deal of time. He wished to speak about my education; it isn't finished yet, you know. I don't know what they can do with me more; but it appears it's far from finished. Papa told me one day he thought he would finish it himself; for the last year or two, at the convent, the masters that teach the tall girls are so very dear. Papa's not rich, and I should be very sorry if he were to pay much money for me, because I don't think I'm worth it. I don't learn quickly enough, and I have no memory. For what I'm told, yes—especially when it's pleasant; but not for what I learn in a book. There was a young girl who was my best friend, and they took her away from the convent, when she was fourteen, to make—how do you say it in English?—to make a dot. You don't say it in English? I hope it isn't wrong; I only mean they wished to keep the money to marry her. I don't know whether it is for that that papa wishes to keep the money—to marry me. It costs so much to marry!" Pansy went on with a sigh; "I think papa might make that economy. At any rate I'm too young to think about it yet, and I don't care for any gentleman; I mean for any but him. If he were not my papa I should like to marry him; I would rather be his daughter than the wife of—of some strange person. I miss him very much, but not so much as you might think, for I've been so much away from him. Papa has always been principally for holidays. I miss Madame Catherine almost more; but you must not tell him that. You shall not see him again? I'm very sorry, and he'll be sorry too. Of everyone who comes here I like you the best. That's not a great compliment, for there are not many people. It was very kind of you to come to-day—so far from your house; for I'm really as yet only a child. Oh, yes, I've only the occupations of a child. When did *you* give them up, the occupations of a child? I should like to know how old you are, but I don't know whether it's

right to ask. At the convent they told us that we must never ask the age. I don't like to do anything that's not expected; it looks as if one had not been properly taught. I myself—I should never like to be taken by surprise. Papa left directions for everything. I go to bed very early. When the sun goes off that side I go into the garden. Papa left strict orders that I was not to get scorched. I always enjoy the view; the mountains are so graceful. In Rome, from the convent, we saw nothing but roofs and bell-towers. I practise three hours. I don't play very well. You play yourself? I wish very much you'd play something for me; papa has the idea that I should hear good music. Madame Merle has played for me several times; that's what I like best about Madame Merle; she has great facility. I shall never have facility. And I've no voice—just a small sound like the squeak of a slate-pencil making flourishes.”

Isabel gratified this respectful wish, drew off her gloves and sat down to the piano, while Pansy, standing beside her, watched her white hands move quickly over the keys. When she stopped she kissed the child good-bye, held her close, looked at her long. “Be very good,” she said; “give pleasure to your father.”

“I think that's what I live for,” Pansy answered. “He has not much pleasure; he's rather a sad man.”

Isabel listened to this assertion with an interest which she felt it almost a torment to be obliged to conceal. It was her pride that obliged her, and a certain sense of decency; there were still other things in her head which she felt a strong impulse, instantly checked, to say to Pansy about her father; there were things it would have given her pleasure to hear the child, to make the child, say. But she no sooner became conscious of these things than her imagination was hushed with horror at the idea of taking advantage of the little girl—it was of this she would have accused herself—and of exhaling into that air where he might still have a subtle sense for it any breath of her charmed state. She had come—she had come; but she had stayed only an hour. She rose quickly from the music-stool; even then, however, she lingered a moment, still holding her small companion, drawing the child's sweet slimmness closer and looking down at her almost in envy. She was obliged to confess it to herself—she would have taken a passionate pleasure in talking of Gilbert Osmond to this innocent, diminutive creature who was so near him. But she said no other word; she only kissed Pansy once again. They went together through the vestibule, to the door that opened on the court; and there her young hostess stopped, looking rather wistfully beyond. “I may go no further. I've promised papa not to pass this door.”

“You're right to obey him; he'll never ask you anything unreasonable.”

“I shall always obey him. But when will you come again?”

“Not for a long time, I'm afraid.”

“As soon as you can, I hope. I'm only a little girl,” said Pansy, “but I shall always expect you.” And the small figure stood in the high, dark doorway, watching Isabel cross the clear, grey court and disappear into the brightness beyond the big *portone*, which gave a wider dazzle as it opened.

CHAPTER XXXI

Isabel came back to Florence, but only after several months; an interval sufficiently replete with incident. It is not, however, during this interval that we are closely concerned with her; our attention is engaged again on a certain day in the late spring-time, shortly after her return to Palazzo Crescentini and a year from the date of the incidents just narrated. She was alone on this occasion, in one of the smaller of the numerous rooms devoted by Mrs. Touchett to social uses, and there was that in her expression and attitude which would have suggested that she was expecting a visitor. The tall window was open, and though its green shutters were partly drawn the bright air of the garden had come in through a broad interstice and filled the room with warmth and perfume. Our young woman stood near it for some time, her hands clasped behind her; she gazed abroad with the vagueness of unrest. Too troubled for attention she moved in a vain circle. Yet it could not be in her thought to catch a glimpse of her visitor before he should pass into the house, since the entrance to the palace was not through the garden, in which stillness and privacy always reigned. She wished rather to forestall his arrival by a process of conjecture, and to judge by the expression of her face this attempt gave her plenty to do. Grave she found herself, and positively more weighted, as by the experience of the lapse of the year she had spent in seeing the world. She had ranged, she would have said, through space and surveyed much of mankind, and was therefore now, in her own eyes, a very different person from the frivolous young woman from Albany who had begun to take the measure of Europe on the lawn at Gardencourt a couple of years before. She flattered herself she had harvested wisdom and learned a great deal more of life than this light-minded creature had even suspected. If her thoughts just now had inclined themselves to retrospect, instead of fluttering their wings nervously about the present, they would have evoked a multitude of interesting pictures. These pictures would have been both landscapes and figure-pieces; the latter, however, would have been the more numerous. With several of the images that might have been projected on such a field we are already acquainted. There would be for instance the conciliatory Lily, our heroine's sister and Edmund Ludlow's wife, who had come out from New York to spend five months with her relative. She had left her husband behind her, but had brought her children, to whom Isabel now played with equal munificence and tenderness the part of maiden-aunt. Mr. Ludlow, toward the last, had been able to snatch a few weeks from his forensic triumphs and, crossing the ocean with extreme rapidity, had spent a month with the two ladies in Paris before taking his wife home. The little Ludlows had not yet, even from the American point of view, reached the proper tourist-age; so that while her sister was with her Isabel had confined her movements to a narrow circle. Lily and the babies had joined her in Switzerland in the month of July, and they had spent a summer of fine weather in an Alpine valley where the flowers were thick in the meadows and the shade of great chestnuts made a resting-place for such upward wanderings as might be undertaken by ladies and children on warm afternoons. They had afterwards reached the French capital, which was worshipped, and with costly ceremonies, by Lily, but thought of as noisily vacant by Isabel, who in these days made use of her memory of Rome as she might have done, in a hot and crowded room, of a phial of something pungent hidden in her handkerchief.

Mrs. Ludlow sacrificed, as I say, to Paris, yet had doubts and wonderments not allayed at that altar; and after her husband had joined her found further chagrin in his failure to throw himself into these speculations. They all had Isabel for subject; but Edmund Ludlow, as he had always done before, declined to be surprised, or distressed, or mystified, or elated, at anything his sister-in-law might have done or have failed to do. Mrs. Ludlow's mental motions were sufficiently various. At one moment she thought it would be so natural for that young woman to come home and take a house in New York—the Rossiters', for instance, which had an elegant conservatory and was just round the corner from her own; at another she couldn't conceal her surprise at the girl's not marrying some member of one of the great aristocracies. On the whole, as I have said, she had fallen from high communion with

the probabilities. She had taken more satisfaction in Isabel's accession of fortune than if the money had been left to herself; it had seemed to her to offer just the proper setting for her sister's slightly meagre, but scarce the less eminent figure. Isabel had developed less, however, than Lily had thought likely—development, to Lily's understanding, being somehow mysteriously connected with morning-calls and evening-parties. Intellectually, doubtless, she had made immense strides; but she appeared to have achieved few of those social conquests of which Mrs. Ludlow had expected to admire the trophies. Lily's conception of such achievements was extremely vague; but this was exactly what she had expected of Isabel—to give it form and body. Isabel could have done as well as she had done in New York; and Mrs. Ludlow appealed to her husband to know whether there was any privilege she enjoyed in Europe which the society of that city might not offer her. We know ourselves that Isabel had made conquests—whether inferior or not to those she might have effected in her native land it would be a delicate matter to decide; and it is not altogether with a feeling of complacency that I again mention that she had not rendered these honourable victories public. She had not told her sister the history of Lord Warburton, nor had she given her a hint of Mr. Osmond's state of mind; and she had had no better reason for her silence than that she didn't wish to speak. It was more romantic to say nothing, and, drinking deep, in secret, of romance, she was as little disposed to ask poor Lily's advice as she would have been to close that rare volume forever. But Lily knew nothing of these discriminations, and could only pronounce her sister's career a strange anti-climax—an impression confirmed by the fact that Isabel's silence about Mr. Osmond, for instance, was in direct proportion to the frequency with which he occupied her thoughts. As this happened very often it sometimes appeared to Mrs. Ludlow that she had lost her courage. So uncanny a result of so exhilarating an incident as inheriting a fortune was of course perplexing to the cheerful Lily; it added to her general sense that Isabel was not at all like other people.

Our young lady's courage, however, might have been taken as reaching its height after her relations had gone home. She could imagine braver things than spending the winter in Paris—Paris had sides by which it so resembled New York, Paris was like smart, neat prose—and her close correspondence with Madame Merle did much to stimulate such flights. She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty, than when she turned away from the platform at the Euston Station on one of the last days of November, after the departure of the train that was to convey poor Lily, her husband and her children to their ship at Liverpool. It had been good for her to regale; she was very conscious of that; she was very observant, as we know, of what was good for her, and her effort was constantly to find something that was good enough. To profit by the present advantage till the latest moment she had made the journey from Paris with the unenvied travellers. She would have accompanied them to Liverpool as well, only Edmund Ludlow had asked her, as a favour, not to do so; it made Lily so fidgety and she asked such impossible questions. Isabel watched the train move away; she kissed her hand to the elder of her small nephews, a demonstrative child who leaned dangerously far out of the window of the carriage and made separation an occasion of violent hilarity, and then she walked back into the foggy London street. The world lay before her—she could do whatever she chose. There was a deep thrill in it all, but for the present her choice was tolerably discreet; she chose simply to walk back from Euston Square to her hotel. The early dusk of a November afternoon had already closed in; the street-lamps, in the thick, brown air, looked weak and red; our heroine was unattended and Euston Square was a long way from Piccadilly. But Isabel performed the journey with a positive enjoyment of its dangers and lost her way almost on purpose, in order to get more sensations, so that she was disappointed when an obliging policeman easily set her right again. She was so fond of the spectacle of human life that she enjoyed even the aspect of gathering dusk in the London streets—the moving crowds, the hurrying cabs, the lighted shops, the flaring stalls, the dark, shining dampness of everything. That evening, at her hotel, she wrote to Madame Merle that she should start in a day or two for Rome. She made her way down to Rome without touching at Florence—having gone first to Venice and then proceeded southward

