

**ГЕНРИ
ДЖЕЙМС**

A LONDON LIFE,
AND OTHER
TALES

Генри Джеймс
A London Life, and Other Tales

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34839582

A London Life, and Other Tales:

Содержание

A LONDON LIFE	4
I	4
II	22
III	35
IV	40
V	53
VI	63
VII	70
VIII	85
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	94

Henry James A London Life, and Other Tales

A LONDON LIFE

I

It was raining, apparently, but she didn't mind—she would put on stout shoes and walk over to Plash. She was restless and so fidgety that it was a pain; there were strange voices that frightened her—they threw out the ugliest intimations—in the empty rooms at home. She would see old Mrs. Berrington, whom she liked because she was so simple, and old Lady Davenant, who was staying with her and who was interesting for reasons with which simplicity had nothing to do. Then she would come back to the children's tea—she liked even better the last half-hour in the schoolroom, with the bread and butter, the candles and the red fire, the little spasms of confidence of Miss Steet the nursery-governess, and the society of Scratch and Parson (their nicknames would have made you think they were dogs) her small, magnificent nephews, whose flesh was so firm yet so soft and

their eyes so charming when they listened to stories. Plash was the dower-house and about a mile and a half, through the park, from Mellows. It was not raining after all, though it had been; there was only a grayness in the air, covering all the strong, rich green, and a pleasant damp, earthy smell, and the walks were smooth and hard, so that the expedition was not arduous.

The girl had been in England more than a year, but there were some satisfactions she had not got used to yet nor ceased to enjoy, and one of these was the accessibility, the convenience of the country. Within the lodge-gates or without them it seemed all alike a park—it was all so intensely 'property.' The very name of Plash, which was quaint and old, had not lost its effect upon her, nor had it become indifferent to her that the place was a dower-house—the little red-walled, ivied asylum to which old Mrs. Berrington had retired when, on his father's death, her son came into the estates. Laura Wing thought very ill of the custom of the expropriation of the widow in the evening of her days, when honour and abundance should attend her more than ever; but her condemnation of this wrong forgot itself when so many of the consequences looked right—barring a little dampness: which was the fate sooner or later of most of her unfavourable judgments of English institutions. Iniquities in such a country somehow always made pictures; and there had been dower-houses in the novels, mainly of fashionable life, on which her later childhood was fed. The iniquity did not as a general thing prevent these retreats from being occupied by old ladies with wonderful reminiscences and

rare voices, whose reverses had not deprived them of a great deal of becoming hereditary lace. In the park, half-way, suddenly, Laura stopped, with a pain—a moral pang—that almost took away her breath; she looked at the misty glades and the dear old beeches (so familiar they were now and loved as much as if she owned them); they seemed in their unlighted December bareness conscious of all the trouble, and they made her conscious of all the change. A year ago she knew nothing, and now she knew almost everything; and the worst of her knowledge (or at least the worst of the fears she had raised upon it) had come to her in that beautiful place, where everything was so full of peace and purity, of the air of happy submission to immemorial law. The place was the same but her eyes were different: they had seen such sad, bad things in so short a time. Yes, the time was short and everything was strange. Laura Wing was too uneasy even to sigh, and as she walked on she lightened her tread almost as if she were going on tiptoe.

At Plash the house seemed to shine in the wet air—the tone of the mottled red walls and the limited but perfect lawn to be the work of an artist's brush. Lady Davenant was in the drawing-room, in a low chair by one of the windows, reading the second volume of a novel. There was the same look of crisp chintz, of fresh flowers wherever flowers could be put, of a wall-paper that was in the bad taste of years before, but had been kept so that no more money should be spent, and was almost covered over with amateurish drawings and superior engravings, framed in narrow

gilt with large margins. The room had its bright, durable, sociable air, the air that Laura Wing liked in so many English things—that of being meant for daily life, for long periods, for uses of high decency. But more than ever to-day was it incongruous that such an habitation, with its chintzes and its British poets, its well-worn carpets and domestic art—the whole aspect so unmeretricious and sincere—should have to do with lives that were not right. Of course however it had to do only indirectly, and the wrong life was not old Mrs. Berrington's nor yet Lady Davenant's. If Selina and Selina's doings were not an implication of such an interior any more than it was for them an explication, this was because she had come from so far off, was a foreign element altogether. Yet it was there she had found her occasion, all the influences that had altered her so (her sister had a theory that she was metamorphosed, that when she was young she seemed born for innocence) if not at Plash at least at Mellows, for the two places after all had ever so much in common, and there were rooms at the great house that looked remarkably like Mrs. Berrington's parlour.

Lady Davenant always had a head-dress of a peculiar style, original and appropriate—a sort of white veil or cape which came in a point to the place on her forehead where her smooth hair began to show and then covered her shoulders. It was always exquisitely fresh and was partly the reason why she struck the girl rather as a fine portrait than as a living person. And yet she was full of life, old as she was, and had been made finer,

sharper and more delicate, by nearly eighty years of it. It was the hand of a master that Laura seemed to see in her face, the witty expression of which shone like a lamp through the ground-glass of her good breeding; nature was always an artist, but not so much of an artist as that. Infinite knowledge the girl attributed to her, and that was why she liked her a little fearfully. Lady Davenant was not as a general thing fond of the young or of invalids; but she made an exception as regards youth for the little girl from America, the sister of the daughter-in-law of her dearest friend. She took an interest in Laura partly perhaps to make up for the tepidity with which she regarded Selina. At all events she had assumed the general responsibility of providing her with a husband. She pretended to care equally little for persons suffering from other forms of misfortune, but she was capable of finding excuses for them when they had been sufficiently to blame. She expected a great deal of attention, always wore gloves in the house and never had anything in her hand but a book. She neither embroidered nor wrote—only read and talked. She had no special conversation for girls but generally addressed them in the same manner that she found effective with her contemporaries. Laura Wing regarded this as an honour, but very often she didn't know what the old lady meant and was ashamed to ask her. Once in a while Lady Davenant was ashamed to tell. Mrs. Berrington had gone to a cottage to see an old woman who was ill—an old woman who had been in her service for years, in the old days. Unlike her friend she was fond of young

people and invalids, but she was less interesting to Laura, except that it was a sort of fascination to wonder how she could have such abysses of placidity. She had long cheeks and kind eyes and was devoted to birds; somehow she always made Laura think secretly of a tablet of fine white soap—nothing else was so smooth and clean.

'And what's going on *chez vous*—who is there and what are they doing?' Lady Davenant asked, after the first greetings.

'There isn't any one but me—and the children—and the governess.'

'What, no party—no private theatricals? How do you live?'

'Oh, it doesn't take so much to keep me going,' said Laura. 'I believe there were some people coming on Saturday, but they have been put off, or they can't come. Selina has gone to London.'

'And what has she gone to London for?'

'Oh, I don't know—she has so many things to do.'

'And where is Mr. Berrington?'

'He has been away somewhere; but I believe he is coming back to-morrow—or next day.'

'Or the day after?' said Lady Davenant. 'And do they never go away together?' she continued after a pause.

'Yes, sometimes—but they don't come back together.'

'Do you mean they quarrel on the way?'

'I don't know what they do, Lady Davenant—I don't understand,' Laura Wing replied, with an unguarded tremor in her voice. 'I don't think they are very happy.'

'Then they ought to be ashamed of themselves. They have got everything so comfortable—what more do they want?'

'Yes, and the children are such dears!'

'Certainly—charming. And is she a good person, the present governess? Does she look after them properly?'

'Yes—she seems very good—it's a blessing. But I think she's unhappy too.'

'Bless us, what a house! Does she want some one to make love to her?'

'No, but she wants Selina to see—to appreciate,' said the young girl.

'And doesn't she appreciate—when she leaves them that way quite to the young woman?'

'Miss Steet thinks she doesn't notice how they come on—she is never there.'

'And has she wept and told you so? You know they are always crying, governesses—whatever line you take. You shouldn't draw them out too much—they are always looking for a chance. She ought to be thankful to be let alone. You mustn't be too sympathetic—it's mostly wasted,' the old lady went on.

'Oh, I'm not—I assure you I'm not,' said Laura Wing. 'On the contrary, I see so much about me that I don't sympathise with.'

'Well, you mustn't be an impertinent little American either!' her interlocutress exclaimed. Laura sat with her for half an hour and the conversation took a turn through the affairs of Plash and through Lady Davenant's own, which were visits in prospect

and ideas suggested more or less directly by them as well as by the books she had been reading, a heterogeneous pile on a table near her, all of them new and clean, from a circulating library in London. The old woman had ideas and Laura liked them, though they often struck her as very sharp and hard, because at Mellows she had no diet of that sort. There had never been an idea in the house, since she came at least, and there was wonderfully little reading. Lady Davenant still went from country-house to country-house all winter, as she had done all her life, and when Laura asked her she told her the places and the people she probably should find at each of them. Such an enumeration was much less interesting to the girl than it would have been a year before: she herself had now seen a great many places and people and the freshness of her curiosity was gone. But she still cared for Lady Davenant's descriptions and judgments, because they were the thing in her life which (when she met the old woman from time to time) most represented talk—the rare sort of talk that was not mere chaff. That was what she had dreamed of before she came to England, but in Selina's set the dream had not come true. In Selina's set people only harried each other from morning till night with extravagant accusations—it was all a kind of horse-play of false charges. When Lady Davenant was accusatory it was within the limits of perfect verisimilitude.

Laura waited for Mrs. Berrington to come in but she failed to appear, so that the girl gathered her waterproof together with an intention of departure. But she was secretly reluctant, because

she had walked over to Plash with a vague hope that some soothing hand would be laid upon her pain. If there was no comfort at the dower-house she knew not where to look for it, for there was certainly none at home—not even with Miss Steet and the children. It was not Lady Davenant's leading characteristic that she was comforting, and Laura had not aspired to be coaxed or coddled into forgetfulness: she wanted rather to be taught a certain fortitude—how to live and hold up one's head even while knowing that things were very bad. A brazen indifference—it was not exactly that that she wished to acquire; but were there not some sorts of indifference that were philosophic and noble? Could Lady Davenant not teach them, if she should take the trouble? The girl remembered to have heard that there had been years before some disagreeable occurrences in *her* family; it was not a race in which the ladies inveterately turned out well. Yet who to-day had the stamp of honour and credit—of a past which was either no one's business or was part and parcel of a fair public record—and carried it so much as a matter of course? She herself had been a good woman and that was the only thing that told in the long run. It was Laura's own idea to be a good woman and that this would make it an advantage for Lady Davenant to show her how not to feel too much. As regards feeling enough, that was a branch in which she had no need to take lessons.

The old woman liked cutting new books, a task she never remitted to her maid, and while her young visitor sat there she went through the greater part of a volume with the paper-

knife. She didn't proceed very fast—there was a kind of patient, awkward fumbling of her aged hands; but as she passed her knife into the last leaf she said abruptly—'And how is your sister going on? She's very light!' Lady Davenant added before Laura had time to reply.

'Oh, Lady Davenant!' the girl exclaimed, vaguely, slowly, vexed with herself as soon as she had spoken for having uttered the words as a protest, whereas she wished to draw her companion out. To correct this impression she threw back her waterproof.

'Have you ever spoken to her?' the old woman asked.

'Spoken to her?'

'About her behaviour. I daresay you haven't—you Americans have such a lot of false delicacy. I daresay Selina wouldn't speak to you if you were in her place (excuse the supposition!) and yet she is capable—' But Lady Davenant paused, preferring not to say of what young Mrs. Berrington was capable. 'It's a bad house for a girl.'

'It only gives me a horror,' said Laura, pausing in turn.

'A horror of your sister? That's not what one should aim at. You ought to get married—and the sooner the better. My dear child, I have neglected you dreadfully.'

'I am much obliged to you, but if you think marriage looks to me happy!' the girl exclaimed, laughing without hilarity.

'Make it happy for some one else and you will be happy enough yourself. You ought to get out of your situation.'

Laura Wing was silent a moment, though this was not a new reflection to her. 'Do you mean that I should leave Selina altogether? I feel as if I should abandon her—as if I should be a coward.'

'Oh, my dear, it isn't the business of little girls to serve as parachutes to fly-away wives! That's why if you haven't spoken to her you needn't take the trouble at this time of day. Let her go—let her go!'

'Let her go?' Laura repeated, staring.

Her companion gave her a sharper glance. 'Let her stay, then! Only get out of the house. You can come to me, you know, whenever you like. I don't know another girl I would say that to.'

'Oh, Lady Davenant,' Laura began again, but she only got as far as this; in a moment she had covered her face with her hands—she had burst into tears.

'Ah my dear, don't cry or I shall take back my invitation! It would never do if you were to *larmoyer*. If I have offended you by the way I have spoken of Selina I think you are too sensitive. We shouldn't feel more for people than they feel for themselves. She has no tears, I'm sure.'

'Oh, she has, she has!' cried the girl, sobbing with an odd effect as she put forth this pretension for her sister.

