ГЕНРИ ДЖЕЙМС

THE SACRED FOUNT

Генри Джеймс
The Sacred Fount

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34841510
The Sacred Fount:

Содержание

Henry James
The Sacred Fount

I

IT was an occasion, I felt—the prospect of a large party—to look out at the station for others, possible friends and even possible enemies, who might be going. Such premonitions, it was true, bred fears when they failed to breed hopes, though it was to be added that there were sometimes, in the case, rather happy ambiguities. One was glowered at, in the compartment, by people who on the morrow, after breakfast, were to prove charming; one was spoken to first by people whose sociability was subsequently to show as bleak; and one built with confidence on others who were never to reappear at all—who were only going to Birmingham. As soon as I saw Gilbert Long, some way up the platform, however, I knew him as an element. It was not so much that the wish was father to the thought as that I remembered having already more than once met him at Newmarch. He was a friend of the house—he wouldn't be going to Birmingham. I so little expected him, at the same time, to recognise me that I stopped short of the carriage near which he stood—I looked for a seat that wouldn't make us neighbours.

I had met him at Newmarch only—a place of a charm so

special as to create rather a bond among its guests; but he had always, in the interval, so failed to know me that I could only hold him as stupid unless I held him as impertinent. He was stupid in fact, and in that character had no business at Newmarch; but he had also, no doubt, his system, which he applied without discernment. I wondered, while I saw my things put into my corner, what Newmarch could see in him—for it always had to see something before it made a sign. His good looks, which were striking, perhaps paid his way—his six feet and more of stature, his low-growing, tight-curling hair, his big, bare, blooming face. He was a fine piece of human furniture—he made a small party seem more numerous. This, at least, was the impression of him that had revived before I stepped out again to the platform, and it armed me only at first with surprise when I saw him come down to me as if for a greeting. If he had decided at last to treat me as an acquaintance made, it was none the less a case for letting him come all the way. That, accordingly, was what he did, and with so clear a conscience, I hasten to add, that at the end of a minute we were talking together quite as with the tradition of prompt intimacy. He was good-looking enough, I now again saw, but not such a model of it as I had seemed to remember; on the other hand his manners had distinctly gained in ease. He referred to our previous encounters and common contacts—he was glad I was going; he peeped into my compartment and thought it better than his own. He called a porter, the next minute, to shift his things, and while his attention was so taken I made out some of the rest

of the contingent, who were finding or had already found places.

This lasted till Long came back with his porter, as well as with a lady unknown to me and to whom he had apparently mentioned that our carriage would pleasantly accommodate her. The porter carried in fact her dressing-bag, which he put upon a seat and the bestowal of which left the lady presently free to turn to me with a reproach: "I don't think it very nice of you not to speak to me." I stared, then caught at her identity through her voice; after which I reflected that she might easily have thought me the same sort of ass as I had thought Long. For she was simply, it appeared, Grace Brissenden. We had, the three of us, the carriage to ourselves, and we journeyed together for more than an hour, during which, in my corner, I had my companions opposite. We began at first by talking a little, and then as the train—a fast one—ran straight and proportionately bellowed, we gave up the effort to compete with its music. Meantime, however, we had exchanged with each other a fact or two to turn over in silence. Brissenden was coming later—not, indeed, that that was such a fact. But his wife was informed—she knew about the numerous others; she had mentioned, while we waited, people and things: that Obert, R.A., was somewhere in the train, that her husband was to bring on Lady John, and that Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley were in the wondrous new fashion—and their servants too, like a single household—starting, travelling, arriving together. It came back to me as I sat there that when she mentioned Lady John as in charge of Brissenden the other member of our trio had expressed

interest and surprise—expressed it so as to have made her reply with a smile: "Didn't you really know?" This passage had taken place on the platform while, availing ourselves of our last minute, we hung about our door.

"Why in the world *should* I know?"

To which, with good nature, she had simply returned: "Oh, it's only that I thought you always did!" And they both had looked at me a little oddly, as if appealing from each other. "What in the world does she mean?" Long might have seemed to ask; while Mrs. Brissenden conveyed with light profundity: "*You* know why he should as well as I, don't you?" In point of fact I didn't in the least; and what afterwards struck me much more as the beginning of my anecdote was a word dropped by Long after someone had come up to speak to her. I had then given him his cue by alluding to my original failure to place her. What in the world, in the year or two, had happened to her? She had changed so extraordinarily for the better. How could a woman who had been plain so long become pretty so late?

It was just what he had been wondering. "I didn't place her at first myself. She had to speak to me. But I hadn't seen her since her marriage, which was—wasn't it?—four or five years ago. She's amazing for her age."

"What then *is* her age?"

"Oh—two or three-and-forty."

"She's prodigious for that. But can it be so great?"

"Isn't it easy to count?" he asked. "Don't you remember, when

poor Briss married her, how immensely she was older? What was it they called it?—a case of child-stealing. Everyone made jokes. Briss isn't yet thirty." No, I bethought myself, he wouldn't be; but I hadn't remembered the difference as so great. What I had mainly remembered was that she had been rather ugly. At present she was rather handsome. Long, however, as to this, didn't agree. "I'm bound to say I don't quite call it beauty."

"Oh, I only speak of it as relative. She looks so well—and somehow so 'fine.' Why else shouldn't we have recognised her?"

"Why indeed? But it isn't a thing with which beauty has to do." He had made the matter out with an acuteness for which I shouldn't have given him credit. "What has happened to her is simply that—well, that nothing has."

"Nothing has happened? But, my dear man, she has been married. That's supposed to be something."

"Yes, but she has been married so little and so stupidly. It must be desperately dull to be married to poor Briss. His comparative youth doesn't, after all, make more of him. He's nothing but what he is. Her clock has simply stopped. She looks no older—that's all."

"Ah, and a jolly good thing too, when you start where she did. But I take your discrimination," I added, "as just. The only thing is that if a woman doesn't grow older she may be said to grow younger; and if she grows younger she may be supposed to grow prettier. That's all—except, of course, that it strikes me as charming also for Brissenden himself. *He* had the face, I seem to

recall, of a baby; so that if his wife did flaunt her fifty years–!"

"Oh," Long broke in, "it wouldn't have mattered to him if she had. That's the awfulness, don't you see? of the married state. People have to get used to each other's charms as well as to their faults. He wouldn't have noticed. It's only you and I who do, and the charm of it is for *us*."

"What a lucky thing then," I laughed, "that, with Brissenden so out of it and relegated to the time-table's obscure hereafter, it should be you and I who enjoy her!" I had been struck in what he said with more things than I could take up, and I think I must have looked at him, while he talked, with a slight return of my first mystification. He talked as I had never heard him—less and less like the heavy Adonis who had so often "cut" me; and while he did so I was proportionately more conscious of the change in him. He noticed in fact after a little the vague confusion of my gaze and asked me—with complete good nature—why I stared at him so hard. I sufficiently disembroiled myself to reply that I could only be fascinated by the way he made his points; to which he—with the same sociability—made answer that he, on the contrary, more than suspected me, clever and critical as I was, of amusement at his artless prattle. He stuck none the less to his idea that what we had been discussing was lost on Brissenden. "Ah, then I hope," I said, "that at least Lady John isn't!"

"Oh, Lady John–!" And he turned away as if there were either too much or too little to say about her.

I found myself engaged again with Mrs. Briss while he was

occupied with a newspaper-boy—and engaged, oddly, in very much the free view of him that he and I had just taken of herself. She put it to me frankly that she had never seen a man so improved: a confidence that I met with alacrity, as it showed me that, under the same impression, I had not been astray. She had only, it seemed, on seeing him, made him out with a great effort. I took in this confession, but I repaid it. "He hinted to me that he had not known you more easily."

"More easily than you did? Oh, nobody does that; and, to be quite honest, I've got used to it and don't mind. People talk of our changing every seven years, but they make me feel as if I changed every seven minutes. What will you have, at any rate, and how can I help it? It's the grind of life, the wear and tear of time and misfortune. And, you know, I'm ninety-three."

"How young you must feel," I answered, "to care to talk of your age! I envy you, for nothing would induce me to let you know mine. You look, you see, just twenty-five."

It evidently too, what I said, gave her pleasure—a pleasure that she caught and held. "Well, you can't say I dress it."

"No, you dress, I make out, ninety-three. If you *would* only dress twenty-five you'd look fifteen."

"Fifteen in a schoolroom charade!" She laughed at this happily enough. "Your compliment to my taste is odd. I know, at all events," she went on, "what's the difference in Mr. Long."

"Be so good then, for my relief, as to name it."

"Well, a very clever woman has for some time past–"

"Taken"—this beginning was of course enough—"a particular interest in him? Do you mean Lady John?" I inquired; and, as she evidently did, I rather demurred. "Do you call Lady John a very clever woman?"

"Surely. That's why I kindly arranged that, as she was to take, I happened to learn, the next train, Guy should come with her."

"You arranged it?" I wondered. "She's not so clever as you then."

"Because you feel that *she* wouldn't, or couldn't? No doubt she wouldn't have made the same point of it—for more than one reason. Poor Guy hasn't pretensions—has nothing but his youth and his beauty. But that's precisely why I'm sorry for him and try whenever I can to give him a lift. Lady John's company *is*, you see, a lift."

"You mean it has so unmistakably been one to Long?"

"Yes—it has positively given him a mind and a tongue. *That's* what has come over him."

"Then," I said, "it's a most extraordinary case—such as one really has never met."

"Oh, but," she objected, "it happens."

"Ah, so very seldom! Yes—I've positively never met it. Are you very sure," I insisted, "that Lady John is the influence?"

"I don't mean to say, of course," she replied, "that he looks fluttered if you mention her, that he doesn't in fact look as blank as a pickpocket. But that proves nothing—or rather, as they're known to be always together, and she from morning till night as

pointed as a hat-pin, it proves just what one sees. One simply takes it in."

I turned the picture round. "They're scarcely together when she's together with Brissenden."

"Ah, that's only once in a way. It's a thing that from time to time such people—don't you know?—make a particular point of: they cultivate, to cover their game, the appearance of other little friendships. It puts outsiders off the scent, and the real thing meanwhile goes on. Besides, you yourself acknowledge the effect. If she hasn't made him clever, what has she made him? She has given him, steadily, more and more intellect."

