

**ГЕНРИ
ДЖЕЙМС**

THE

AWKWARD

AGE

Генри Джеймс
The Awkward Age

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Henry James

The Awkward Age

PREFACE

I recall with perfect ease the idea in which “The Awkward Age” had its origin, but re-perusal gives me pause in respect to naming it. This composition, as it stands, makes, to my vision—and will have made perhaps still more to that of its readers—so considerable a mass beside the germ sunk in it and still possibly distinguishable, that I am half-moved to leave my small secret undivulged. I shall encounter, I think, in the course of this copious commentary, no better example, and none on behalf of which I shall venture to invite more interest, of the quite incalculable tendency of a mere grain of subject-matter to expand and develop and cover the ground when conditions happen to favour it. I say all, surely, when I speak of the thing as planned, in perfect good faith, for brevity, for levity, for simplicity, for jocosity, in fine, and for an accommodating irony. I invoked, for my protection, the spirit of the lightest comedy, but “The Awkward Age” was to belong, in the event, to a group of productions, here re-introduced, which have in common, to their author’s eyes, the endearing sign that they asserted in each case an unforeseen principle of growth. They were projected as small things, yet had finally to be provided for as comparative monsters. That is my own title for them, though I should perhaps resent it if applied by another critic—above all in the case of the piece before us, the careful measure of which I have just freshly taken. The result of this consideration has been in the first place to render sharp for me again the interest of the whole process thus illustrated, and in the second quite to place me on unexpectedly good terms with the work itself. As I scan my list I encounter none the “history” of which embodies a greater number of curious truths—or of truths at least by which I find contemplation more enlivened. The thing done and dismissed has ever, at the best, for the ambitious workman, a trick of looking dead, if not buried, so that he almost throbs with ecstasy when, on an anxious review, the flush of life reappears. It is verily on recognising that flush on a whole side of “The Awkward Age” that I brand it all, but ever so tenderly, as monstrous—which is but my way of noting the QUANTITY of finish it stows away. Since I speak so undauntedly, when need is, of the value of composition, I shall not beat about the bush to claim for these pages the maximum of that advantage. If such a feat be possible in this field as really taking a lesson from one’s own adventure I feel I have now not failed of it—to so much more demonstration of my profit than I can hope to carry through do I find myself urged. Thus it is that, still with a remnant of self-respect, or at least of sanity, one may turn to complacency, one may linger with pride. Let my pride provoke a frown till I justify it; which—though with more matters to be noted here than I have room for I shall accordingly proceed to do.

Yet I must first make a brave face, no doubt, and present in its native humility my scant but quite ponderable germ. The seed sprouted in that vast nursery of sharp appeals and concrete images which calls itself, for blest convenience, London; it fell even into the order of the minor “social phenomena” with which, as fruit for the observer, that mightiest of the trees of suggestion bristles. It was not, no doubt, a fine purple peach, but it might pass for a round ripe plum, the note one had inevitably had to take of the difference made in certain friendly houses and for certain flourishing mothers by the sometimes dreaded, often delayed, but never fully arrested coming to the forefront of some vague slip of a daughter. For such mild revolutions as these not, to one’s imagination, to remain mild one had had, I dare say, to be infinitely addicted to “noticing”; under the rule of that secret vice or that unfair advantage, at any rate, the “sitting downstairs,” from a given date, of the merciless maiden previously perched aloft could easily be felt as a crisis. This crisis, and the sense for it in those whom it most concerns, has to confess itself courageously the prime propulsive force of

“The Awkward Age.” Such a matter might well make a scant show for a “thick book,” and no thick book, but just a quite charmingly thin one, was in fact originally dreamt of. For its proposed scale the little idea seemed happy—happy, that is, above all in having come very straight; but its proposed scale was the limit of a small square canvas. One had been present again and again at the exhibition I refer to—which is what I mean by the “coming straight” of this particular London impression; yet one was (and through fallibilities that after all had their sweetness, so that one would on the whole rather have kept them than parted with them) still capable of so false a measurement. When I think indeed of those of my many false measurements that have resulted, after much anguish, in decent symmetries, I find the whole case, I profess, a theme for the philosopher. The little ideas one wouldn’t have treated save for the design of keeping them small, the developed situations that one would never with malice prepense have undertaken, the long stories that had thoroughly meant to be short, the short subjects that had underhandedly plotted to be long, the hypocrisy of modest beginnings, the audacity of misplaced middles, the triumph of intentions never entertained—with these patches, as I look about, I see my experience paved: an experience to which nothing is wanting save, I confess, some grasp of its final lesson.

This lesson would, if operative, surely provide some law for the recognition, the determination in advance, of the just limits and the just extent of the situation, ANY situation, that appeals, and that yet, by the presumable, the helpful law of situations, must have its reserves as well as its promises. The storyteller considers it because it promises, and undertakes it, often, just because also making out, as he believes, where the promise conveniently drops. The promise, for instance, of the case I have just named, the case of the account to be taken, in a circle of free talk, of a new and innocent, a wholly unacclimatised presence, as to which such accommodations have never had to come up, might well have appeared as limited as it was lively; and if these pages were not before us to register my illusion I should never have made a braver claim for it. They themselves admonish me, however, in fifty interesting ways, and they especially emphasise that truth of the vanity of the a priori test of what an idee-mere may have to give. The truth is that what a happy thought has to give depends immensely on the general turn of the mind capable of it, and on the fact that its loyal entertainer, cultivating fondly its possible relations and extensions, the bright efflorescence latent in it, but having to take other things in their order too, is terribly at the mercy of his mind. That organ has only to exhale, in its degree, a fostering tropic air in order to produce complications almost beyond reckoning. The trap laid for his superficial convenience resides in the fact that, though the relations of a human figure or a social occurrence are what make such objects interesting, they also make them, to the same tune, difficult to isolate, to surround with the sharp black line, to frame in the square, the circle, the charming oval, that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture. The storyteller has but to have been condemned by nature to a liberally amused and beguiled, a richly sophisticated, view of relations and a fine inquisitive speculative sense for them, to find himself at moments flounder in a deep warm jungle. These are the moments at which he recalls ruefully that the great merit of such and such a small case, the merit for his particular advised use, had been precisely in the smallness.

I may say at once that this had seemed to me, under the first flush of recognition, the good mark for the pretty notion of the “free circle” put about by having, of a sudden, an ingenuous mind and a pair of limpid searching eyes to count with. Half the attraction was in the current actuality of the thing: repeatedly, right and left, as I have said, one had seen such a drama constituted, and always to the effect of proposing to the interested view one of those questions that are of the essence of drama: what will happen, who suffer, who not suffer, what turn be determined, what crisis created, what issue found? There had of course to be, as a basis, the free circle, but this was material of that admirable order with which the good London never leaves its true lover and believer long unprovided. One could count them on one’s fingers (an abundant allowance), the liberal firesides beyond the wide glow of which, in a comparative dimness, female adolescence hovered and waited. The wide glow was bright, was favourable to “real” talk, to play of mind, to an explicit interest in life, a due demonstration of

the interest by persons I qualified to feel it: all of which meant frankness and ease, the perfection, almost, as it were, of intercourse, and a tone as far as possible removed from that of the nursery and the schoolroom—as far as possible removed even, no doubt, in its appealing “modernity,” from that of supposedly privileged scenes of conversation twenty years ago. The charm was, with a hundred other things, in the freedom—the freedom menaced by the inevitable irruption of the ingenuous mind; whereby, if the freedom should be sacrificed, what would truly BECOME of the charm? The charm might be figured as dear to members of the circle consciously contributing to it, but it was none the less true that some sacrifice in some quarter would have to be made, and what mediator worth his salt could fail to hold his breath while waiting on the event? The ingenuous mind might, it was true, be suppressed altogether, the general disconcertment averted either by some master-stroke of diplomacy or some rude simplification; yet these were ugly matters, and in the examples before one’s eyes nothing ugly, nothing harsh or crude, had flourished. A girl might be married off the day after her irruption, or better still the day before it, to remove her from the sphere of the play of mind; but these were exactly not crudities, and even then, at the worst, an interval had to be bridged. “The Awkward Age” is precisely a study of one of these curtailed or extended periods of tension and apprehension, an account of the manner in which the resented interference with ancient liberties came to be in a particular instance dealt with.