'Then she's worse than I thought. I don't mind them so much when they are merry but I hate them when they are sentimental.'

'She's so changed—so changed!' Laura Wing went on.

'Never, never, my dear: *c'est de naissance*.'

'You never knew my mother,' returned the girl; 'when I think of mother—' The words failed her while she sobbed.

'I daresay she was very nice,' said Lady Davenant gently. 'It would take that to account for you: such women as Selina are always easily enough accounted for. I didn't mean it was inherited—for that sort of thing skips about. I daresay there was some improper ancestress—except that you Americans don't seem to have ancestresses.'

Laura gave no sign of having heard these observations; she was occupied in brushing away her tears. 'Everything is so changed—you don't know,' she remarked in a moment. 'Nothing could have been happier—nothing could have been sweeter. And now to be so dependent—so helpless—so poor!'

'Have you nothing at all?' asked Lady Davenant, with simplicity.

'Only enough to pay for my clothes.'

'That's a good deal, for a girl. You are uncommonly dressy, you know.'

'I'm sorry I seem so. That's just the way I don't want to look.'

'You Americans can't help it; you "wear" your very features and your eyes look as if they had just been sent home. But I confess you are not so smart as Selina.'

'Yes, isn't she splendid?' Laura exclaimed, with proud inconsequence. 'And the worse she is the better she looks.'

'Oh my child, if the bad women looked as bad as they are—! It's only the good ones who can afford that,' the old lady murmured.

'It was the last thing I ever thought of—that I should be ashamed,' said Laura.

'Oh, keep your shame till you have more to do with it. It's like lending your umbrella—when you have only one.'

'If anything were to happen—publicly—I should die, I should die!' the girl exclaimed passionately and with a motion that carried her to her feet. This time she settled herself for departure. Lady Davenant's admonition rather frightened than sustained her.

The old woman leaned back in her chair, looking up at her. 'It would be very bad, I daresay. But it wouldn't prevent me from taking you in.'

Laura Wing returned her look, with eyes slightly distended, musing. 'Think of having to come to that!'

Lady Davenant burst out laughing. 'Yes, yes, you must come; you are so original!'

'I don't mean that I don't feel your kindness,' the girl broke out, blushing. 'But to be only protected—always protected: is that a life?'

'Most women are only too thankful and I am bound to say I think you are *difficile*.' Lady Davenant used a good many French words, in the old-fashioned manner and with a pronunciation not perfectly pure: when she did so she reminded Laura Wing of Mrs. Gore's novels. 'But you shall be better protected than even by me. *Nous verrons cela*. Only you must stop crying—this isn't a crying country.'

'No, one must have courage here. It takes courage to marry for such a reason.'

'Any reason is good enough that keeps a woman from being an old maid. Besides, you will like him.'

'He must like me first,' said the girl, with a sad smile.

'There's the American again! It isn't necessary. You are too proud—you expect too much.'

'I'm proud for what I am—that's very certain. But I don't expect anything,' Laura Wing declared. 'That's the only form my pride takes. Please give my love to Mrs. Berrington. I am so sorry—so sorry,' she went on, to change the talk from the subject of her marrying. She wanted to marry but she wanted also not to want it and, above all, not to appear to. She lingered in the room, moving about a little; the place was always so pleasant to her that to go away—to return to her own barren home—had the effect of forfeiting a sort of privilege of sanctuary. The afternoon had faded but the lamps had been brought in, the smell of flowers was in the air and the old house of Plash seemed to recognise the hour that suited it best. The quiet old lady in the firelight, encompassed with the symbolic security of chintz and water-colour, gave her a sudden vision of how blessed it would be to jump all the middle dangers of life and have arrived at the end, safely, sensibly, with a cap and gloves and consideration and memories. 'And, Lady Davenant, what does *she* think?' she asked abruptly, stopping short and referring to Mrs. Berrington.

'Think? Bless your soul, she doesn't do that! If she did, the

things she says would be unpardonable.'

'The things she says?'

'That's what makes them so beautiful—that they are not spoiled by preparation. You could never think of them *for* her.' The girl smiled at this description of the dearest friend of her interlocutress, but she wondered a little what Lady Davenant would say to visitors about *her* if she should accept a refuge under her roof. Her speech was after all a flattering proof of confidence. 'She wishes it had been you—I happen to know that,' said the old woman.

'It had been me?'

'That Lionel had taken a fancy to.'

'I wouldn't have married him,' Laura rejoined, after a moment.

'Don't say that or you will make me think it won't be easy to help you. I shall depend upon you not to refuse anything so good.'

'I don't call him good. If he were good his wife would be better.'

'Very likely; and if you had married him *he* would be better, and that's more to the purpose. Lionel is as idiotic as a comic song, but you have cleverness for two.'

'And you have it for fifty, dear Lady Davenant. Never, never—I shall never marry a man I can't respect!' Laura Wing exclaimed.

She had come a little nearer her old friend and taken her hand; her companion held her a moment and with the other hand pushed aside one of the flaps of the waterproof. 'And what is it your clothing costs you?' asked Lady Davenant, looking at the

dress underneath and not giving any heed to this declaration.

'I don't exactly know: it takes almost everything that is sent me from America. But that is dreadfully little—only a few pounds. I am a wonderful manager. Besides,' the girl added, 'Selina wants one to be dressed.'

'And doesn't she pay any of your bills?'

'Why, she gives me everything—food, shelter, carriages.'

'Does she never give you money?'

'I wouldn't take it,' said the girl. 'They need everything they have—their life is tremendously expensive.'

'That I'll warrant!' cried the old woman. 'It was a most beautiful property, but I don't know what has become of it now. *Ce n'est pas pour vous blesser*, but the hole you Americans can make—'

Laura interrupted immediately, holding up her head; Lady Davenant had dropped her hand and she had receded a step. 'Selina brought Lionel a very considerable fortune and every penny of it was paid.'

'Yes, I know it was; Mrs. Berrington told me it was most satisfactory. That's not always the case with the fortunes you young ladies are supposed to bring!' the old lady added, smiling.

The girl looked over her head a moment. 'Why do your men marry for money?'

'Why indeed, my dear? And before your troubles what used your father to give you for your personal expenses?'

'He gave us everything we asked—we had no particular

allowance.'

'And I daresay you asked for everything?' said Lady Davenant.

'No doubt we were very dressy, as you say.'

'No wonder he went bankrupt—for he did, didn't he?'

'He had dreadful reverses but he only sacrificed himself—he protected others.'

'Well, I know nothing about these things and I only ask *pour me renseigner*,' Mrs. Berrington's guest went on. 'And after their reverses your father and mother lived I think only a short time?'

Laura Wing had covered herself again with her mantle; her eyes were now bent upon the ground and, standing there before her companion with her umbrella and her air of momentary submission and self-control, she might very well have been a young person in reduced circumstances applying for a place. 'It was short enough but it seemed—some parts of it—terribly long and painful. My poor father—my dear father,' the girl went on. But her voice trembled and she checked herself.

'I feel as if I were cross-questioning you, which God forbid!' said Lady Davenant. 'But there is one thing I should really like to know. Did Lionel and his wife, when you were poor, come freely to your assistance?'

'They sent us money repeatedly—it was *her* money of course. It was almost all we had.'

'And if you have been poor and know what poverty is tell me this: has it made you afraid to marry a poor man?'

It seemed to Lady Davenant that in answer to this her young

friend looked at her strangely; and then the old woman heard her say something that had not quite the heroic ring she expected. 'I am afraid of so many things to-day that I don't know where my fears end.'

'I have no patience with the highstrung way you take things. But I have to know, you know.'

'Oh, don't try to know any more shames—any more horrors!' the girl wailed with sudden passion, turning away.

Her companion got up, drew her round again and kissed her. 'I think you would fidget me,' she remarked as she released her. Then, as if this were too cheerless a leave-taking, she added in a gayer tone, as Laura had her hand on the door: 'Mind what I tell you, my dear; let her go!' It was to this that the girl's lesson in philosophy reduced itself, she reflected, as she walked back to Mellows in the rain, which had now come on, through the darkening park.

II

The children were still at tea and poor Miss Steet sat between them, consoling herself with strong cups, crunching melancholy morsels of toast and dropping an absent gaze on her little companions as they exchanged small, loud remarks. She always sighed when Laura came in—it was her way of expressing appreciation of the visit—and she was the one person whom the girl frequently saw who seemed to her more unhappy than herself. But Laura envied her—she thought her position had more dignity than that of her employer's dependent sister. Miss Steet had related her life to the children's pretty young aunt and this personage knew that though it had had painful elements nothing so disagreeable had ever befallen her or was likely to befall her as the odious possibility of her sister's making a scandal. She had two sisters (Laura knew all about them) and one of them was married to a clergyman in Staffordshire (a very ugly part) and had seven children and four hundred a year; while the other, the eldest, was enormously stout and filled (it was a good deal of a squeeze) a position as matron in an orphanage at Liverpool. Neither of them seemed destined to go into the English divorce-court, and such a circumstance on the part of one's near relations struck Laura as in itself almost sufficient to constitute happiness. Miss Steet never lived in a state of nervous anxiety—everything about her was respectable. She made the

girl almost angry sometimes, by her drooping, martyr-like air: Laura was near breaking out at her with, 'Dear me, what have you got to complain of? Don't you earn your living like an honest girl and are you obliged to see things going on about you that you hate?'

But she could not say things like that to her, because she had promised Selina, who made a great point of this, that she would never be too familiar with her. Selina was not without her ideas of decorum—very far from it indeed; only she erected them in such queer places. She was not familiar with her children's governess; she was not even familiar with the children themselves. That was why after all it was impossible to address much of a remonstrance to Miss Steet when she sat as if she were tied to the stake and the fagots were being lighted. If martyrs in this situation had tea and cold meat served them they would strikingly have resembled the provoking young woman in the schoolroom at Mellows. Laura could not have denied that it was natural she should have liked it better if Mrs. Berrington would *sometimes* just look in and give a sign that she was pleased with her system; but poor Miss Steet only knew by the servants or by Laura whether Mrs. Berrington were at home or not: she was for the most part not, and the governess had a way of silently intimating (it was the manner she put her head on one side when she looked at Scratch and Parson—of course *she* called them Geordie and Ferdy) that she was immensely handicapped and even that they were. Perhaps they were, though they certainly showed it little in their appearance

and manner, and Laura was at least sure that if Selina had been perpetually dropping in Miss Steet would have taken that discomfort even more tragically. The sight of this young woman's either real or fancied wrongs did not diminish her conviction that she herself would have found courage to become a governess. She would have had to teach very young children, for she believed she was too ignorant for higher flights. But Selina would never have consented to that—she would have considered it a disgrace or even worse—a *pose*. Laura had proposed to her six months before that she should dispense with a paid governess and suffer *her* to take charge of the little boys: in that way she should not feel so completely dependent—she should be doing something in return. 'And pray what would happen when you came to dinner? Who would look after them then?' Mrs. Berrington had demanded, with a very shocked air. Laura had replied that perhaps it was not absolutely necessary that she should come to dinner—she could dine early, with the children; and that if her presence in the drawing-room should be required the children had their nurse—and what did they have their nurse for? Selina looked at her as if she was deplorably superficial and told her that they had their nurse to dress them and look after their clothes—did she wish the poor little ducks to go in rags? She had her own ideas of thoroughness and when Laura hinted that after all at that hour the children were in bed she declared that even when they were asleep she desired the governess to be at hand—that was the way a mother felt who really took an interest.

Selina was wonderfully thorough; she said something about the evening hours in the quiet schoolroom being the proper time for the governess to 'get up' the children's lessons for the next day. Laura Wing was conscious of her own ignorance; nevertheless she presumed to believe that she could have taught Geordie and Ferdy the alphabet without anticipatory nocturnal researches. She wondered what her sister supposed Miss Steet taught them—whether she had a cheap theory that they were in Latin and algebra.

The governess's evening hours in the quiet schoolroom would have suited Laura well—so at least she believed; by touches of her own she would make the place even prettier than it was already, and in the winter nights, near the bright fire, she would get through a delightful course of reading. There was the question of a new piano (the old one was pretty bad—Miss Steet had a finger!) and perhaps she should have to ask Selina for that—but it would be all. The schoolroom at Mellows was not a charmless place and the girl often wished that she might have spent her own early years in so dear a scene. It was a sort of panelled parlour, in a wing, and looked out on the great cushiony lawns and a part of the terrace where the peacocks used most to spread their tails. There were quaint old maps on the wall, and 'collections'—birds and shells—under glass cases, and there was a wonderful pictured screen which old Mrs. Berrington had made when Lionel was young out of primitive woodcuts illustrative of nursery-tales. The place was a setting for rosy childhood, and

Laura believed her sister never knew how delightful Scratch and Parson looked there. Old Mrs. Berrington had known in the case of Lionel—it had all been arranged for him. That was the story told by ever so many other things in the house, which betrayed the full perception of a comfortable, liberal, deeply domestic effect, addressed to eternities of possession, characteristic thirty years before of the unquestioned and unquestioning old lady whose sofas and 'corners' (she had perhaps been the first person in England to have corners) demonstrated the most of her cleverness.