by Ancona. She accomplished this journey without other assistance than that of her servant, for her natural protectors were not now on the ground. Ralph Touchett was spending the winter at Corfu, and Miss Stackpole, in the September previous, had been recalled to America by a telegram from the *Interviewer*. This journal offered its brilliant correspondent a fresher field for her genius than the mouldering cities of Europe, and Henrietta was cheered on her way by a promise from Mr. Bantling that he would soon come over to see her. Isabel wrote to Mrs. Touchett to apologise for not presenting herself just yet in Florence, and her aunt replied characteristically enough. Apologies, Mrs. Touchett intimated, were of no more use to her than bubbles, and she herself never dealt in such articles. One either did the thing or one didn't, and what one "would" have done belonged to the sphere of the irrelevant, like the idea of a future life or of the origin of things. Her letter was frank, but (a rare case with Mrs. Touchett) not so frank as it pretended. She easily forgave her niece for not stopping at Florence, because she took it for a sign that Gilbert Osmond was less in question there than formerly. She watched of course to see if he would now find a pretext for going to Rome, and derived some comfort from learning that he had not been guilty of an absence. Isabel, on her side, had not been a fortnight in Rome before she proposed to Madame Merle that they should make a little pilgrimage to the East. Madame Merle remarked that her friend was restless, but she added that she herself had always been consumed with the desire to visit Athens and Constantinople. The two ladies accordingly embarked on this expedition, and spent three months in Greece, in Turkey, in Egypt. Isabel found much to interest her in these countries, though Madame Merle continued to remark that even among the most classic sites, the scenes most calculated to suggest repose and reflexion, a certain incoherence prevailed in her. Isabel travelled rapidly and recklessly; she was like a thirsty person draining cup after cup. Madame Merle meanwhile, as lady-in-waiting to a princess circulating *incognita*, panted a little in her rear. It was on Isabel's invitation she had come, and she imparted all due dignity to the girl's uncountenanced state. She played her part with the tact that might have been expected of her, effacing herself and accepting the position of a companion whose expenses were profusely paid. The situation, however, had no hardships, and people who met this reserved though striking pair on their travels would not have been able to tell you which was patroness and which client. To say that Madame Merle improved on acquaintance states meagrely the impression she made on her friend, who had found her from the first so ample and so easy. At the end of an intimacy of three months Isabel felt she knew her better; her character had revealed itself, and the admirable woman had also at last redeemed her promise of relating her history from her own point of view—a consummation the more desirable as Isabel had already heard it related from the point of view of others. This history was so sad a one (in so far as it concerned the late M. Merle, a positive adventurer, she might say, though originally so plausible, who had taken advantage, years before, of her youth and of an inexperience in which doubtless those who knew her only now would find it difficult to believe); it abounded so in startling and lamentable incidents that her companion wondered a person so *eprouvée* could have kept so much of her freshness, her interest in life. Into this freshness of Madame Merle's she obtained a considerable insight; she seemed to see it as professional, as slightly mechanical, carried about in its case like the fiddle of the virtuoso, or blanketed and bridled like the "favourite" of the jockey. She liked her as much as ever, but there was a corner of the curtain that never was lifted; it was as if she had remained after all something of a public performer, condemned to emerge only in character and in costume. She had once said that she came from a distance, that she belonged to the "old, old" world, and Isabel never lost the impression that she was the product of a different moral or social clime from her own, that she had grown up under other stars.

She believed then that at bottom she had a different morality. Of course the morality of civilised persons has always much in common; but our young woman had a sense in her of values gone wrong or, as they said at the shops, marked down. She considered, with the presumption of youth, that a morality differing from her own must be inferior to it; and this conviction was an aid to detecting an occasional flash of cruelty, an occasional lapse from candour, in the conversation of a person who

had raised delicate kindness to an art and whose pride was too high for the narrow ways of deception. Her conception of human motives might, in certain lights, have been acquired at the court of some kingdom in decadence, and there were several in her list of which our heroine had not even heard. She had not heard of everything, that was very plain; and there were evidently things in the world of which it was not advantageous to hear. She had once or twice had a positive scare; since it so affected her to have to exclaim, of her friend, "Heaven forgive her, she doesn't understand me!" Absurd as it may seem this discovery operated as a shock, left her with a vague dismay in which there was even an element of foreboding. The dismay of course subsided, in the light of some sudden proof of Madame Merle's remarkable intelligence; but it stood for a high-water-mark in the ebb and flow of confidence. Madame Merle had once declared her belief that when a friendship ceases to grow it immediately begins to decline—there being no point of equilibrium between liking more and liking less. A stationary affection, in other words, was impossible—it must move one way or the other. However that might be, the girl had in these days a thousand uses for her sense of the romantic, which was more active than it had ever been. I do not allude to the impulse it received as she gazed at the Pyramids in the course of an excursion from Cairo, or as she stood among the broken columns of the Acropolis and fixed her eyes upon the point designated to her as the Strait of Salamis; deep and memorable as these emotions had remained. She came back by the last of March from Egypt and Greece and made another stay in Rome. A few days after her arrival Gilbert Osmond descended from Florence and remained three weeks, during which the fact of her being with his old friend Madame Merle, in whose house she had gone to lodge, made it virtually inevitable that he should see her every day. When the last of April came she wrote to Mrs. Touchett that she should now rejoice to accept an invitation given long before, and went to pay a visit at Palazzo Crescentini, Madame Merle on this occasion remaining in Rome. She found her aunt alone; her cousin was still at Corfu. Ralph, however, was expected in Florence from day to day, and Isabel, who had not seen him for upwards of a year, was prepared to give him the most affectionate welcome.

CHAPTER XXXII

It was not of him, nevertheless, that she was thinking while she stood at the window near which we found her a while ago, and it was not of any of the matters I have rapidly sketched. She was not turned to the past, but to the immediate, impending hour. She had reason to expect a scene, and she was not fond of scenes. She was not asking herself what she should say to her visitor; this question had already been answered. What he would say to her—that was the interesting issue. It could be nothing in the least soothing—she had warrant for this, and the conviction doubtless showed in the cloud on her brow. For the rest, however, all clearness reigned in her; she had put away her mourning and she walked in no small shimmering splendour. She only, felt older—ever so much, and as if she were “worth more” for it, like some curious piece in an antiquary’s collection. She was not at any rate left indefinitely to her apprehensions, for a servant at last stood before her with a card on his tray. “Let the gentleman come in,” she said, and continued to gaze out of the window after the footman had retired. It was only when she had heard the door close behind the person who presently entered that she looked round.

Caspar Goodwood stood there—stood and received a moment, from head to foot, the bright, dry gaze with which she rather withheld than offered a greeting. Whether his sense of maturity had kept pace with Isabel’s we shall perhaps presently ascertain; let me say meanwhile that to her critical glance he showed nothing of the injury of time. Straight, strong and hard, there was nothing in his appearance that spoke positively either of youth or of age; if he had neither innocence nor weakness, so he had no practical philosophy. His jaw showed the same voluntary cast as in earlier days; but a crisis like the present had in it of course something grim. He had the air of a man who had travelled hard; he said nothing at first, as if he had been out of breath. This gave Isabel time to make a reflexion: “Poor fellow, what great things he’s capable of, and what a pity he should waste so dreadfully his splendid force! What a pity too that one can’t satisfy everybody!” It gave her time to do more to say at the end of a minute: “I can’t tell you how I hoped you wouldn’t come!”

“I’ve no doubt of that.” And he looked about him for a seat. Not only had he come, but he meant to settle.

“You must be very tired,” said Isabel, seating herself, and generously, as she thought, to give him his opportunity.

“No, I’m not at all tired. Did you ever know me to be tired?”

“Never; I wish I had! When did you arrive?”

“Last night, very late; in a kind of snail-train they call the express. These Italian trains go at about the rate of an American funeral.”

“That’s in keeping—you must have felt as if you were coming to bury me!” And she forced a smile of encouragement to an easy view of their situation. She had reasoned the matter well out, making it perfectly clear that she broke no faith and falsified no contract; but for all this she was afraid of her visitor. She was ashamed of her fear; but she was devoutly thankful there was nothing else to be ashamed of. He looked at her with his stiff insistence, an insistence in which there was such a want of tact; especially when the dull dark beam in his eye rested on her as a physical weight.

“No, I didn’t feel that; I couldn’t think of you as dead. I wish I could!” he candidly declared.

“I thank you immensely.”

“I’d rather think of you as dead than as married to another man.”

“That’s very selfish of you!” she returned with the ardour of a real conviction. “If you’re not happy yourself others have yet a right to be.”

“Very likely it’s selfish; but I don’t in the least mind your saying so. I don’t mind anything you can say now—I don’t feel it. The cruellest things you could think of would be mere pin-pricks. After what you’ve done I shall never feel anything—I mean anything but that. That I shall feel all my life.”

Mr. Goodwood made these detached assertions with dry deliberateness, in his hard, slow American tone, which flung no atmospheric colour over propositions intrinsically crude. The tone made Isabel angry rather than touched her; but her anger perhaps was fortunate, inasmuch as it gave her a further reason for controlling herself. It was under the pressure of this control that she became, after a little, irrelevant. “When did you leave New York?”

He threw up his head as if calculating. “Seventeen days ago.”

“You must have travelled fast in spite of your slow trains.”

“I came as fast as I could. I’d have come five days ago if I had been able.”

“It wouldn’t have made any difference, Mr. Goodwood,” she coldly smiled.

“Not to you—no. But to me.”

“You gain nothing that I see.”

“That’s for me to judge!”

“Of course. To me it seems that you only torment yourself.” And then, to change the subject, she asked him if he had seen Henrietta Stackpole. He looked as if he had not come from Boston to Florence to talk of Henrietta Stackpole; but he answered, distinctly enough, that this young lady had been with him just before he left America. “She came to see you?” Isabel then demanded.

“Yes, she was in Boston, and she called at my office. It was the day I had got your letter.”

“Did you tell her?” Isabel asked with a certain anxiety.

“Oh no,” said Caspar Goodwood simply; “I didn’t want to do that. She’ll hear it quick enough; she hears everything.”

“I shall write to her, and then she’ll write to me and scold me,” Isabel declared, trying to smile again.

Caspar, however, remained sternly grave. “I guess she’ll come right out,” he said.

“On purpose to scold me?”

“I don’t know. She seemed to think she had not seen Europe thoroughly.”

“I’m glad you tell me that,” Isabel said. “I must prepare for her.”

Mr. Goodwood fixed his eyes for a moment on the floor; then at last, raising them, “Does she know Mr. Osmond?” he enquired.

“A little. And she doesn’t like him. But of course I don’t marry to please Henrietta,” she added. It would have been better for poor Caspar if she had tried a little more to gratify Miss Stackpole; but he didn’t say so; he only asked, presently, when her marriage would take place. To which she made answer that she didn’t know yet. “I can only say it will be soon. I’ve told no one but yourself and one other person—an old friend of Mr. Osmond’s.”