I note once again that I had not escaped seeing it actually and traceably dealt with—(I admit) a good deal of friendly suspense; also with the nature and degree of the “sacrifice” left very much to one’s appreciation. In circles highly civilised the great things, the real things, the hard, the cruel and even the tender things, the true elements of any tension and true facts of any crisis, have ever, for the outsider’s, for the critic’s use, to be translated into terms—terms in the distinguished name of which, terms for the right employment of which, more than one situation of the type I glance at had struck me as all irresistibly appealing. There appeared in fact at moments no end to the things they said, the suggestions into which they flowered; one of these latter in especial arriving at the highest intensity. Putting vividly before one the perfect system on which the awkward age is handled in most other European societies, it threw again into relief the inveterate English trick of the so morally well-meant and so intellectually helpless compromise. We live notoriously, as I suppose every age lives, in an “epoch of transition”; but it may still be said of the French for instance, I assume, that their social scheme absolutely provides against awkwardness. That is it would be, by this scheme, so infinitely awkward, so awkward beyond any patching-up, for the hovering female young to be conceived as present at “good” talk, that their presence is, theoretically at least, not permitted till their youth has been promptly corrected by marriage—in which case they have ceased to be merely young. The better the talk prevailing in any circle, accordingly, the more organised, the more complete, the element of precaution and exclusion. Talk—giving the term a wide application—is one thing, and a proper inexperience another; and it has never occurred to a logical people that the interest of the greater, the general, need be sacrificed to that of the less, the particular. Such sacrifices strike them as gratuitous and barbarous, as cruel above all to the social intelligence; also as perfectly preventable by wise arrangement. Nothing comes home more, on the other hand, to the observer of English manners than the very moderate degree in which wise arrangement, in the French sense of a scientific economy, has ever been invoked; a fact indeed largely explaining the great interest of their incoherence, their heterogeneity, their wild abundance. The French, all analytically, have conceived of fifty different proprieties, meeting fifty different cases, whereas the English mind, less intensely at work, has never conceived but of one—the grand propriety, for every case, it should in fairness be said, of just being English. As practice, however, has always to be a looser thing than theory, so no application of that rigour has been possible in the London world without a thousand departures from the grim ideal.

The American theory, if I may “drag it in,” would be, I think, that talk should never become “better” than the female young, either actually or constructively present, are minded to allow it. THAT system involves as little compromise as the French; it has been absolutely simple, and the beauty of

its success shines out in every record of our conditions of intercourse—premiering always our “basic” assumption that the female young read the newspapers. The English theory may be in itself almost as simple, but different and much more complex forces have ruled the application of it; so much does the goodness of talk depend on what there may be to talk about. There are more things in London, I think, than anywhere in the world; hence the charm of the dramatic struggle reflected in my book, the struggle somehow to fit propriety into a smooth general case which is really all the while bristling and crumbling into fierce particular ones. The circle surrounding Mrs. Brookenham, in my pages, is of course nothing if not a particular, even a “peculiar” one—and its rather vain effort (the vanity, the real inexpertness, being precisely part of my tale) is toward the courage of that condition. It has cropped up in a social order where individual appreciations of propriety have not been formally allowed for, in spite of their having very often quite rudely and violently and insolently, rather of course than insidiously, flourished; so that as the matter stands, rightly or wrongly, Nanda’s retarded, but eventually none the less real, incorporation means virtually Nanda’s exposure. It means this, that is, and many things beside—means them for Nanda herself and, with a various intensity, for the other participants in the action; but what it particularly means, surely, is the failure of successful arrangement and the very moral, sharply pointed, of the fruits of compromise. It is compromise that has suffered her to be in question at all, and that has condemned the freedom of the circle to be self-conscious, compunctious, on the whole much more timid than brave—the consequent muddle, if the term be not too gross, representing meanwhile a great inconvenience for life, but, as I found myself feeling, an immense promise, a much greater one than on the “foreign” showing, for the painted picture of life. Beyond which let me add that here immediately is a prime specimen of the way in which the obscurer, the lurking relations of a motive apparently simple, always in wait for their spring, may by seizing their chance for it send simplicity flying. Poor Nanda’s little case, and her mother’s, and Mr. Longdon’s and Vanderbank’s and Mitchy’s, to say nothing of that of the others, has only to catch a reflected light from over the Channel in order to double at once its appeal to the imagination. (I am considering all these matters, I need scarce say, only as they are concerned with that faculty. With a relation NOT imaginative to his material the storyteller has nothing whatever to do.)

It exactly happened moreover that my own material here was to profit in a particular way by that extension of view. My idea was to be treated with light irony—it would be light and ironical or it would be nothing; so that I asked myself, naturally, what might be the least solemn form to give it, among recognised and familiar forms. The question thus at once arose: What form so familiar, so recognised among alert readers, as that in which the ingenious and inexhaustible, the charming philosophic “Gyp” casts most of her social studies? Gyp had long struck me as mistress, in her levity, of one of the happiest of forms—the only objection to my use of which was a certain extraordinary benightedness on the part of the Anglo-Saxon reader. One had noted this reader as perverse and inconsequent in respect to the absorption of “dialogue”—observed the “public for fiction” consume it, in certain connexions, on the scale and with the smack of lips that mark the consumption of bread-and-jam by a children’s school-feast, consume it even at the theatre, so far as our theatre ever vouchsafes it, and yet as flagrantly reject it when served, so to speak, *au naturel*. One had seen good solid slices of fiction, well endued, one might surely have thought, with this easiest of lubrications, deplored by editor and publisher as positively not, for the general gullet as known to THEM, made adequately “slick.” “‘Dialogue,’ always ‘dialogue!’” I had seemed from far back to hear them mostly cry: “We can’t have too much of it, we can’t have enough of it, and no excess of it, in the form of no matter what savourless dilution, or what boneless dispersion, ever began to injure a book so much as even the very scantest claim put in for form and substance.” This wisdom had always been in one’s ears; but it had at the same time been equally in one’s eyes that really constructive dialogue, dialogue organic and dramatic, speaking for itself, representing and embodying substance and form, is among us an uncanny and abhorrent thing, not to be dealt with on any terms. A comedy or a tragedy may run for a thousand nights without prompting twenty persons in London or in New York

to desire that view of its text which is so desired in Paris, as soon as a play begins to loom at all large, that the number of copies of the printed piece in circulation far exceeds at last the number of performances. But as with the printed piece our own public, infatuated as it may be with the theatre, refuses all commerce—though indeed this can't but be, without cynicism, very much through the infirmity the piece, IF printed, would reveal—so the same horror seems to attach to any typographic hint of the proscribed playbook or any insidious plea for it. The immense oddity resides in the almost exclusively typographic order of the offence. An English, an American Gyp would typographically offend, and that would be the end of her. THERE gloomed at me my warning, as well as shone at me my provocation, in respect to the example of this delightful writer. I might emulate her, since I presumptuously would, but dishonour would await me if, proposing to treat the different faces of my subject in the most completely instituted colloquial form, I should evoke the figure and affirm the presence of participants by the repeated and prefixed name rather than by the recurrent and affixed “said he” and “said she.” All I have space to go into here—much as the funny fact I refer to might seem to invite us to dance hand in hand round it—is that I was at any rate duly admonished, that I took my measures accordingly, and that the manner in which I took them has lived again for me ever so arrestingly, so amusingly, on re-examination of the book.

But that I did, positively and seriously—ah so seriously!—emulate the levity of Gyp and, by the same token, of that hardiest of flowers fostered in her school, M. Henri Lavedan, is a contribution to the history of “The Awkward Age” that I shall obviously have had to brace myself in order to make. Vivid enough to me the expression of face of any kindest of critics, even, moved to declare that he would never in the least have suspected it. Let me say at once, in extenuation of the too respectful distance at which I may thus have appeared to follow my model, that my first care HAD to be the covering of my tracks—lest I truly should be caught in the act of arranging, of organising dialogue to “speak for itself.” What I now see to have happened is that I organised and arranged but too well—too well, I mean, for any betrayal of the Gyp taint, however faded and feeble. The trouble appears to have been that while I on the one hand exorcised the baleful association, I succeeded in rousing on nobody's part a sense of any other association whatever, or of my having cast myself into any conceivable or calculable form. My private inspiration had been in the Gyp plan (artfully dissimulated, for dear life, and applied with the very subtlest consistency, but none the less kept in secret view); yet I was to fail to make out in the event that the book succeeded in producing the impression of ANY plan on any person. No hint of that sort of success, or of any critical perception at all in relation to the business, has ever come my way; in spite of which when I speak, as just above, of what was to “happen” under the law of my ingenious labour, I fairly lose myself in the vision of a hundred bright phenomena. Some of these incidents I must treat myself to naming, for they are among the best I shall have on any occasion to retail. But I must first give the measure of the degree in which they were mere matters of the study. This composition had originally appeared in “Harper's Weekly” during the autumn of 1898 and the first weeks of the winter, and the volume containing it was published that spring. I had meanwhile been absent from England, and it was not till my return, some time later, that I had from my publisher any news of our venture. But the news then met at a stroke all my curiosity: “I'm sorry to say the book has done nothing to speak of; I've never in all my experience seen one treated with more general and complete disrespect.” There was thus to be nothing left me for fond subsequent reference—of which I doubtless give even now so adequate an illustration—save the rich reward of the singular interest attaching to the very intimacies of the effort.