"Well, you may be right," I laughed, "though you speak as if it were cod-liver oil. Does she administer it, as a daily dose, by the spoonful? or only as a drop at a time? Does he take it in his food? Is he supposed to know? The difficulty for me is simply that if I've seen the handsome grow ugly and the ugly handsome, the fat grow thin and the thin fat, the short grow long and the long short; if I've even, likewise, seen the clever, as I've too fondly, at least, supposed them, grow stupid: so have I *not* seen—no, not once in all my days—the stupid grow clever."

It was a question, none the less, on which she could perfectly stand up. "All I can say is then that you'll have, the next day or two, an interesting new experience."

"It *will* be interesting," I declared while I thought—"and all the more if I make out for myself that Lady John *is* the agent."

"You'll make it out if you talk to her—that is, I mean, if you

make *her* talk. You'll see how she *can*."

"She keeps her wit then," I asked, "in spite of all she pumps into others?"

"Oh, she has enough for two!"

"I'm immensely struck with yours," I replied, "as well as with your generosity. I've seldom seen a woman take so handsome a view of another."

"It's because I like to be kind!" she said with the best faith in the world; to which I could only return, as we entered the train, that it was a kindness Lady John would doubtless appreciate. Long rejoined us, and we ran, as I have said, our course; which, as I have also noted, seemed short to me in the light of such a blaze of suggestion. To each of my companions—and the fact stuck out of them—something unprecedented had happened.

II

THE day was as fine and the scene as fair at Newmarch as the party was numerous and various; and my memory associates with the rest of the long afternoon many renewals of acquaintance and much sitting and strolling, for snatches of talk, in the long shade of great trees and through the straight walks of old gardens. A couple of hours thus passed, and fresh accessions enriched the picture. There were persons I was curious of—of Lady John, for instance, of whom I promised myself an early view; but we were apt to be carried away in currents that reflected new images and sufficiently beguiled impatience. I recover, all the same, a full sequence of impressions, each of which, I afterwards saw, had been appointed to help all the others. If my anecdote, as I have mentioned, had begun, at Paddington, at a particular moment, it gathered substance step by step and without missing a link. The links, in fact, should I count them all, would make too long a chain. They formed, nevertheless, the happiest little chapter of accidents, though a series of which I can scarce give more than the general effect.

One of the first accidents was that, before dinner, I met Ford Obert wandering a little apart with Mrs. Server, and that, as they were known to me as agreeable acquaintances, I should have faced them with confidence had I not immediately drawn from their sequestered air the fear of interrupting them. Mrs.

Server was always lovely and Obert always expert; the latter straightway pulled up, however, making me as welcome as if their converse had dropped. She was extraordinarily pretty, markedly responsive, conspicuously charming, but he gave me a look that really seemed to say: "Don't—there's a good fellow—leave me any longer alone with her!" I had met her at Newmarch before—it was indeed only so that I had met her—and I knew how she was valued there. I also knew that an aversion to pretty women—numbers of whom he had preserved for a grateful posterity—was his sign neither as man nor as artist; the effect of all of which was to make me ask myself what she could have been doing to him. Making love, possibly—yet from that he would scarce have appealed. She wouldn't, on the other hand, have given him her company only to be inhuman. I joined them, at all events, learning from Mrs. Server that she had come by a train previous to my own; and we made a slow trio till, at a turn of the prospect, we came upon another group. It consisted of Mrs. Froome and Lord Lutley and of Gilbert Long and Lady John—mingled and confounded, as might be said, not assorted according to tradition. Long and Mrs. Froome came first, I recollect, together, and his lordship turned away from Lady John on seeing me rather directly approach her. She had become for me, on the spot, as interesting as, while we travelled, I had found my two friends in the train. As the source of the flow of "intellect" that had transmuted our young man, she had every claim to an earnest attention; and I should soon have been ready

to pronounce that she rewarded it as richly as usual. She was indeed, as Mrs. Briss had said, as pointed as a hat-pin, and I bore in mind that lady's injunction to look in her for the answer to our riddle.

The riddle, I may mention, sounded afresh to my ear in Gilbert Long's gay voice; it hovered there—before me, beside, behind me, as we all paused—in his light, restless step, a nervous animation that seemed to multiply his presence. He became really, for the moment, under this impression, the thing I was most conscious of; I heard him, I felt him even while I exchanged greetings with the sorceress by whose wand he had been touched. To be touched myself was doubtless not quite what I wanted; yet I wanted, distinctly, a glimpse; so that, with the smart welcome Lady John gave me, I might certainly have felt that I was on the way to get it. The note of Long's predominance deepened during these minutes in a manner I can't describe, and I continued to feel that though we pretended to talk it was to him only we listened. He had us all in hand; he controlled for the moment all our attention and our relations. He was in short, as a consequence of our attitude, in possession of the scene to a tune he couldn't have dreamed of a year or two before—inasmuch as at that period he could have figured at no such eminence without making a fool of himself. And the great thing was that if his eminence was now so perfectly graced he yet knew less than any of us what was the matter with him. He was unconscious of how he had "come out"—which was exactly what sharpened my wonder. Lady John,

on her side, was thoroughly conscious, and I had a fancy that she looked at me to measure how far *I* was. I cared, naturally, not in the least what she guessed; her interest for me was all in the operation of her influence. I am afraid I watched to catch it in the act—watched her with a curiosity of which she might well have become aware.

What an intimacy, what an intensity of relation, I said to myself, so successful a process implied! It was of course familiar enough that when people were so deeply in love they rubbed off on each other—that a great pressure of soul to soul usually left on either side a sufficient show of tell-tale traces. But for Long to have been so stamped as I found him, how the pliant wax must have been prepared and the seal of passion applied! What an affection the woman working such a change in him must have managed to create as a preface to her influence! With what a sense of her charm she must have paved the way for it! Strangely enough, however—it was even rather irritating—there was nothing more than usual in Lady John to assist my view of the height at which the pair so evoked must move. These things—the way other people could feel about each other, the power not one's self, in the given instance, that made for passion—were of course at best the mystery of mysteries; still, there were cases in which fancy, sounding the depths or the shallows, could at least drop the lead. Lady John, perceptibly, was no such case; imagination, in her presence, was but the weak wing of the insect that bumps against the glass. She was pretty, prompt, hard, and, in a way that

was special to her, a mistress at once of "culture" and of slang. She was like a hat—with one of Mrs. Briss's hat-pins—askew on the bust of Virgil. Her ornamental information—as strong as a coat of furniture-polish—almost knocked you down. What I felt in her now more than ever was that, having a reputation for "point" to keep up, she was always under arms, with absences and anxieties like those of a celebrity at a public dinner. She thought too much of her "speech"—of how soon it would have to come. It was none the less wonderful, however, that, as Grace Brissenden had said, she should still find herself with intellect to spare—have lavished herself by precept and example on Long and yet have remained for each other interlocutor as fresh as the clown bounding into the ring. She cracked, for my benefit, as many jokes and turned as many somersaults as might have been expected; after which I thought it fair to let her off. We all faced again to the house, for dressing and dinner were in sight.

I found myself once more, as we moved, with Mrs. Server, and I remember rejoicing that, sympathetic as she showed herself, she didn't think it necessary to be, like Lady John, always "ready." She was delightfully handsome—handsomer than ever; slim, fair, fine, with charming pale eyes and splendid auburn hair. I said to myself that I hadn't done her justice; she hadn't organised her forces, was a little helpless and vague, but there was ease for the weary in her happy nature and her peculiar grace. These last were articles on which, five minutes later, before the house, where we still had a margin, I was moved to challenge Ford Obert.

"What was the matter just now—when, though you were so fortunately occupied, you yet seemed to call me to the rescue?"

"Oh," he laughed, "I was only occupied in being frightened!"

"But at what?"

"Well, at a sort of sense that she wanted to make love to me."

I reflected. "Mrs. Server? Does Mrs. Server make love?"

"It seemed to me," my friend replied, "that she began on it to *you* as soon as she got hold of you. Weren't you aware?"

I debated afresh; I didn't know that I had been. "Not to the point of terror. She's so gentle and so appealing. Even if she took one in hand with violence, moreover," I added, "I don't see why terror—given so charming a person—should be the result. It's flattering."

"Ah, you're brave," said Obert.

"I didn't know you were ever timid. How can you be, in your profession? Doesn't it come back to me, for that matter, that—only the other year—you painted her?"

"Yes, I faced her to that extent. But she's different now."

I scarcely made it out. "In what way different? She's as charming as ever."

As if even for his own satisfaction my friend seemed to think a little. "Well, her affections were not then, I imagine, at her disposal. I judge that that's what it must have been. They were fixed—with intensity; and it made the difference with *me*. Her imagination had, for the time, rested its wing. At present it's ready for flight—it seeks a fresh perch. It's trying. Take care."

"Oh, I don't flatter myself," I laughed, "that I've only to hold out my hand! At any rate," I went on, "*I* sha'n't call for help."

He seemed to think again. "I don't know. You'll see."

"If I do I shall see a great deal more than I now suspect." He wanted to get off to dress, but I still held him. "Isn't she wonderfully lovely?"

"Oh!" he simply exclaimed.

"Isn't she as lovely as she seems?"

But he had already broken away. "What has that to do with it?"

"What has anything, then?"

"She's too beastly unhappy."

"But isn't that just one's advantage?"

"No. It's uncanny." And he escaped.

The question had at all events brought us indoors and so far up our staircase as to where it branched towards Obert's room. I followed it to my corridor, with which other occasions had made me acquainted, and I reached the door on which I expected to find my card of designation. This door, however, was open, so as to show me, in momentary possession of the room, a gentleman, unknown to me, who, in unguided quest of his quarters, appeared to have arrived from the other end of the passage. He had just seen, as the property of another, my unpacked things, with which he immediately connected me. He moreover, to my surprise, on my entering, sounded my name, in response to which I could only at first remain blank. It was in fact not till I had begun to help him place himself that, correcting my blankness, I knew him for

Guy Brissenden. He had been put by himself, for some reason, in the bachelor wing and, exploring at hazard, had mistaken the signs. By the time we found his servant and his lodging I had reflected on the oddity of my having been as stupid about the husband as I had been about the wife. He had escaped my notice since our arrival, but I had, as a much older man, met him—the hero of his odd union—at some earlier time. Like his wife, none the less, he had now struck me as a stranger, and it was not till, in his room, I stood a little face to face with him that I made out the wonderful reason.