Laura Wing envied English children, the boys at least, and even her own chubby nephews, in spite of the cloud that hung over them; but she had already noted the incongruity that appeared to-day between Lionel Berrington at thirty-five and the influences that had surrounded his younger years. She did not dislike her brother-in-law, though she admired him scantily, and she pitied him; but she marvelled at the waste involved in some human institutions (the English country gentry for instance) when she perceived that it had taken so much to produce so little. The sweet old wainscoted parlour, the view of the garden that reminded her of scenes in Shakespeare's comedies, all that was exquisite in the home of his forefathers—what visible reference was there to these fine things in poor Lionel's stable-stamped composition? When she came in this evening and saw his small sons making competitive noises in their mugs (Miss Steet checked this impropriety on her entrance) she asked herself

what *they* would have to show twenty years later for the frame that made them just then a picture. Would they be wonderfully ripe and noble, the perfection of human culture? The contrast was before her again, the sense of the same curious duplicity (in the literal meaning of the word) that she had felt at Plash—the way the genius of such an old house was all peace and decorum and the spirit that prevailed there, outside of the schoolroom, was contentious and impure. She had often been struck with it before—with that perfection of machinery which can still at certain times make English life go on of itself with a stately rhythm long after there is corruption within it.

She had half a purpose of asking Miss Steet to dine with her that evening downstairs, so absurd did it seem to her that two young women who had so much in common (enough at least for that) should sit feeding alone at opposite ends of the big empty house, melancholy on such a night. She would not have cared just now whether Selina did think such a course familiar: she indulged sometimes in a kind of angry humility, placing herself near to those who were laborious and sordid. But when she observed how much cold meat the governess had already consumed she felt that it would be a vain form to propose to her another repast. She sat down with her and presently, in the firelight, the two children had placed themselves in position for a story. They were dressed like the mariners of England and they smelt of the ablutions to which they had been condemned before tea and the odour of which was but partly overlaid by that of bread and butter. Scratch wanted

an old story and Parson a new, and they exchanged from side to side a good many powerful arguments. While they were so engaged Miss Steet narrated at her visitor's invitation the walk she had taken with them and revealed that she had been thinking for a long time of asking Mrs. Berrington—if she only had an opportunity—whether she should approve of her giving them a few elementary notions of botany. But the opportunity had not come—she had had the idea for a long time past. She was rather fond of the study herself; she had gone into it a little—she seemed to intimate that there had been times when she extracted a needed comfort from it. Laura suggested that botany might be a little dry for such young children in winter, from text-books—that the better way would be perhaps to wait till the spring and show them out of doors, in the garden, some of the peculiarities of plants. To this Miss Steet rejoined that her idea had been to teach some of the general facts slowly—it would take a long time—and then they would be all ready for the spring. She spoke of the spring as if it would not arrive for a terribly long time. She had hoped to lay the question before Mrs. Berrington that week—but was it not already Thursday? Laura said, 'Oh yes, you had better do anything with the children that will keep them profitably occupied;' she came very near saying anything that would occupy the governess herself.

She had rather a dread of new stories—it took the little boys so long to get initiated and the first steps were so terribly bestrewn with questions. Receptive silence, broken only by an occasional

rectification on the part of the listener, never descended until after the tale had been told a dozen times. The matter was settled for 'Riquet with the Tuft,' but on this occasion the girl's heart was not much in the entertainment. The children stood on either side of her, leaning against her, and she had an arm round each, their little bodies were thick and strong and their voices had the quality of silver bells. Their mother had certainly gone too far; but there was nevertheless a limit to the tenderness one could feel for the neglected, compromised bairns. It was difficult to take a sentimental view of them—they would never take such a view of themselves. Geordie would grow up to be a master-hand at polo and care more for that pastime than for anything in life, and Ferdy perhaps would develop into 'the best shot in England.' Laura felt these possibilities stirring within them; they were in the things they said to her, in the things they said to each other. At any rate they would never reflect upon anything in the world. They contradicted each other on a question of ancestral history to which their attention apparently had been drawn by their nurse, whose people had been tenants for generations. Their grandfather had had the hounds for fifteen years—Ferdy maintained that he had always had them. Geordie ridiculed this idea, like a man of the world; he had had them till he went into volunteering—then he had got up a magnificent regiment, he had spent thousands of pounds on it. Ferdy was of the opinion that this was wasted money—he himself intended to have a real regiment, to be a colonel in the Guards. Geordie looked as if he thought

that a superficial ambition and could see beyond it; his own most definite view was that he would have back the hounds. He didn't see why papa didn't have them—unless it was because he wouldn't take the trouble.

'I know—it's because mamma is an American!' Ferdy announced, with confidence.

'And what has that to do with it?' asked Laura.

'Mamma spends so much money—there isn't any more for anything!'

This startling speech elicited an alarmed protest from Miss Steet; she blushed and assured Laura that she couldn't imagine where the child could have picked up such an extraordinary idea. 'I'll look into it—you may be sure I'll look into it,' she said; while Laura told Ferdy that he must never, never, never, under any circumstances, either utter or listen to a word that should be wanting in respect to his mother.

'If any one should say anything against any of my people I would give him a good one!' Geordie shouted, with his hands in his little blue pockets.

'I'd hit him in the eye!' cried Ferdy, with cheerful inconsequence.

'Perhaps you don't care to come to dinner at half-past seven,' the girl said to Miss Steet; 'but I should be very glad—I'm all alone.'

'Thank you so much. All alone, really?' murmured the governess.

'Why don't you get married? then you wouldn't be alone,' Georgie interposed, with ingenuity.

'Children, you are really too dreadful this evening!' Miss Steet exclaimed.

'I shan't get married—I want to have the hounds,' proclaimed Georgie, who had apparently been much struck with his brother's explanation.

'I will come down afterwards, about half-past eight, if you will allow me,' said Miss Steet, looking conscious and responsible.

'Very well—perhaps we can have some music; we will try something together.'

'Oh, music—we don't go in for music!' said Georgie, with clear superiority; and while he spoke Laura saw Miss Steet get up suddenly, looking even less alleviated than usual. The door of the room had been pushed open and Lionel Berrington stood there. He had his hat on and a cigar in his mouth and his face was red, which was its common condition. He took off his hat as he came into the room, but he did not stop smoking and he turned a little redder than before. There were several ways in which his sister-in-law often wished he had been very different, but she had never disliked him for a certain boyish shyness that was in him, which came out in his dealings with almost all women. The governess of his children made him uncomfortable and Laura had already noticed that he had the same effect upon Miss Steet. He was fond of his children, but he saw them hardly more frequently than their mother and they never knew whether he were at home or

away. Indeed his goings and comings were so frequent that Laura herself scarcely knew: it was an accident that on this occasion his absence had been marked for her. Selina had had her reasons for wishing not to go up to town while her husband was still at Mellows, and she cherished the irritating belief that he stayed at home on purpose to watch her—to keep her from going away. It was her theory that she herself was perpetually at home—that few women were more domestic, more glued to the fireside and absorbed in the duties belonging to it; and unreasonable as she was she recognised the fact that for her to establish this theory she must make her husband sometimes see her at Mellows. It was not enough for her to maintain that he would see her if he were sometimes there himself. Therefore she disliked to be caught in the crude fact of absence—to go away under his nose; what she preferred was to take the next train after his own and return an hour or two before him. She managed this often with great ability, in spite of her not being able to be sure when he *would* return. Of late however she had ceased to take so much trouble, and Laura, by no desire of the girl's own, was enough in the confidence of her impatiences and perversities to know that for her to have wished (four days before the moment I write of) to put him on a wrong scent—or to keep him at least off the right one—she must have had something more dreadful than usual in her head. This was why the girl had been so nervous and why the sense of an impending catastrophe, which had lately gathered strength in her mind, was at present almost intolerably pressing:

she knew how little Selina could afford to be more dreadful than usual.

Lionel startled her by turning up in that unexpected way, though she could not have told herself when it would have been natural to expect him. This attitude, at Mellows, was left to the servants, most of them inscrutable and incommunicative and erect in a wisdom that was founded upon telegrams—you couldn't speak to the butler but he pulled one out of his pocket. It was a house of telegrams; they crossed each other a dozen times an hour, coming and going, and Selina in particular lived in a cloud of them. Laura had but vague ideas as to what they were all about; once in a while, when they fell under her eyes, she either failed to understand them or judged them to be about horses. There were an immense number of horses, in one way and another, in Mrs. Berrington's life. Then she had so many friends, who were always rushing about like herself and making appointments and putting them off and wanting to know if she were going to certain places or whether she would go if they did or whether she would come up to town and dine and 'do a theatre.' There were also a good many theatres in the existence of this busy lady. Laura remembered how fond their poor father had been of telegraphing, but it was never about the theatre: at all events she tried to give her sister the benefit or the excuse of heredity. Selina had her own opinions, which were superior to this—she once remarked to Laura that it was idiotic for a woman to write—to telegraph was the only way not to get into trouble.

If doing so sufficed to keep a lady out of it Mrs. Berrington's life should have flowed like the rivers of Eden.

III

Laura, as soon as her brother-in-law had been in the room a moment, had a particular fear; she had seen him twice noticeably under the influence of liquor; she had not liked it at all and now there were some of the same signs. She was afraid the children would discover them, or at any rate Miss Steet, and she felt the importance of not letting him stay in the room. She thought it almost a sign that he should have come there at all—he was so rare an apparition. He looked at her very hard, smiling as if to say, 'No, no, I'm not—not if you think it!' She perceived with relief in a moment that he was not very bad, and liquor disposed him apparently to tenderness, for he indulged in an interminable kissing of Geordie and Ferdy, during which Miss Steet turned away delicately, looking out of the window. The little boys asked him no questions to celebrate his return—they only announced that they were going to learn botany, to which he replied: 'Are you, really? Why, I never did,' and looked askance at the governess, blushing as if to express the hope that she would let him off from carrying that subject further. To Laura and to Miss Steet he was amiably explanatory, though his explanations were not quite coherent. He had come back an hour before—he was going to spend the night—he had driven over from Churton—he was thinking of taking the last train up to town. Was Laura dining at home? Was any one coming? He should enjoy a quiet

dinner awfully.

'Certainly I'm alone,' said the girl. 'I suppose you know Selina is away.'

'Oh yes—I know where Selina is!' And Lionel Berrington looked round, smiling at every one present, including Scratch and Parson. He stopped while he continued to smile and Laura wondered what he was so much pleased at. She preferred not to ask—she was sure it was something that wouldn't give *her* pleasure; but after waiting a moment her brother-in-law went on: 'Selina's in Paris, my dear; that's where Selina is!'

'In Paris?' Laura repeated.

'Yes, in Paris, my dear—God bless her! Where else do you suppose? Geordie my boy, where should *you* think your mummy would naturally be?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Geordie, who had no reply ready that would express affectingly the desolation of the nursery. 'If I were mummy I'd travel.'

'Well now that's your mummy's idea—she has gone to travel,' returned the father. 'Were you ever in Paris, Miss Steet?'

Miss Steet gave a nervous laugh and said No, but she had been to Boulogne; while to her added confusion Ferdy announced that he knew where Paris was—it was in America. 'No, it ain't—it's in Scotland!' cried Geordie; and Laura asked Lionel how he knew—whether his wife had written to him.

'Written to me? when did she ever write to me? No, I saw a fellow in town this morning who saw her there—at breakfast

yesterday. He came over last night. That's how I know my wife's in Paris. You can't have better proof than that!

'I suppose it's a very pleasant season there,' the governess murmured, as if from a sense of duty, in a distant, uncomfortable tone.

'I daresay it's very pleasant indeed—I daresay it's awfully amusing!' laughed Mr. Berrington. 'Shouldn't you like to run over with me for a few days, Laura—just to have a go at the theatres? I don't see why we should always be moping at home. We'll take Miss Steet and the children and give mummy a pleasant surprise. Now who do you suppose she was with, in Paris—who do you suppose she was seen with?'

Laura had turned pale, she looked at him hard, imploringly, in the eyes: there was a name she was terribly afraid he would mention. 'Oh sir, in that case we had better go and get ready!' Miss Steet quavered, betwixt a laugh and a groan, in a spasm of discretion; and before Laura knew it she had gathered Geordie and Ferdy together and swept them out of the room. The door closed behind her with a very quick softness and Lionel remained a moment staring at it.

'I say, what does she mean?—ain't that damned impertinent?' he stammered. 'What did she think I was going to say? Does she suppose I would say any harm before—before *her*? Dash it, does she suppose I would give away my wife to the servants?' Then he added, 'And I wouldn't say any harm before you, Laura. You are too good and too nice and I like you too much!'

'Won't you come downstairs? won't you have some tea?' the girl asked, uneasily.