It comes back to me, the whole “job,” as wonderfully amusing and delightfully difficult from the first; since amusement deeply abides, I think, in any artistic attempt the basis and groundwork of which are conscious of a particular firmness. On that hard fine floor the element of execution feels it may more or less confidently DANCE; in which case puzzling questions, sharp obstacles, dangers of detail, may come up for it by the dozen without breaking its heart or shaking its nerve. It is the difficulty produced by the loose foundation or the vague scheme that breaks the heart—when

a luckless fatuity has over-persuaded an author of the “saving” virtue of treatment. Being “treated” is never, in a workable idea, a mere passive condition, and I hold no subject ever susceptible of help that isn’t, like the embarrassed man of our proverbial wisdom, first of all able to help itself. I was thus to have here an envious glimpse, in carrying my design through, of that artistic rage and that artistic felicity which I have ever supposed to be intensest and highest, the confidence of the dramatist strong in the sense of his postulate. The dramatist has verily to BUILD, is committed to architecture, to construction at any cost; to driving in deep his vertical supports and laying across and firmly fixing his horizontal, his resting pieces—at the risk of no matter what vibration from the tap of his master-hammer. This makes the active value of his basis immense, enabling him, with his flanks protected, to advance undistractedly, even if not at all carelessly, into the comparative fairy-land of the mere minor anxiety. In other words his scheme HOLDS, and as he feels this in spite of noted strains and under repeated tests, so he keeps his face to the day. I rejoiced, by that same token, to feel MY scheme hold, and even a little ruefully watched it give me much more than I had ventured to hope. For I promptly found my conceived arrangement of my material open the door wide to ingenuity. I remember that in sketching my project for the conductors of the periodical I have named I drew on a sheet of paper—and possibly with an effect of the cabalistic, it now comes over me, that even anxious amplification may have but vainly attenuated—the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distance about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects. I had divided it, didn’t they see? into aspects—uncanny as the little term might sound (though not for a moment did I suggest we should use it for the public), and by that sign we would conquer.

They “saw,” all genially and generously—for I must add that I had made, to the best of my recollection, no morbid scruple of not blabbing about Gyp and her strange incitement. I the more boldly held my tongue over this that the more I, by my intelligence, lived in my arrangement and moved about in it, the more I sank into satisfaction. It was clearly to work to a charm and, during this process—by calling at every step for an exquisite management—“to haunt, to startle and waylay.” Each of my “lamps” would be the light of a single “social occasion” in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned, and would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme. I revelled in this notion of the Occasion as a thing by itself, really and completely a scenic thing, and could scarce name it, while crouching amid the thick arcana of my plan, with a large enough O. The beauty of the conception was in this approximation of the respective divisions of my form to the successive Acts of a Play—as to which it was more than ever a case for charmed capitals. The divine distinction of the act of a play—and a greater than any other it easily succeeds in arriving at—was, I reasoned, in its special, its guarded objectivity. This objectivity, in turn, when achieving its ideal, came from the imposed absence of that “going behind,” to compass explanations and amplifications, to drag out odds and ends from the “mere” storyteller’s great property-shop of aids to illusion: a resource under denial of which it was equally perplexing and delightful, for a change, to proceed. Everything, for that matter, becomes interesting from the moment it has closely to consider, for full effect positively to bestride, the law of its kind. “Kinds” are the very life of literature, and truth and strength come from the complete recognition of them, from abounding to the utmost in their respective senses and sinking deep into their consistency. I myself have scarcely to plead the cause of “going behind,” which is right and beautiful and fruitful in its place and order; but as the confusion of kinds is the inelegance of letters and the stultification of values, so to renounce that line utterly and do something quite different instead may become in another connexion the true course and the vehicle of effect. Something in the very nature, in the fine rigour, of this special sacrifice (which is capable of affecting the form-lover, I think, as really more of a projected form than any other) lends it moreover a coercive charm; a charm that grows in proportion as the appeal to it tests and stretches and strains it, puts it powerfully to the

touch. To make the presented occasion tell all its story itself, remain shut up in its own presence and yet on that patch of staked-out ground become thoroughly interesting and remain thoroughly clear, is a process not remarkable, no doubt, so long as a very light weight is laid on it, but difficult enough to challenge and inspire great adroitness so soon as the elements to be dealt with begin at all to “size up.”

The disdainers of the contemporary drama deny, obviously, with all promptness, that the matter to be expressed by its means—richly and successfully expressed that is—CAN loom with any largeness; since from the moment it does one of the conditions breaks down. The process simply collapses under pressure, they contend, proves its weakness as quickly as the office laid on it ceases to be simple. “Remember,” they say to the dramatist, “that you have to be, supremely, three things: you have to be true to your form, you have to be interesting, you have to be clear. You have in other words to prove yourself adequate to taking a heavy weight. But we defy you really to conform to your conditions with any but a light one. Make the thing you have to convey, make the picture you have to paint, at all rich and complex, and you cease to be clear. Remain clear—and with the clearness required by the infantine intelligence of any public consenting to see a play—and what becomes of the ‘importance’ of your subject? If it’s important by any other critical measure than the little foot-rule the ‘produced’ piece has to conform to, it is predestined to be a muddle. When it has escaped being a muddle the note it has succeeded in striking at the furthest will be recognised as one of those that are called high but by the courtesy, by the intellectual provinciality, of theatrical criticism, which, as we can see for ourselves any morning, is—well, an abyss even deeper than the theatre itself. Don’t attempt to crush us with Dumas and Ibsen, for such values are from any informed and enlightened point of view, that is measured by other high values, literary, critical, philosophic, of the most moderate order. Ibsen and Dumas are precisely cases of men, men in their degree, in their poor theatrical straight-jacket, speculative, who have HAD to renounce the finer thing for the coarser, the thick, in short, for the thin and the curious for the self-evident. What earthly intellectual distinction, what ‘prestige’ of achievement, would have attached to the substance of such things as ‘Denise,’ as ‘Monsieur Alphonse,’ as ‘Francillon’ (and we take the Dumas of the supposedly subtler period) in any other form? What virtues of the same order would have attached to ‘The Pillars of Society,’ to ‘An Enemy of the People,’ to ‘Ghosts,’ to ‘Rosmersholm’ (or taking also Ibsen’s ‘subtler period’) to ‘John Gabriel Borkmann,’ to ‘The Master-Builder’? Ibsen is in fact wonderfully a case in point, since from the moment he’s clear, from the moment he’s ‘amusing,’ it’s on the footing of a thesis as simple and superficial as that of ‘A Doll’s House’—while from the moment he’s by apparent intention comprehensive and searching it’s on the footing of an effect as confused and obscure as ‘The Wild Duck.’ From which you easily see ALL the conditions can’t be met. The dramatist has to choose but those he’s most capable of, and by that choice he’s known.”

So the objector concludes, and never surely without great profit from his having been “drawn.” His apparent triumph—if it be even apparent—still leaves, it will be noted, convenient cover for retort in the riddled face of the opposite stronghold. The last word in these cases is for nobody who can’t pretend to an ABSOLUTE test. The terms here used, obviously, are matters of appreciation, and there is no short cut to proof (luckily for us all round) either that “Monsieur Alphonse” develops itself on the highest plane of irony or that “Ghosts” simplifies almost to excruciation. If “John Gabriel Borkmann” is but a pennyworth of effect as to a character we can imagine much more amply presented, and if “Hedda Gabler” makes an appeal enfeebled by remarkable vagueness, there is by the nature of the case no catching the convinced, or call him the deluded, spectator or reader in the act of a mistake. He is to be caught at the worst in the act of attention, of the very greatest attention, and that is all, as a precious preliminary at least, that the playwright asks of him, besides being all the very divinest poet can get. I remember rejoicing as much to remark this, after getting launched in “The Awkward Age,” as if I were in fact constructing a play—just as I may doubtless appear now not less anxious to keep the philosophy of the dramatist’s course before me than if I belonged to his order. I felt, certainly, the support he feels, I participated in his technical amusement, I tasted to the full the bitter-sweetness of

his draught—the beauty and the difficulty (to harp again on that string) of escaping poverty EVEN THOUGH the references in one’s action can only be, with intensity, to each other, to things exactly on the same plane of exhibition with themselves. Exhibition may mean in a “story” twenty different ways, fifty excursions, alternatives, excrescences, and the novel, as largely practised in English, is the perfect paradise of the loose end. The play consents to the logic of but one way, mathematically right, and with the loose end as gross an impertinence on its surface, and as grave a dishonour, as the dangle of a snippet of silk or wool on the right side of a tapestry. We are shut up wholly to cross-relations, relations all within the action itself; no part of which is related to anything but some other part—save of course by the relation of the total to life. And, after invoking the protection of Gyp, I saw the point of my game all in the problem of keeping these conditioned relations crystalline at the same time that I should, in emulation of life, consent to their being numerous and fine and characteristic of the London world (as the London world was in this quarter and that to be deciphered). All of which was to make in the event for complications.