“Is it a marriage your friends won’t like?” he demanded.

“I really haven’t an idea. As I say, I don’t marry for my friends.”

He went on, making no exclamation, no comment, only asking questions, doing it quite without delicacy. “Who and what then is Mr. Gilbert Osmond?”

“Who and what? Nobody and nothing but a very good and very honourable man. He’s not in business,” said Isabel. “He’s not rich; he’s not known for anything in particular.”

She disliked Mr. Goodwood’s questions, but she said to herself that she owed it to him to satisfy him as far as possible. The satisfaction poor Caspar exhibited was, however, small; he sat very upright, gazing at her. “Where does he come from? Where does he belong?”

She had never been so little pleased with the way he said “belawng.” “He comes from nowhere. He has spent most of his life in Italy.”

“You said in your letter he was American. Hasn’t he a native place?”

“Yes, but he has forgotten it. He left it as a small boy.”

“Has he never gone back?”

“Why should he go back?” Isabel asked, flushing all defensively. “He has no profession.”

“He might have gone back for his pleasure. Doesn’t he like the United States?”

“He doesn’t know them. Then he’s very quiet and very simple—he contents himself with Italy.”

“With Italy and with you,” said Mr. Goodwood with gloomy plainness and no appearance of trying to make an epigram. “What has he ever done?” he added abruptly.

“That I should marry him? Nothing at all,” Isabel replied while her patience helped itself by turning a little to hardness. “If he had done great things would you forgive me any better? Give me up, Mr. Goodwood; I’m marrying a perfect nonentity. Don’t try to take an interest in him. You can’t.”

“I can’t appreciate him; that’s what you mean. And you don’t mean in the least that he’s a perfect nonentity. You think he’s grand, you think he’s great, though no one else thinks so.”

Isabel’s colour deepened; she felt this really acute of her companion, and it was certainly a proof of the aid that passion might render perceptions she had never taken for fine. “Why do you always come back to what others think? I can’t discuss Mr. Osmond with you.”

“Of course not,” said Caspar reasonably. And he sat there with his air of stiff helplessness, as if not only this were true, but there were nothing else that they might discuss.

“You see how little you gain,” she accordingly broke out—“how little comfort or satisfaction I can give you.”

“I didn’t expect you to give me much.”

“I don’t understand then why you came.”

“I came because I wanted to see you once more—even just as you are.”

“I appreciate that; but if you had waited a while, sooner or later we should have been sure to meet, and our meeting would have been pleasanter for each of us than this.”

“Waited till after you’re married? That’s just what I didn’t want to do. You’ll be different then.”

“Not very. I shall still be a great friend of yours. You’ll see.”

“That will make it all the worse,” said Mr. Goodwood grimly.

“Ah, you’re unaccommodating! I can’t promise to dislike you in order to help you to resign yourself.”

“I shouldn’t care if you did!”

Isabel got up with a movement of repressed impatience and walked to the window, where she remained a moment looking out. When she turned round her visitor was still motionless in his place. She came toward him again and stopped, resting her hand on the back of the chair she had just quitted. “Do you mean you came simply to look at me? That’s better for you perhaps than for me.”

“I wished to hear the sound of your voice,” he said.

“You’ve heard it, and you see it says nothing very sweet.”

“It gives me pleasure, all the same.” And with this he got up. She had felt pain and displeasure on receiving early that day the news he was in Florence and by her leave would come within an hour to see her. She had been vexed and distressed, though she had sent back word by his messenger that he might come when he would. She had not been better pleased when she saw him; his being there at all was so full of heavy implications. It implied things she could never assent to—rights, reproaches, remonstrance, rebuke, the expectation of making her change her purpose. These things, however, if implied, had not been expressed; and now our young lady, strangely enough, began to resent her visitor’s remarkable self-control. There was a dumb misery about him that irritated her; there was a manly staying of his hand that made her heart beat faster. She felt her agitation rising, and she said to herself that she was angry in the way a woman is angry when she has been in the wrong. She was not in the wrong; she had fortunately not that bitterness to swallow; but, all the same, she wished he would denounce her a little. She had wished his visit would be short; it had no purpose, no propriety; yet now that he seemed to be turning away she felt a sudden horror of his leaving her without uttering a word that would give her an opportunity to defend herself more than she had done in writing to him a month before, in a few carefully chosen words, to announce her engagement. If she were not in the wrong, however, why should she desire to defend herself? It was an excess of generosity on Isabel’s part to desire that Mr. Goodwood should be angry. And if he had not meanwhile held himself hard

it might have made him so to hear the tone in which she suddenly exclaimed, as if she were accusing him of having accused her: "I've not deceived you! I was perfectly free!"

"Yes, I know that," said Caspar.

"I gave you full warning that I'd do as I chose."

"You said you'd probably never marry, and you said it with such a manner that I pretty well believed it."

She considered this an instant. "No one can be more surprised than myself at my present intention."

"You told me that if I heard you were engaged I was not to believe it," Caspar went on. "I heard it twenty days ago from yourself, but I remembered what you had said. I thought there might be some mistake, and that's partly why I came."

"If you wish me to repeat it by word of mouth, that's soon done. There's no mistake whatever."

"I saw that as soon as I came into the room."

"What good would it do you that I shouldn't marry?" she asked with a certain fierceness.

"I should like it better than this."

"You're very selfish, as I said before."

"I know that. I'm selfish as iron."

"Even iron sometimes melts! If you'll be reasonable I'll see you again."

"Don't you call me reasonable now?"

"I don't know what to say to you," she answered with sudden humility.

"I shan't trouble you for a long time," the young man went on. He made a step towards the door, but he stopped. "Another reason why I came was that I wanted to hear what you would say in explanation of your having changed your mind."

Her humbleness as suddenly deserted her. "In explanation? Do you think I'm bound to explain?"

He gave her one of his long dumb looks. "You were very positive. I did believe it."

"So did I. Do you think I could explain if I would?"

"No, I suppose not. Well," he added, "I've done what I wished. I've seen you."

"How little you make of these terrible journeys," she felt the poverty of her presently replying.

"If you're afraid I'm knocked up—in any such way as that—you may be at your ease about it." He turned away, this time in earnest, and no hand-shake, no sign of parting, was exchanged between them.

At the door he stopped with his hand on the knob. "I shall leave Florence to-morrow," he said without a quaver.

"I'm delighted to hear it!" she answered passionately. Five minutes after he had gone out she burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Her fit of weeping, however, was soon smothered, and the signs of it had vanished when, an hour later, she broke the news to her aunt. I use this expression because she had been sure Mrs. Touchett would not be pleased; Isabel had only waited to tell her till she had seen Mr. Goodwood. She had an odd impression that it would not be honourable to make the fact public before she should have heard what Mr. Goodwood would say about it. He had said rather less than she expected, and she now had a somewhat angry sense of having lost time. But she would lose no more; she waited till Mrs. Touchett came into the drawing-room before the mid-day breakfast, and then she began. “Aunt Lydia, I’ve something to tell you.”

Mrs. Touchett gave a little jump and looked at her almost fiercely. “You needn’t tell me; I know what it is.”

“I don’t know how you know.”

“The same way that I know when the window’s open—by feeling a draught. You’re going to marry that man.”

“What man do you mean?” Isabel enquired with great dignity.

“Madame Merle’s friend—Mr. Osmond.”

“I don’t know why you call him Madame Merle’s friend. Is that the principal thing he’s known by?”

“If he’s not her friend he ought to be—after what she has done for him!” cried Mrs. Touchett. “I shouldn’t have expected it of her; I’m disappointed.”

“If you mean that Madame Merle has had anything to do with my engagement you’re greatly mistaken,” Isabel declared with a sort of ardent coldness.

“You mean that your attractions were sufficient, without the gentleman’s having had to be lashed up? You’re quite right. They’re immense, your attractions, and he would never have presumed to think of you if she hadn’t put him up to it. He has a very good opinion of himself, but he was not a man to take trouble. Madame Merle took the trouble for him.”

“He has taken a great deal for himself!” cried Isabel with a voluntary laugh.

Mrs. Touchett gave a sharp nod. “I think he must, after all, to have made you like him so much.”

“I thought he even pleased *you*.”

“He did, at one time; and that’s why I’m angry with him.”

“Be angry with me, not with him,” said the girl.

“Oh, I’m always angry with you; that’s no satisfaction! Was it for this that you refused Lord Warburton?”

“Please don’t go back to that. Why shouldn’t I like Mr. Osmond, since others have done so?”

“Others, at their wildest moments, never wanted to marry him. There’s nothing *of* him,” Mrs. Touchett explained.

“Then he can’t hurt me,” said Isabel.

“Do you think you’re going to be happy? No one’s happy, in such doings, you should know.”

“I shall set the fashion then. What does one marry for?”

“What *you* will marry for, heaven only knows. People usually marry as they go into partnership—to set up a house. But in your partnership you’ll bring everything.”

“Is it that Mr. Osmond isn’t rich? Is that what you’re talking about?” Isabel asked.

“He has no money; he has no name; he has no importance. I value such things and I have the courage to say it; I think they’re very precious. Many other people think the same, and they show it. But they give some other reason.”

Isabel hesitated a little. “I think I value everything that’s valuable. I care very much for money, and that’s why I wish Mr. Osmond to have a little.”

“Give it to him then; but marry some one else.”

“His name’s good enough for me,” the girl went on. “It’s a very pretty name. Have I such a fine one myself?”

“All the more reason you should improve on it. There are only a dozen American names. Do you marry him out of charity?”

“It was my duty to tell you, Aunt Lydia, but I don’t think it’s my duty to explain to you. Even if it were I shouldn’t be able. So please don’t remonstrate; in talking about it you have me at a disadvantage. I can’t talk about it.”

“I don’t remonstrate, I simply answer you: I must give some sign of intelligence. I saw it coming, and I said nothing. I never meddle.”

“You never do, and I’m greatly obliged to you. You’ve been very considerate.”

“It was not considerate—it was convenient,” said Mrs. Touchett. “But I shall talk to Madame Merle.”

“I don’t see why you keep bringing her in. She has been a very good friend to me.”

“Possibly; but she has been a poor one to me.”

“What has she done to you?”

“She has deceived me. She had as good as promised me to prevent your engagement.”

“She couldn’t have prevented it.”

“She can do anything; that’s what I’ve always liked her for. I knew she could play any part; but I understood that she played them one by one. I didn’t understand that she would play two at the same time.”

“I don’t know what part she may have played to you,” Isabel said; “that’s between yourselves. To me she has been honest and kind and devoted.”

“Devoted, of course; she wished you to marry her candidate. She told me she was watching you only in order to interpose.”

“She said that to please you,” the girl answered; conscious, however, of the inadequacy of the explanation.

“To please me by deceiving me? She knows me better. Am I pleased to-day?”

“I don’t think you’re ever much pleased,” Isabel was obliged to reply. “If Madame Merle knew you would learn the truth what had she to gain by insincerity?”