'No, no, I want to stay here—I like this place,' he replied, very gently and reasoningly. 'It's a deuced nice place—it's an awfully jolly room. It used to be this way—always—when I was a little chap. I was a rough one, my dear; I wasn't a pretty little lamb like that pair. I think it's because you look after them—that's what makes 'em so sweet. The one in my time—what was her name? I think it was Bald or Bold—I rather think she found me a handful. I used to kick her shins—I was decidedly vicious. And do *you* see it's kept so well, Laura?' he went on, looking round him. "Pon my soul, it's the prettiest room in the house. What does she want to go to Paris for when she has got such a charming house? Now can you answer me that, Laura?"

'I suppose she has gone to get some clothes: her dressmaker lives in Paris, you know.'

'Dressmaker? Clothes? Why, she has got whole rooms full of them. Hasn't she got whole rooms full of them?'

'Speaking of clothes I must go and change mine,' said Laura. 'I have been out in the rain—I have been to Plash—I'm decidedly damp.'

'Oh, you have been to Plash? You have seen my mother? I hope she's in very good health.' But before the girl could reply to this he went on: 'Now, I want you to guess who she's in Paris with. Motcomb saw them together—at that place, what's his name? close to the Madeleine.' And as Laura was silent, not wishing

at all to guess, he continued—'It's the ruin of any woman, you know; I can't think what she has got in her head.' Still Laura said nothing, and as he had hold of her arm, she having turned away, she led him this time out of the room. She had a horror of the name, the name that was in her mind and that was apparently on his lips, though his tone was so singular, so contemplative. 'My dear girl, she's with Lady Ringrose—what do you say to that?' he exclaimed, as they passed along the corridor to the staircase.

'With Lady Ringrose?'

'They went over on Tuesday—they are knocking about there alone.'

'I don't know Lady Ringrose,' Laura said, infinitely relieved that the name was not the one she had feared. Lionel leaned on her arm as they went downstairs.

'I rather hope not—I promise you she has never put her foot in this house! If Selina expects to bring her here I should like half an hour's notice; yes, half an hour would do. She might as well be seen with—' And Lionel Berrington checked himself. 'She has had at least fifty—' And again he stopped short. 'You must pull me up, you know, if I say anything you don't like!'

'I don't understand you—let me alone, please!' the girl broke out, disengaging herself with an effort from his arm. She hurried down the rest of the steps and left him there looking after her, and as she went she heard him give an irrelevant laugh.

IV

She determined not to go to dinner—she wished for that day not to meet him again. He would drink more—he would be worse—she didn't know what he might say. Besides she was too angry—not with him but with Selina—and in addition to being angry she was sick. She knew who Lady Ringrose was; she knew so many things to-day that when she was younger—and only a little—she had not expected ever to know. Her eyes had been opened very wide in England and certainly they had been opened to Lady Ringrose. She had heard what she had done and perhaps a good deal more, and it was not very different from what she had heard of other women. She knew Selina had been to her house; she had an impression that her ladyship had been to Selina's, in London, though she herself had not seen her there. But she had not known they were so intimate as that—that Selina would rush over to Paris with her. What they had gone to Paris for was not necessarily criminal; there were a hundred reasons, familiar to ladies who were fond of change, of movement, of the theatres and of new bonnets; but nevertheless it was the fact of this little excursion quite as much as the companion that excited Laura's disgust.

She was not ready to say that the companion was any worse, though Lionel appeared to think so, than twenty other women who were her sister's intimates and whom she herself had seen

in London, in Grosvenor Place, and even under the motherly old beeches at Mellows. But she thought it unpleasant and base in Selina to go abroad that way, like a commercial traveller, capriciously, clandestinely, without giving notice, when she had left her to understand that she was simply spending three or four days in town. It was bad taste and bad form, it was *cabotin* and had the mark of Selina's complete, irremediable frivolity—the worst accusation (Laura tried to cling to that opinion) that she laid herself open to. Of course frivolity that was never ashamed of itself was like a neglected cold—you could die of it morally as well as of anything else. Laura knew this and it was why she was inexpressibly vexed with her sister. She hoped she should get a letter from Selina the next morning (Mrs. Berrington would show at least that remnant of propriety) which would give her a chance to despatch her an answer that was already writing itself in her brain. It scarcely diminished Laura's eagerness for such an opportunity that she had a vision of Selina's showing her letter, laughing, across the table, at the place near the Madeleine, to Lady Ringrose (who would be painted—Selina herself, to do her justice, was not yet) while the French waiters, in white aprons, contemplated *ces dames*. It was new work for our young lady to judge of these shades—the gradations, the probabilities of license, and of the side of the line on which, or rather how far on the wrong side, Lady Ringrose was situated.

A quarter of an hour before dinner Lionel sent word to her room that she was to sit down without him—he had a

headache and wouldn't appear. This was an unexpected grace and it simplified the position for Laura; so that, smoothing her ruffles, she betook herself to the table. Before doing this however she went back to the schoolroom and told Miss Steet she must contribute her company. She took the governess (the little boys were in bed) downstairs with her and made her sit opposite, thinking she would be a safeguard if Lionel were to change his mind. Miss Steet was more frightened than herself—she was a very shrinking bulwark. The dinner was dull and the conversation rare; the governess ate three olives and looked at the figures on the spoons. Laura had more than ever her sense of impending calamity; a draught of misfortune seemed to blow through the house; it chilled her feet under her chair. The letter she had in her head went out like a flame in the wind and her only thought now was to telegraph to Selina the first thing in the morning, in quite different words. She scarcely spoke to Miss Steet and there was very little the governess could say to her: she had already related her history so often. After dinner she carried her companion into the drawing-room, by the arm, and they sat down to the piano together. They played duets for an hour, mechanically, violently; Laura had no idea what the music was—she only knew that their playing was execrable. In spite of this—'That's a very nice thing, that last,' she heard a vague voice say, behind her, at the end; and she became aware that her brother-in-law had joined them again.

Miss Steet was pusillanimous—she retreated on the spot, though Lionel had already forgotten that he was angry at the

scandalous way she had carried off the children from the schoolroom. Laura would have gone too if Lionel had not told her that he had something very particular to say to her. That made her want to go more, but she had to listen to him when he expressed the hope that she hadn't taken offence at anything he had said before. He didn't strike her as tipsy now; he had slept it off or got rid of it and she saw no traces of his headache. He was still conspicuously cheerful, as if he had got some good news and were very much encouraged. She knew the news he had got and she might have thought, in view of his manner, that it could not really have seemed to him so bad as he had pretended to think it. It was not the first time however that she had seen him pleased that he had a case against his wife, and she was to learn on this occasion how extreme a satisfaction he could take in his wrongs. She would not sit down again; she only lingered by the fire, pretending to warm her feet, and he walked to and fro in the long room, where the lamp-light to-night was limited, stepping on certain figures of the carpet as if his triumph were alloyed with hesitation.

'I never know how to talk to you—you are so beastly clever,' he said. 'I can't treat you like a little girl in a pinafore—and yet of course you are only a young lady. You're so deuced good—that makes it worse,' he went on, stopping in front of her with his hands in his pockets and the air he himself had of being a good-natured but dissipated boy; with his small stature, his smooth, fat, suffused face, his round, watery, light-coloured eyes and his hair

growing in curious infantile rings. He had lost one of his front teeth and always wore a stiff white scarf, with a pin representing some symbol of the turf or the chase. 'I don't see why *she* couldn't have been a little more like you. If I could have had a shot at you first!'

'I don't care for any compliments at my sister's expense,' Laura said, with some majesty.

'Oh I say, Laura, don't put on so many frills, as Selina says. You know what your sister is as well as I do!' They stood looking at each other a moment and he appeared to see something in her face which led him to add—'You know, at any rate, how little we hit it off.'

'I know you don't love each other—it's too dreadful.'

'Love each other? she hates me as she'd hate a hump on her back. She'd do me any devilish turn she could. There isn't a feeling of loathing that she doesn't have for me! She'd like to stamp on me and hear me crack, like a black beetle, and she never opens her mouth but she insults me.' Lionel Berrington delivered himself of these assertions without violence, without passion or the sting of a new discovery; there was a familiar gaiety in his trivial little tone and he had the air of being so sure of what he said that he did not need to exaggerate in order to prove enough.

'Oh, Lionel!' the girl murmured, turning pale. 'Is that the particular thing you wished to say to me?'

'And you can't say it's my fault—you won't pretend to do that, will you?' he went on. 'Ain't I quiet, ain't I kind, don't I go steady?'

Haven't I given her every blessed thing she has ever asked for?'

'You haven't given her an example!' Laura replied, with spirit. 'You don't care for anything in the wide world but to amuse yourself, from the beginning of the year to the end. No more does she—and perhaps it's even worse in a woman. You are both as selfish as you can live, with nothing in your head or your heart but your vulgar pleasure, incapable of a concession, incapable of a sacrifice!' She at least spoke with passion; something that had been pent up in her soul broke out and it gave her relief, almost a momentary joy.

It made Lionel Berrington stare; he coloured, but after a moment he threw back his head with laughter. 'Don't you call me kind when I stand here and take all that? If I'm so keen for my pleasure what pleasure do *you* give me? Look at the way I take it, Laura. You ought to do me justice. Haven't I sacrificed my home? and what more can a man do?'

'I don't think you care any more for your home than Selina does. And it's so sacred and so beautiful, God forgive you! You are all blind and senseless and heartless and I don't know what poison is in your veins. There is a curse on you and there will be a judgment!' the girl went on, glowing like a young prophetess.

'What do you want me to do? Do you want me to stay at home and read the Bible?' her companion demanded with an effect of profanity, confronted with her deep seriousness.

'It wouldn't do you any harm, once in a while.'

'There will be a judgment on *her*—that's very sure, and I know

where it will be delivered,' said Lionel Berrington, indulging in a visible approach to a wink. 'Have I done the half to her she has done to me? I won't say the half but the hundredth part? Answer me truly, my dear!'

'I don't know what she has done to you,' said Laura, impatiently.

'That's exactly what I want to tell you. But it's difficult. I'll bet you five pounds she's doing it now!'

'You are too unable to make yourself respected,' the girl remarked, not shrinking now from the enjoyment of an advantage—that of feeling herself superior and taking her opportunity.

Her brother-in-law seemed to feel for the moment the prick of this observation. 'What has such a piece of nasty boldness as that to do with respect? She's the first that ever defied me!' exclaimed the young man, whose aspect somehow scarcely confirmed this pretension. 'You know all about her—don't make believe you don't,' he continued in another tone. 'You see everything—you're one of the sharp ones. There's no use beating about the bush, Laura—you've lived in this precious house and you're not so green as that comes to. Besides, you're so good yourself that you needn't give a shriek if one is obliged to say what one means. Why didn't you grow up a little sooner? Then, over there in New York, it would certainly have been you I would have made up to. *You* would have respected me—eh? now don't say you wouldn't.' He rambled on, turning about the room again, partly like a person whose sequences were naturally slow but also a little as if, though

he knew what he had in mind, there were still a scruple attached to it that he was trying to rub off.

'I take it that isn't what I must sit up to listen to, Lionel, is it?' Laura said, wearily.

'Why, you don't want to go to bed at nine o'clock, do you? That's all rot, of course. But I want you to help me.'

'To help you—how?'

'I'll tell you—but you must give me my head. I don't know what I said to you before dinner—I had had too many brandy and sodas. Perhaps I was too free; if I was I beg your pardon. I made the governess bolt—very proper in the superintendent of one's children. Do you suppose they saw anything? I shouldn't care for that. I did take half a dozen or so; I was thirsty and I was awfully gratified.'

'You have little enough to gratify you.'

'Now that's just where you are wrong. I don't know when I've fancied anything so much as what I told you.'

'What you told me?'

'About her being in Paris. I hope she'll stay a month!'

'I don't understand you,' Laura said.

'Are you very sure, Laura? My dear, it suits my book! Now you know yourself he's not the first.'

Laura was silent; his round eyes were fixed on her face and she saw something she had not seen before—a little shining point which on Lionel's part might represent an idea, but which made his expression conscious as well as eager. 'He?' she presently

asked. 'Whom are you speaking of?'

'Why, of Charley Crispin, G—' And Lionel Berrington accompanied this name with a startling imprecation.

'What has he to do—?'

'He has everything to do. Isn't he with her there?'

'How should I know? You said Lady Ringrose.'

'Lady Ringrose is a mere blind—and a devilish poor one at that. I'm sorry to have to say it to you, but he's her lover. I mean Selina's. And he ain't the first.'

There was another short silence while they stood opposed, and then Laura asked—and the question was unexpected—'Why do you call him Charley?'

'Doesn't he call me Lion, like all the rest?' said her brother-in-law, staring.

'You're the most extraordinary people. I suppose you have a certain amount of proof before you say such things to me?'

'Proof, I've oceans of proof! And not only about Crispin, but about Deepmere.'

'And pray who is Deepmere?'