I see now of course how far, with my complications, I got away from Gyp; but I see to-day so much else too that this particular deflexion from simplicity makes scarce a figure among the others after having once served its purpose, I mean, of lighting my original imitative innocence. For I recognise in especial, with a waking vibration of that interest in which, as I say, the plan of the book is embalmed for me, that my subject was probably condemned in advance to appreciable, or more exactly perhaps to almost preposterously appreciative, over-treatment. It places itself for me thus in a group of small productions exhibiting this perversity, representations of conceived cases in which my process has been to pump the case gaspingly dry, dry not only of superfluous moisture, but absolutely (for I have encountered the charge) of breathable air. I may note, in fine, that coming back to the pages before us with a strong impression of their recording, to my shame, that disaster, even to the extent of its disqualifying them for decent reappearance, I have found the adventure taking, to my relief, quite another turn, and have lost myself in the wonder of what “over-treatment” may, in the detail of its desperate ingenuity, consist of. The revived interest I speak of has been therefore that of following critically, from page to page, even as the red Indian tracks in the forest the pale-face, the footsteps of the systematic loyalty I was able to achieve. The amusement of this constation is, as I have hinted, in the detail of the matter, and the detail is so dense, the texture of the figured and smoothed tapestry so loose, that the genius of Gyp herself, muse of general looseness, would certainly, once warned, have uttered the first disavowal of my homage. But what has occurred meanwhile is that this high consistency has itself, so to speak, constituted an exhibition, and that an important artistic truth has seemed to me thereby lighted. We brushed against that truth just now in our glance at the denial of expansibility to any idea the mould of the “stage-play” may hope to express without cracking and bursting—and we bear in mind at the same time that the picture of Nanda Brookenham’s situation, though perhaps seeming to a careless eye so to wander and sprawl, yet presents itself on absolutely scenic lines, and that each of these scenes in itself, and each as related to each and to all of its companions, abides without a moment’s deflexion by the principle of the stage-play. In doing this then it does more—it helps us ever so happily to see the grave distinction between substance and form in a really wrought work of art signally break down. I hold it impossible to say, before “The Awkward Age,” where one of these elements ends and the other begins: I have been unable at least myself, on re-examination, to mark any such joint or seam, to see the two DISCHARGED offices as separate. They are separate before the fact, but the sacrament of execution indissolubly marries them, and the marriage, like any other marriage, has only to be a “true” one for the scandal of a breach not to show. The thing “done,” artistically, is a fusion, or it has not BEEN done—in which case of course the artist may be, and all deservedly, pelted with any fragment of his botch the critic shall choose to pick up. But his ground once conquered, in this particular field, he knows nothing of fragments and may say in all security: “Detach one if you can. You can analyse in YOUR way, oh yes—to relate, to report, to explain; but you can’t disintegrate my synthesis; you can’t resolve the

elements of my whole into different responsible agents or find your way at all (for your own fell purpose). My mixture has only to be perfect literally to bewilder you—you are lost in the tangle of the forest. Prove this value, this effect, in the air of the whole result, to be of my subject, and that other value, other effect, to be of my treatment, prove that I haven't so shaken them together as the conjurer I profess to be **MUST** consummately shake, and I consent but to parade as before a booth at the fair." The exemplary closeness of "The Awkward Age" even affects me, on re-perusal, I confess, as treasure quite instinctively and foreseeingly laid up against my present opportunity for these remarks. I have been positively struck by the quantity of meaning and the number of intentions, the extent of **GROUND FOR INTEREST**, as I may call it, that I have succeeded in working scenically, yet without loss of sharpness, clearness or "atmosphere," into each of my illuminating occasions—where, at certain junctures, the due preservation of all these values took, in the familiar phrase, a good deal of doing.

I should have liked just here to re-examine with the reader some of the positively most artful passages I have in mind—such as the hour of Mr. Longdon's beautiful and, as it were, mystic attempt at a compact with Vanderbank, late at night, in the billiard-room of the country-house at which they are staying; such as the other nocturnal passage, under Mr. Longdon's roof, between Vanderbank and Mitchy, where the conduct of so much fine meaning, so many flares of the exhibitory torch through the labyrinth of mere immediate appearances, mere familiar allusions, is successfully and safely effected; such as the whole array of the terms of presentation that are made to serve, all systematically, yet without a gap anywhere, for the presentation, throughout, of a Mitchy "subtle" no less than concrete and concrete no less than deprived of that officious explanation which we know as "going behind"; such as, briefly, the general service of co-ordination and vivification rendered, on lines of ferocious, of really quite heroic compression, by the picture of the assembled group at Mrs. Grendon's, where the "cross-references" of the action are as thick as the green leaves of a garden, but none the less, as they have scenically to be, counted and disposed, weighted with responsibility. Were I minded to use in this connexion a "loud" word—and the critic in general hates loud words as a man of taste may hate loud colours—I should speak of the composition of the chapters entitled "Tishy Grendon," with all the pieces of the game on the table together and each unconfusedly and contributively placed, as triumphantly scientific. I must properly remind myself, rather, that the better lesson of my retrospect would seem to be really a supreme revision of the question of what it may be for a subject to suffer, to call it suffering, by over-treatment. Bowed down so long by the inference that its product had in this case proved such a betrayal, my artistic conscience meets the relief of having to recognise truly here no traces of suffering. The thing carries itself to my maturer and gratified sense as with every symptom of soundness, an insolence of health and joy. And from this precisely I deduce my moral; which is to the effect that, since our only way, in general, of knowing that we have had too much of anything is by **FEELING** that too much: so, by the same token, when we don't feel the excess (and I am contending, mind, that in "The Awkward Age" the multiplicity yields to the order) how do we know that the measure not recorded, the notch not reached, does represent adequacy or satiety? The mere feeling helps us for certain degrees of congestion, but for exact science, that is for the criticism of "fine" art, we want the notation. The notation, however, is what we lack, and the verdict of the mere feeling is liable to fluctuate. In other words an imputed defect is never, at the worst, disengageable, or other than matter for appreciation—to come back to my claim for that felicity of the dramatist's case that his synthetic "whole" **IS** his form, the only one we have to do with. I like to profit in his company by the fact that if our art has certainly, for the impression it produces, to defer to the rise and fall, in the critical temperature, of the telltale mercury, it still hasn't to reckon with the engraved thermometer-face.

HENRY JAMES.

THE AWKWARD AGE

BOOK FIRST. LADY JULIA

I

Save when it happened to rain Vanderbank always walked home, but he usually took a hansom when the rain was moderate and adopted the preference of the philosopher when it was heavy. On this occasion he therefore recognised as the servant opened the door a congruity between the weather and the “four-wheeler” that, in the empty street, under the glazed radiance, waited and trickled and blackly glittered. The butler mentioned it as on such a wild night the only thing they could get, and Vanderbank, having replied that it was exactly what would do best, prepared in the doorway to put up his umbrella and dash down to it. At this moment he heard his name pronounced from behind and on turning found himself joined by the elderly fellow guest with whom he had talked after dinner and about whom later on upstairs he had sounded his hostess. It was at present a clear question of how this amiable, this apparently unassertive person should get home—of the possibility of the other cab for which even now one of the footmen, with a whistle to his lips, craned out his head and listened through the storm. Mr. Longdon wondered to Vanderbank if their course might by any chance be the same; which led our young friend immediately to express a readiness to see him safely in any direction that should accommodate him. As the footman’s whistle spent itself in vain they got together into the four-wheeler, where at the end of a few moments more Vanderbank became conscious of having proposed his own rooms as a wind-up to their drive. Wouldn’t that be a better finish of the evening than just separating in the wet? He liked his new acquaintance, who struck him as in a manner clinging to him, who was staying at an hotel presumably at that hour dismal, and who, confessing with easy humility to a connexion positively timid with a club at which one couldn’t have a visitor, accepted his invitation under pressure. Vanderbank, when they arrived, was amused at the air of added extravagance with which he said he would keep the cab: he so clearly enjoyed to that extent the sense of making a night of it. “You young men, I believe, keep them for hours, eh? At least they did in my time,” he laughed —“the wild ones! But I think of them as all wild then. I dare say that when one settles in town one learns how to manage; only I’m afraid, you know, that I’ve got completely out of it. I do feel really quite mouldy. It’s a matter of thirty years—!”

“Since you’ve been in London?”

“For more than a few days at a time, upon my honour. You won’t understand that—any more, I dare say, than I myself quite understand how at the end of all I’ve accepted this queer view of the doom of coming back. But I don’t doubt I shall ask you, if you’ll be so good as to let me, for the help of a hint or two: as to how to do, don’t you know? and not to—what do you fellows call it?—BE done. Now about one of THESE things—!”

One of these things was the lift in which, at no great pace and with much rumbling and creaking, the porter conveyed the two gentlemen to the alarming eminence, as Mr. Longdon measured their flight, at which Vanderbank perched. The impression made on him by this contrivance showed him as unsophisticated, yet when his companion, at the top, ushering him in, gave a touch to the quick light and, in the pleasant ruddy room, all convenience and character, had before the fire another look at him, it was not to catch in him any protrusive angle. Mr. Longdon was slight and neat, delicate of body and both keen and kind of face, with black brows finely marked and thick smooth hair in which the silver had deep shadows. He wore neither whisker nor moustache and seemed to carry in the flicker of his quick brown eyes and the positive sun-play of his smile even more than the equivalent of what

might, superficially or stupidly, elsewhere be missed in him; which was mass, substance, presence—what is vulgarly called importance. He had indeed no presence but had somehow an effect. He might almost have been a priest if priests, as it occurred to Vanderbank, were ever such dandies. He had at all events conclusively doubled the Cape of the years—he would never again see fifty-five: to the warning light of that bleak headland he presented a back sufficiently conscious. Yet though to Vanderbank he couldn't look young he came near—strikingly and amusingly—looking new: this after a minute appeared mainly perhaps indeed in the perfection of his evening dress and the special smartness of the sleeveless overcoat he had evidently had made to wear with it and might even actually be wearing for the first time. He had talked to Vanderbank at Mrs. Brookenham's about Beccles and Suffolk; but it was not at Beccles nor anywhere in the county that these ornaments had been designed. His action had already been, with however little purpose, to present the region to his interlocutor in a favourable light. Vanderbank, for that matter, had the kind of imagination that likes to PLACE an object, even to the point of losing sight of it in the conditions; he already saw the nice old nook it must have taken to keep a man of intelligence so fresh while suffering him to remain so fine. The product of Beccles accepted at all events a cigarette—still much as a joke and an adventure—and looked about him as if even more pleased than he expected. Then he broke, through his double eye-glass, into an exclamation that was like a passing pang of envy and regret. “You young men, you young men—!”