The wonderful reason was that I was *not* a much older man; Guy Brissenden, at any rate, was not a much younger. It was he who was old—it was he who was older—it was he who was oldest. That was so disconcertingly what he had become. It was in short what he would have been had he been as old as he looked. He looked almost anything—he looked quite sixty. I made it out again at dinner, where, from a distance, but opposite, I had him in sight. Nothing could have been stranger than the way that, fatigued, fixed, settled, he seemed to have piled up the years. They were there without having had time to arrive. It was as if he had discovered some miraculous short cut to the common doom. He had grown old, in fine, as people you see after an interval sometimes strike you as having grown rich—too quickly for the honest, or at least for the straight, way. He had cheated or inherited or speculated. It took me but a minute then to add him to my little gallery—the small collection, I mean, represented by

his wife and by Gilbert Long, as well as in some degree doubtless also by Lady John: the museum of those who put to me with such intensity the question of what had happened to them. His wife, on the same side, was not out of my range, and now, largely exposed, lighted, jewelled, and enjoying moreover visibly the sense of these things—his wife, upon my honour, as I soon remarked to the lady next me, his wife (it was too prodigious!) looked about twenty.

"Yes—isn't it funny?" said the lady next me.

It was so funny that it set me thinking afresh and that, with the interest of it, which became a positive excitement, I had to keep myself in hand in order not too publicly to explain, not to break out right and left with my reflections. I don't know why—it was a sense instinctive and unreasoned, but I felt from the first that if I was on the scent of something ultimate I had better waste neither my wonder nor my wisdom. I *was* on the scent—that I was sure of; and yet even after I was sure I should still have been at a loss to put my enigma itself into words. I was just conscious, vaguely, of being on the track of a law, a law that would fit, that would strike me as governing the delicate phenomena—delicate though so marked—that my imagination found itself playing with. A part of the amusement they yielded came, I daresay, from my exaggerating them—grouping them into a larger mystery (and thereby a larger "law") than the facts, as observed, yet warranted; but that is the common fault of minds for which the vision of life is an obsession. The obsession pays, if one will; but to pay it has

to borrow. After dinner, but while the men were still in the room, I had some talk again with Long, of whom I inquired if he had been so placed as to see "poor Briss."

He appeared to wonder, and poor Briss, with our shifting of seats, was now at a distance. "I think so—but I didn't particularly notice. What's the matter with poor Briss?"

"That's exactly what I thought you might be able to tell me. But if nothing, in him, strikes you–!"

He met my eyes a moment—then glanced about. "Where is he?"

"Behind you; only don't turn round to look, for he knows–" But I dropped, having caught something directed toward me in Brissenden's face. My interlocutor remained blank, simply asking me, after an instant, what it was he knew. On this I said what I meant. "He knows we've noticed."

Long wondered again. "Ah, but I *haven't*!" He spoke with some sharpness.

"He knows," I continued, noting the sharpness too, "what's the matter with him."

"Then what the devil is it?"

I waited a little, having for the moment an idea on my hands. "Do you see him often?"

Long disengaged the ash from his cigarette. "No. Why should I?"

Distinctly, he was uneasy—though as yet perhaps but vaguely—at what I might be coming to. That was precisely my idea, and

if I pitied him a little for my pressure my idea was yet what most possessed me. "Do you mean there's nothing in him that strikes you?"

On this, unmistakably, he looked at me hard. "'Strikes' me—in that boy? Nothing in him, that I know of, ever struck me in my life. He's not an object of the smallest interest to me!"

I felt that if I insisted I should really stir up the old Long, the stolid coxcomb, capable of rudeness, with whose redemption, reabsorption, supersession—one scarcely knew what to call it—I had been so happily impressed. "Oh, of course, if you haven't noticed, you haven't, and the matter I was going to speak of will have no point. You won't know what I mean." With which I paused long enough to let his curiosity operate if his denial had been sincere. But it hadn't. His curiosity never operated. He only exclaimed, more indulgently, that he didn't know what I was talking about; and I recognised after a little that if I had made him, without intention, uncomfortable, this was exactly a proof of his being what Mrs. Briss, at the station, had called cleverer, and what I had so much remarked while, in the garden before dinner, he held our small company. Nobody, nothing could, in the time of his inanity, have made him turn a hair. It was the mark of his aggrandisement. But I spared him—so far as was consistent with my wish for absolute certainty; changed the subject, spoke of other things, took pains to sound disconnectedly, and only after reference to several of the other ladies, the name over which we had just felt friction. "Mrs.

Brissenden's quite fabulous."

He appeared to have strayed, in our interval, far. "'Fabulous'?"

"Why, for the figure that, by candle-light and in cloth-of-silver and diamonds, she is still able to make."

"Oh dear, yes!" He showed as relieved to be able to see what I meant. "She has grown so very much less plain."

But that wasn't at all what I meant. "Ah," I said, "you put it the other way at Paddington—which was much more the right one."

He had quite forgotten. "How then did I put it?"

As he had done before, I got rid of my ash. "She hasn't grown very much less plain. She has only grown very much less old."

"Ah, well," he laughed, but as if his interest had quickly dropped, "youth is—comparatively speaking—beauty."

"Oh, not always. Look at poor Briss himself."

"Well, if you like better, beauty is youth."

"Not always, either," I returned. "Certainly only when it *is* beauty. To see how little it may be either, look," I repeated, "at poor Briss."

"I thought you told me just now not to!" He rose at last in his impatience.

"Well, at present you can."

I also got up, the other men at the same moment moved, and the subject of our reference stood in view. This indeed was but briefly, for, as if to examine a picture behind him, the personage in question suddenly turned his back. Long, however, had had time to take him in and then to decide. "I've looked. What then?"

"You don't see anything?"

"Nothing."

"Not what everyone else must?"

"No, confound you!"

I already felt that, to be so tortuous, he must have had a reason, and the search for his reason was what, from this moment, drew me on. I had in fact half guessed it as we stood there. But this only made me the more explanatory. "It isn't really, however, that Brissenden has grown less lovely—it's only that he has grown less young."

To which my friend, as we quitted the room, replied simply: "Oh!"

The effect I have mentioned was, none the less, too absurd. The poor youth's back, before us, still as if consciously presented, confessed to the burden of time. "How old," I continued, "did we make out this afternoon that he would be?"

"That who would?"

"Why, poor Briss."

He fairly pulled up in our march. "Have you got him on the brain?"

"Don't I seem to remember, my dear man, that it was you yourself who knew? He's thirty at the most. He can't possibly be more. And there he is: as fine, as swaddled, as royal a mummy, to the eye, as one would wish to see. Don't pretend! But it's all right." I laughed as I took myself up. "I must talk to Lady John."

I did talk to her, but I must come to it. What is most to the

point just here is an observation or two that, in the smoking-room, before going to bed, I exchanged with Ford Obert. I forbore, as I have hinted, to show all I saw, but it was lawfully open to me to judge of what other people did; and I had had before dinner my little proof that, on occasion, Obert could see as much as most. Yet I said nothing more to him for the present about Mrs. Server. The Brissendens were new to him, and his experience of every sort of facial accident, of human sign, made him just the touchstone I wanted. Nothing, naturally, was easier than to turn him on the question of the fair and the foul, type and character, weal and woe, among our fellow-visitors; so that my mention of the air of disparity in the couple I have just named came in its order and produced its effect. This effect was that of my seeing—which was all I required—that if the disparity was marked for him this expert observer could yet read it quite the wrong way. Why had so fine a young creature married a man three times her age? He was of course astounded when I told him the young creature was much nearer three times Brissenden's, and this led to some interesting talk between us as to the consequences, in general, of such association on such terms. The particular case before us, I easily granted, sinned by over-emphasis, but it was a fair, though a gross, illustration of what almost always occurred when twenty and forty, when thirty and sixty, mated or mingled, lived together in intimacy. Intimacy of course had to be postulated. Then either the high number or the low always got the upper hand, and it was usually the high that

succeeded. It seemed, in other words, more possible to go back than to keep still, to grow young than to remain so. If Brissenden had been of his wife's age and his wife of Brissenden's, it would thus be he who must have redescended the hill, it would be she who would have been pushed over the brow. There was really a touching truth in it, the stuff of—what did people call such things?—an apologue or a parable. "One of the pair," I said, "has to pay for the other. What ensues is a miracle, and miracles are expensive. What's a greater one than to have your youth twice over? It's a second wind, another 'go'—which isn't the sort of thing life mostly treats us to. Mrs. Briss had to get her new blood, her extra allowance of time and bloom, somewhere; and from whom could she so conveniently extract them as from Guy himself? She *has*, by an extraordinary feat of legerdemain, extracted them; and he, on his side, to supply her, has had to tap the sacred fount. But the sacred fount is like the greedy man's description of the turkey as an 'awkward' dinner dish. It may be sometimes too much for a single share, but it's not enough to go round."

Obert was at all events sufficiently struck with my view to throw out a question on it. "So that, paying to his last drop, Mr. Briss, as you call him, can only die of the business?"

"Oh, not yet, I hope. But before *her*—yes: long."

He was much amused. "How you polish them off!"

"I only talk," I returned, "as you paint; not a bit worse! But one must indeed wonder," I conceded, "how the poor wretches feel."

"You mean whether Brissenden likes it?"

I made up my mind on the spot. "If he loves her he must. That is if he loves her passionately, sublimely." I saw it all. "It's in fact just because he does so love her that the miracle, for her, is wrought."

"Well," my friend reflected, "for taking a miracle coolly–!"

"She hasn't her equal? Yes, she does take it. She just quietly, but just selfishly, profits by it."

"And doesn't see then how her victim loses?"

"No. She can't. The perception, if she had it, would be painful and terrible—might even be fatal to the process. So she hasn't it. She passes round it. It takes all her flood of life to meet her own chance. She has only a wonderful sense of success and well-being. The *other* consciousness–"

"Is all for the other party?"

"The author of the sacrifice."

"Then how beautifully 'poor Briss,'" my companion said, "must have it!"