“She gained time, as you see. While I waited for her to interfere you were marching away, and she was really beating the drum.”

“That’s very well. But by your own admission you saw I was marching, and even if she had given the alarm you wouldn’t have tried to stop me.”

“No, but some one else would.”

“Whom do you mean?” Isabel asked, looking very hard at her aunt. Mrs. Touchett’s little bright eyes, active as they usually were, sustained her gaze rather than returned it. “Would you have listened to Ralph?”

“Not if he had abused Mr. Osmond.”

“Ralph doesn’t abuse people; you know that perfectly. He cares very much for you.”

“I know he does,” said Isabel; “and I shall feel the value of it now, for he knows that whatever I do I do with reason.”

“He never believed you would do this. I told him you were capable of it, and he argued the other way.”

“He did it for the sake of argument,” the girl smiled. “You don’t accuse him of having deceived you; why should you accuse Madame Merle?”

“He never pretended he’d prevent it.”

“I’m glad of that!” cried Isabel gaily. “I wish very much,” she presently added, “that when he comes you’d tell him first of my engagement.”

“Of course I’ll mention it,” said Mrs. Touchett. “I shall say nothing more to you about it, but I give you notice I shall talk to others.”

“That’s as you please. I only meant that it’s rather better the announcement should come from you than from me.”

“I quite agree with you; it’s much more proper!” And on this the aunt and the niece went to breakfast, where Mrs. Touchett, as good as her word, made no allusion to Gilbert Osmond. After an interval of silence, however, she asked her companion from whom she had received a visit an hour before.

“From an old friend—an American gentleman,” Isabel said with a colour in her cheek.

“An American gentleman of course. It’s only an American gentleman who calls at ten o’clock in the morning.”

“It was half-past ten; he was in a great hurry; he goes away this evening.”

“Couldn’t he have come yesterday, at the usual time?”

“He only arrived last night.”

“He spends but twenty-four hours in Florence?” Mrs. Touchett cried. “He’s an American gentleman truly.”

“He is indeed,” said Isabel, thinking with perverse admiration of what Caspar Goodwood had done for her.

Two days afterward Ralph arrived; but though Isabel was sure that Mrs. Touchett had lost no time in imparting to him the great fact, he showed at first no open knowledge of it. Their prompted talk was naturally of his health; Isabel had many questions to ask about Corfu. She had been shocked by his appearance when he came into the room; she had forgotten how ill he looked. In spite of Corfu he looked very ill to-day, and she wondered if he were really worse or if she were simply disaccustomed to living with an invalid. Poor Ralph made no nearer approach to conventional beauty as he advanced in life, and the now apparently complete loss of his health had done little to mitigate the natural oddity of his person. Blighted and battered, but still responsive and still ironic, his face was like a lighted lantern patched with paper and unsteadily held; his thin whisker languished upon a lean cheek; the exorbitant curve of his nose defined itself more sharply. Lean he was altogether, lean and long and loose-jointed; an accidental cohesion of relaxed angles. His brown velvet jacket had become perennial; his hands had fixed themselves in his pockets; he shambled and stumbled and shuffled in a manner that denoted great physical helplessness. It was perhaps this whimsical gait that helped to mark his character more than ever as that of the humorous invalid—the invalid for whom even his own disabilities are part of the general joke. They might well indeed with Ralph have been the chief cause of the want of seriousness marking his view of a world in which the reason for his own continued presence was past finding out. Isabel had grown fond of his ugliness; his awkwardness had become dear to her. They had been sweetened by association; they struck her as the very terms on which it had been given him to be charming. He was so charming that her sense of his being ill had hitherto had a sort of comfort in it; the state of his health had seemed not a limitation, but a kind of intellectual advantage; it absolved him from all professional and official emotions and left him the luxury of being exclusively personal. The personality so resulting was delightful; he had remained proof against the staleness of disease; he had had to consent to be deplorably ill, yet had somehow escaped being formally sick. Such had been the girl’s impression of her cousin; and when she had pitied him it was only on reflection. As she reflected a good deal she had allowed him a certain amount of compassion; but she always had a dread of wasting that essence—a precious article, worth more to the giver than to any one else. Now, however, it took no great sensibility to feel that poor Ralph’s tenure of life was less elastic than it should be. He was a bright, free, generous spirit, he had all the illumination of wisdom and none of its pedantry, and yet he was distressfully dying.

Isabel noted afresh that life was certainly hard for some people, and she felt a delicate glow of shame as she thought how easy it now promised to become for herself. She was prepared to learn that

Ralph was not pleased with her engagement; but she was not prepared, in spite of her affection for him, to let this fact spoil the situation. She was not even prepared, or so she thought, to resent his want of sympathy; for it would be his privilege—it would be indeed his natural line—to find fault with any step she might take toward marriage. One's cousin always pretended to hate one's husband; that was traditional, classical; it was a part of one's cousin's always pretending to adore one. Ralph was nothing if not critical; and though she would certainly, other things being equal, have been as glad to marry to please him as to please any one, it would be absurd to regard as important that her choice should square with his views. What were his views after all? He had pretended to believe she had better have married Lord Warburton; but this was only because she had refused that excellent man. If she had accepted him Ralph would certainly have taken another tone; he always took the opposite. You could criticise any marriage; it was the essence of a marriage to be open to criticism. How well she herself, should she only give her mind to it, might criticise this union of her own! She had other employment, however, and Ralph was welcome to relieve her of the care. Isabel was prepared to be most patient and most indulgent. He must have seen that, and this made it the more odd he should say nothing. After three days had elapsed without his speaking our young woman wearied of waiting; dislike it as he would, he might at least go through the form. We, who know more about poor Ralph than his cousin, may easily believe that during the hours that followed his arrival at Palazzo Crescentini he had privately gone through many forms. His mother had literally greeted him with the great news, which had been even more sensibly chilling than Mrs. Touchett's maternal kiss. Ralph was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost. He drifted about the house like a rudderless vessel in a rocky stream, or sat in the garden of the palace on a great cane chair, his long legs extended, his head thrown back and his hat pulled over his eyes. He felt cold about the heart; he had never liked anything less. What could he do, what could he say? If the girl were irreclaimable could he pretend to like it? To attempt to reclaim her was permissible only if the attempt should succeed. To try to persuade her of anything sordid or sinister in the man to whose deep art she had succumbed would be decently discreet only in the event of her being persuaded. Otherwise he should simply have damned himself. It cost him an equal effort to speak his thought and to dissemble; he could neither assent with sincerity nor protest with hope. Meanwhile he knew—or rather he supposed—that the affianced pair were daily renewing their mutual vows. Osmond at this moment showed himself little at Palazzo Crescentini; but Isabel met him every day elsewhere, as she was free to do after their engagement had been made public. She had taken a carriage by the month, so as not to be indebted to her aunt for the means of pursuing a course of which Mrs. Touchett disapproved, and she drove in the morning to the Cascine. This suburban wilderness, during the early hours, was void of all intruders, and our young lady, joined by her lover in its quietest part, strolled with him a while through the grey Italian shade and listened to the nightingales.

CHAPTER XXXIV

One morning, on her return from her drive, some half-hour before luncheon, she quitted her vehicle in the court of the palace and, instead of ascending the great staircase, crossed the court, passed beneath another archway and entered the garden. A sweeter spot at this moment could not have been imagined. The stillness of noontide hung over it, and the warm shade, enclosed and still, made bowers like spacious caves. Ralph was sitting there in the clear gloom, at the base of a statue of Terpsichore—a dancing nymph with taper fingers and inflated draperies in the manner of Bernini; the extreme relaxation of his attitude suggested at first to Isabel that he was asleep. Her light footstep on the grass had not roused him, and before turning away she stood for a moment looking at him. During this instant he opened his eyes; upon which she sat down on a rustic chair that matched with his own. Though in her irritation she had accused him of indifference she was not blind to the fact that he had visibly had something to brood over. But she had explained his air of absence partly by the languor of his increased weakness, partly by worries connected with the property inherited from his father—the fruit of eccentric arrangements of which Mrs. Touchett disapproved and which, as she had told Isabel, now encountered opposition from the other partners in the bank. He ought to have gone to England, his mother said, instead of coming to Florence; he had not been there for months, and took no more interest in the bank than in the state of Patagonia.

“I’m sorry I waked you,” Isabel said; “you look too tired.”

“I feel too tired. But I was not asleep. I was thinking of you.”

“Are you tired of that?”

“Very much so. It leads to nothing. The road’s long and I never arrive.”

“What do you wish to arrive at?” she put to him, closing her parasol.

“At the point of expressing to myself properly what I think of your engagement.”

“Don’t think too much of it,” she lightly returned.

“Do you mean that it’s none of my business?”

“Beyond a certain point, yes.”

“That’s the point I want to fix. I had an idea you may have found me wanting in good manners. I’ve never congratulated you.”

“Of course I’ve noticed that. I wondered why you were silent.”

“There have been a good many reasons. I’ll tell you now,” Ralph said. He pulled off his hat and laid it on the ground; then he sat looking at her. He leaned back under the protection of Bernini, his head against his marble pedestal, his arms dropped on either side of him, his hands laid upon the rests of his wide chair. He looked awkward, uncomfortable; he hesitated long. Isabel said nothing; when people were embarrassed she was usually sorry for them, but she was determined not to help Ralph to utter a word that should not be to the honour of her high decision. “I think I’ve hardly got over my surprise,” he went on at last. “You were the last person I expected to see caught.”

“I don’t know why you call it caught.”

“Because you’re going to be put into a cage.”

“If I like my cage, that needn’t trouble you,” she answered.

“That’s what I wonder at; that’s what I’ve been thinking of.”

“If you’ve been thinking you may imagine how I’ve thought! I’m satisfied that I’m doing well.”

“You must have changed immensely. A year ago you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted only to see life.”

“I’ve seen it,” said Isabel. “It doesn’t look to me now, I admit, such an inviting expanse.”

“I don’t pretend it is; only I had an idea that you took a genial view of it and wanted to survey the whole field.”

“I’ve seen that one can’t do anything so general. One must choose a corner and cultivate that.”

“That’s what I think. And one must choose as good a corner as possible. I had no idea, all winter, while I read your delightful letters, that you were choosing. You said nothing about it, and your silence put me off my guard.”

“It was not a matter I was likely to write to you about. Besides, I knew nothing of the future. It has all come lately. If you had been on your guard, however,” Isabel asked, “what would you have done?”

“I should have said ‘Wait a little longer.’”

“Wait for what?”

“Well, for a little more light,” said Ralph with rather an absurd smile, while his hands found their way into his pockets.

“Where should my light have come from? From you?”

“I might have struck a spark or two.”

Isabel had drawn off her gloves; she smoothed them out as they lay upon her knee. The mildness of this movement was accidental, for her expression was not conciliatory. “You’re beating about the bush, Ralph. You wish to say you don’t like Mr. Osmond, and yet you’re afraid.”

“Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike? I’m willing to wound *him*, yes—but not to wound you. I’m afraid of you, not of him. If you marry him it won’t be a fortunate way for me to have spoken.”

“*If* I marry him! Have you had any expectation of dissuading me?”

“Of course that seems to you too fatuous.”

“No,” said Isabel after a little; “it seems to me too touching.”

“That’s the same thing. It makes me so ridiculous that you pity me.”

She stroked out her long gloves again. “I know you’ve a great affection for me. I can’t get rid of that.”

“For heaven’s sake don’t try. Keep that well in sight. It will convince you how intensely I want you to do well.”

“And how little you trust me!”

There was a moment’s silence; the warm noontide seemed to listen. “I trust you, but I don’t trust him,” said Ralph.

She raised her eyes and gave him a wide, deep look. “You’ve said it now, and I’m glad you’ve made it so clear. But you’ll suffer by it.”

“Not if you’re just.”

“I’m very just,” said Isabel. “What better proof of it can there be than that I’m not angry with you? I don’t know what’s the matter with me, but I’m not. I was when you began, but it has passed away. Perhaps I ought to be angry, but Mr. Osmond wouldn’t think so. He wants me to know everything; that’s what I like him for. You’ve nothing to gain, I know that. I’ve never been so nice to you, as a girl, that you should have much reason for wishing me to remain one. You give very good advice; you’ve often done so. No, I’m very quiet; I’ve always believed in your wisdom,” she went on, boasting of her quietness, yet speaking with a kind of contained exaltation. It was her passionate desire to be just; it touched Ralph to the heart, affected him like a caress from a creature he had injured. He wished to interrupt, to reassure her; for a moment he was absurdly inconsistent; he would have retracted what he had said. But she gave him no chance; she went on, having caught a glimpse, as she thought, of the heroic line and desiring to advance in that direction. “I see you’ve some special idea; I should like very much to hear it. I’m sure it’s disinterested; I feel that. It seems a strange thing to argue about, and of course I ought to tell you definitely that if you expect to dissuade me you may give it up. You’ll not move me an inch; it’s too late. As you say, I’m caught. Certainly it won’t be pleasant for you to remember this, but your pain will be in your own thoughts. I shall never reproach you.”

“I don’t think you ever will,” said Ralph. “It’s not in the least the sort of marriage I thought you’d make.”

“What sort of marriage was that, pray?”

“Well, I can hardly say. I hadn’t exactly a positive view of it, but I had a negative. I didn’t think you’d decide for—well, for that type.”

“What’s the matter with Mr. Osmond’s type, if it be one? His being so independent, so individual, is what I most see in him,” the girl declared. “What do you know against him? You know him scarcely at all.”

“Yes,” Ralph said, “I know him very little, and I confess I haven’t facts and items to prove him a villain. But all the same I can’t help feeling that you’re running a grave risk.”

“Marriage is always a grave risk, and his risk’s as grave as mine.”

“That’s his affair! If he’s afraid, let him back out. I wish to God he would.”

Isabel reclined in her chair, folding her arms and gazing a while at her cousin. “I don’t think I understand you,” she said at last coldly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I believed you’d marry a man of more importance.”

Cold, I say, her tone had been, but at this a colour like a flame leaped into her face. “Of more importance to whom? It seems to me enough that one’s husband should be of importance to one’s self!”

Ralph blushed as well; his attitude embarrassed him. Physically speaking he proceeded to change it; he straightened himself, then leaned forward, resting a hand on each knee. He fixed his eyes on the ground; he had an air of the most respectful deliberation.

“I’ll tell you in a moment what I mean,” he presently said. He felt agitated, intensely eager; now that he had opened the discussion he wished to discharge his mind. But he wished also to be superlatively gentle.

Isabel waited a little—then she went on with majesty. “In everything that makes one care for people Mr. Osmond is pre-eminent. There may be nobler natures, but I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting one. Mr. Osmond’s is the finest I know; he’s good enough for me, and interesting enough, and clever enough. I’m far more struck with what he has and what he represents than with what he may lack.”

“I had treated myself to a charming vision of your future,” Ralph observed without answering this; “I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you. There was to be nothing of this sort in it. You were not to come down so easily or so soon.”

“Come down, you say?”

“Well, that renders my sense of what has happened to you. You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue—to be, sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly some one tosses up a faded rosebud—a missile that should never have reached you—and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me,” said Ralph audaciously, “hurts me as if I had fallen myself!”

The look of pain and bewilderment deepened in his companion’s face. “I don’t understand you in the least,” she repeated. “You say you amused yourself with a project for my career—I don’t understand that. Don’t amuse yourself too much, or I shall think you’re doing it at my expense.”

Ralph shook his head. “I’m not afraid of your not believing that I’ve had great ideas for you.”

“What do you mean by my soaring and sailing?” she pursued.

“I’ve never moved on a higher plane than I’m moving on now. There’s nothing higher for a girl than to marry a—a person she likes,” said poor Isabel, wandering into the didactic.

“It’s your liking the person we speak of that I venture to criticise, my dear cousin. I should have said that the man for you would have been a more active, larger, freer sort of nature.” Ralph hesitated, then added: “I can’t get over the sense that Osmond is somehow—well, small.” He had uttered the last word with no great assurance; he was afraid she would flash out again. But to his surprise she was quiet; she had the air of considering.

“Small?” She made it sound immense.

“I think he’s narrow, selfish. He takes himself so seriously!”

“He has a great respect for himself; I don’t blame him for that,” said Isabel. “It makes one more sure to respect others.”

Ralph for a moment felt almost reassured by her reasonable tone.

“Yes, but everything is relative; one ought to feel one’s relation to things—to others. I don’t think Mr. Osmond does that.”

“I’ve chiefly to do with his relation to me. In that he’s excellent.”

“He’s the incarnation of taste,” Ralph went on, thinking hard how he could best express Gilbert Osmond’s sinister attributes without putting himself in the wrong by seeming to describe him coarsely. He wished to describe him impersonally, scientifically. “He judges and measures, approves and condemns, altogether by that.”

“It’s a happy thing then that his taste should be exquisite.”

“It’s exquisite, indeed, since it has led him to select you as his bride. But have you ever seen such a taste—a really exquisite one—ruffled?”

“I hope it may never be my fortune to fail to gratify my husband’s.”

At these words a sudden passion leaped to Ralph’s lips. “Ah, that’s wilful, that’s unworthy of you! You were not meant to be measured in that way—you were meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante!”

Isabel rose quickly and he did the same, so that they stood for a moment looking at each other as if he had flung down a defiance or an insult. But “You go too far,” she simply breathed.

“I’ve said what I had on my mind—and I’ve said it because I love you!”

Isabel turned pale: was he too on that tiresome list? She had a sudden wish to strike him off. “Ah then, you’re not disinterested!”

“I love you, but I love without hope,” said Ralph quickly, forcing a smile and feeling that in that last declaration he had expressed more than he intended.

Isabel moved away and stood looking into the sunny stillness of the garden; but after a little she turned back to him. “I’m afraid your talk then is the wildness of despair! I don’t understand it—but it doesn’t matter. I’m not arguing with you; it’s impossible I should; I’ve only tried to listen to you. I’m much obliged to you for attempting to explain,” she said gently, as if the anger with which she had just sprung up had already subsided. “It’s very good of you to try to warn me, if you’re really alarmed; but I won’t promise to think of what you’ve said: I shall forget it as soon as possible. Try and forget it yourself; you’ve done your duty, and no man can do more. I can’t explain to you what I feel, what I believe, and I wouldn’t if I could.” She paused a moment and then went on with an inconsequence that Ralph observed even in the midst of his eagerness to discover some symptom of concession. “I can’t enter into your idea of Mr. Osmond; I can’t do it justice, because I see him in quite another way. He’s not important—no, he’s not important; he’s a man to whom importance is supremely indifferent. If that’s what you mean when you call him ‘small,’ then he’s as small as you please. I call that large—it’s the largest thing I know. I won’t pretend to argue with you about a person I’m going to marry,” Isabel repeated. “I’m not in the least concerned to defend Mr. Osmond; he’s not so weak as to need my defence. I should think it would seem strange even to yourself that I should talk of him so quietly and coldly, as if he were any one else. I wouldn’t talk of him at all to any one but you; and you, after what you’ve said—I may just answer you once for all. Pray, would you wish me to make a mercenary marriage—what they call a marriage of ambition? I’ve only one ambition—to be free to follow out a good feeling. I had others once, but they’ve passed away. Do you complain of Mr. Osmond because he’s not rich? That’s just what I like him for. I’ve fortunately money enough; I’ve never felt so thankful for it as to-day. There have been moments when I should like to go and kneel down by your father’s grave: he did perhaps a better thing than he knew when he put it into my power to marry a poor man—a man who has borne his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference. Mr. Osmond has never scrambled nor struggled—he has cared for no worldly prize. If that’s to be narrow, if that’s to be selfish, then it’s very well. I’m not frightened by such words, I’m not even displeased; I’m only sorry

that you should make a mistake. Others might have done so, but I'm surprised that you should. You might know a gentleman when you see one—you might know a fine mind. Mr. Osmond makes no mistakes! He knows everything, he understands everything, he has the kindest, gentlest, highest spirit. You've got hold of some false idea. It's a pity, but I can't help it; it regards you more than me." Isabel paused a moment, looking at her cousin with an eye illumined by a sentiment which contradicted the careful calmness of her manner—a mingled sentiment, to which the angry pain excited by his words and the wounded pride of having needed to justify a choice of which she felt only the nobleness and purity, equally contributed. Though she paused Ralph said nothing; he saw she had more to say. She was grand, but she was highly solicitous; she was indifferent, but she was all in a passion. "What sort of a person should you have liked me to marry?" she asked suddenly. "You talk about one's soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth. One has human feelings and needs, one has a heart in one's bosom, and one must marry a particular individual. Your mother has never forgiven me for not having come to a better understanding with Lord Warburton, and she's horrified at my contenting myself with a person who has none of his great advantages—no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It's the total absence of all these things that pleases me. Mr. Osmond's simply a very lonely, a very cultivated and a very honest man—he's not a prodigious proprietor."

Ralph had listened with great attention, as if everything she said merited deep consideration; but in truth he was only half thinking of the things she said, he was for the rest simply accommodating himself to the weight of his total impression—the impression of her ardent good faith. She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory, about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours. Ralph remembered what he had said to his father about wishing to put it into her power to meet the requirements of her imagination. He had done so, and the girl had taken full advantage of the luxury. Poor Ralph felt sick; he felt ashamed. Isabel had uttered her last words with a low solemnity of conviction which virtually terminated the discussion, and she closed it formally by turning away and walking back to the house. Ralph walked beside her, and they passed into the court together and reached the big staircase. Here he stopped and Isabel paused, turning on him a face of elation—absolutely and perversely of gratitude. His opposition had made her own conception of her conduct clearer to her. "Shall you not come up to breakfast?" she asked.

"No; I want no breakfast; I'm not hungry."

"You ought to eat," said the girl; "you live on air."