'Did you never hear of Lord Deepmere? He has gone to India. That was before you came. I don't say all this for my pleasure, Laura,' Mr. Berrington added.

'Don't you, indeed?' asked the girl with a singular laugh. 'I thought you were so glad.'

'I'm glad to know it but I'm not glad to tell it. When I say I'm glad to know it I mean I'm glad to be fixed at last. Oh, I've got

the tip! It's all open country now and I know just how to go. I've gone into it most extensively; there's nothing you can't find out to-day—if you go to the right place. I've—I've—' He hesitated a moment, then went on: 'Well, it's no matter what I've done. I know where I am and it's a great comfort. She's up a tree, if ever a woman was. Now we'll see who's a beetle and who's a toad!' Lionel Berrington concluded, gaily, with some incongruity of metaphor.

'It's not true—it's not true—it's not true,' Laura said, slowly.

'That's just what she'll say—though that's not the way she'll say it. Oh, if she could get off by your saying it for her!—for you, my dear, would be believed.'

'Get off—what do you mean?' the girl demanded, with a coldness she failed to feel, for she was tingling all over with shame and rage.

'Why, what do you suppose I'm talking about? I'm going to haul her up and to have it out.'

'You're going to make a scandal?'

'*Make* it? Bless my soul, it isn't me! And I should think it was made enough. I'm going to appeal to the laws of my country—that's what I'm going to do. She pretends I'm stopped, whatever she does. But that's all gammon—I ain't!'

'I understand—but you won't do anything so horrible,' said Laura, very gently.

'Horrible as you please, but less so than going on in this way; I haven't told you the fiftieth part—you will easily understand

that I can't. They are not nice things to say to a girl like you—especially about Deepmere, if you didn't know it. But when they happen you've got to look at them, haven't you? That's the way I look at it.'

'It's not true—it's not true—it's not true,' Laura Wing repeated, in the same way, slowly shaking her head.

'Of course you stand up for your sister—but that's just what I wanted to say to you, that you ought to have some pity for *me* and some sense of justice. Haven't I always been nice to you? Have you ever had so much as a nasty word from me?'

This appeal touched the girl; she had eaten her brother-in-law's bread for months, she had had the use of all the luxuries with which he was surrounded, and to herself personally she had never known him anything but good-natured. She made no direct response however; she only said—'Be quiet, be quiet and leave her to me. I will answer for her.'

'Answer for her—what do you mean?'

'She shall be better—she shall be reasonable—there shall be no more talk of these horrors. Leave her to me—let me go away with her somewhere.'

'Go away with her? I wouldn't let you come within a mile of her, if you were *my* sister!'

'Oh, shame, shame!' cried Laura Wing, turning away from him.

She hurried to the door of the room, but he stopped her before she reached it. He got his back to it, he barred her way and she

had to stand there and hear him. 'I haven't said what I wanted—for I told you that I wanted you to help me. I ain't cruel—I ain't insulting—you can't make out that against me; I'm sure you know in your heart that I've swallowed what would sicken most men. Therefore I will say that you ought to be fair. You're too clever not to be; *you* can't pretend to swallow—' He paused a moment and went on, and she saw it was his idea—an idea very simple and bold. He wanted her to side with him—to watch for him—to help him to get his divorce. He forbore to say that she owed him as much for the hospitality and protection she had in her poverty enjoyed, but she was sure that was in his heart. 'Of course she's your sister, but when one's sister's a perfect bad 'un there's no law to force one to jump into the mud to save her. It *is* mud, my dear, and mud up to your neck. You had much better think of her children—you had much better stop in *my* boat.'

'Do you ask me to help you with evidence against her?' the girl murmured. She had stood there passive, waiting while he talked, covering her face with her hands, which she parted a little, looking at him.

He hesitated a moment. 'I ask you not to deny what you have seen—what you feel to be true.'

'Then of the abominations of which you say you have proof, you haven't proof.'

'Why haven't I proof?'

'If you want *me* to come forward!'

'I shall go into court with a strong case. You may do what you

like. But I give you notice and I expect you not to forget that I have given it. Don't forget—because you'll be asked—that I have told you to-night where she is and with whom she is and what measures I intend to take.'

'Be asked—be asked?' the girl repeated.

'Why, of course you'll be cross-examined.'

'Oh, mother, mother!' cried Laura Wing. Her hands were over her face again and as Lionel Berrington, opening the door, let her pass, she burst into tears. He looked after her, distressed, compunctious, half-ashamed, and he exclaimed to himself—'The bloody brute, the bloody brute!' But the words had reference to his wife.

V

'And are you telling me the perfect truth when you say that Captain Crispin was not there?'

'The perfect truth?' Mrs. Berrington straightened herself to her height, threw back her head and measured her interlocutress up and down; it is to be surmised that this was one of the many ways in which she knew she looked very handsome indeed. Her interlocutress was her sister, and even in a discussion with a person long since initiated she was not incapable of feeling that her beauty was a new advantage. On this occasion she had at first the air of depending upon it mainly to produce an effect upon Laura; then, after an instant's reflection, she determined to arrive at her result in another way. She exchanged her expression of scorn (of resentment at her veracity's being impugned) for a look of gentle amusement; she smiled patiently, as if she remembered that of course Laura couldn't understand of what an impertinence she had been guilty. There was a quickness of perception and lightness of hand which, to her sense, her American sister had never acquired: the girl's earnest, almost barbarous probity blinded her to the importance of certain pleasant little forms. 'My poor child, the things you do say! One doesn't put a question about the perfect truth in a manner that implies that a person is telling a perfect lie. However, as it's only you, I don't mind satisfying your clumsy curiosity. I haven't

the least idea whether Captain Crispin was there or not. I know nothing of his movements and he doesn't keep me informed—why should he, poor man?—of his whereabouts. He was not there for me—isn't that all that need interest you? As far as I was concerned he might have been at the North Pole. I neither saw him nor heard of him. I didn't see the end of his nose!' Selina continued, still with her wiser, tolerant brightness, looking straight into her sister's eyes. Her own were clear and lovely and she was but little less handsome than if she had been proud and freezing. Laura wondered at her more and more; stupefied suspense was now almost the girl's constant state of mind.

Mrs. Berrington had come back from Paris the day before but had not proceeded to Mellows the same night, though there was more than one train she might have taken. Neither had she gone to the house in Grosvenor Place but had spent the night at an hotel. Her husband was absent again; he was supposed to be in Grosvenor Place, so that they had not yet met. Little as she was a woman to admit that she had been in the wrong she was known to have granted later that at this moment she had made a mistake in not going straight to her own house. It had given Lionel a degree of advantage, made it appear perhaps a little that she had a bad conscience and was afraid to face him. But she had had her reasons for putting up at an hotel, and she thought it unnecessary to express them very definitely. She came home by a morning train, the second day, and arrived before luncheon, of which meal she partook in the company of her sister

and in that of Miss Steet and the children, sent for in honour of the occasion. After luncheon she let the governess go but kept Scratch and Parson—kept them on ever so long in the morning-room where she remained; longer than she had ever kept them before. Laura was conscious that she ought to have been pleased at this, but there was a perversity even in Selina's manner of doing right; for she wished immensely now to see her alone—she had something so serious to say to her. Selina hugged her children repeatedly, encouraging their sallies; she laughed extravagantly at the artlessness of their remarks, so that at table Miss Steet was quite abashed by her unusual high spirits. Laura was unable to question her about Captain Crispin and Lady Ringrose while Geordie and Ferdy were there: they would not understand, of course, but names were always reflected in their limpid little minds and they gave forth the image later—often in the most extraordinary connections. It was as if Selina knew what she was waiting for and were determined to make her wait. The girl wished her to go to her room, that she might follow her there. But Selina showed no disposition to retire, and one could never entertain the idea for her, on any occasion, that it would be suitable that she should change her dress. The dress she wore—whatever it was—was too becoming to her, and to the moment, for that. Laura noticed how the very folds of her garment told that she had been to Paris; she had spent only a week there but the mark of her *couturière* was all over her: it was simply to confer with this great artist that, from her own account, she had crossed

the Channel. The signs of the conference were so conspicuous that it was as if she had said, 'Don't you see the proof that it was for nothing but *chiffons*?' She walked up and down the room with Geordie in her arms, in an access of maternal tenderness; he was much too big to nestle gracefully in her bosom, but that only made her seem younger, more flexible, fairer in her tall, strong slimness. Her distinguished figure bent itself hither and thither, but always in perfect freedom, as she romped with her children; and there was another moment, when she came slowly down the room, holding one of them in each hand and singing to them while they looked up at her beauty, charmed and listening and a little surprised at such new ways—a moment when she might have passed for some grave, antique statue of a young matron, or even for a picture of Saint Cecilia. This morning, more than ever, Laura was struck with her air of youth, the inextinguishable freshness that would have made any one exclaim at her being the mother of such bouncing little boys. Laura had always admired her, thought her the prettiest woman in London, the beauty with the finest points; and now these points were so vivid (especially her finished slenderness and the grace, the natural elegance of every turn—the fall of her shoulders had never looked so perfect) that the girl almost detested them: they appeared to her a kind of advertisement of danger and even of shame.

Miss Steet at last came back for the children, and as soon as she had taken them away Selina observed that she would go over to Plash—just as she was: she rang for her hat and jacket and

for the carriage. Laura could see that she would not give her just yet the advantage of a retreat to her room. The hat and jacket were quickly brought, but after they were put on Selina kept her maid in the drawing-room, talking to her a long time, telling her elaborately what she wished done with the things she had brought from Paris. Before the maid departed the carriage was announced, and the servant, leaving the door of the room open, hovered within earshot. Laura then, losing patience, turned out the maid and closed the door; she stood before her sister, who was prepared for her drive. Then she asked her abruptly, fiercely, but colouring with her question, whether Captain Crispin had been in Paris. We have heard Mrs. Berrington's answer, with which her strenuous sister was imperfectly satisfied; a fact the perception of which it doubtless was that led Selina to break out, with a greater show of indignation: 'I never heard of such extraordinary ideas for a girl to have, and such extraordinary things for a girl to talk about! My dear, you have acquired a freedom—you have emancipated yourself from conventionality—and I suppose I must congratulate you.' Laura only stood there, with her eyes fixed, without answering the sally, and Selina went on, with another change of tone: 'And pray if he *was* there, what is there so monstrous? Hasn't it happened that he is in London when I am there? Why is it then so awful that he should be in Paris?'

'Awful, awful, too awful,' murmured Laura, with intense gravity, still looking at her—looking all the more fixedly that she

knew how little Selina liked it.

'My dear, you do indulge in a style of innuendo, for a respectable young woman!' Mrs. Berrington exclaimed, with an angry laugh. 'You have ideas that when I was a girl—' She paused, and her sister saw that she had not the assurance to finish her sentence on that particular note.

'Don't talk about my innuendoes and my ideas—you might remember those in which I have heard you indulge! Ideas? what ideas did I ever have before I came here?' Laura Wing asked, with a trembling voice. 'Don't pretend to be shocked, Selina; that's too cheap a defence. You have said things to me—if you choose to talk of freedom! What is the talk of your house and what does one hear if one lives with you? I don't care what I hear now (it's all odious and there's little choice and my sweet sensibility has gone God knows where!) and I'm very glad if you understand that I don't care what I say. If one talks about your affairs, my dear, one mustn't be too particular!' the girl continued, with a flash of passion.

Mrs. Berrington buried her face in her hands. 'Merciful powers, to be insulted, to be covered with outrage, by one's wretched little sister!' she moaned.

'I think you should be thankful there is one human being—however wretched—who cares enough for you to care about the truth in what concerns you,' Laura said. 'Selina, Selina—are you hideously deceiving us?'

'Us?' Selina repeated, with a singular laugh. 'Whom do you

mean by us?'

Laura Wing hesitated; she had asked herself whether it would be best she should let her sister know the dreadful scene she had had with Lionel; but she had not, in her mind, settled that point. However, it was settled now in an instant. 'I don't mean your friends—those of them that I have seen. I don't think *they* care a straw—I have never seen such people. But last week Lionel spoke to me—he told me he *knew* it, as a certainty.'

'Lionel spoke to you?' said Mrs. Berrington, holding up her head with a stare. 'And what is it that he knows?'

'That Captain Crispin was in Paris and that you were with him. He believes you went there to meet him.'

'He said this to *you*?'

'Yes, and much more—I don't know why I should make a secret of it.'

'The disgusting beast!' Selina exclaimed slowly, solemnly. 'He enjoys the right—the legal right—to pour forth his vileness upon *me*; but when he is so lost to every feeling as to begin to talk to you in such a way—!' And Mrs. Berrington paused, in the extremity of her reprobation.

'Oh, it was not his talk that shocked me—it was his believing it,' the girl replied. 'That, I confess, made an impression on me.'

'Did it indeed? I'm infinitely obliged to you! You are a tender, loving little sister.'