I had already assured myself. He had gone to bed, and my fancy followed him. "Oh, he has it so that, though he goes, in his passion, about with her, he dares scarcely show his face." And I made a final induction. "The agents of the sacrifice are uncomfortable, I gather, when they suspect or fear that you see."

My friend was charmed with my ingenuity. "How you've worked it out!"

"Well, I feel as if I were on the way to something."

He looked surprised. "Something still more?"

"Something still more." I had an impulse to tell him I scarce knew what. But I kept it under. "I seem to snuff up–"

"*Quoi donc?*"

"The sense of a discovery to be made."

"And of what?"

"I'll tell you to-morrow. Good-night."

III

I did on the morrow several things, but the first was not to redeem that vow. It was to address myself straight to Grace Brissenden. "I must let you know that, in spite of your guarantee, it doesn't go at all—oh, but not at all! I've tried Lady John, as you enjoined, and I can't but feel that she leaves us very much where we were." Then, as my listener seemed not quite to remember where we had been, I came to her help. "You said yesterday at Paddington, to explain the change in Gilbert Long—don't you recall?—that that woman, plying him with her genius and giving him of her best, is clever enough for two. She's not clever enough then, it strikes me, for three—or at any rate for four. I confess I don't see it. Does she really dazzle *you*?"

My friend had caught up. "Oh, you've a standard of wit!"

"No, I've only a sense of reality—a sense not at all satisfied by the theory of such an influence as Lady John's."

She wondered. "Such a one as whose else then?"

"Ah, that's for us still to find out! Of course this can't be easy; for as the appearance is inevitably a kind of betrayal, it's in somebody's interest to conceal it."

This Mrs. Brissenden grasped. "Oh, you mean in the lady's?"

"In the lady's most. But also in Long's own, if he's really tender of the lady—which is precisely what our theory posits."

My companion, once roused, was all there. "I see. You call

the appearance a kind of betrayal because it points to the relation behind it."

"Precisely."

"And the relation—to do that sort of thing—must be necessarily so awfully intimate."

"*Intimissima.*"

"And kept therefore in the background exactly in that proportion."

"Exactly in that proportion."

"Very well then," said Mrs. Brissenden, "doesn't Mr. Long's tenderness of Lady John quite fall in with what I mentioned to you?"

I remembered what she had mentioned to me. "His making her come down with poor Briss?"

"Nothing less."

"And is that all you go upon?"

"That and lots more."

I thought a minute—but I had been abundantly thinking. "I know what you mean by 'lots.' Is Brissenden in it?"

"Dear no—poor Briss! He wouldn't like that. *I* saw the manœuvre, but Guy didn't. And you must have noticed how he stuck to her all last evening."

"How Gilbert Long stuck to Lady John? Oh yes, I noticed. They were like Lord Lutley and Mrs. Froome. But is that what one can call being tender of her?"

My companion weighed it. "He must speak to her *sometimes*.

I'm glad you admit, at any rate," she continued, "that it does take what you so prettily call some woman's secretly giving him of her best to account for him."

"Oh, that I admit with all my heart—or at least with all my head. Only, Lady John has none of the signs–"

"Of being the beneficent woman? What then *are* they—the signs—to be so plain?" I was not yet quite ready to say, however; on which she added: "It proves nothing, you know, that *you* don't like her."

"No. It would prove more if she didn't like *me*, which—fatuous fool as you may find me—I verily believe she does. If she hated me it would be, you see, for my ruthless analysis of her secret. She *has* no secret. She would like awfully to have—and she would like almost as much to be believed to have. Last evening, after dinner, she could feel perhaps for a while that she *was* believed. But it won't do. There's nothing in it. You asked me just now," I pursued, "what the signs of such a secret would naturally be. Well, bethink yourself a moment of what the secret itself must naturally be."

Oh, she looked as if she knew all about *that*! "Awfully charming—mustn't it?—to act upon a person, through an affection, so deeply."

"Yes—it can certainly be no vulgar flirtation." I felt a little like a teacher encouraging an apt pupil; but I could only go on with the lesson. "Whoever she is, she gives all she has. She keeps nothing back—nothing for herself."

"I see—because *he* takes everything. He just cleans her out." She looked at me—pleased at last really to understand—with the best conscience in the world. "Who *is* the lady then?"

But I could answer as yet only by a question. "How can she possibly be a woman who gives absolutely nothing whatever; who scrapes and saves and hoards; who keeps every crumb for herself? The whole show's there—to minister to Lady John's vanity and advertise the business—behind her smart shop-window. You can see it, as much as you like, and even amuse yourself with pricing it. But she never parts with an article. If poor Long depended on *her*——"

"Well, what?" She was really interested.

"Why, he'd be the same poor Long as ever. He would go as he used to go—naked and unashamed. No," I wound up, "he deals—turned out as we now see him—at another establishment."

"I'll grant it," said Mrs. Brissenden, "if you'll only name me the place."

Ah, I could still but laugh and resume! "He doesn't screen Lady John—she doesn't screen herself—with your husband or with anybody. It's she who's herself the screen! And pleased as she is at being so clever, and at being thought so, she doesn't even know it. She doesn't so much as suspect it. She's an unmitigated fool about it. 'Of course Mr. Long's clever, because he's in love with me and sits at my feet, and don't you see how clever *I* am? Don't you hear what good things I say—wait a little, I'm going to say another in about three minutes; and how, if you'll only

give him time too, he comes out with them after me? They don't perhaps sound so good, but you see where he has got them. I'm so brilliant, in fine, that the men who admire me have only to imitate me, which, you observe, they strikingly do.' Something like that is all her philosophy."

My friend turned it over. "You do sound like her, you know. Yet how, if a woman's stupid–"

"Can she have made a man clever? She can't. She can't at least have begun it. What we shall know the real person by, in the case that you and I are studying, is that the man himself will have made her what she has become. She will have done just what Lady John has not done—she will have put up the shutters and closed the shop. She will have parted, for her friend, with her wit."

"So that she may be regarded as reduced to idiocy?"

"Well—so I can only see it."

"And that if we look, therefore, for the right idiot–"

"We shall find the right woman—our friend's mystic Egeria? Yes, we shall be at least approaching the truth. We shall 'burn,' as they say in hide-and-seek." I of course kept to the point that the idiot would have to *be* the right one. *Any* idiot wouldn't be to the purpose. If it was enough that a woman was a fool the search might become hopeless even in a house that would have passed but ill for a fool's paradise. We were on one of the shaded terraces, to which, here and there, a tall window stood open. The picture without was all morning and August, and within all

clear dimness and rich gleams. We stopped once or twice, raking the gloom for lights, and it was at some such moment that Mrs. Brissenden asked me if I then regarded Gilbert Long as now exalted to the position of the most brilliant of our companions. "The cleverest man of the party?"—it pulled me up a little. "Hardly that, perhaps—for don't you see the proofs I'm myself giving you? But say he *is*"—I considered—"the cleverest but one." The next moment I had seen what she meant. "In that case the thing we're looking for ought logically to be the person, of the opposite sex, giving us the maximum sense of depletion for his benefit? The biggest fool, you suggest, *must*, consistently, be the right one? Yes again; it would so seem. But that's not really, you see, the short cut it sounds. The biggest fool is what we want, but the question is to discover who *is* the biggest."

"I'm glad then *I* feel so safe!" Mrs. Brissenden laughed.

"Oh, you're not the biggest!" I handsomely conceded. "Besides, as I say, there must be the other evidence—the evidence of relations."

We had gone on, with this, a few steps, but my companion again checked me, while her nod toward a window gave my attention a lead. "Won't *that*, as it happens, then do?" We could just see, from where we stood, a corner of one of the rooms. It was occupied by a seated couple, a lady whose face was in sight and a gentleman whose identity was attested by his back, a back somehow replete for us, at the moment, with a guilty significance. There *was* the evidence of relations. That we had

suddenly caught Long in the act of presenting his receptacle at the sacred fount seemed announced by the tone in which Mrs. Brissenden named the other party—"Mme. de Dreuil!" We looked at each other, I was aware, with some elation; but our triumph was brief. The Comtesse de Dreuil, we quickly felt—an American married to a Frenchman—wasn't at all the thing. She was almost as much "all there" as Lady John. She was only another screen, and we perceived, for that matter, the next minute, that Lady John was also present. Another step had placed us within range of her; the picture revealed in the rich dusk of the room was a group of three. From that moment, unanimously, we gave up Lady John, and as we continued our stroll my friend brought out her despair. "Then he has nothing *but* screens? The need for so many does suggest a fire!" And in spite of discouragement she sounded, interrogatively, one after the other, the names of those ladies the perfection of whose presence of mind might, when considered, pass as questionable. We soon, however, felt our process to be, practically, a trifle invidious. Not one of the persons named could, at any rate—to do them all justice—affect us as an intellectual ruin. It was natural therefore for Mrs. Brissenden to conclude with scepticism. "She may exist—and exist as you require her; but what, after all, proves that she's here? She mayn't have come down with him. Does it necessarily follow that they always go about together?"

I was ready to declare that it necessarily followed. I had my idea, and I didn't see why I shouldn't bring it out. "It's my belief

that he no more goes away without her than you go away without poor Briss."

She surveyed me in splendid serenity. "But what have we in common?"

"With the parties to an abandoned flirtation? Well, you've in common your mutual attachment and the fact that you're thoroughly happy together."

"Ah," she good-humouredly answered, "we don't flirt!"

"Well, at all events, you don't separate. He doesn't really suffer you out of his sight, and, to circulate in the society you adorn, you don't leave him at home."

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked, looking at me, I thought, just a trifle harder.

"It isn't a question of why you shouldn't—it's a question of whether you do. You don't—do you? That's all."

She thought it over as if for the first time. "It seems to me I often leave him when I don't want him."

"Oh, when you don't want him—yes. But when don't you want him? You want him when you want to be right, and you want to be right when you mix in a scene like this. I mean," I continued for my private amusement, "when you want to be happy. Happiness, you know, is, to a lady in the full tide of social success, even more becoming than a new French frock. You have the advantage, for your beauty, of being admirably married. You bloom in your husband's presence. I don't say he need always be at your elbow; I simply say that you're most completely yourself

when he's not far off. If there were nothing else there would be the help given you by your quiet confidence in his lawful passion."