“Well, what about us?” Vanderbank's tone encouraged the courtesy of the reference. “I'm not so young moreover as that comes to.”

“How old are you then, pray?”

“Why I'm thirty-four.”

“What do you call that? I'm a hundred and three!” Mr. Longdon at all events took out his watch. “It's only a quarter past eleven.” Then with a quick change of interest, “What did you say is your public office?” he enquired.

“The General Audit. I'm Deputy Chairman.”

“Dear!” Mr. Longdon looked at him as if he had had fifty windows. “What a head you must have!”

“Oh yes—our head's Sir Digby Dence.”

“And what do we do for you?”

“Well, you gild the pill—though not perhaps very thick. But it's a decent berth.”

“A thing a good many fellows would give a pound of their flesh for?”

Vanderbank's visitor appeared so to deprecate too faint a picture that he dropped all scruples. “I'm the most envied man I know—so that if I were a shade less amiable I should be one of the most hated.”

Mr. Longdon laughed, yet not quite as if they were joking. “I see. Your pleasant way carries it off.”

Vanderbank was, however, not serious. “Wouldn't it carry off anything?”

Again his friend, through the pince-nez, appeared to crown him with a Whitehall cornice. “I think I ought to let you know I'm studying you. It's really fair to tell you,” he continued with an earnestness not discomposed by the indulgence in Vanderbank's face. “It's all right—all right!” he reassuringly added, having meanwhile stopped before a photograph suspended on the wall. “That's your mother!” he brought out with something of the elation of a child making a discovery or guessing a riddle. “I don't make you out in her yet—in my recollection of her, which, as I told you, is perfect; but I dare say I soon shall.”

Vanderbank was more and more aware that the kind of amusement he excited would never in the least be a bar to affection. “Please take all your time.”

Mr. Longdon looked at his watch again. “Do you think I HAD better keep it?”

“The cab?” Vanderbank liked him so, found in him such a promise of pleasant things, that he was almost tempted to say: “Dear and delightful sir, don’t weigh that question; I’ll pay, myself, for the man’s whole night!” His approval at all events was complete.

“Most certainly. That’s the only way not to think of it.”

“Oh you young men, you young men!” his guest again murmured. He had passed on to the photograph—Vanderbank had many, too many photographs—of some other relation, and stood wiping the gold-mounted glasses through which he had been darting admirations and catching side-lights for shocks. “Don’t talk nonsense,” he continued as his friend attempted once more to throw in a protest; “I belong to a different period of history. There have been things this evening that have made me feel as if I had been disinterred—literally dug up from a long sleep. I assure you there have!”—he really pressed the point.

Vanderbank wondered a moment what things in particular these might be; he found himself wanting to get at everything his visitor represented, to enter into his consciousness and feel, as it were, on his side. He glanced with an intention freely sarcastic at an easy possibility. “The extraordinary vitality of Brookenham?”

Mr. Longdon, with nippers in place again, fixed on him a gravity that failed to prevent his discovering in the eyes behind them a shy reflexion of his irony. “Oh Brookenham! You must tell me all about Brookenham.”

“I see that’s not what you mean.”

Mr. Longdon forbore to deny it. “I wonder if you’ll understand what I mean.” Vanderbank bristled with the wish to be put to the test, but was checked before he could say so. “And what’s HIS place—Brookenham’s?”

“Oh Rivers and Lakes—an awfully good thing. He got it last year.”

Mr. Longdon—but not too grossly—wondered. “How did he get it?”

Vanderbank laughed. “Well, SHE got it.”

His friend remained grave. “And about how much now—?”

“Oh twelve hundred—and lots of allowances and boats and things. To do the work!” Vanderbank, still with a certain levity, added.

“And what IS the work?”

The young man had a pause. “Ask HIM. He’ll like to tell you.”

“Yet he seemed to have but little to say.” Mr. Longdon exactly measured it again.

“Ah not about that. Try him.”

He looked more sharply at his host, as if vaguely suspicious of a trap; then not less vaguely he sighed. “Well, it’s what I came up for—to try you all. But do they live on that?” he continued.

Vanderbank once more debated. “One doesn’t quite know what they live on. But they’ve means—for it was just that fact, I remember, that showed Brookenham’s getting the place wasn’t a job. It was given, I mean, not to his mere domestic need, but to his notorious efficiency. He has a property—an ugly little place in Gloucestershire—which they sometimes let. His elder brother has the better one, but they make up an income.”

Mr. Longdon for an instant lost himself. “Yes, I remember—one heard of those things at the time. And SHE must have had something.”

“Yes indeed, she had something—and she always has her intense cleverness. She knows thoroughly how. They do it tremendously well.”

“Tremendously well,” Mr. Longdon intelligently echoed. “But a house in Buckingham Crescent, with the way they seem to have built through to all sorts of other places—?”

“Oh they’re all right,” Vanderbank soothingly dropped.

“One likes to feel that of people with whom one has dined. There are four children?” his friend went on.

“The older boy, whom you saw and who in his way is a wonder, the older girl, whom you must see, and two youngsters, male and female, whom you mustn’t.”

There might by this time, in the growing interest of their talk, have been almost nothing too uncanny for Mr. Longdon to fear it. “You mean the youngsters are—unfortunate?”

“No—they’re only, like all the modern young, I think, mysteries, terrible little baffling mysteries.” Vanderbank had found amusement again—it flickered so from his friend’s face that, really at moments to the point of alarm, his explanations deepened darkness. Then with more interest he harked back. “I know the thing you just mentioned—the thing that strikes you as odd.” He produced his knowledge quite with elation. “The talk.” Mr. Longdon on this only looked at him in silence and harder, but he went on with assurance: “Yes, the talk—for we do talk, I think.” Still his guest left him without relief, only fixing him and his suggestion with a suspended judgement. Whatever the old man was on the point of saying, however, he disposed of in a curtailed murmur; he had already turned afresh to the series of portraits, and as he glanced at another Vanderbank spoke afresh.

“It was very interesting to me to hear from you there, when the ladies had left us, how many old threads you were prepared to pick up.”

Mr. Longdon had paused. “I’m an old boy who remembers the mothers,” he at last replied.

“Yes, you told me how well you remember Mrs. Brookenham’s.”

“Oh, oh!”—and he arrived at a new subject. “This must be your sister Mary.”

“Yes; it’s very bad, but as she’s dead—”

“Dead? Dear, dear!”

“Oh long ago”—Vanderbank eased him off. “It’s delightful of you,” this informant went on, “to have known also such a lot of MY people.”

Mr. Longdon turned from his contemplation with a visible effort. “I feel obliged to you for taking it so; it mightn’t—one never knows—have amused you. As I told you there, the first thing I did was to ask Fernanda about the company; and when she mentioned your name I immediately said: ‘Would he like me to speak to him?’”

“And what did Fernanda say?”

Mr. Longdon stared. “Do YOU call her Fernanda?”

Vanderbank felt ever so much more guilty than he would have expected. “You think it too much in the manner we just mentioned?”

His friend hesitated; then with a smile a trifle strange: “Pardon me; *I* didn’t mention—”

“No, you didn’t; and your scruple was magnificent. In point of fact,” Vanderbank pursued, “I DON’T call Mrs. Brookenham by her Christian name.”

Mr. Longdon’s clear eyes were searching. “Unless in speaking of her to others?” He seemed really to wish to know.

Vanderbank was but too ready to satisfy him. “I dare say we seem to you a vulgar lot of people. That’s not the way, I can see, you speak of ladies at Beccles.”

“Oh if you laugh at me—!” And his visitor turned off.

“Don’t threaten me,” said Vanderbank, “or I WILL send away the cab. Of course I know what you mean. It will be tremendously interesting to hear how the sort of thing we’ve fallen into—oh we HAVE fallen in!—strikes your fresh, your uncorrupted ear. Do have another cigarette. Sunk as I must appear to you it sometimes strikes even mine. But I’m not sure as regards Mrs. Brookenham, whom I’ve known a long time.”

Mr. Longdon again took him up. “What do you people call a long time?”