"I do, very much, and I shall go back into the garden and take another mouthful. I came thus far simply to say this. I told you last year that if you were to get into trouble I should feel terribly sold. That's how I feel to-day."

"Do you think I'm in trouble?"

"One's in trouble when one's in error."

"Very well," said Isabel; "I shall never complain of my trouble to you!" And she moved up the staircase.

Ralph, standing there with his hands in his pockets, followed her with his eyes; then the lurking chill of the high-walled court struck him and made him shiver, so that he returned to the garden to breakfast on the Florentine sunshine.

CHAPTER XXXV

Isabel, when she strolled in the Cascine with her lover, felt no impulse to tell him how little he was approved at Palazzo Crescentini. The discreet opposition offered to her marriage by her aunt and her cousin made on the whole no great impression upon her; the moral of it was simply that they disliked Gilbert Osmond. This dislike was not alarming to Isabel; she scarcely even regretted it; for it served mainly to throw into higher relief the fact, in every way so honourable, that she married to please herself. One did other things to please other people; one did this for a more personal satisfaction; and Isabel's satisfaction was confirmed by her lover's admirable good conduct. Gilbert Osmond was in love, and he had never deserved less than during these still, bright days, each of them numbered, which preceded the fulfilment of his hopes, the harsh criticism passed upon him by Ralph Touchett. The chief impression produced on Isabel's spirit by this criticism was that the passion of love separated its victim terribly from every one but the loved object. She felt herself disjoined from every one she had ever known before—from her two sisters, who wrote to express a dutiful hope that she would be happy, and a surprise, somewhat more vague, at her not having chosen a consort who was the hero of a richer accumulation of anecdote; from Henrietta, who, she was sure, would come out, too late, on purpose to remonstrate; from Lord Warburton, who would certainly console himself, and from Caspar Goodwood, who perhaps would not; from her aunt, who had cold, shallow ideas about marriage, for which she was not sorry to display her contempt; and from Ralph, whose talk about having great views for her was surely but a whimsical cover for a personal disappointment. Ralph apparently wished her not to marry at all—that was what it really meant—because he was amused with the spectacle of her adventures as a single woman. His disappointment made him say angry things about the man she had preferred even to him: Isabel flattered herself that she believed Ralph had been angry. It was the more easy for her to believe this because, as I say, she had now little free or unemployed emotion for minor needs, and accepted as an incident, in fact quite as an ornament, of her lot the idea that to prefer Gilbert Osmond as she preferred him was perforce to break all other ties. She tasted of the sweets of this preference, and they made her conscious, almost with awe, of the invidious and remorseless tide of the charmed and possessed condition, great as was the traditional honour and imputed virtue of being in love. It was the tragic part of happiness; one's right was always made of the wrong of some one else.

The elation of success, which surely now flamed high in Osmond, emitted meanwhile very little smoke for so brilliant a blaze. Contentment, on his part, took no vulgar form; excitement, in the most self-conscious of men, was a kind of ecstasy of self-control. This disposition, however, made him an admirable lover; it gave him a constant view of the smitten and dedicated state. He never forgot himself, as I say; and so he never forgot to be graceful and tender, to wear the appearance—which presented indeed no difficulty—of stirred senses and deep intentions. He was immensely pleased with his young lady; Madame Merle had made him a present of incalculable value. What could be a finer thing to live with than a high spirit attuned to softness? For would not the softness be all for one's self, and the strenuousness for society, which admired the air of superiority? What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind which saved one repetitions and reflected one's thought on a polished, elegant surface? Osmond hated to see his thought reproduced literally—that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be freshened in the reproduction even as “words” by music. His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife; this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one—a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert. He found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring. He knew perfectly, though he had not been told, that their union enjoyed little favour with the girl's relations; but he had always treated her so completely as an independent

person that it hardly seemed necessary to express regret for the attitude of her family. Nevertheless, one morning, he made an abrupt allusion to it. “It’s the difference in our fortune they don’t like,” he said. “They think I’m in love with your money.”

“Are you speaking of my aunt—of my cousin?” Isabel asked. “How do you know what they think?”

“You’ve not told me they’re pleased, and when I wrote to Mrs. Touchett the other day she never answered my note. If they had been delighted I should have had some sign of it, and the fact of my being poor and you rich is the most obvious explanation of their reserve. But of course when a poor man marries a rich girl he must be prepared for imputations. I don’t mind them; I only care for one thing—for your not having the shadow of a doubt. I don’t care what people of whom I ask nothing think—I’m not even capable perhaps of wanting to know. I’ve never so concerned myself, God forgive me, and why should I begin to-day, when I have taken to myself a compensation for everything? I won’t pretend I’m sorry you’re rich; I’m delighted. I delight in everything that’s yours—whether it be money or virtue. Money’s a horrid thing to follow, but a charming thing to meet. It seems to me, however, that I’ve sufficiently proved the limits of my itch for it: I never in my life tried to earn a penny, and I ought to be less subject to suspicion than most of the people one sees grubbing and grabbing. I suppose it’s their business to suspect—that of your family; it’s proper on the whole they should. They’ll like me better some day; so will you, for that matter. Meanwhile my business is not to make myself bad blood, but simply to be thankful for life and love.” “It has made me better, loving you,” he said on another occasion; “it has made me wiser and easier and—I won’t pretend to deny—brighter and nicer and even stronger. I used to want a great many things before and to be angry I didn’t have them. Theoretically I was satisfied, as I once told you. I flattered myself I had limited my wants. But I was subject to irritation; I used to have morbid, sterile, hateful fits of hunger, of desire. Now I’m really satisfied, because I can’t think of anything better. It’s just as when one has been trying to spell out a book in the twilight and suddenly the lamp comes in. I had been putting out my eyes over the book of life and finding nothing to reward me for my pains; but now that I can read it properly I see it’s a delightful story. My dear girl, I can’t tell you how life seems to stretch there before us—what a long summer afternoon awaits us. It’s the latter half of an Italian day—with a golden haze, and the shadows just lengthening, and that divine delicacy in the light, the air, the landscape, which I have loved all my life and which you love to-day. Upon my honour, I don’t see why we shouldn’t get on. We’ve got what we like—to say nothing of having each other. We’ve the faculty of admiration and several capital convictions. We’re not stupid, we’re not mean, we’re not under bonds to any kind of ignorance or dreariness. You’re remarkably fresh, and I’m remarkably well-seasoned. We’ve my poor child to amuse us; we’ll try and make up some little life for her. It’s all soft and mellow—it has the Italian colouring.”

They made a good many plans, but they left themselves also a good deal of latitude; it was a matter of course, however, that they should live for the present in Italy. It was in Italy that they had met, Italy had been a party to their first impressions of each other, and Italy should be a party to their happiness. Osmond had the attachment of old acquaintance and Isabel the stimulus of new, which seemed to assure her a future at a high level of consciousness of the beautiful. The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one’s energies to a point. She had told Ralph she had “seen life” in a year or two and that she was already tired, not of the act of living, but of that of observing. What had become of all her ardours, her aspirations, her theories, her high estimate of her independence and her incipient conviction that she should never marry? These things had been absorbed in a more primitive need—a need the answer to which brushed away numberless questions, yet gratified infinite desires. It simplified the situation at a stroke, it came down from above like the light of the stars, and it needed no explanation. There was explanation enough in the fact that he was her lover, her own,

and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she could marry him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving.

He brought Pansy with him two or three times to the Cascine—Pansy who was very little taller than a year before, and not much older. That she would always be a child was the conviction expressed by her father, who held her by the hand when she was in her sixteenth year and told her to go and play while he sat down a little with the pretty lady. Pansy wore a short dress and a long coat; her hat always seemed too big for her. She found pleasure in walking off, with quick, short steps, to the end of the alley, and then in walking back with a smile that seemed an appeal for approbation. Isabel approved in abundance, and the abundance had the personal touch that the child's affectionate nature craved. She watched her indications as if for herself also much depended on them—Pansy already so represented part of the service she could render, part of the responsibility she could face. Her father took so the childish view of her that he had not yet explained to her the new relation in which he stood to the elegant Miss Archer. "She doesn't know," he said to Isabel; "she doesn't guess; she thinks it perfectly natural that you and I should come and walk here together simply as good friends. There seems to me something enchantingly innocent in that; it's the way I like her to be. No, I'm not a failure, as I used to think; I've succeeded in two things. I'm to marry the woman I adore, and I've brought up my child, as I wished, in the old way."

He was very fond, in all things, of the "old way"; that had struck Isabel as one of his fine, quiet, sincere notes. "It occurs to me that you'll not know whether you've succeeded until you've told her," she said. "You must see how she takes your news, She may be horrified—she may be jealous."

"I'm not afraid of that; she's too fond of you on her own account. I should like to leave her in the dark a little longer—to see if it will come into her head that if we're not engaged we ought to be."

Isabel was impressed by Osmond's artistic, the plastic view, as it somehow appeared, of Pansy's innocence—her own appreciation of it being more anxiously moral. She was perhaps not the less pleased when he told her a few days later that he had communicated the fact to his daughter, who had made such a pretty little speech—"Oh, then I shall have a beautiful sister!" She was neither surprised nor alarmed; she had not cried, as he expected.

"Perhaps she had guessed it," said Isabel.

"Don't say that; I should be disgusted if I believed that. I thought it would be just a little shock; but the way she took it proves that her good manners are paramount. That's also what I wished. You shall see for yourself; to-morrow she shall make you her congratulations in person."

The meeting, on the morrow, took place at the Countess Gemini's, whither Pansy had been conducted by her father, who knew that Isabel was to come in the afternoon to return a visit made her by the Countess on learning that they were to become sisters-in-law. Calling at Casa Touchett the visitor had not found Isabel at home; but after our young woman had been ushered into the Countess's drawing-room Pansy arrived to say that her aunt would presently appear. Pansy was spending the day with that lady, who thought her of an age to begin to learn how to carry herself in company. It was Isabel's view that the little girl might have given lessons in deportment to her relative, and nothing could have justified this conviction more than the manner in which Pansy acquitted herself while they waited together for the Countess. Her father's decision, the year before, had finally been to send her back to the convent to receive the last graces, and Madame Catherine had evidently carried out her theory that Pansy was to be fitted for the great world.

"Papa has told me that you've kindly consented to marry him," said this excellent woman's pupil. "It's very delightful; I think you'll suit very well."

"You think I shall suit *you*?"

"You'll suit me beautifully; but what I mean is that you and papa will suit each other. You're both so quiet and so serious. You're not so quiet as he—or even as Madame Merle; but you're more quiet than many others. He should not for instance have a wife like my aunt. She's always in motion, in agitation—to-day especially; you'll see when she comes in. They told us at the convent it was wrong

to judge our elders, but I suppose there's no harm if we judge them favourably. You'll be a delightful companion for papa."

"For you too, I hope," Isabel said.