"I'm bound to say," Mrs. Brissenden replied, "that such help is consistent with his not having spoken to me since we parted, yesterday, to come down here by different trains. We haven't so much as met since our arrival. My finding him so indispensable is consistent with my not having so much as looked at him. Indispensable, please, for what?"

"For your not being without him."

"What then do I do *with* him?"

I hesitated—there were so many ways of putting it; but I gave them all up. "Ah, I think it will be only *he* who can tell you! My point is that you've the instinct—playing in you, on either side, with all the ease of experience—of what you are to each other. All I mean is that it's the instinct that Long and *his* good friend must have. They too perhaps haven't spoken to each other. But where he comes she does, and where she comes he does. That's why I know she's among us."

"It's wonderful what you know!" Mrs. Brissenden again laughed. "How can you think of them as enjoying the facilities of people in *our* situation?"

"Of people married and therefore logically in presence? I don't," I was able to reply, "speak of their facilities as the same, and I recognise every limit to their freedom. But I maintain, none the less, that so far as they *can* go, they do go. It's a relation, and

they work the relation: the relation, exquisite surely, of knowing they help each other to shine. Why are they not, therefore, like you and Brissenden? What I make out is that when they do shine one will find—though only after a hunt, I admit, as you see—they must both have been involved. Feeling their need, and consummately expert, they will have managed, have arranged."

She took it in with her present odd mixture of the receptive and the derisive. "Arranged what?"

"Oh, ask *her*!"

"I would if I could find her!" After which, for a moment, my interlocutress again considered. "But I thought it was just your contention that *she* doesn't shine. If it's Lady John's perfect repair that puts that sort of thing out of the question, your image, it seems to me, breaks down."

It did a little, I saw, but I gave it a tilt up. "Not at all. It's a case of shining as Brissenden shines." I wondered if I might go further—then risked it. "By sacrifice."

I perceived at once that I needn't fear: her conscience was too good—she was only amused. "Sacrifice, for mercy's sake, of what?"

"Well—for mercy's sake—of his time."

"His time?" She stared. "Hasn't he all the time he wants?"

"My dear lady," I smiled, "he hasn't all the time *you* want!"

But she evidently had not a glimmering of what I meant. "Don't I make things of an ease, don't I make life of a charm, for him?"

I'm afraid I laughed out. "That's perhaps exactly it! It's what Gilbert Long does for *his* victim—makes things, makes life, of an ease and a charm."

She stopped yet again, really wondering at me now. "Then it's the woman, simply, who's happiest?"

"Because Brissenden's the man who is? Precisely!"

On which for a minute, without her going on, we looked at each other. "Do you really mean that if you only knew *me* as I am, it would come to you in the same way to hunt for my confederate? I mean if he weren't made obvious, you know, by his being my husband."

I turned this over. "If you were only in flirtation—as you reminded me just now that you're not? Surely!" I declared. "I should arrive at him, perfectly, after all eliminations, on the principle of looking for the greatest happiness–"

"Of the smallest number? Well, he may be a small number," she indulgently sighed, "but he's wholly content! Look at him now there," she added the next moment, "and judge." We had resumed our walk and turned the corner of the house, a movement that brought us into view of a couple just round the angle of the terrace, a couple who, like ourselves, must have paused in a sociable stroll. The lady, with her back to us, leaned a little on the balustrade and looked at the gardens; the gentleman close to her, with the same support, offered us the face of Guy Brissenden, as recognisable at a distance as the numbered card of a "turn"—the black figure upon white—at

a music-hall. On seeing us he said a word to his companion, who quickly jerked round. Then his wife exclaimed to me—only with more sharpness—as she had exclaimed at Mme. de Dreuil: "By all that's lovely—May Server!" I took it, on the spot, for a kind of "Eureka!" but without catching my friend's idea. I was only aware at first that this idea left me as unconvinced as when the other possibilities had passed before us. Wasn't it simply the result of this lady's being the only one we had happened not to eliminate? She had not even occurred to us. She was pretty enough perhaps for any magic, but she hadn't the other signs. I didn't believe, somehow—certainly not on such short notice—either in her happiness or in her flatness. There was a vague suggestion, of a sort, in our having found her there with Brissenden: there would have been a pertinence, to our curiosity, or at least to mine, in this juxtaposition of the two persons who paid, as I had amused myself with calling it, so heroically; yet I had only to have it marked for me (to see them, that is, side by side,) in order to feel how little—at any rate superficially—the graceful, natural, charming woman ranged herself with the superannuated youth.

She had said a word to him at sight of us, in answer to his own, and in a minute or two they had met us. This had given me time for more than one reflection. It had also given Mrs. Brissenden time to insist to me on her identification, which I could see she would be much less quick to drop than in the former cases. "We have her," she murmured; "we have her;

it's *she*!" It was by her insistence in fact that my thought was quickened. It even felt a kind of chill—an odd revulsion—at the touch of her eagerness. Singular perhaps that only then—yet quite certainly then—the curiosity to which I had so freely surrendered myself began to strike me as wanting in taste. It was reflected in Mrs. Brissenden quite by my fault, and I can't say just what cause for shame, after so much talk of our search and our scent, I found in our awakened and confirmed keenness. Why in the world hadn't I found it before? My scruple, in short, was a thing of the instant; it was in a positive flash that the amusing question was stamped for me as none of my business. One of the reflections I have just mentioned was that I had not had a happy hand in making it so completely Mrs. Brissenden's. Another was, however, that nothing, fortunately, that had happened between us really signified. For what had so suddenly overtaken me was the consciousness of this anomaly: that I was at the same time as disgusted as if I had exposed Mrs. Server and absolutely convinced that I had yet *not* exposed her.

While, after the others had greeted us and we stood in vague talk, I caught afresh the effect of their juxtaposition, I grasped, with a private joy that was quite extravagant—as so beyond the needed mark—at the reassurance it offered. This reassurance sprang straight from a special source. Brissenden's secret was so aware of itself as to be always on the defensive. Shy and suspicious, it was as much on the defensive at present as I had felt it to be—so far as I was concerned—the night before. What

was there accordingly in Mrs. Server—frank and fragrant in the morning air—to correspond to any such consciousness? Nothing whatever—not a symptom. Whatever secrets she might have had, she had not *that* one; she was not in the same box; the sacred fount, in her, was not threatened with exhaustion. We all soon re-entered the house together, but Mrs. Brissenden, during the few minutes that followed, managed to possess herself of the subject of her denunciation. She put me off with Guy, and I couldn't help feeling it as a sign of her concentration. She warmed to the question just as I had thrown it over; and I asked myself rather ruefully what on earth I had been thinking of. I hadn't in the least had it in mind to "compromise" an individual; but an individual would be compromised if I didn't now take care.

IV

I have said that I did many things on this wonderful day, but perhaps the simplest way to describe the rest of them is as a sustained attempt to avert that disaster. I succeeded, by vigilance, in preventing my late companion from carrying Mrs. Server off: I had no wish to see her studied—by anyone but myself at least—in the light of my theory. I felt by this time that I understood my theory, but I was not obliged to believe that Mrs. Brissenden did. I am afraid I must frankly confess that I called deception to my aid; to separate the two ladies I gave the more initiated a look in which I invited her to read volumes. This look, or rather the look she returned, comes back to me as the first note of a tolerably tight, tense little drama, a little drama of which our remaining hours at Newmarch were the all too ample stage. She understood me, as I meant, that she had better leave me to get at the truth—owing me some obligation, as she did, for so much of it as I had already communicated. This step was of course a tacit pledge that she should have the rest from me later on. I knew of some pictures in one of the rooms that had not been lighted the previous evening, and I made these my pretext for the effect I desired. I asked Mrs. Server if she wouldn't come and see them with me, admitting at the same time that I could scarce expect her to forgive me for my share in the invasion of the quiet corner in which poor Briss had evidently managed so to interest her.

"Oh, yes," she replied as we went our way, "he *had* managed to interest me. Isn't he curiously interesting? But I hadn't," she continued on my being too struck with her question for an immediate answer—"I hadn't managed to interest *him*. Of course you know why!" she laughed. "No one interests him but Lady John, and he could think of nothing, while I kept him there, but of how soon he could return to her."

These remarks—of which I give rather the sense than the form, for they were a little scattered and troubled, and I helped them out and pieced them together—these remarks had for me, I was to find, unexpected suggestions, not all of which was I prepared on the spot to take up. "And is Lady John interested in our friend?"

"Not, I suppose, given her situation, so much as he would perhaps desire. You don't know what her situation *is*?" she went on while I doubtless appeared to be sunk in innocence. "Isn't it rather marked that there's only one person she's interested in?"

"One person?" I was thoroughly at sea.

But we had reached with it the great pictured saloon with which I had proposed to assist her to renew acquaintance and in which two visitors had anticipated us. "Why, here he is!" she exclaimed as we paused, for admiration, in the doorway. The high frescoed ceiling arched over a floor so highly polished that it seemed to reflect the faded pastels set, in rococo borders, in the walls and constituting the distinction of the place. Our companions, examining together one of the portraits and turning

their backs, were at the opposite end, and one of them was Gilbert Long.

I immediately named the other. "Do you mean Ford Obert?"

She gave me, with a laugh, one of her beautiful looks. "Yes!"

It was answer enough for the moment, and the manner of it showed me to what legend she was committed. I asked myself, while the two men faced about to meet us, why she was committed to it, and I further considered that if Grace Brissenden, against every appearance, was right, there would now be something for me to see. Which of the two—the agent or the object of the sacrifice—would take most precautions? I kept my companion purposely, for a little while, on our side of the room, leaving the others, interested in their observations, to take their time to join us. It gave me occasion to wonder if the question mightn't be cleared up on the spot. There *was* no question, I had compunctiously made up my mind, for Mrs. Server; but now I should see the proof of that conclusion. The proof of it would be, between her and her imputed lover, the absence of anything that was not perfectly natural. Mrs. Server, with her eyes raised to the painted dome, with response charmed almost to solemnity in her exquisite face, struck me at this moment, I had to concede, as more than ever a person to have a lover imputed. The place, save for its pictures of later date, a triumph of the florid decoration of two centuries ago, evidently met her special taste, and a kind of profane piety had dropped on her, drizzling down, in the cold light, in silver, in crystal, in faint, mixed delicacies of colour,

almost as on a pilgrim at a shrine. I don't know what it was in her —save, that is, the positive pitch of delicacy in her beauty—that made her, so impressed and presented, indescribably touching. She was like an awestruck child; she might have been herself— all Greuze tints, all pale pinks and blues and pearly whites and candid eyes—an old dead pastel under glass.