Vanderbank considered. “Ah there you are! And now we’re ‘we people’! That’s right—give it to us. I’m sure that in one way or another it’s all earned. Well, I’ve known her ten years. But awfully well.”

“What do you call awfully well?”

“We people?” Vanderbank’s enquirer, with his continued restless observation, moving nearer, the young man had laid on his shoulder the lightest of friendly hands. “Don’t you perhaps ask too

much? But no,” he added quickly and gaily, “of course you don’t: if I don’t look out I shall have exactly the effect on you I don’t want. I dare say I don’t know HOW well I know Mrs. Brookenham. Mustn’t that sort of thing be put in a manner to the proof? What I meant to say just now was that I wouldn’t—at least I hope I shouldn’t—have named her as I did save to an old friend.”

Mr. Longdon looked promptly satisfied and reassured. “You probably heard me address her myself.”

“I did, but you’ve your rights, and that wouldn’t excuse me. The only thing is that I go to see her every Sunday.”

Mr. Longdon pondered and then, a little to Vanderbank’s surprise, at any rate to his deeper amusement, candidly asked: “Only Fernanda? No other lady?”

“Oh yes, several other ladies.”

Mr. Longdon appeared to hear this with pleasure. “You’re quite right. We don’t make enough of Sunday at Beccles.”

“Oh we make plenty of it in London!” Vanderbank said. “And I think it’s rather in my interest I should mention that Mrs. Brookenham calls ME—”

His visitor covered him now with an attention that just operated as a check. “By your Christian name?”

Before Vanderbank could in any degree attenuate “What IS your Christian name?” Mr. Longdon asked.

Vanderbank felt of a sudden almost guilty—as if his answer could only impute extravagance to the lady. “My Christian name”—he blushed it out—“is Gustavus.”

His friend took a droll conscious leap. “And she calls you Gussy?”

“No, not even Gussy. But I scarcely think I ought to tell you,” he pursued, “if she herself gave you no glimpse of the fact. Any implication that she consciously avoided it might make you see deeper depths.”

He spoke with pointed levity, but his companion showed him after an instant a face just covered—and a little painfully—with the vision of the possibility brushed away by the joke. “Oh I’m not so bad as that!” Mr. Longdon modestly ejaculated.

“Well, she doesn’t do it always,” Vanderbank laughed, “and it’s nothing moreover to what some people are called. Why, there was a fellow there—” He pulled up, however, and, thinking better of it, selected another instance. “The Duchess—weren’t you introduced to the Duchess?—never calls me anything but ‘Vanderbank’ unless she calls me ‘caro mio.’ It wouldn’t have taken much to make her appeal to YOU with an ‘I say, Longdon!’ I can quite hear her.”

Mr. Longdon, focussing the effect of the sketch, pointed its moral with an indulgent: “Oh well, a FOREIGN duchess!” He could make his distinctions.

“Yes, she’s invidiously, cruelly foreign,” Vanderbank agreed: “I’ve never indeed seen a woman avail herself so cleverly, to make up for the obloquy of that state, of the benefits and immunities it brings with it. She has bloomed in the hot-house of her widowhood—she’s a Neapolitan hatched by an incubator.”

“A Neapolitan?”—Mr. Longdon seemed all civilly to wish he had only known it.

“Her husband was one; but I believe that dukes at Naples are as thick as princes at Petersburg. He’s dead, at any rate, poor man, and she has come back here to live.”

“Gloomily, I should think—after Naples?” Mr. Longdon threw out.

“Oh it would take more than even a Neapolitan past—! However”—and the young man caught himself up—“she lives not in what’s behind her, but in what’s before—she lives in her precious little Aggie.”

“Little Aggie?” Mr. Longdon risked a cautious interest.

“I don’t take a liberty there,” Vanderbank smiled: “I speak only of the young Agnesina, a little girl, the Duchess’s niece, or rather I believe her husband’s, whom she has adopted—in the place of a daughter early lost—and has brought to England to marry.”

“Ah to some great man of course!”

Vanderbank thought. “I don’t know.” He gave a vague but expressive sigh. “She’s rather lovely, little Aggie.”

Mr. Longdon looked conspicuously subtle. “Then perhaps YOU’RE the man!”

“Do I look like a ‘great’ one?” Vanderbank broke in.

His visitor, turning away from him, again embraced the room. “Oh dear, yes!”

“Well then, to show how right you are, there’s the young lady.” He pointed to an object on one of the tables, a small photograph with a very wide border of something that looked like crimson fur.

Mr. Longdon took up the picture; he was serious now. “She’s very beautiful—but she’s not a little girl.”

“At Naples they develop early. She’s only seventeen or eighteen, I suppose; but I never know how old—or at least how young—girls are, and I’m not sure. An aunt, at any rate, has of course nothing to conceal. She IS extremely pretty—with extraordinary red hair and a complexion to match; great rarities I believe, in that race and latitude. She gave me the portrait—frame and all. The frame is Neapolitan enough and little Aggie’s charming.” Then Vanderbank subjoined: “But not so charming as little Nanda.”

“Little Nanda?—have you got HER?” The old man was all eagerness.

“She’s over there beside the lamp—also a present from the original.”

II

Mr. Longdon had gone to the place—little Nanda was in glazed white wood. He took her up and held her out; for a moment he said nothing, but presently, over his glasses, rested on his host a look intenser even than his scrutiny of the faded image. “Do they give their portraits now?”

“Little girls—innocent lambs? Surely—to old friends. Didn’t they in your time?”

Mr. Longdon studied the portrait again; after which, with an exhalation of something between superiority and regret, “They never did to me,” he returned.

“Well, you can have all you want now!” Vanderbank laughed.

His friend gave a slow droll headshake. “I don’t want them ‘now’!”

“You could do with them, my dear sir, still,” Vanderbank continued in the same manner, “every bit *I* do!”

“I’m sure you do nothing you oughtn’t.” Mr. Longdon kept the photograph and continued to look at it. “Her mother told me about her—promised me I should see her next time.”

“You must—she’s a great friend of mine.”

Mr. Longdon was really deep in it. “Is she clever?”

Vanderbank turned it over. “Well, you’ll tell me if you think so.”

“Ah with a child of seventeen—!” Mr. Longdon murmured it as if in dread of having to pronounce. “This one too IS seventeen?”

Vanderbank again considered. “Eighteen.” He just hung fire once more, then brought out: “Well, call it nearly nineteen. I’ve kept her birthdays,” he laughed.

His companion caught at the idea. “Upon my honour *I* should like to! When is the next?”

“You’ve plenty of time—the fifteenth of June.”

“I’m only too sorry to wait.” Laying down the object he had been examining Mr. Longdon took another turn about the room, and his manner was such an appeal to his host to accept his restlessness that as he circulated the latter watched him with encouragement. “I said to you just now that I knew

the mothers, but it would have been more to the point to say the grandmothers.” He stopped before his young friend, then nodded at the image of Nanda. “I knew *HERS*. She put it at something less.”

Vanderbank rather failed to understand. “The old lady? Put what?”

Mr. Longdon’s face showed him as for a moment feeling his way. “I’m speaking of Mrs. Brookenham. She spoke of her daughter as only sixteen.”

Vanderbank’s amusement at the tone of this broke out. “She usually does! She has done so, I think, for the last year or two.”

His visitor dropped upon his sofa as with the weight of something sudden and fresh; then from this place, with a sharp little movement, tossed into the fire the end of a cigarette. Vanderbank offered him another, and as he accepted it and took a light he said: “I don’t know what you’re doing with me—I never at home smoke so much!” But he puffed away and, seated near, laid his hand on Vanderbank’s arm as to help himself to utter something too delicate not to be guarded and yet too important not to be risked. “Now that’s the sort of thing I did mean—as one of my impressions.” Vanderbank continued at a loss and he went on: “I refer—if you don’t mind my saying so—to what you said just now.”

Vanderbank was conscious of a deep desire to draw from him whatever might come; so sensible was it somehow that whatever in him was good was also thoroughly personal. But our young friend had to think a minute. “I see, I see. Nothing’s more probable than that I’ve said something nasty; but which of my particular horrors?”

“Well then, your conveying that she makes her daughter out younger—!”

“To make herself out the same?” Vanderbank took him straight up. “It was nasty my doing that? I see, I see. Yes, yes: I rather gave her away, and you’re struck by it—as is most delightful you *SHOULD* be—because you’re in every way of a better tradition and, knowing Mrs. Brookenham’s my friend, can’t conceive of one’s playing on a friend a trick so vulgar and odious. It strikes you also probably as the kind of thing we must be constantly doing; it strikes you that right and left, probably, we keep giving each other away. Well, I dare say we do. Yes, ‘come to think of it,’ as they say in America, we do. But what shall I tell you? Practically we all know it and allow for it and it’s as broad as it’s long. What’s London life after all? It’s tit for tat!”

“Ah but what becomes of friendship?” Mr. Longdon earnestly and pleadingly asked, while he still held Vanderbank’s arm as if under the spell of the vivid explanation supplied him.

The young man met his eyes only the more sociably. “Friendship?”

“Friendship.” Mr. Longdon maintained the full value of the word.