'Yes, I am, if it's tender to have cried about you—all these days—till I'm blind and sick!' Laura replied. 'I hope you are prepared

to meet him. His mind is quite made up to apply for a divorce.'

Laura's voice almost failed her as she said this—it was the first time that in talking with Selina she had uttered that horrible word. She had heard it however, often enough on the lips of others; it had been bandied lightly enough in her presence under those somewhat austere ceilings of Mellows, of which the admired decorations and mouldings, in the taste of the middle of the last century, all in delicate plaster and reminding her of Wedgewood pottery, consisted of slim festoons, urns and trophies and knotted ribbons, so many symbols of domestic affection and irrevocable union. Selina herself had flashed it at her with light superiority, as if it were some precious jewel kept in reserve, which she could convert at any moment into specie, so that it would constitute a happy provision for her future. The idea—associated with her own point of view—was apparently too familiar to Mrs. Berrington to be the cause of her changing colour; it struck her indeed, as presented by Laura, in a ludicrous light, for her pretty eyes expanded a moment and she smiled pityingly. 'Well, you are a poor dear innocent, after all. Lionel would be about as able to divorce me—even if I were the most abandoned of my sex—as he would be to write a leader in the *Times*.'

'I know nothing about that,' said Laura.

'So I perceive—as I also perceive that you must have shut your eyes very tight. Should you like to know a few of the reasons—heaven forbid I should attempt to go over them all; there are

millions!—why his hands are tied?'

'Not in the least.'

'Should you like to know that his own life is too base for words and that his impudence in talking about me would be sickening if it weren't grotesque?' Selina went on, with increasing emotion. 'Should you like me to tell you to what he has stooped—to the very gutter—and the charming history of his relations with—'

'No, I don't want you to tell me anything of the sort,' Laura interrupted. 'Especially as you were just now so pained by the license of my own allusions.'

'You listen to him then—but it suits your purpose not to listen to me!'

'Oh, Selina, Selina!' the girl almost shrieked, turning away.

'Where have your eyes been, or your senses, or your powers of observation? You can be clever enough when it suits you!' Mrs. Berrington continued, throwing off another ripple of derision. 'And now perhaps, as the carriage is waiting, you will let me go about my duties.'

Laura turned again and stopped her, holding her arm as she passed toward the door. 'Will you swear—will you swear by everything that is most sacred?'

'Will I swear what?' And now she thought Selina visibly blanched.

'That you didn't lay eyes on Captain Crispin in Paris.'

Mrs. Berrington hesitated, but only for an instant. 'You are really too odious, but as you are pinching me to death I will swear,

to get away from you. I never laid eyes on him.'

The organs of vision which Mrs. Berrington was ready solemnly to declare that she had not misapplied were, as her sister looked into them, an abyss of indefinite prettiness. The girl had sounded them before without discovering a conscience at the bottom of them, and they had never helped any one to find out anything about their possessor except that she was one of the beauties of London. Even while Selina spoke Laura had a cold, horrible sense of not believing her, and at the same time a desire, colder still, to extract a reiteration of the pledge. Was it the asseveration of her innocence that she wished her to repeat, or only the attestation of her falsity? One way or the other it seemed to her that this would settle something, and she went on inexorably—'By our dear mother's memory—by our poor father's?'

'By my mother's, by my father's,' said Mrs. Berrington, 'and by that of any other member of the family you like!' Laura let her go; she had not been pinching her, as Selina described the pressure, but had clung to her with insistent hands. As she opened the door Selina said, in a changed voice: 'I suppose it's no use to ask you if you care to drive to Plash.'

'No, thank you, I don't care—I shall take a walk.'

'I suppose, from that, that your friend Lady Davenant has gone.'

'No, I think she is still there.'

'That's a bore!' Selina exclaimed, as she went off.

VI

Laura Wing hastened to her room to prepare herself for her walk; but when she reached it she simply fell on her knees, shuddering, beside her bed. She buried her face in the soft counterpane of wadded silk; she remained there a long time, with a kind of aversion to lifting it again to the day. It burned with horror and there was coolness in the smooth glaze of the silk. It seemed to her that she had been concerned in a hideous transaction, and her uppermost feeling was, strangely enough, that she was ashamed—not of her sister but of herself. She did not believe her—that was at the bottom of everything, and she had made her lie, she had brought out her perjury, she had associated it with the sacred images of the dead. She took no walk, she remained in her room, and quite late, towards six o'clock, she heard on the gravel, outside of her windows, the wheels of the carriage bringing back Mrs. Berrington. She had evidently been elsewhere as well as to Plash; no doubt she had been to the vicarage—she was capable even of that. She could pay 'duty-visits,' like that (she called at the vicarage about three times a year), and she could go and be nice to her mother-in-law with her fresh lips still fresher for the lie she had just told. For it was as definite as an aching nerve to Laura that she did not believe her, and if she did not believe her the words she had spoken were a lie. It was the lie, the lie to *her* and which she

had dragged out of her that seemed to the girl the ugliest thing. If she had admitted her folly, if she had explained, attenuated, sophisticated, there would have been a difference in her favour; but now she was bad because she was hard. She had a surface of polished metal. And she could make plans and calculate, she could act and do things for a particular effect. She could go straight to old Mrs. Berrington and to the parson's wife and his many daughters (just as she had kept the children after luncheon, on purpose, so long) because that looked innocent and domestic and denoted a mind without a feather's weight upon it.

A servant came to the young lady's door to tell her that tea was ready; and on her asking who else was below (for she had heard the wheels of a second vehicle just after Selina's return), she learned that Lionel had come back. At this news she requested that some tea should be brought to her room—she determined not to go to dinner. When the dinner-hour came she sent down word that she had a headache, that she was going to bed. She wondered whether Selina would come to her (she could forget disagreeable scenes amazingly); but her fervent hope that she would stay away was gratified. Indeed she would have another call upon her attention if her meeting with her husband was half as much of a concussion as was to have been expected. Laura had found herself listening hard, after knowing that her brother-in-law was in the house: she half expected to hear indications of violence—loud cries or the sound of a scuffle. It was a matter of course to her that some dreadful scene had not been slow

to take place, something that discretion should keep her out of even if she had not been too sick. She did not go to bed—partly because she didn't know what might happen in the house. But she was restless also for herself: things had reached a point when it seemed to her that she must make up her mind. She left her candles unlighted—she sat up till the small hours, in the glow of the fire. What had been settled by her scene with Selina was that worse things were to come (looking into her fire, as the night went on, she had a rare prevision of the catastrophe that hung over the house), and she considered, or tried to consider, what it would be best for her, in anticipation, to do. The first thing was to take flight.

It may be related without delay that Laura Wing did not take flight and that though the circumstance detracts from the interest that should be felt in her character she did not even make up her mind. That was not so easy when action had to ensue. At the same time she had not the excuse of a conviction that by not acting—that is by not withdrawing from her brother-in-law's roof—she should be able to hold Selina up to her duty, to drag her back into the straight path. The hopes connected with that project were now a phase that she had left behind her; she had not to-day an illusion about her sister large enough to cover a sixpence. She had passed through the period of superstition, which had lasted the longest—the time when it seemed to her, as at first, a kind of profanity to doubt of Selina and judge her, the elder sister whose beauty and success she had ever been proud of and who carried

herself, though with the most good-natured fraternisings, as one native to an upper air. She had called herself in moments of early penitence for irrepressible suspicion a little presumptuous prig: so strange did it seem to her at first, the impulse of criticism in regard to her bright protectress. But the revolution was over and she had a desolate, lonely freedom which struck her as not the most cynical thing in the world only because Selina's behaviour was more so. She supposed she should learn, though she was afraid of the knowledge, what had passed between that lady and her husband while her vigil ached itself away. But it appeared to her the next day, to her surprise, that nothing was changed in the situation save that Selina knew at present how much more she was suspected. As this had not a chastening effect upon Mrs. Berrington nothing had been gained by Laura's appeal to her. Whatever Lionel had said to his wife he said nothing to Laura: he left her at perfect liberty to forget the subject he had opened up to her so luminously. This was very characteristic of his good-nature; it had come over him that after all she wouldn't like it, and if the free use of the gray ponies could make up to her for the shock she might order them every day in the week and banish the unpleasant episode from her mind.

Laura ordered the gray ponies very often: she drove herself all over the country. She visited not only the neighbouring but the distant poor, and she never went out without stopping for one of the vicar's fresh daughters. Mellows was now half the time full of visitors and when it was not its master and mistress were

staying with their friends either together or singly. Sometimes (almost always when she was asked) Laura Wing accompanied her sister and on two or three occasions she paid an independent visit. Selina had often told her that she wished her to have her own friends, so that the girl now felt a great desire to show her that she had them. She had arrived at no decision whatever; she had embraced in intention no particular course. She drifted on, shutting her eyes, averting her head and, as it seemed to herself, hardening her heart. This admission will doubtless suggest to the reader that she was a weak, inconsequent, spasmodic young person, with a standard not really, or at any rate not continuously, high; and I have no desire that she shall appear anything but what she was. It must even be related of her that since she could not escape and live in lodgings and paint fans (there were reasons why this combination was impossible) she determined to try and be happy in the given circumstances—to float in shallow, turbid water. She gave up the attempt to understand the cynical *modus vivendi* at which her companions seemed to have arrived; she knew it was not final but it served them sufficiently for the time; and if it served them why should it not serve her, the dependent, impecunious, tolerated little sister, representative of the class whom it behoved above all to mind their own business? The time was coming round when they would all move up to town, and there, in the crowd, with the added movement, the strain would be less and indifference easier.

Whatever Lionel had said to his wife that evening she had

found something to say to him: that Laura could see, though not so much from any change in the simple expression of his little red face and in the vain bustle of his existence as from the grand manner in which Selina now carried herself. She was 'smarter' than ever and her waist was smaller and her back straighter and the fall of her shoulders finer; her long eyes were more oddly charming and the extreme detachment of her elbows from her sides conduced still more to the exhibition of her beautiful arms. So she floated, with a serenity not disturbed by a general tardiness, through the interminable succession of her engagements. Her photographs were not to be purchased in the Burlington Arcade—she had kept out of that; but she looked more than ever as they would have represented her if they had been obtainable there. There were times when Laura thought her brother-in-law's formless desistence too frivolous for nature: it even gave her a sense of deeper dangers. It was as if he had been digging away in the dark and they would all tumble into the hole. It happened to her to ask herself whether the things he had said to her the afternoon he fell upon her in the schoolroom had not all been a clumsy practical joke, a crude desire to scare, that of a schoolboy playing with a sheet in the dark; or else brandy and soda, which came to the same thing. However this might be she was obliged to recognise that the impression of brandy and soda had not again been given her. More striking still however was Selina's capacity to recover from shocks and condone imputations; she kissed again—kissed

Laura—without tears, and proposed problems connected with the rearrangement of trimmings and of the flowers at dinner, as candidly—as earnestly—as if there had never been an intenser question between them. Captain Crispin was not mentioned; much less of course, so far as Laura was concerned, was he seen. But Lady Ringrose appeared; she came down for two days, during an absence of Lionel's. Laura, to her surprise, found her no such Jezebel but a clever little woman with a single eye-glass and short hair who had read Lecky and could give her useful hints about water-colours: a reconciliation that encouraged the girl, for this was the direction in which it now seemed to her best that she herself should grow.

VII

In Grosvenor Place, on Sunday afternoon, during the first weeks of the season, Mrs. Berrington was usually at home: this indeed was the only time when a visitor who had not made an appointment could hope to be admitted to her presence. Very few hours in the twenty-four did she spend in her own house. Gentlemen calling on these occasions rarely found her sister: Mrs. Berrington had the field to herself. It was understood between the pair that Laura should take this time for going to see her old women: it was in that manner that Selina qualified the girl's independent social resources. The old women however were not a dozen in number; they consisted mainly of Lady Davenant and the elder Mrs. Berrington, who had a house in Portman Street. Lady Davenant lived at Queen's Gate and also was usually at home of a Sunday afternoon: her visitors were not all men, like Selina Berrington's, and Laura's maidenly bonnet was not a false note in her drawing-room. Selina liked her sister, naturally enough, to make herself useful, but of late, somehow, they had grown rarer, the occasions that depended in any degree upon her aid, and she had never been much appealed to—though it would have seemed natural she should be—on behalf of the weekly chorus of gentlemen. It came to be recognised on Selina's part that nature had dedicated her more to the relief of old women than to that of young men. Laura had a distinct sense of

interfering with the free interchange of anecdote and pleasantry that went on at her sister's fireside: the anecdotes were mostly such an immense secret that they could not be told fairly if she were there, and she had their privacy on her conscience. There was an exception however; when Selina expected Americans she naturally asked her to stay at home: not apparently so much because their conversation would be good for her as because hers would be good for them.