She was not too reduced to this state, however, not to take, soon enough, her own precaution—if a precaution it was to be deemed. I was acutely conscious that the naturalness to which I have just alluded would be, for either party, the only precaution worth speaking of. We moved slowly round the room, pausing here and there for curiosity; during which time the two men remained where we had found them. She had begun at last to watch them and had proposed that we should see in what they were so absorbed; but I checked her in the movement, raising my hand in a friendly admonition to wait. We waited then, face to face, looking at each other as if to catch a strain of music. This was what I had intended, for it had just come to me that one of the voices was in the air and that it had imposed close attention. The distinguished painter listened while—to all appearance—Gilbert Long did, in the presence of the picture, the explaining. Ford Obert moved, after a little, but not so as to interrupt—only so as to show me his face in a recall of what had passed between us the night before in the smoking-room. I turned my eyes from Mrs. Server's; I allowed myself to commune a little, across the shining space, with those of our fellow-auditor. The occasion had thus

for a minute the oddest little air of an aesthetic lecture prompted by accidental, but immense, suggestions and delivered by Gilbert Long.

I couldn't, at the distance, with my companion, quite follow it, but Obert was clearly patient enough to betray that he was struck. His impression was at any rate doubtless his share of surprise at Long's gift of talk. This was what his eyes indeed most seemed to throw over to me—"What an unexpected demon of a critic!" It was extraordinarily interesting—I don't mean the special drift of Long's eloquence, which I couldn't, as I say, catch; but the phenomenon of his, of all people, dealing in that article. It put before me the question of whether, in these strange relations that I believed I had thus got my glimpse of, the action of the person "sacrificed" mightn't be quite out of proportion to the resources of that person. It was as if these elements might really multiply in the transfer made of them; as if the borrower practically found himself—or herself—in possession of a greater sum than the known property of the creditor. The surrender, in this way, added, by pure beauty, to the thing surrendered. We all know the French adage about that *plus belle fille du monde* who can give but what she has; yet if Mrs. Server, for instance, *had* been the heroine of this particular connection, the communication of her intelligence to her friend would quite have falsified it. She would have given much more than she had.

When Long had finished his demonstration and his charged voice had dropped, we crossed to claim acquaintance with the

work that had inspired him. The place had not been completely new to Mrs. Server any more than to myself, and the impression now made on her was but the intenser vibration of a chord already stirred; nevertheless I was struck with her saying, as a result of more remembrance than I had attributed to her "Oh yes,—the man with the mask in his hand!" On our joining the others I expressed regret at our having turned up too late for the ideas that, on a theme so promising, they would have been sure to produce, and Obert, quite agreeing that we had lost a treat, said frankly, in reference to Long, but addressing himself more especially to Mrs. Server: "He's perfectly amazing, you know—he's perfectly amazing!"

I observed that as a consequence of this Long looked neither at Mrs. Server nor at Obert; he looked only at me, and with quite a penetrable shade of shyness. Then again a strange thing happened, a stranger thing even than my quick sense, the previous afternoon at the station, that he was a changed man. It was as if he were still more changed—had altered as much since the evening before as during the so much longer interval of which I had originally to take account. He had altered almost like Grace Brissenden—he looked fairly distinguished. I said to myself that, without his stature and certain signs in his dress, I should probably not have placed him. Engrossed an instant with this view and with not losing touch of the uneasiness that I conceived I had fastened on him, I became aware only after she had spoken that Mrs. Server had gaily and gracefully asked of

Obert why in the world so clever a man should *not* have been clever. "Obert," I accordingly took upon myself to remark, "had evidently laboured under some extraordinary delusion. He must literally have doubted if Long *was* clever."

"Fancy!" Mrs. Server explained with a charming smile at Long, who, still looking pleasantly competent and not too fatuous, amiably returned it.

"They're natural, they're natural," I privately reflected; "that is, he's natural to *her*, but he's not so to me." And as if seeing depths in this, and to try it, I appealed to him. "Do, my dear man, let us have it again. It's the picture, of all pictures, that most needs an interpreter. *Don't* we want," I asked of Mrs. Server, "to know what it means?" The figure represented is a young man in black—a quaint, tight black dress, fashioned in years long past; with a pale, lean, livid face and a stare, from eyes without eyebrows, like that of some whitened old-world clown. In his hand he holds an object that strikes the spectator at first simply as some obscure, some ambiguous work of art, but that on a second view becomes a representation of a human face, modelled and coloured, in wax, in enamelled metal, in some substance not human. The object thus appears a complete mask, such as might have been fantastically fitted and worn.

"Yes, what in the world does it mean?" Mrs. Server replied. "One could call it—though that doesn't get one much further—the Mask of Death."

"Why so?" I demanded while we all again looked at the

picture. "Isn't it much rather the Mask of Life? It's the man's own face that's Death. The other one, blooming and beautiful–"

"Ah, but with an awful grimace!" Mrs. Server broke in.

"The other one, blooming and beautiful," I repeated, "is Life, and he's going to put it on; unless indeed he has just taken it off."

"He's dreadful, he's awful—that's what I mean," said Mrs. Server. "But what does Mr. Long think?"

"The artificial face, on the other hand," I went on, as Long now said nothing, "is extremely studied and, when you carefully look at it, charmingly pretty. I don't see the grimace."

"I don't see anything else!" Mrs. Server good-humouredly insisted. "And what does Mr. Obert think?"

He kept his eyes on her a moment before replying. "He thinks it looks like a lovely lady."

"That grinning mask? What lovely lady?"

"It does," I declared to him, really seeing what he meant—"it does look remarkably like Mrs. Server."

She laughed, but forgivingly. "I'm immensely obliged. You deserve," she continued to me, "that I should say the gentleman's own face is the image of a certain other gentleman's."

"It isn't the image of yours," Obert said to me, fitting the cap, "but it's a funny thing that it should really recall to one some face among us here, on this occasion—I mean some face in our party —that I can't think of." We had our eyes again on the ominous figure. "We've seen him yesterday—we've seen him already this morning." Obert, oddly enough, still couldn't catch it. "Who the

deuce is it?"

"I know," I returned after a moment—our friend's reference having again, in a flash, become illuminating. "But nothing would induce me to tell."

"If *I* were the flattered individual," Long observed, speaking for the first time, "I've an idea that you'd give me the benefit of the compliment. Therefore it's probably not me."

"Oh, it's not you in the least," Mrs. Server blandly took upon herself to observe. "This face is so bad–"

"And mine is so good?" our companion laughed. "Thank you for saving me!"

I watched them look at each other, for there had been as yet between them no complete exchange. Yes, they were natural. I couldn't have made it out that they were not. But there was something, all the same, that I wanted to know, and I put it immediately to Long. "Why do you bring against me such an accusation?"

He met the question—singularly enough—as if his readiness had suddenly deserted him. "I don't know!"—and he turned off to another picture.

It left the three of us all the more confronted with the conundrum launched by Obert, and Mrs. Server's curiosity remained. "*Do* name," she said to me, "the flattered individual."

"No, it's a responsibility I leave to Obert."

But he was clearly still at fault; he was like a man desiring, but unable, to sneeze. "I see the fellow—yet I don't. Never mind."

He turned away too. "He'll come to me."

"The resemblance," said Long, on this, at a distance from us and not turning, "the resemblance, which I shouldn't think would puzzle anyone, is simply to 'poor Briss'!"

"Oh, of course!"—and Obert gave a jump round.

"Ah—I do see it," Mrs. Server conceded with her head on one side, but as if speaking rather for harmony.

I didn't believe she saw it, but that only made her the more natural; which was also the air she had on going to join Long, in his new contemplation, after I had admitted that it was of Brissenden I myself had thought. Obert and I remained together in the presence of the Man with the Mask, and, the others being out of earshot, he reminded me that I had promised him the night before in the smoking-room to give him to-day the knowledge I had then withheld. If I had announced that I was on the track of a discovery, pray had I made it yet, and what was it, at any rate, that I proposed to discover? I felt now, in truth, more uncomfortable than I had expected in being kept to my obligation, and I beat about the bush a little till, instead of meeting it, I was able to put the natural question: "What wonderful things was Long just saying to you?"

"Oh, characteristic ones enough—whimsical, fanciful, funny. The things he says, you know."

It was indeed a fresh view. "They strike you as characteristic?"

"Of the man himself and his type of mind? Surely. Don't *you*? He talks to talk, but he's really amusing."

I was watching our companions. "Indeed he is—extraordinarily amusing." It was highly interesting to me to hear at last of Long's "type of mind." "See how amusing he is at the present moment to Mrs. Server."

Obert took this in; she was convulsed, in the extravagance always so pretty as to be pardonable, with laughter, and she even looked over at us as if to intimate with her shining, lingering eyes that we wouldn't be surprised at her transports if we suspected what her entertainer, whom she had never known for such a humourist, was saying. Instead of going to find out, all the same, we remained another minute together. It was for me, now, I could see, that Obert had his best attention. "What's the matter with them?"

It startled me almost as much as if he had asked me what was the matter with myself—for that something *was*, under this head, I was by this time unable to ignore. Not twenty minutes had elapsed since our meeting with Mrs. Server on the terrace had determined Grace Brissenden's elation, but it was a fact that my nervousness had taken an extraordinary stride. I had perhaps not till this instant been fully aware of it—it was really brought out by the way Obert looked at me as if he fancied he had heard me shake. Mrs. Server might be natural, and Gilbert Long might be, but I should not preserve that calm unless I pulled myself well together. I made the effort, facing my sharp interlocutor; and I think it was at this point that I fully measured my dismay. I had grown—that was what was the matter with me

—precipitately, preposterously anxious. Instead of dropping, the discomfort produced in me by Mrs. Brissenden had deepened to agitation, and this in spite of the fact that in the brief interval nothing worse, nothing but what was right, had happened. Had I myself suddenly fallen so much in love with Mrs. Server that the care for her reputation had become with me an obsession? It was of no use saying I simply pitied her: what did I pity her for if she wasn't in danger? She *was* in danger: that rushed over me at present—rushed over me while I tried to look easy and delayed to answer my friend. She *was* in danger—if only because she had caught and held the search-light of Obert's attention. I took up his inquiry. "The matter with them? I don't know anything but that they're young and handsome and happy—children, as who should say, of the world; children of leisure and pleasure and privilege."