"I speak first of him on purpose. I've told you already what I myself think of you; I liked you from the first. I admire you so much that I think it will be a good fortune to have you always before me. You'll be my model; I shall try to imitate you though I'm afraid it will be very feeble. I'm very glad for papa—he needed something more than me. Without you I don't see how he could have got it. You'll be my stepmother, but we mustn't use that word. They're always said to be cruel; but I don't think you'll ever so much as pinch or even push me. I'm not afraid at all."

"My good little Pansy," said Isabel gently, "I shall be ever so kind to you." A vague, inconsequent vision of her coming in some odd way to need it had intervened with the effect of a chill.

"Very well then, I've nothing to fear," the child returned with her note of prepared promptitude. What teaching she had had, it seemed to suggest—or what penalties for non-performance she dreaded!

Her description of her aunt had not been incorrect; the Countess Gemini was further than ever from having folded her wings. She entered the room with a flutter through the air and kissed Isabel first on the forehead and then on each cheek as if according to some ancient prescribed rite. She drew the visitor to a sofa and, looking at her with a variety of turns of the head, began to talk very much as if, seated brush in hand before an easel, she were applying a series of considered touches to a composition of figures already sketched in. "If you expect me to congratulate you I must beg you to excuse me. I don't suppose you care if I do or not; I believe you're supposed not to care—through being so clever—for all sorts of ordinary things. But I care myself if I tell fibs; I never tell them unless there's something rather good to be gained. I don't see what's to be gained with you—especially as you wouldn't believe me. I don't make professions any more than I make paper flowers or flouney lampshades—I don't know how. My lampshades would be sure to take fire, my roses and my fibs to be larger than life. I'm very glad for my own sake that you're to marry Osmond; but I won't pretend I'm glad for yours. You're very brilliant—you know that's the way you're always spoken of; you're an heiress and very good-looking and original, not banal; so it's a good thing to have you in the family. Our family's very good, you know; Osmond will have told you that; and my mother was rather distinguished—she was called the American Corinne. But we're dreadfully fallen, I think, and perhaps you'll pick us up. I've great confidence in you; there are ever so many things I want to talk to you about. I never congratulate any girl on marrying; I think they ought to make it somehow not quite so awful a steel trap. I suppose Pansy oughtn't to hear all this; but that's what she has come to me for—to acquire the tone of society. There's no harm in her knowing what horrors she may be in for. When first I got an idea that my brother had designs on you I thought of writing to you, to recommend you, in the strongest terms, not to listen to him. Then I thought it would be disloyal, and I hate anything of that kind. Besides, as I say, I was enchanted for myself; and after all I'm very selfish. By the way, you won't respect me, not one little mite, and we shall never be intimate. I should like it, but you won't. Some day, all the same, we shall be better friends than you will believe at first. My husband will come and see you, though, as you probably know, he's on no sort of terms with Osmond. He's very fond of going to see pretty women, but I'm not afraid of you. In the first place I don't care what he does. In the second, you won't care a straw for him; he won't be a bit, at any time, your affair, and, stupid as he is, he'll see you're not his. Some day, if you can stand it, I'll tell you all about him. Do you think my niece ought to go out of the room? Pansy, go and practise a little in my boudoir."

"Let her stay, please," said Isabel. "I would rather hear nothing that Pansy may not!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

One afternoon of the autumn of 1876, toward dusk, a young man of pleasing appearance rang at the door of a small apartment on the third floor of an old Roman house. On its being opened he enquired for Madame Merle; whereupon the servant, a neat, plain woman, with a French face and a lady's maid's manner, ushered him into a diminutive drawing-room and requested the favour of his name. "Mr. Edward Rosier," said the young man, who sat down to wait till his hostess should appear.

The reader will perhaps not have forgotten that Mr. Rosier was an ornament of the American circle in Paris, but it may also be remembered that he sometimes vanished from its horizon. He had spent a portion of several winters at Pau, and as he was a gentleman of constituted habits he might have continued for years to pay his annual visit to this charming resort. In the summer of 1876, however, an incident befell him which changed the current not only of his thoughts, but of his customary sequences. He passed a month in the Upper Engadine and encountered at Saint Moritz a charming young girl. To this little person he began to pay, on the spot, particular attention: she struck him as exactly the household angel he had long been looking for. He was never precipitate, he was nothing if not discreet, so he forbore for the present to declare his passion; but it seemed to him when they parted—the young lady to go down into Italy and her admirer to proceed to Geneva, where he was under bonds to join other friends—that he should be romantically wretched if he were not to see her again. The simplest way to do so was to go in the autumn to Rome, where Miss Osmond was domiciled with her family. Mr. Rosier started on his pilgrimage to the Italian capital and reached it on the first of November. It was a pleasant thing to do, but for the young man there was a strain of the heroic in the enterprise. He might expose himself, unseasoned, to the poison of the Roman air, which in November lay, notoriously, much in wait. Fortune, however, favours the brave; and this adventurer, who took three grains of quinine a day, had at the end of a month no cause to deplore his temerity. He had made to a certain extent good use of his time; he had devoted it in vain to finding a flaw in Pansy Osmond's composition. She was admirably finished; she had had the last touch; she was really a consummate piece. He thought of her in amorous meditation a good deal as he might have thought of a Dresden-china shepherdess. Miss Osmond, indeed, in the bloom of her juvenility, had a hint of the rococo which Rosier, whose taste was predominantly for that manner, could not fail to appreciate. That he esteemed the productions of comparatively frivolous periods would have been apparent from the attention he bestowed upon Madame Merle's drawing-room, which, although furnished with specimens of every style, was especially rich in articles of the last two centuries. He had immediately put a glass into one eye and looked round; and then "By Jove, she has some jolly good things!" he had yearningly murmured. The room was small and densely filled with furniture; it gave an impression of faded silk and little statuettes which might totter if one moved. Rosier got up and wandered about with his careful tread, bending over the tables charged with knick-knacks and the cushions embossed with princely arms. When Madame Merle came in she found him standing before the fireplace with his nose very close to the great lace flounce attached to the damask cover of the mantel. He had lifted it delicately, as if he were smelling it.

"It's old Venetian," she said; "it's rather good."

"It's too good for this; you ought to wear it."

"They tell me you have some better in Paris, in the same situation."

"Ah, but I can't wear mine," smiled the visitor.

"I don't see why you shouldn't! I've better lace than that to wear."

His eyes wandered, lingeringly, round the room again. "You've some very good things."

"Yes, but I hate them."

"Do you want to get rid of them?" the young man quickly asked.

"No, it's good to have something to hate: one works it off!"

“I love my things,” said Mr. Rosier as he sat there flushed with all his recognitions. “But it’s not about them, nor about yours, that I came to talk to you.” He paused a moment and then, with greater softness: “I care more for Miss Osmond than for all the bibelots in Europe!”

Madame Merle opened wide eyes. “Did you come to tell me that?”

“I came to ask your advice.”

She looked at him with a friendly frown, stroking her chin with her large white hand. “A man in love, you know, doesn’t ask advice.”

“Why not, if he’s in a difficult position? That’s often the case with a man in love. I’ve been in love before, and I know. But never so much as this time—really never so much. I should like particularly to know what you think of my prospects. I’m afraid that for Mr. Osmond I’m not—well, a real collector’s piece.”

“Do you wish me to intercede?” Madame Merle asked with her fine arms folded and her handsome mouth drawn up to the left.

“If you could say a good word for me I should be greatly obliged. There will be no use in my troubling Miss Osmond unless I have good reason to believe her father will consent.”

“You’re very considerate; that’s in your favour. But you assume in rather an off-hand way that I think you a prize.”

“You’ve been very kind to me,” said the young man. “That’s why I came.”

“I’m always kind to people who have good Louis Quatorze. It’s very rare now, and there’s no telling what one may get by it.” With which the left-hand corner of Madame Merle’s mouth gave expression to the joke.

But he looked, in spite of it, literally apprehensive and consistently strenuous. “Ah, I thought you liked me for myself!”

“I like you very much; but, if you please, we won’t analyse. Pardon me if I seem patronising, but I think you a perfect little gentleman. I must tell you, however, that I’ve not the marrying of Pansy Osmond.”

“I didn’t suppose that. But you’ve seemed to me intimate with her family, and I thought you might have influence.”

Madame Merle considered. “Whom do you call her family?”

“Why, her father; and—how do you say it in English?—her belle-mere.”

“Mr. Osmond’s her father, certainly; but his wife can scarcely be termed a member of her family. Mrs. Osmond has nothing to do with marrying her.”

“I’m sorry for that,” said Rosier with an amiable sigh of good faith. “I think Mrs. Osmond would favour me.”

“Very likely—if her husband doesn’t.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Does she take the opposite line from him?”

“In everything. They think quite differently.”

“Well,” said Rosier, “I’m sorry for that; but it’s none of my business. She’s very fond of Pansy.”

“Yes, she’s very fond of Pansy.”

“And Pansy has a great affection for her. She has told me how she loves her as if she were her own mother.”

“You must, after all, have had some very intimate talk with the poor child,” said Madame Merle. “Have you declared your sentiments?”

“Never!” cried Rosier, lifting his neatly-gloved hand. “Never till I’ve assured myself of those of the parents.”

“You always wait for that? You’ve excellent principles; you observe the proprieties.”

“I think you’re laughing at me,” the young man murmured, dropping back in his chair and feeling his small moustache. “I didn’t expect that of you, Madame Merle.”

She shook her head calmly, like a person who saw things as she saw them. “You don’t do me justice. I think your conduct in excellent taste and the best you could adopt. Yes, that’s what I think.”

“I wouldn’t agitate her—only to agitate her; I love her too much for that,” said Ned Rosier.

“I’m glad, after all, that you’ve told me,” Madame Merle went on. “Leave it to me a little; I think I can help you.”

“I said you were the person to come to!” her visitor cried with prompt elation.

“You were very clever,” Madame Merle returned more dryly. “When I say I can help you I mean once assuming your cause to be good. Let us think a little if it is.”

“I’m awfully decent, you know,” said Rosier earnestly. “I won’t say I’ve no faults, but I’ll say I’ve no vices.”

“All that’s negative, and it always depends, also, on what people call vices. What’s the positive side? What’s the virtuous? What have you got besides your Spanish lace and your Dresden teacups?”

“I’ve a comfortable little fortune—about forty thousand francs a year. With the talent I have for arranging, we can live beautifully on such an income.”

“Beautifully, no. Sufficiently, yes. Even that depends on where you live.”

“Well, in Paris. I would undertake it in Paris.”

Madame Merle’s mouth rose to the left. “It wouldn’t be famous; you’d have to make use of the teacups, and they’d get broken.”

“We don’t want to be famous. If Miss Osmond should have everything pretty it would be enough. When one’s as pretty as she one can afford—well, quite cheap faience. She ought never to wear anything but muslin—without the sprig,” said Rosier reflectively.

“Wouldn’t you even allow her the sprig? She’d be much obliged to you at any rate for that theory.”

“It’s the correct one, I assure you; and I’m sure she’d enter into it. She understands all that; that’s why I love her.”

“She’s a very good little girl, and most tidy—also extremely graceful. But her father, to the best of my belief, can give her nothing.”