One Sunday, about the middle of May, Laura Wing prepared herself to go and see Lady Davenant, who had made a long absence from town at Easter but would now have returned. The weather was charming, she had from the first established her right to tread the London streets alone (if she was a poor girl she could have the detachment as well as the helplessness of it) and she promised herself the pleasure of a walk along the park, where the new grass was bright. A moment before she quitted the house her sister sent for her to the drawing-room; the servant gave her a note scrawled in pencil: 'That man from New York is here—Mr. Wendover, who brought me the introduction the other day from the Schoolings. He's rather a dose—you must positively come down and talk to him. Take him out with you if you can.' The description was not alluring, but Selina had never made a request of her to which the girl had not instantly responded: it seemed to her she was there for that. She joined the circle in the drawing-room and found that it consisted of five persons, one of whom was Lady Ringrose. Lady Ringrose was at all times and in

all places a fitful apparition; she had described herself to Laura during her visit at Mellows as 'a bird on the branch.' She had no fixed habit of receiving on Sunday, she was in and out as she liked, and she was one of the few specimens of her sex who, in Grosvenor Place, ever turned up, as she said, on the occasions to which I allude. Of the three gentlemen two were known to Laura; she could have told you at least that the big one with the red hair was in the Guards and the other in the Rifles; the latter looked like a rosy child and as if he ought to be sent up to play with Geordie and Ferdy: his social nickname indeed was the Baby. Selina's admirers were of all ages—they ranged from infants to octogenarians.

She introduced the third gentleman to her sister; a tall, fair, slender young man who suggested that he had made a mistake in the shade of his tight, perpendicular coat, ordering it of too heavenly a blue. This added however to the candour of his appearance, and if he was a dose, as Selina had described him, he could only operate beneficently. There were moments when Laura's heart rather yearned towards her countrymen, and now, though she was preoccupied and a little disappointed at having been detained, she tried to like Mr. Wendover, whom her sister had compared invidiously, as it seemed to her, with her other companions. It struck her that his surface at least was as glossy as theirs. The Baby, whom she remembered to have heard spoken of as a dangerous flirt, was in conversation with Lady Ringrose and the guardsman with Mrs. Berrington; so she did her best to

entertain the American visitor, as to whom any one could easily see (she thought) that he had brought a letter of introduction—he wished so to maintain the credit of those who had given it to him. Laura scarcely knew these people, American friends of her sister who had spent a period of festivity in London and gone back across the sea before her own advent; but Mr. Wendover gave her all possible information about them. He lingered upon them, returned to them, corrected statements he had made at first, discoursed upon them earnestly and exhaustively. He seemed to fear to leave them, lest he should find nothing again so good, and he indulged in a parallel that was almost elaborate between Miss Fanny and Miss Katie. Selina told her sister afterwards that she had overheard him—that he talked of them as if he had been a nursemaid; upon which Laura defended the young man even to extravagance. She reminded her sister that people in London were always saying Lady Mary and Lady Susan: why then shouldn't Americans use the Christian name, with the humbler prefix with which they had to content themselves? There had been a time when Mrs. Berrington had been happy enough to be Miss Lina, even though she was the elder sister; and the girl liked to think there were still old friends—friends of the family, at home, for whom, even should she live to sixty years of spinsterhood, she would never be anything but Miss Laura. This was as good as Donna Anna or Donna Elvira: English people could never call people as other people did, for fear of resembling the servants.

Mr. Wendover was very attentive, as well as communicative; however his letter might be regarded in Grosvenor Place he evidently took it very seriously himself; but his eyes wandered considerably, none the less, to the other side of the room, and Laura felt that though he had often seen persons like her before (not that he betrayed this too crudely) he had never seen any one like Lady Ringrose. His glance rested also on Mrs. Berrington, who, to do her justice, abstained from showing, by the way she returned it, that she wished her sister to get him out of the room. Her smile was particularly pretty on Sunday afternoons and he was welcome to enjoy it as a part of the decoration of the place. Whether or no the young man should prove interesting he was at any rate interested; indeed she afterwards learned that what Selina deprecated in him was the fact that he would eventually display a fatiguing intensity of observation. He would be one of the sort who noticed all kinds of little things—things she never saw or heard of—in the newspapers or in society, and would call upon her (a dreadful prospect) to explain or even to defend them. She had not come there to explain England to the Americans; the more particularly as her life had been a burden to her during the first years of her marriage through her having to explain America to the English. As for defending England to her countrymen she had much rather defend it *from* them: there were too many—too many for those who were already there. This was the class she wished to spare—she didn't care about the English. They could obtain an eye for an eye and a cutlet for a cutlet by going over

there; which she had no desire to do—not for all the cutlets in Christendom!

When Mr. Wendover and Laura had at last cut loose from the Schoolings he let her know confidentially that he had come over really to see London; he had time, that year; he didn't know when he should have it again (if ever, as he said) and he had made up his mind that this was about the best use he could make of four months and a half. He had heard so much of it; it was talked of so much to-day; a man felt as if he ought to know something about it. Laura wished the others could hear this—that England was coming up, was making her way at last to a place among the topics of societies more universal. She thought Mr. Wendover after all remarkably like an Englishman, in spite of his saying that he believed she had resided in London quite a time. He talked a great deal about things being characteristic, and wanted to know, lowering his voice to make the inquiry, whether Lady Ringrose were not particularly so. He had heard of her very often, he said; and he observed that it was very interesting to see her: he could not have used a different tone if he had been speaking of the prime minister or the laureate. Laura was ignorant of what he had heard of Lady Ringrose; she doubted whether it could be the same as what she had heard from her brother-in-law: if this had been the case he never would have mentioned it. She foresaw that his friends in London would have a good deal to do in the way of telling him whether this or that were characteristic or not; he would go about in much the same way that English

travellers did in America, fixing his attention mainly on society (he let Laura know that this was especially what he wished to go into) and neglecting the antiquities and sights, quite as if he failed to believe in their importance. He would ask questions it was impossible to answer; as to whether for instance society were very different in the two countries. If you said yes you gave a wrong impression and if you said no you didn't give a right one: that was the kind of thing that Selina had suffered from. Laura found her new acquaintance, on the present occasion and later, more philosophically analytic of his impressions than those of her countrymen she had hitherto encountered in her new home: the latter, in regard to such impressions, usually exhibited either a profane levity or a tendency to mawkish idealism.

Mrs. Berrington called out at last to Laura that she must not stay if she had prepared herself to go out: whereupon the girl, having nodded and smiled good-bye at the other members of the circle, took a more formal leave of Mr. Wendover—expressed the hope, as an American girl does in such a case, that they should see him again. Selina asked him to come and dine three days later; which was as much as to say that relations might be suspended till then. Mr. Wendover took it so, and having accepted the invitation he departed at the same time as Laura. He passed out of the house with her and in the street she asked him which way he was going. He was too tender, but she liked him; he appeared not to deal in chaff and that was a change that relieved her—she had so often had to pay out that coin when

she felt wretchedly poor. She hoped he would ask her leave to go with her the way she was going—and this not on particular but on general grounds. It would be American, it would remind her of old times; she should like him to be as American as that. There was no reason for her taking so quick an interest in his nature, inasmuch as she had not fallen under his spell; but there were moments when she felt a whimsical desire to be reminded of the way people felt and acted at home. Mr. Wendover did not disappoint her, and the bright chocolate-coloured vista of the Fifth Avenue seemed to surge before her as he said, 'May I have the pleasure of making my direction the same as yours?' and moved round, systematically, to take his place between her and the curbstone. She had never walked much with young men in America (she had been brought up in the new school, the school of attendant maids and the avoidance of certain streets) and she had very often done so in England, in the country; yet, as at the top of Grosvenor Place she crossed over to the park, proposing they should take that way, the breath of her native land was in her nostrils. It was certainly only an American who could have the tension of Mr. Wendover; his solemnity almost made her laugh, just as her eyes grew dull when people 'slanged' each other hilariously in her sister's house; but at the same time he gave her a feeling of high respectability. It would be respectable still if she were to go on with him indefinitely—if she never were to come home at all. He asked her after a while, as they went, whether he had violated the custom of the English in offering her

his company; whether in that country a gentleman might walk with a young lady—the first time he saw her—not because their roads lay together but for the sake of the walk.

'Why should it matter to me whether it is the custom of the English? I am not English,' said Laura Wing. Then her companion explained that he only wanted a general guidance—that with her (she was so kind) he had not the sense of having taken a liberty. The point was simply—and rather comprehensively and strenuously he began to set forth the point. Laura interrupted him; she said she didn't care about it and he almost irritated her by telling her she was kind. She was, but she was not pleased at its being recognised so soon; and he was still too importunate when he asked her whether she continued to go by American usage, didn't find that if one lived there one had to conform in a great many ways to the English. She was weary of the perpetual comparison, for she not only heard it from others—she heard it a great deal from herself. She held that there were certain differences you felt, if you belonged to one or the other nation, and that was the end of it: there was no use trying to express them. Those you *could* express were not real or not important ones and were not worth talking about. Mr. Wendover asked her if she liked English society and if it were superior to American; also if the tone were very high in London. She thought his questions 'academic'—the term she used to see applied in the *Times* to certain speeches in Parliament. Bending his long leanness over her (she had never seen a man whose material

presence was so insubstantial, so unoppressive) and walking almost sidewise, to give her a proper attention, he struck her as innocent, as incapable of guessing that she had had a certain observation of life. They were talking about totally different things: English society, as he asked her judgment upon it and she had happened to see it, was an affair that he didn't suspect. If she were to give him that judgment it would be more than he doubtless bargained for; but she would do it not to make him open his eyes—only to relieve herself. She had thought of that before in regard to two or three persons she had met—of the satisfaction of breaking out with some of her feelings. It would make little difference whether the person understood her or not; the one who should do so best would be far from understanding everything. 'I want to get out of it, please—out of the set I live in, the one I have tumbled into through my sister, the people you saw just now. There are thousands of people in London who are different from that and ever so much nicer; but I don't see them, I don't know how to get at them; and after all, poor dear man, what power have you to help me?' That was in the last analysis the gist of what she had to say.

Mr. Wendover asked her about Selina in the tone of a person who thought Mrs. Berrington a very important phenomenon, and that by itself was irritating to Laura Wing. Important—gracious goodness, no! She might have to live with her, to hold her tongue about her; but at least she was not bound to exaggerate her significance. The young man forbore decorously to make use

of the expression, but she could see that he supposed Selina to be a professional beauty and she guessed that as this product had not yet been domesticated in the western world the desire to behold it, after having read so much about it, had been one of the motives of Mr. Wendover's pilgrimage. Mrs. Schooling, who must have been a goose, had told him that Mrs. Berrington, though transplanted, was the finest flower of a rich, ripe society and as clever and virtuous as she was beautiful. Meanwhile Laura knew what Selina thought of Fanny Schooling and her incurable provinciality. 'Now was that a good example of London talk—what I heard (I only heard a little of it, but the conversation was more general before you came in) in your sister's drawing-room? I don't mean literary, intellectual talk—I suppose there are special places to hear that; I mean—I mean—' Mr. Wendover went on with a deliberation which gave his companion an opportunity to interrupt him. They had arrived at Lady Davenant's door and she cut his meaning short. A fancy had taken her, on the spot, and the fact that it was whimsical seemed only to recommend it.

'If you want to hear London talk there will be some very good going on in here,' she said. 'If you would like to come in with me—?'

'Oh, you are very kind—I should be delighted,' replied Mr. Wendover, endeavouring to emulate her own more rapid processes. They stepped into the porch and the young man, anticipating his companion, lifted the knocker and gave a postman's rap. She laughed at him for this and he looked

bewildered; the idea of taking him in with her had become agreeably exhilarating. Their acquaintance, in that moment, took a long jump. She explained to him who Lady Davenant was and that if he was in search of the characteristic it would be a pity he shouldn't know her; and then she added, before he could put the question:

'And what I am doing is *not* in the least usual. No, it is not the custom for young ladies here to take strange gentlemen off to call on their friends the first time they see them.'

'So that Lady Davenant will think it rather extraordinary?' Mr. Wendover eagerly inquired; not as if that idea frightened him, but so that his observation on this point should also be well founded. He had entered into Laura's proposal with complete serenity.

'Oh, most extraordinary!' said Laura, as they went in. The old lady however concealed such surprise as she may have felt, and greeted Mr. Wendover as if he were any one of fifty familiars. She took him altogether for granted and asked him no questions about his arrival, his departure, his hotel or his business in England. He noticed, as he afterwards confided to Laura, her omission of these forms; but he was not wounded by it—he only made a mark against it as an illustration of the difference between English and American manners: in New York people always asked the arriving stranger the first thing about the steamer and the hotel. Mr. Wendover appeared greatly impressed with Lady Davenant's antiquity, though he confessed to his companion on a subsequent occasion that he thought her a little flippant, a

little frivolous even for her years. 'Oh yes,' said the girl, on that occasion, 'I have no doubt that you considered she talked too much, for one so old. In America old ladies sit silent and listen to the young.' Mr. Wendover stared a little and replied to this that with her—with Laura Wing—it was impossible to tell which side she was on, the American or the English: sometimes she seemed to take one, sometimes the other. At any rate, he added, smiling, with regard to the other great division it was easy to see—she was on the side of the old. 'Of course I am,' she said; 'when one *is* old!' And then he inquired, according to his wont, if she were thought so in England; to which she answered that it was England that had made her so.