Obert's eyes went back to them. "Do you remember what I said to you about her yesterday afternoon? She darts from flower to flower, but she clings, for the time, to each. You've been feeling, I judge, the force of my remark."

"Oh, she didn't at all 'dart,'" I replied, "just now at me. I darted, much rather, at *her*."

"Long didn't, then," Obert said, still with his eyes on them.

I had to wait a moment. "Do you mean he struck you as avoiding her?"

He in turn considered. "He struck me as having noticed with what intensity, ever since we came down, she has kept alighting.

She inaugurated it, the instant she arrived, with *me*, and every man of us has had his turn. I dare say it's only fair, certainly, that Long should have."

"He's lucky to get it, the brute! She's as charming as she can possibly be."

"That's it, precisely; and it's what no woman ought to be—as charming as she possibly can!—more than once or twice in her life. This lady is so every blessed minute, and to every blessed male. It's as if she were too awfully afraid one wouldn't take it in. If she but knew how one does! However," my friend continued, "you'll recollect that we differed about her yesterday—and what does it signify? One should of course bear lightly on anything so light. But I stick to it that she's different."

I pondered. "Different from whom?"

"Different from herself—as she was when I painted her. There's something the matter with her."

"Ah, then, it's for me to ask *you* what. I don't myself, you see, perceive it."

He made for a little no answer, and we were both indeed by this time taken up with the withdrawal of the two other members of our group. They moved away together across the shining floor, pausing, looking up at the painted vault, saying the inevitable things—bringing off their retreat, in short, in the best order. It struck me somehow as a retreat, and yet I insisted to myself, once more, on its being perfectly natural. At the high door, which stood open, they stopped a moment and looked

back at us—looked frankly, sociably, as if in consciousness of our sympathetic attention. Mrs. Server waved, as in temporary farewell, a free explanatory hand at me; she seemed to explain that she was now trying somebody else. Obert moreover added *his* explanation. "That's the way she collars us."

"Oh, Long doesn't mind," I said. "But what's the way she strikes you as different?"

"From what she was when she sat to me? Well, a part of it is that she can't keep still. She was as still then as if she had been paid for it. Now she's all over the place." But he came back to something else. "I like your talking, my dear man, of what you 'don't perceive.' I've yet to find out what that remarkable quantity is. What you do perceive has at all events given me so much to think about that it doubtless ought to serve me for the present. I feel I ought to let you know that you've made me also perceive the Brissendens." I of course remembered what I had said to him, but it was just this that now touched my uneasiness, and I only echoed the name, a little blankly, with the instinct of gaining time. "You put me on them wonderfully," Obert continued, "though of course I've kept your idea to myself. All the same it sheds a great light."

I could again but feebly repeat it. "A great light?"

"As to what may go on even between others still. It's a jolly idea—a torch in the darkness; and do you know what I've done with it? I've held it up, I don't mind telling you, to just the question of the change, since this interests you, in Mrs. Server.

If you've got your mystery I'll be hanged if I won't have mine. If you've got your Brissendens I shall see what I can do with *her*. You've given me an analogy, and I declare I find it dazzling. I don't see the end of what may be done with it. If Brissenden's paying for his wife, for her amazing second bloom, who's paying for Mrs. Server? Isn't *that*—what do the newspapers call it?—the missing word? Isn't it perhaps in fact just what you told me last night you were on the track of? But don't add now," he went on, more and more amused with his divination, "don't add now that the man's obviously Gilbert Long—for I won't be put off with anything of the sort. She collared him much too markedly. The real man must be one she doesn't markedly collar."

"But I thought that what you a moment ago made out was that she so markedly collars all of us." This was my immediate reply to Obert's blaze of ingenuity, but I none the less saw more things in it than I could reply to. I saw, at any rate, and saw with relief, that if he should look on the principle suggested to him by the case of the Brissendens, there would be no danger at all of his finding it. If, accordingly, I was nervous for Mrs. Server, all I had to do was to keep him on this false scent. Since it was not she who was paid for, but she who possibly paid, his fancy might harmlessly divert him till the party should disperse. At the same time, in the midst of these reflections, the question of the "change" in her, which he was in so much better a position than I to measure, couldn't help having for me its portent, and the sense of that was, no doubt, in my next words. "What makes you think

that what you speak of was what I had in my head?"

"Well, the way, simply, that the shoe fits. She's absolutely not the same person I painted. It's exactly like Mrs. Brissenden's having been for you yesterday not the same person you had last seen bearing her name."

"Very good," I returned, "though I didn't in the least mean to set you digging so hard. However, dig on your side, by all means, while I dig on mine. All I ask of you is complete discretion."

"Ah, naturally!"

"We ought to remember," I pursued, even at the risk of showing as too sententious, "that success in such an inquiry may perhaps be more embarrassing than failure. To nose about for a relation that a lady has her reasons for keeping secret–"

"Is made not only quite inoffensive, I hold"—he immediately took me up—"but positively honourable, by being confined to psychologic evidence."

I wondered a little. "Honourable to whom?"

"Why, to the investigator. Resting on the *kind* of signs that the game takes account of when fairly played—resting on psychologic signs alone, it's a high application of intelligence. What's ignoble is the detective and the keyhole."

"I see," I after a moment admitted. "I did have, last night, my scruples, but you warm me up. Yet I confess also," I still added, "that if I do muster the courage of my curiosity, it's a little because I feel even yet, as I think you also must, altogether destitute of a material clue. If I had a material clue I should feel

ashamed: the fact would be deterrent. I start, for my part, at any rate, quite in the dark—or in a darkness lighted, at best, by what you have called the torch of my analogy. The analogy too," I wound up, "may very well be only half a help. It was easy to find poor Briss, because poor Briss is here, and it's always easy, moreover, to find a husband. But say Mrs. Server's poor Briss—or his equivalent, whoever it may be—*isn't* here."

We had begun to walk away with this, but my companion pulled up at the door of the room. "I'm sure he is. She tells me he's near."

"'Tells' you?" I challenged it, but I uncomfortably reflected that it was just what I had myself told Mrs. Brissenden.

"She wouldn't be as she is if he weren't. Her being as she is is the sign of it. He wasn't present—that is he wasn't present in her life at all—when I painted her; and the difference we're impressed with is exactly the proof that he is now."

My difficulty in profiting by the relief he had so unconsciously afforded me resided of course in my not feeling free to show for quite as impressed as he was. I hadn't really made out at all what he was impressed *with*, and I should only have spoiled everything by inviting him to be definite. This was a little of a worry, for I should have liked to know; but on the other hand I felt my track at present effectually covered. "Well, then, grant he's one of us. There are more than a dozen of us—a dozen even with you and me and Brissenden counted out. The hitch is that we're nowhere without a primary lead. As to Brissenden there *was* the lead."

"You mean as afforded by his wife's bloated state, which was a signal–?"

"Precisely: for the search for something or other that would help to explain it. Given his wife's bloated state, his own shrunken one was what was to have been predicated. I knew definitely, in other words, what to look for."

"Whereas we don't know here?"

"Mrs. Server's state, unfortunately," I replied, "is not bloated."

He laughed at my "unfortunately," though recognising that I spoke merely from the point of view of lucidity, and presently remarked that he had his own idea. He didn't say what it was, and I didn't ask, intimating thereby that I held it to be in this manner we were playing the game; but I indulgently questioned it in the light of its not yet having assisted him. He answered that the minutes we had just passed were what had made the difference; it had sprung from the strong effect produced on him after she came in with me. "It's but now I really see her. She did and said nothing special, nothing striking or extraordinary; but that didn't matter—it never does: one saw how she *is*. She's nothing but *that*."

"Nothing but what?"

"She's all *in* it," he insisted. "Or it's all in *her*. It comes to the same thing."

"Of course it's all in her," I said as impatiently as I could, though his attestation—for I wholly trusted his perception—left me so much in his debt. "That's what we start with, isn't it? It

leaves us as far as ever from what we must arrive at."

But he was too interested in his idea to heed my question. He was wrapped in the "psychologic" glow. "I *have* her!"

"Ah, but it's a question of having *him*!"

He looked at me on this as if I had brought him back to a mere detail, and after an instant the light went out of his face. "So it is. I leave it to you. I don't care." His drop had the usual suddenness of the drops of the artistic temperament. "Look for the last man," he nevertheless, but with more detachment, added. "I daresay it would be he."

"The last? In what sense the last?"

"Well, the last sort of creature who could be believed of her."

"Oh," I rejoined as we went on, "the great bar to that is that such a sort of creature as the last won't *be* here!"

He hesitated. "So much the better. I give him, at any rate, wherever he is, up to you."

"Thank you," I returned, "for the beauty of the present! You do see, then, that our psychologic glow doesn't, after all, prevent the thing–"

"From being none of one's business? Yes. Poor little woman!" He seemed somehow satisfied; he threw it all up. "It isn't any of one's business, is it?"

"Why, that's what I was telling you," I impatiently exclaimed, "that *I* feel!"

V

THE first thing that happened to me after parting with him was to find myself again engaged with Mrs. Brissenden, still full of the quick conviction with which I had left her. "It *is* she—quite unmistakably, you know. I don't see how I can have been so stupid as not to make it out. I haven't your cleverness, of course, till my nose is rubbed into a thing. But when it *is*—!" She celebrated her humility in a laugh that was proud. "The two are off together."

"Off where?"

"I don't know where, but I saw them a few minutes ago most distinctly 'slope.' They've gone for a quiet, unwatched hour, poor dears, out into the park or the gardens. When one knows it, it's all there. But what's that vulgar song?—'You've got to know it first!' It strikes me, if you don't mind my telling you so, that the way *you* get hold of things is positively uncanny. I mean as regards what first marked her for you."

"But, my dear lady," I protested, "nothing at all first marked her for me. She *isn't* marked for me, first or last. It was only you who so jumped at her."