“Well,” his companion risked, “I dare say it isn’t in London by any means what it is at Beccles. I quite literally mean that,” Vanderbank reassuringly added; “I never really have believed in the existence of friendship in big societies—in great towns and great crowds. It’s a plant that takes time and space and air; and London society is a huge ‘squash,’ as we elegantly call it—an elbowing pushing perspiring chattering mob.”

“Ah I don’t say *THAT* of you!” the visitor murmured with a withdrawal of his hand and a visible scruple for the sweeping concession he had evoked.

“Do say it then—for God’s sake; let some one say it, so that something or other, whatever it may be, may come of it! It’s impossible to say too much—it’s impossible to say enough. There isn’t anything any one can say that I won’t agree to.”

“That shows you really don’t care,” the old man returned with acuteness.

“Oh we’re past saving, if that’s what you mean!” Vanderbank laughed.

“You don’t care, you don’t care!” his guest repeated, “and—if I may be frank with you—I shouldn’t wonder if it were rather a pity.”

“A pity I don’t care?”

“You ought to, you ought to.” And Mr. Longdon paused. “May I say all I think?”

“I assure you *I* shall! You’re awfully interesting.”

“So are you, if you come to that. It’s just what I’ve had in my head. There’s something I seem to make out in you—!” He abruptly dropped this, however, going on in another way. “I remember the rest of you, but why did I never see YOU?”

“I must have been at school—at college. Perhaps you did know my brothers, elder and younger.”

“There was a boy with your mother at Malvern. I was near her there for three months in—what WAS the year?”

“Yes, I know,” Vanderbank replied while his guest tried to fix the date. “It was my brother Miles. He was awfully clever, but had no health, poor chap, and we lost him at seventeen. She used to take houses at such places with him—it was supposed to be for his benefit.”

Mr. Longdon listened with a visible recovery. “He used to talk to me—I remember he asked me questions I couldn’t answer and made me dreadfully ashamed. But I lent him books—partly, upon my honour, to make him think that as I had them I did know something. He read everything and had a lot to say about it. I used to tell your mother he had a great future.”

Vanderbank shook his head sadly and kindly. “So he had. And you remember Nancy, who was handsome and who was usually with them?” he went on.

Mr. Longdon looked so uncertain that he explained he meant his other sister; on which his companion said: “Oh her? Yes, she was charming—she evidently had a future too.”

“Well, she’s in the midst of her future now. She’s married.”

“And whom did she marry?”

“A fellow called Toovey. A man in the City.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Longdon a little blankly. Then as if to retrieve his blankness: “But why do you call her Nancy? Wasn’t her name Blanche?”

“Exactly—Blanche Bertha Vanderbank.”

Mr. Longdon looked half-mystified and half-distressed. “And now she’s Nancy Toovey?”

Vanderbank broke into laughter at his dismay. “That’s what every one calls her.”

“But why?”

“Nobody knows. You see you were right about her future.”

Mr. Longdon gave another of his soft smothered sighs; he had turned back again to the first photograph, which he looked at for a longer time. “Well, it wasn’t HER way.”

“My mother’s? No indeed. Oh my mother’s way—!” Vanderbank waited, then added gravely: “She was taken in time.”

Mr. Longdon turned half-round as to reply to this, but instead of replying proceeded afresh to an examination of the expressive oval in the red plush frame. He took up little Aggie, who appeared to interest him, and abruptly observed: “Nanda isn’t so pretty.”

“No, not nearly. There’s a great question whether Nanda’s pretty at all.”

Mr. Longdon continued to inspect her more favoured friend; which led him after a moment to bring out: “She ought to be, you know. Her grandmother was.”

“Oh and her mother,” Vanderbank threw in. “Don’t you think Mrs. Brookenham lovely?”

Mr. Longdon kept him waiting a little. “Not so lovely as Lady Julia. Lady Julia had—!” He faltered; then, as if there were too much to say, disposed of the question. “Lady Julia had everything.”

Vanderbank gathered hence an impression that determined him more and more to diplomacy. “But isn’t that just what Mrs. Brookenham has?”

This time the old man was prompt. “Yes, she’s very brilliant, but it’s a totally different thing.” He laid little Aggie down and moved away as without a purpose; but his friend presently perceived his purpose to be another glance at the other young lady. As if all accidentally and absently he bent again over the portrait of Nanda. “Lady Julia was exquisite and this child’s exactly like her.”

Vanderbank, more and more conscious of something working in him, was more and more interested. “If Nanda’s so like her, WAS she so exquisite?”

“Oh yes; every one was agreed about that.” Mr. Longdon kept his eyes on the face, trying a little, Vanderbank even thought, to conceal his own. “She was one of the greatest beauties of her day.”

“Then IS Nanda so like her?” Vanderbank persisted, amused at his friend’s transparency.

“Extraordinarily. Her mother told me all about her.”

“Told you she’s as beautiful as her grandmother?”

Mr. Longdon turned it over. “Well, that she has just Lady Julia’s expression. She absolutely HAS it—I see it here.” He was delightfully positive. “She’s much more like the dead than like the living.”

Vanderbank saw in this too many deep things not to follow them up. One of these was, to begin with, that his guest had not more than half-succumbed to Mrs. Brookenham’s attraction, if indeed he had by a fine originality not resisted it altogether. That in itself, for an observer deeply versed in this lady, was attaching and beguiling. Another indication was that he found himself, in spite of such a break in the chain, distinctly predisposed to Nanda. “If she reproduces then so vividly Lady Julia,” the young man threw out, “why does she strike you as so much less pretty than her foreign friend there, who is after all by no means a prodigy?”

The subject of this address, with one of the photographs in his hand, glanced, while he reflected, at the other. Then with a subtlety that matched itself for the moment with Vanderbank’s: “You just told me yourself that the little foreign person—”

“Is ever so much the lovelier of the two? So I did. But you’ve promptly recognised it. It’s the first time,” Vanderbank went on, to let him down more gently, “that I’ve heard Mrs. Brookenham admit the girl’s good looks.”

“Her own girl’s? ‘Admit’ them?”

“I mean grant them to be even as good as they are. I myself, I must tell you, extremely like Nanda’s appearance. I think Lady Julia’s granddaughter has in her face, in spite of everything—!”

“What do you mean by everything?” Mr. Longdon broke in with such an approach to resentment that his host’s gaiety overflowed.

“You’ll see—when you do see. She has no features. No, not one,” Vanderbank inexorably pursued; “unless indeed you put it that she has two or three too many. What I was going to say was that she has in her expression all that’s charming in her nature. But beauty, in London”—and feeling that he held his visitor’s attention he gave himself the pleasure of freely presenting his idea—“staring glaring obvious knock-down beauty, as plain as a poster on a wall, an advertisement of soap or whiskey, something that speaks to the crowd and crosses the footlights, fetches such a price in the market that the absence of it, for a woman with a girl to marry, inspires endless terrors and constitutes for the wretched pair (to speak of mother and daughter alone) a sort of social bankruptcy. London doesn’t love the latent or the lurking, has neither time nor taste nor sense for anything less discernible than the red flag in front of the steam-roller. It wants cash over the counter and letters ten feet high. Therefore you see it’s all as yet rather a dark question for poor Nanda—a question that in a way quite occupies the foreground of her mother’s earnest little life. How WILL she look, what will be thought of her and what will she be able to do for herself? She’s at the age when the whole thing—speaking of her ‘attractions,’ her possible share of good looks—is still to a degree in a fog. But everything depends on it.”

Mr. Longdon had by this time come back to him. “Excuse my asking it again—for you take such jumps: what, once more, do you mean by everything?”

“Why naturally her marrying. Above all her marrying early.”

Mr. Longdon stood before the sofa. “What do you mean by early?”

“Well, we do doubtless get up later than at Beccles; but that gives us, you see, shorter days. I mean in a couple of seasons. Soon enough,” Vanderbank developed, “to limit the strain—!” He was moved to higher gaiety by his friend’s expression.

“What do you mean by the strain?”

“Well, the complication of her being there.”

“Being where?”

“You do put one through!” Vanderbank laughed. But he showed himself perfectly prepared. “Out of the school-room and where she is now. In her mother’s drawing-room. At her mother’s fireside.”

Mr. Longdon stared. “But where else should she be?”

“At her husband’s, don’t you see?”

He looked as if he quite saw, yet was nevertheless not to be put off from his original challenge. “Ah certainly; but not as if she had been pushed down the chimney. All in good time.”

“What do you call good time?”

“Why time to make herself loved.”

Vanderbank wondered. “By the men who come to the house?”

Mr. Longdon slightly attenuated this way of putting it. “Yes—and in the home circle. Where’s the ‘strain’ of her being suffered to be a member of it?”

III

Vanderbank at this left his corner of the sofa and, with his hands in his pockets and a manner so amused that it might have passed for excited, took several paces about the room while his interlocutor, watching him, waited for his response. That gentleman, as this response for a minute hung fire, took his turn at sitting down, and then Vanderbank stopped before him with a face in which something had been still more brightly kindled. “You ask me more things than I can tell you. You ask me more than I think you suspect. You must come and see me again—you must let me come and see you. You raise the most interesting questions and we must sooner or later have them all out.”