Lady Davenant's bright drawing-room was filled with mementoes and especially with a collection of portraits of distinguished people, mainly fine old prints with signatures, an array of precious autographs. 'Oh, it's a cemetery,' she said, when the young man asked her some question about one of the pictures; 'they are my contemporaries, they are all dead and those things are the tombstones, with the inscriptions. I'm the grave-digger, I look after the place and try to keep it a little tidy. I have dug my own little hole,' she went on, to Laura, 'and when you are sent for you must come and put me in.' This evocation of mortality led Mr. Wendover to ask her if she had known Charles Lamb; at which she stared for an instant, replying: 'Dear me, no—one didn't meet him.'

'Oh, I meant to say Lord Byron,' said Mr. Wendover.

'Bless me, yes; I was in love with him. But he didn't notice me, fortunately—we were so many. He was very nice-looking but he was very vulgar.' Lady Davenant talked to Laura as if Mr. Wendover had not been there; or rather as if his interests and knowledge were identical with hers. Before they went away the young man asked her if she had known Garrick and she replied: 'Oh, dear, no, we didn't have them in our houses, in those days.'

'He must have been dead long before you were born!' Laura exclaimed.

'I daresay; but one used to hear of him.'

'I think I meant Edmund Kean,' said Mr. Wendover.

'You make little mistakes of a century or two,' Laura Wing remarked, laughing. She felt now as if she had known Mr. Wendover a long time.

'Oh, he was very clever,' said Lady Davenant.

'Very magnetic, I suppose,' Mr. Wendover went on.

'What's that? I believe he used to get tipsy.'

'Perhaps you don't use that expression in England?' Laura's companion inquired.

'Oh, I daresay we do, if it's American; we talk American now. You seem very good-natured people, but such a jargon as you *do* speak!'

'I like *your* way, Lady Davenant,' said Mr. Wendover, benevolently, smiling.

'You might do worse,' cried the old woman; and then she added: 'Please go out!' They were taking leave of her but she

kept Laura's hand and, for the young man, nodded with decision at the open door. 'Now, wouldn't *he* do?' she asked, after Mr. Wendover had passed into the hall.

'Do for what?'

'For a husband, of course.'

'For a husband—for whom?'

'Why—for me,' said Lady Davenant.

'I don't know—I think he might tire you.'

'Oh—if he's tiresome!' the old lady continued, smiling at the girl.

'I think he is very good,' said Laura.

'Well then, he'll do.'

'Ah, perhaps *you* won't!' Laura exclaimed, smiling back at her and turning away.

VIII

She was of a serious turn by nature and unlike many serious people she made no particular study of the art of being gay. Had her circumstances been different she might have done so, but she lived in a merry house (heaven save the mark! as she used to say) and therefore was not driven to amuse herself for conscience sake. The diversions she sought were of a serious cast and she liked those best which showed most the note of difference from Selina's interests and Lionel's. She felt that she was most divergent when she attempted to cultivate her mind, and it was a branch of such cultivation to visit the curiosities, the antiquities, the monuments of London. She was fond of the Abbey and the British Museum—she had extended her researches as far as the Tower. She read the works of Mr. John Timbs and made notes of the old corners of history that had not yet been abolished—the houses in which great men had lived and died. She planned a general tour of inspection of the ancient churches of the City and a pilgrimage to the queer places commemorated by Dickens. It must be added that though her intentions were great her adventures had as yet been small. She had wanted for opportunity and independence; people had other things to do than to go with her, so that it was not till she had been some time in the country and till a good while after she had begun to go out alone that she entered upon the privilege of visiting public institutions by

herself. There were some aspects of London that frightened her, but there were certain spots, such as the Poets' Corner in the Abbey or the room of the Elgin marbles, where she liked better to be alone than not to have the right companion. At the time Mr. Wendover presented himself in Grosvenor Place she had begun to put in, as they said, a museum or something of that sort whenever she had a chance. Besides her idea that such places were sources of knowledge (it is to be feared that the poor girl's notions of knowledge were at once conventional and crude) they were also occasions for detachment, an escape from worrying thoughts. She forgot Selina and she 'qualified' herself a little—though for what she hardly knew.

The day Mr. Wendover dined in Grosvenor Place they talked about St. Paul's, which he expressed a desire to see, wishing to get some idea of the great past, as he said, in England as well as of the present. Laura mentioned that she had spent half an hour the summer before in the big black temple on Ludgate Hill; whereupon he asked her if he might entertain the hope that—if it were not disagreeable to her to go again—she would serve as his guide there. She had taken him to see Lady Davenant, who was so remarkable and worth a long journey, and now he should like to pay her back—to show *her* something. The difficulty would be that there was probably nothing she had not seen; but if she could think of anything he was completely at her service. They sat together at dinner and she told him she would think of something before the repast was over. A little while later she let

him know that a charming place had occurred to her—a place to which she was afraid to go alone and where she should be grateful for a protector: she would tell him more about it afterwards. It was then settled between them that on a certain afternoon of the same week they would go to St. Paul's together, extending their ramble as much further as they had time. Laura lowered her voice for this discussion, as if the range of allusion had had a kind of impropriety. She was now still more of the mind that Mr. Wendover was a good young man—he had such worthy eyes. His principal defect was that he treated all subjects as if they were equally important; but that was perhaps better than treating them with equal levity. If one took an interest in him one might not despair of teaching him to discriminate.

Laura said nothing at first to her sister about her appointment with him: the feelings with which she regarded Selina were not such as to make it easy for her to talk over matters of conduct, as it were, with this votary of pleasure at any price, or at any rate to report her arrangements to her as one would do to a person of fine judgment. All the same, as she had a horror of positively hiding anything (Selina herself did that enough for two) it was her purpose to mention at luncheon on the day of the event that she had agreed to accompany Mr. Wendover to St. Paul's. It so happened however that Mrs. Berrington was not at home at this repast; Laura partook of it in the company of Miss Steet and her young charges. It very often happened now that the sisters failed to meet in the morning, for Selina remained very late in

her room and there had been a considerable intermission of the girl's earlier custom of visiting her there. It was Selina's habit to send forth from this fragrant sanctuary little hieroglyphic notes in which she expressed her wishes or gave her directions for the day. On the morning I speak of her maid put into Laura's hand one of these communications, which contained the words: 'Please be sure and replace me with the children at lunch—I meant to give them that hour to-day. But I have a frantic appeal from Lady Watermouth; she is worse and beseeches me to come to her, so I rush for the 12.30 train.' These lines required no answer and Laura had no questions to ask about Lady Watermouth. She knew she was tiresomely ill, in exile, condemned to forego the diversions of the season and calling out to her friends, in a house she had taken for three months at Weybridge (for a certain particular air) where Selina had already been to see her. Selina's devotion to her appeared commendable—she had her so much on her mind. Laura had observed in her sister in relation to other persons and objects these sudden intensities of charity, and she had said to herself, watching them—'Is it because she is bad?—does she want to make up for it somehow and to buy herself off from the penalties?'

Mr. Wendover called for his *cicerone* and they agreed to go in a romantic, Bohemian manner (the young man was very docile and appreciative about this), walking the short distance to the Victoria station and taking the mysterious underground railway. In the carriage she anticipated the inquiry that she figured to

herself he presently would make and said, laughing: 'No, no, this is very exceptional; if we were both English—and both what we are, otherwise—we wouldn't do this.'

'And if only one of us were English?'

'It would depend upon which one.'

'Well, say me.'

'Oh, in that case I certainly—on so short an acquaintance—would not go sight-seeing with you.'

'Well, I am glad I'm American,' said Mr. Wendover, sitting opposite to her.

'Yes, you may thank your fate. It's much simpler,' Laura added.

'Oh, you spoil it!' the young man exclaimed—a speech of which she took no notice but which made her think him brighter, as they used to say at home. He was brighter still after they had descended from the train at the Temple station (they had meant to go on to Blackfriars, but they jumped out on seeing the sign of the Temple, fired with the thought of visiting that institution too) and got admission to the old garden of the Benchers, which lies beside the foggy, crowded river, and looked at the tombs of the crusaders in the low Romanesque church, with the cross-legged figures sleeping so close to the eternal uproar, and lingered in the flagged, homely courts of brick, with their much-lettered door-posts, their dull old windows and atmosphere of consultation—lingered to talk of Johnson and Goldsmith and to remark how London opened one's eyes to Dickens; and he was brightest of

all when they stood in the high, bare cathedral, which suggested a dirty whiteness, saying it was fine but wondering why it was not finer and letting a glance as cold as the dusty, colourless glass fall upon epitaphs that seemed to make most of the defunct bores even in death. Mr. Wendover was decorous but he was increasingly gay, and these qualities appeared in him in spite of the fact that St. Paul's was rather a disappointment. Then they felt the advantage of having the other place—the one Laura had had in mind at dinner—to fall back upon: that perhaps would prove a compensation. They entered a hansom now (they had to come to that, though they had walked also from the Temple to St. Paul's) and drove to Lincoln's Inn Fields, Laura making the reflection as they went that it was really a charm to roam about London under valid protection—such a mixture of freedom and safety—and that perhaps she had been unjust, ungenerous to her sister. A good-natured, positively charitable doubt came into her mind—a doubt that Selina might have the benefit of. What she liked in her present undertaking was the element of the *imprévu* that it contained, and perhaps it was simply the same happy sense of getting the laws of London—once in a way—off her back that had led Selina to go over to Paris to ramble about with Captain Crispin. Possibly they had done nothing worse than go together to the Invalides and Notre Dame; and if any one were to meet *her* driving that way, so far from home, with Mr. Wendover—Laura, mentally, did not finish her sentence, overtaken as she was by the reflection that she had fallen again

into her old assumption (she had been in and out of it a hundred times), that Mrs. Berrington *had* met Captain Crispin—the idea she so passionately repudiated. She at least would never deny that she had spent the afternoon with Mr. Wendover: she would simply say that he was an American and had brought a letter of introduction.

The cab stopped at the Soane Museum, which Laura Wing had always wanted to see, a compatriot having once told her that it was one of the most curious things in London and one of the least known. While Mr. Wendover was discharging the vehicle she looked over the important old-fashioned square (which led her to say to herself that London was endlessly big and one would never know all the places that made it up) and saw a great bank of cloud hanging above it—a definite portent of a summer storm. 'We are going to have thunder; you had better keep the cab,' she said; upon which her companion told the man to wait, so that they should not afterwards, in the wet, have to walk for another conveyance. The heterogeneous objects collected by the late Sir John Soane are arranged in a fine old dwelling-house, and the place gives one the impression of a sort of Saturday afternoon of one's youth—a long, rummaging visit, under indulgent care, to some eccentric and rather alarming old travelled person. Our young friends wandered from room to room and thought everything queer and some few objects interesting; Mr. Wendover said it would be a very good place to find a thing you couldn't find anywhere else—it illustrated

the prudent virtue of keeping. They took note of the sarcophagi and pagodas, the artless old maps and medals. They admired the fine Hogarths; there were uncanny, unexpected objects that Laura edged away from, that she would have preferred not to be in the room with. They had been there half an hour—it had grown much darker—when they heard a tremendous peal of thunder and became aware that the storm had broken. They watched it a while from the upper windows—a violent June shower, with quick sheets of lightning and a rainfall that danced on the pavements. They took it sociably, they lingered at the window, inhaling the odour of the fresh wet that splashed over the sultry town. They would have to wait till it had passed, and they resigned themselves serenely to this idea, repeating very often that it would pass very soon. One of the keepers told them that there were other rooms to see—that there were very interesting things in the basement. They made their way down—it grew much darker and they heard a great deal of thunder—and entered a part of the house which presented itself to Laura as a series of dim, irregular vaults—passages and little narrow avenues—encumbered with strange vague things, obscured for the time but some of which had a wicked, startling look, so that she wondered how the keepers could stay there. 'It's very fearful—it looks like a cave of idols!' she said to her companion; and then she added—'Just look there—is that a person or a thing?' As she spoke they drew nearer to the object of her reference—a figure in the middle of a small vista of curiosities, a figure which answered

her question by uttering a short shriek as they approached. The immediate cause of this cry was apparently a vivid flash of lightning, which penetrated into the room and illuminated both Laura's face and that of the mysterious person. Our young lady recognised her sister, as Mrs. Berrington had evidently recognised her. 'Why, Selina!' broke from her lips before she had time to check the words. At the same moment the figure turned quickly away, and then Laura saw that it was accompanied by another, that of a tall gentleman with a light beard which shone in the dusk. The two persons retreated together—dodged out of sight, as it were, disappearing in the gloom or in the labyrinth of the objects exhibited. The whole encounter was but the business of an instant.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.