My interlocutress stared, and I had at this moment, I remember, an almost intolerable sense of her fatuity and cruelty. They were all unconscious, but they were, at that stage, none the less irritating. Her fine bosom heaved, her blue eyes expanded

with her successful, her simplified egotism. I couldn't, in short, I found, bear her being so keen about Mrs. Server while she was so stupid about poor Briss. She seemed to recall to me nobly the fact that *she* hadn't a lover. No, she was only eating poor Briss up inch by inch, but she hadn't a lover. "I don't," I insisted, "see in Mrs. Server any of the right signs."

She looked almost indignant. "Even after your telling me that you see in Lady John only the wrong ones?"

"Ah, but there are other women here than Mrs. Server and Lady John."

"Certainly. But didn't we, a moment ago, think of them all and dismiss them? If Lady John's out of the question, how can Mrs. Server possibly *not* be in it? We want a fool–"

"Ah, *do* we?" I interruptingly wailed.

"Why, exactly by your own theory, in which you've so much interested me! It was you who struck off the idea."

"That we want a fool?" I felt myself turning gloomy enough. "Do we really want anyone at all?"

She gave me, in momentary silence, a strange smile. "Ah, you want to take it back now? You're sorry you spoke. My dear man, you may be–" but that didn't hinder the fact, in short, that I had kindled near me a fine, if modest and timid, intelligence. There did remain the truth of our friend's striking development, to which I had called her attention. Regretting my rashness didn't make the prodigy less. "You'll lead me to believe, if you back out, that there's suddenly someone you want to protect. Weak man,"

she exclaimed with an assurance from which, I confess, I was to take alarm, "something has happened to you since we separated! Weak man," she repeated with dreadful gaiety, "you've been squared!"

I literally blushed for her. "Squared?"

"Does it inconveniently happen that you find you're in love with her yourself?"

"Well," I replied on quick reflection, "do, if you like, call it that; for you see what a motive it gives me for being, in such a matter as this wonderful one that you and I happened to find ourselves for a moment making so free with, absolutely sure about her. I *am* absolutely sure. There! She won't do. And for your postulate that she's at the present moment in some sequestered spot in Long's company, suffer me without delay to correct it. It won't hold water. If you'll go into the library, through which I have just passed, you'll find her there in the company of the Comte de Dreuil."

Mrs. Briss stared again. "Already? She *was*, at any rate, with Mr. Long, and she told me on my meeting them that they had just come from the pastels."

"Exactly. They met there—she and I having gone together; and they retired together under my eyes. They must have parted, clearly, the moment after."

She took it all in, turned it all over. "Then what does that prove but that they're afraid to be seen?"

"Ah, they're *not* afraid, since both you and I saw them!"

"Oh, only just long enough for them to publish themselves as not avoiding each other. All the same, you know," she said, "they do."

"Do avoid each other? How is your belief in that," I asked, "consistent with your belief that they parade together in the park?"

"They ignore each other in public; they foregather in private."

"Ah, but they *don't*—since, as I tell you, she's even while we talk the centre of the mystic circle of the twaddle of M. de Dreuil; chained to a stake if you *can* be. Besides," I wound up, "it's not only that she's not the 'right fool'—it's simply that she's not a fool at all. We want the woman who has been rendered most inane. But this lady hasn't been rendered so in any degree. She's the reverse of inane. She's in full possession."

"In full possession of what?"

"Why, of herself."

"Like Lady John?"

I had unfortunately to discriminate here. "No, not like Lady John."

"Like whom then?"

"Like anyone. Like me; like you; like Brissenden. Don't I satisfy you?" I asked in a moment.

She only looked at me a little, handsome and hard. "If you wished to satisfy me so easily you shouldn't have made such a point of working me up. I daresay I, after all, however," she added, "notice more things than you."

"As for instance?"

"Well, May Server last evening. I was not quite conscious at the time that I did, but when one has had the 'tip' one looks back and sees things in a new light."

It was doubtless because my friend irritated me more and more that I met this with a sharpness possibly excessive. "She's perfectly natural. What I saw was a test. And so is he."

But she gave me no heed. "If there hadn't been so many people I should have noticed of myself after dinner that there was something the matter with her. I should have seen what it was. She was all over the place."

She expressed it as the poor lady's other critic had done, but this didn't shut my mouth. "Ah, then, in spite of the people, you did notice. What do you mean by 'all over the place'?"

"She couldn't keep still. She was different from the woman one had last seen. She used to be so calm—as if she were always sitting for her portrait. Wasn't she in fact always being painted in a pink frock and one row of pearls, always staring out at you in exhibitions, as if she were saying 'Here they are again'? Last night she was on the rush."

"The rush? Oh!"

"Yes, positively—from one man to another. She was on the pounce. She talked to ten in succession, making up to them in the most extraordinary way and leaving them still more crazily. She's as nervous as a cat. Put it to any man here, and see if he doesn't tell you."

"I should think it quite unpleasant to put it to any man here," I returned; "and I should have been sure you would have thought it the same. I spoke to you in the deepest confidence."

Mrs. Brissenden's look at me was for a moment of the least accommodating; then it changed to an intelligent smile. "How you *are* protecting her! But don't cry out," she added, "before you're hurt. Since your confidence has distinguished me—though I don't quite see why—you may be sure I haven't breathed. So I all the more resent your making me a scene on the extraordinary ground that I've observed as well as yourself. Perhaps what you don't like is that my observation may be turned on *you*. I confess it is."

It was difficult to bear being put in the wrong by her, but I made an effort that I believe was not unsuccessful to recover my good humour. "It's not in the least to your observation that I object, it's to the extravagant inferences you draw from it. Of course, however, I admit I always want to protect the innocent. What does she gain, on your theory, by her rushing and pouncing? Had she pounced on Brissenden when we met him with her? Are you so very sure he hadn't pounced on *her*? They had, at all events, to me, quite the air of people settled; she was not, it was clear, at that moment meditating a change. It was we, if you remember, who had absolutely to pull them apart."

"Is it your idea to make out," Mrs. Brissenden inquired in answer to this, "that she has suddenly had the happy thought of a passion for my husband?"

A new possibility, as she spoke, came to me with a whirr of wings, and I half expressed it. "She may have a sympathy."

My interlocutress gazed at space. "You mean she may be sorry for him? On what ground?"

I had gone too far indeed; but I got off as I could. "You neglect him so! But what is she, at any rate," I went on, "nervous—as nervous as you describe her—*about*?"

"About her danger; the contingency of its being fixed upon them—an intimacy so thoroughgoing that they can scarcely afford to let it be seen even as a mere acquaintance. Think of the circumstances—*her* personal ones, I mean, and admit that it wouldn't do. It would be too bad a case. There's everything to make it so. They must live on pins and needles. Anything proved would go tremendously hard for her."

"In spite of which you're surprised that I 'protect' her?"

It was a question, however, that my companion could meet. "From people in general, no. From me in particular, yes."

In justice to Mrs. Brissenden I thought a moment. "Well, then, let us be fair all round. That you don't, as you say, breathe is a discretion I appreciate; all the more that a little inquiry, tactfully pursued, would enable you to judge whether any independent suspicion does attach. A little loose collateral evidence *might* be picked up; and your scorning to handle it is no more than I should, after all, have expected of you."

"Thank you for 'after all'!" My companion tossed her head. "I know for myself what I scorn to handle. Quite apart from that

there's another matter. You must have noticed yourself that when people are so much liked–"

"There's a kind of general, amiable consensus of blindness? Yes—one can think of cases. Popularity shelters and hallows—has the effect of making a good-natured world agree not to see."

My friend seemed pleased that I so sufficiently understood. "This evidently has been a case then in which it has not only agreed not to see, but agreed not even to look. It has agreed in fact to look straight the other way. They say there's no smoke without fire, but it appears there may be fire without smoke. I'm satisfied, at all events, that one wouldn't in connection with these two find the least little puff. Isn't that just what makes the magnificence of their success—the success that reduces us to playing over them with mere moonshine?" She thought of it; seemed fairly to envy it. "I've never *seen* such luck!"

"A rare case of the beauty of impunity *as* impunity?" I laughed. "Such a case puts a price on passions otherwise to be deprecated? I'm glad indeed you admit we're 'reduced.' We *are* reduced. But what I meant to say just now was that if you'll continue to join in the genial conspiracy while I do the same—each of us making an exception only for the other—I'll pledge myself absolutely to the straight course. If before we separate I've seen reason to change my mind, I'll loyally let you know."

"What good will that do me," she asked, "if you *don't* change your mind? You won't change it if you shut your eyes to her."

"Ah, I feel I can't do that now. I *am* interested. The proof of

that is," I pursued, "that I appeal to you for another impression of your own. I still don't see the logic of her general importunity."

"The logic is simply that she has a terror of appearing to encourage anyone in particular."

"Why then isn't it in her own interest, for the sake of the screen, just to *do* that? The appearance of someone in particular would be exactly the opposite of the appearance of Long. Your own admission is that that's *his* line with Lady John."

Mrs. Brissenden took her view. "Oh, she doesn't want to do anything so like the real thing. And, as for what he does, they don't feel in the same way. He's not nervous."

"Then why does he go in for a screen?"

"I mean"—she readily modified it—"that he's not so nervous as May. He hasn't the same reasons for panic. A man never has. Besides, there's not so much in Mr. Long to show–"

"What, by my notion, has taken place? Why not, if it was precisely by the change in him that my notion was inspired? Any change in *her* I know comparatively little about."

We hovered so near the case of Mr. and Mrs. Brissenden that it positively excited me, and all the more for her sustained unconsciousness. "Oh, the man's not aware of his own change. He doesn't see it as we do. It's all to his advantage."

"But *we* see it to his advantage. How should that prevent?"

"We see it to the advantage of his mind and his talk, but not to that of–"

"Well, what?" I pressed as she pulled up.

She was thinking how to name such mysteries. "His delicacy. His consideration. His thought *for* her. He would think for her if he weren't selfish. But he *is* selfish—too much so to spare her, to be generous, to realise. It's only, after all," she sagely went on, feeding me again, as I winced to feel, with profundity of my own sort, "it's only an excessive case, a case that in him happens to show as what the doctors call 'fine,' of what goes on whenever two persons are so much mixed up. One of them always gets more out of it than the other. One of them—you know the saying—gives the lips, the other gives the cheek."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.