Rosier scarce demurred. “I don’t in the least desire that he should. But I may remark, all the same, that he lives like a rich man.”

“The money’s his wife’s; she brought him a large fortune.”

“Mrs. Osmond then is very fond of her stepdaughter; she may do something.”

“For a love-sick swain you have your eyes about you!” Madame Merle exclaimed with a laugh.

“I esteem a dot very much. I can do without it, but I esteem it.”

“Mrs. Osmond,” Madame Merle went on, “will probably prefer to keep her money for her own children.”

“Her own children? Surely she has none.”

“She may have yet. She had a poor little boy, who died two years ago, six months after his birth. Others therefore may come.”

“I hope they will, if it will make her happy. She’s a splendid woman.”

Madame Merle failed to burst into speech. “Ah, about her there’s much to be said. Splendid as you like! We’ve not exactly made out that you’re a *parti*. The absence of vices is hardly a source of income.

“Pardon me, I think it may be,” said Rosier quite lucidly.

“You’ll be a touching couple, living on your innocence!”

“I think you underrate me.”

“You’re not so innocent as that? Seriously,” said Madame Merle, “of course forty thousand francs a year and a nice character are a combination to be considered. I don’t say it’s to be jumped at, but there might be a worse offer. Mr. Osmond, however, will probably incline to believe he can do better.”

“*He* can do so perhaps; but what can his daughter do? She can’t do better than marry the man she loves. For she does, you know,” Rosier added eagerly.

“She does—I know it.”

“Ah,” cried the young man, “I said you were the person to come to.”

“But I don’t know how you know it, if you haven’t asked her,” Madame Merle went on.

“In such a case there’s no need of asking and telling; as you say, we’re an innocent couple. How did *you* know it?”

“I who am not innocent? By being very crafty. Leave it to me; I’ll find out for you.”

Rosier got up and stood smoothing his hat. “You say that rather coldly. Don’t simply find out how it is, but try to make it as it should be.”

“I’ll do my best. I’ll try to make the most of your advantages.”

“Thank you so very much. Meanwhile then I’ll say a word to Mrs. Osmond.”

“*Gardez-vous-en bien!*” And Madame Merle was on her feet. “Don’t set her going, or you’ll spoil everything.”

Rosier gazed into his hat; he wondered whether his hostess *had* been after all the right person to come to. “I don’t think I understand you. I’m an old friend of Mrs. Osmond, and I think she would like me to succeed.”

“Be an old friend as much as you like; the more old friends she has the better, for she doesn’t get on very well with some of her new. But don’t for the present try to make her take up the cudgels for you. Her husband may have other views, and, as a person who wishes her well, I advise you not to multiply points of difference between them.”

Poor Rosier’s face assumed an expression of alarm; a suit for the hand of Pansy Osmond was even a more complicated business than his taste for proper transitions had allowed. But the extreme good sense which he concealed under a surface suggesting that of a careful owner’s “best set” came to his assistance. “I don’t see that I’m bound to consider Mr. Osmond so very much!” he exclaimed. “No, but you should consider *her*. You say you’re an old friend. Would you make her suffer?”

“Not for the world.”

“Then be very careful, and let the matter alone till I’ve taken a few soundings.”

“Let the matter alone, dear Madame Merle? Remember that I’m in love.”

“Oh, you won’t burn up! Why did you come to me, if you’re not to heed what I say?”

“You’re very kind; I’ll be very good,” the young man promised. “But I’m afraid Mr. Osmond’s pretty hard,” he added in his mild voice as he went to the door.

Madame Merle gave a short laugh. “It has been said before. But his wife isn’t easy either.”

“Ah, she’s a splendid woman!” Ned Rosier repeated, for departure. He resolved that his conduct should be worthy of an aspirant who was already a model of discretion; but he saw nothing in any pledge he had given Madame Merle that made it improper he should keep himself in spirits by an occasional visit to Miss Osmond’s home. He reflected constantly on what his adviser had said to him, and turned over in his mind the impression of her rather circumspect tone. He had gone to her *de confiance*, as they put it in Paris; but it was possible he had been precipitate. He found difficulty in thinking of himself as rash—he had incurred this reproach so rarely; but it certainly was true that he had known Madame Merle only for the last month, and that his thinking her a delightful woman was not, when one came to look into it, a reason for assuming that she would be eager to push Pansy Osmond into his arms, gracefully arranged as these members might be to receive her. She had indeed shown him benevolence, and she was a person of consideration among the girl’s people, where she had a rather striking appearance (Rosier had more than once wondered how she managed it) of being intimate without being familiar. But possibly he had exaggerated these advantages. There was no particular reason why she should take trouble for him; a charming woman was charming to every one, and Rosier felt rather a fool when he thought of his having appealed to her on the ground that she had distinguished him. Very likely—though she had appeared to say it in joke—she was really

only thinking of his bibelots. Had it come into her head that he might offer her two or three of the gems of his collection? If she would only help him to marry Miss Osmond he would present her with his whole museum. He could hardly say so to her outright; it would seem too gross a bribe. But he should like her to believe it.

It was with these thoughts that he went again to Mrs. Osmond's, Mrs. Osmond having an "evening"—she had taken the Thursday of each week—when his presence could be accounted for on general principles of civility. The object of Mr. Rosier's well-regulated affection dwelt in a high house in the very heart of Rome; a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny *piazza* in the neighbourhood of the Farnese Palace. In a palace, too, little Pansy lived—a palace by Roman measure, but a dungeon to poor Rosier's apprehensive mind. It seemed to him of evil omen that the young lady he wished to marry, and whose fastidious father he doubted of his ability to conciliate, should be immured in a kind of domestic fortress, a pile which bore a stern old Roman name, which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence, which was mentioned in "Murray" and visited by tourists who looked, on a vague survey, disappointed and depressed, and which had frescoes by Caravaggio in the *piano nobile* and a row of mutilated statues and dusty urns in the wide, nobly-arched loggia overhanging the damp court where a fountain gushed out of a mossy niche. In a less preoccupied frame of mind he could have done justice to the Palazzo Roccanera; he could have entered into the sentiment of Mrs. Osmond, who had once told him that on settling themselves in Rome she and her husband had chosen this habitation for the love of local colour. It had local colour enough, and though he knew less about architecture than about Limoges enamels he could see that the proportions of the windows and even the details of the cornice had quite the grand air. But Rosier was haunted by the conviction that at picturesque periods young girls had been shut up there to keep them from their true loves, and then, under the threat of being thrown into convents, had been forced into unholy marriages. There was one point, however, to which he always did justice when once he found himself in Mrs. Osmond's warm, rich-looking reception-rooms, which were on the second floor. He acknowledged that these people were very strong in "good things." It was a taste of Osmond's own—not at all of hers; this she had told him the first time he came to the house, when, after asking himself for a quarter of an hour whether they had even better "French" than he in Paris, he was obliged on the spot to admit that they had, very much, and vanquished his envy, as a gentleman should, to the point of expressing to his hostess his pure admiration of her treasures. He learned from Mrs. Osmond that her husband had made a large collection before their marriage and that, though he had annexed a number of fine pieces within the last three years, he had achieved his greatest finds at a time when he had not the advantage of her advice. Rosier interpreted this information according to principles of his own. For "advice" read "cash," he said to himself; and the fact that Gilbert Osmond had landed his highest prizes during his impecunious season confirmed his most cherished doctrine—the doctrine that a collector may freely be poor if he be only patient. In general, when Rosier presented himself on a Thursday evening, his first recognition was for the walls of the saloon; there were three or four objects his eyes really yearned for. But after his talk with Madame Merle he felt the extreme seriousness of his position; and now, when he came in, he looked about for the daughter of the house with such eagerness as might be permitted a gentleman whose smile, as he crossed a threshold, always took everything comfortable for granted.

CHAPTER XXXVII

Pansy was not in the first of the rooms, a large apartment with a concave ceiling and walls covered with old red damask; it was here Mrs. Osmond usually sat—though she was not in her most customary place to-night—and that a circle of more especial intimates gathered about the fire. The room was flushed with subdued, diffused brightness; it contained the larger things and—almost always—an odour of flowers. Pansy on this occasion was presumably in the next of the series, the resort of younger visitors, where tea was served. Osmond stood before the chimney, leaning back with his hands behind him; he had one foot up and was warming the sole. Half a dozen persons, scattered near him, were talking together; but he was not in the conversation; his eyes had an expression, frequent with them, that seemed to represent them as engaged with objects more worth their while than the appearances actually thrust upon them. Rosier, coming in unannounced, failed to attract his attention; but the young man, who was very punctilious, though he was even exceptionally conscious that it was the wife, not the husband, he had come to see, went up to shake hands with him. Osmond put out his left hand, without changing his attitude.

“How d’ye do? My wife’s somewhere about.”

“Never fear; I shall find her,” said Rosier cheerfully.

Osmond, however, took him in; he had never in his life felt himself so efficiently looked at. “Madame Merle has told him, and he doesn’t like it,” he privately reasoned. He had hoped Madame Merle would be there, but she was not in sight; perhaps she was in one of the other rooms or would come later. He had never especially delighted in Gilbert Osmond, having a fancy he gave himself airs. But Rosier was not quickly resentful, and where politeness was concerned had ever a strong need of being quite in the right. He looked round him and smiled, all without help, and then in a moment, “I saw a jolly good piece of Capo di Monte to-day,” he said.

Osmond answered nothing at first; but presently, while he warmed his boot-sole, “I don’t care a fig for Capo di Monte!” he returned.

“I hope you’re not losing your interest?”

“In old pots and plates? Yes, I’m losing my interest.”

Rosier for an instant forgot the delicacy of his position. “You’re not thinking of parting with a—a piece or two?”

“No, I’m not thinking of parting with anything at all, Mr. Rosier,” said Osmond, with his eyes still on the eyes of his visitor.

“Ah, you want to keep, but not to add,” Rosier remarked brightly.

“Exactly. I’ve nothing I wish to match.”

Poor Rosier was aware he had blushed; he was distressed at his want of assurance. “Ah, well, I have!” was all he could murmur; and he knew his murmur was partly lost as he turned away. He took his course to the adjoining room and met Mrs. Osmond coming out of the deep doorway. She was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, as he had said, and yet oh so radiantly gentle! We know what Mr. Rosier thought of her and the terms in which, to Madame Merle, he had expressed his admiration. Like his appreciation of her dear little stepdaughter it was based partly on his eye for decorative character, his instinct for authenticity; but also on a sense for uncatalogued values, for that secret of a “lustre” beyond any recorded losing or rediscovering, which his devotion to brittle wares had still not disqualified him to recognise. Mrs. Osmond, at present, might well have gratified such tastes. The years had touched her only to enrich her; the flower of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem. She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception—she had more the air of being able to wait. Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady. “You see I’m very regular,” he said. “But who should be if I’m not?”

“Yes, I’ve known you longer than any one here. But we mustn’t indulge in tender reminiscences. I want to introduce you to a young lady.”

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