Mr. Longdon looked happy in such a prospect, but once more took out his watch. “It wants five minutes to midnight. Which means that I must go now.”

“Not in the least. There are satisfactions you too must give.” His host, with an irresistible hand, confirmed him in his position and pressed upon him another cigarette. His resistance rang hollow—it was clearly, he judged, such an occasion for sacrifices. Vanderbank’s view of it meanwhile was quite as marked. “You see there’s ever so much more you must in common kindness tell me.”

Mr. Longdon sat there like a shy singer invited to strike up. “I told you everything at Mrs. Brookenham’s. It comes over me now how I dropped on you.”

“What you told me,” Vanderbank returned, “was excellent so far as it went; but it was only after all that, having caught my name, you had asked of our friend if I belonged to people you had known years before, and then, from what she had said, had—with what you were so good as to call great pleasure—made out that I did. You came round to me on this, after dinner, and gave me a pleasure still greater. But that only takes us part of the way.” Mr. Longdon said nothing, but there was something appreciative in his conscious lapses; they were a tribute to his young friend’s frequent felicity. This personage indeed appeared more and more to take them for that—which was not without its effect on his spirits. At last, with a flight of some freedom, he brought their pause to a close. “You loved Lady Julia.” Then as the attitude of his guest, who serenely met his eyes, was practically a contribution to the subject, he went on with a feeling that he had positively pleased. “You lost her—and you’re unmarried.”

Mr. Longdon’s smile was beautiful—it supplied so many meanings that when presently he spoke he seemed already to have told half his story. “Well, my life took a form. It had to, or I don’t know what would have become of me, and several things that all happened at once helped me out. My father died—I came into the little place in Suffolk. My sister, my only one, who had married and was older than I, lost within a year or two both her husband and her little boy. I offered her, in the country, a home, for her trouble was greater than any trouble of mine. She came, she stayed; it went

on and on and we lived there together. We were sorry for each other and it somehow suited us. But she died two years ago.”

Vanderbank took all this in, only wishing to show—wishing by this time quite tenderly—that he even read into it deeply enough all the unsaid. He filled out another of his friend’s gaps. “And here you are.” Then he invited Mr. Longdon himself to make the stride. “Well, you’ll be a great success.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Why, that we shall be so infatuated with you that we shall make your life a burden to you. You’ll see soon enough what I mean by it.”

“Possibly,” the old man said; “to understand you I shall have to. You speak of something that as yet—with my race practically run—I know nothing about. I was no success as a young man. I mean of the sort that would have made most difference. People wouldn’t look at me—”

“Well, WE shall look at you,” Vanderbank declared. Then he added: “What people do you mean?” And before his friend could reply: “Lady Julia?”

Mr. Longdon’s assent was mute. “Ah she was not the worst! I mean that what made it so bad,” he continued, “was that they all really liked me. Your mother, I think—as to THAT, the dreadful consolatory ‘liking’—even more than the others.”

“My mother?”—Vanderbank was surprised. “You mean there was a question—?”

“Oh for but half a minute! It didn’t take her long. It was five years after your father’s death.”

This explanation was very delicately made. “She COULD marry again.”

“And I suppose you know she did,” Vanderbank returned.

“I knew it soon enough!” With this, abruptly, Mr. Longdon pulled himself forward. “Good-night, good-night.”

“Good-night,” said Vanderbank. “But wasn’t that AFTER Lady Julia?”

On the edge of the sofa, his hands supporting him, Mr. Longdon looked straight. “There was nothing after Lady Julia.”

“I see.” His companion smiled. “My mother was earlier.”

“She was extremely good to me. I’m not speaking of that time at Malvern—that came later.”

“Precisely—I understand. You’re speaking of the first years of her widowhood.”

Mr. Longdon just faltered. “I should call them rather the last. Six months later came her second marriage.”

Vanderbank’s interest visibly improved. “Ah it was THEN? That was about my seventh year.” He called things back and pieced them together. “But she must have been older than you.”

“Yes—a little. She was kindness itself to me at all events, then and afterwards. That was the charm of the weeks at Malvern.”

“I see,” the young man laughed. “The charm was that you had recovered.”

“Oh dear, no!” Mr. Longdon, rather to his mystification, exclaimed. “I’m afraid I hadn’t recovered at all—hadn’t, if that’s what you mean, got over my misery and my melancholy. She knew I hadn’t—and that was what was nice of her. She was a person with whom I could talk about her.”

Vanderbank took a moment to clear up the ambiguity. “Oh you mean you could talk about the OTHER. You hadn’t got over Lady Julia.”

Mr. Longdon sadly smiled at him. “I haven’t got over her yet!” Then, however, as if not to look morbid, he took pains to be clear. “The first wound was bad—but from that one always comes round. Your mother, dear woman, had known how to help me. Lady Julia was at that time her intimate friend—it was she who introduced me there. She couldn’t help what happened—she did her best. What I meant just now was that in the aftertime, when opportunity occurred, she was the one person with whom I could always talk and who always understood.” He lost himself an instant in the deep memories to attest which he had survived alone; then he sighed out as if the taste of it all came back to him with a faint sweetness: “I think they must both have been good to me. At the Malvern time, the particular time I just mentioned to you, Lady Julia was already married, and during those first

years she had been whirled out of my ken. Then her own life took a quieter turn; we met again; I went for a good while often to her house. I think she rather liked the state to which she had reduced me, though she didn't, you know, in the least presume on it. The better a woman is—it has often struck me—the more she enjoys in a quiet way some fellow's having been rather bad, rather dark and desperate, about her—for her. I dare say, I mean, that though Lady Julia insisted I ought to marry she wouldn't really have liked it much if I had. At any rate it was in those years I saw her daughter just cease to be a child—the little girl who was to be transformed by time into the so different person with whom we dined to-night. That comes back to me when I hear you speak of the growing up, in turn, of that person's own daughter."

"I follow you with a sympathy—!" Vanderbank replied. "The situation's reproduced."

"Ah partly—not altogether. The things that are unlike—well, are so VERY unlike." Mr. Longdon for a moment, on this, fixed his companion with eyes that betrayed one of the restless little jumps of his mind. "I told you just now that there's something I seem to make out in you."

"Yes, that was meant for better things?"—Vanderbank frankly took him up. "There IS something, I really believe—meant for ever so much better ones. Those are just the sort I like to be supposed to have a real affinity with. Help me to them, Mr. Longdon; help me to them, and I don't know what I won't do for you!"

"Then after all"—and his friend made the point with innocent sharpness—"you're NOT past saving!"

"Well, I individually—how shall I put it to you? If I tell you," Vanderbank went on, "that I've that sort of fulcrum for salvation which consists at least in a deep consciousness and the absence of a rag of illusion, I shall appear to say I'm wholly different from the world I live in and to that extent present myself as superior and fatuous. Try me at any rate. Let me try myself. Don't abandon me. See what can be done with me. Perhaps I'm after all a case. I shall certainly cling to you."

"You're too clever—you're too clever: that's what's the matter with you all!" Mr. Longdon sighed.

"With us ALL?" Vanderbank echoed. "Dear Mr. Longdon, it's the first time I've heard it. If you should say the matter with ME in particular, why there might be something in it. What you mean at any rate—I see where you come out—is that we're cold and sarcastic and cynical, without the soft human spot. I think you flatter us even while you attempt to warn; but what's extremely interesting at all events is that, as I gather, we made on you this evening, in a particular way, a collective impression—something in which our trifling varieties are merged." His visitor's face, at this, appeared to acknowledge his putting the case in perfection, so that he was encouraged to go on. "There was something particular with which you weren't altogether pleasantly struck."

Mr. Longdon, who decidedly changed colour easily, showed in his clear cheek the effect at once of feeling a finger on his fault and of admiring his companion's insight. But he accepted the situation. "I couldn't help noticing your tone."

"Do you mean its being so low?"

He had smiled at first but looked grave now. "Do you really want to know?"

"Just how you were affected? I assure you there's at this moment nothing I desire nearly so much."

"I'm no judge then," Mr. Longdon began; "I'm no critic; I'm no talker myself. I'm old-fashioned and narrow and ignorant. I've lived for years in a hole. I'm not a man of the world."

Vanderbank considered him with a benevolence, a geniality of approval, that he literally had to hold in check for fear of seeming to patronise. "There's not one of us who can touch you. You're delightful, you're wonderful, and I'm intensely curious to hear you," the young man pursued. "Were we absolutely odious?" Before his guest's puzzled, finally almost pained face, such an air of appreciating so much candour, yet of looking askance at so much freedom, he could only try to smooth the way and light the subject. "You see we don't in the least know where we are. We're lost—and you find

us.” Mr. Longdon, as he spoke, had prepared at last really to go, reaching the door with a manner that denoted, however, by no means so much satiety as an attention that felt itself positively too agitated. Vanderbank had helped him on with the Inverness cape and for an instant detained him by it. “Just tell me as a kindness. DO we talk—”

“Too freely?” Mr. Longdon, with his clear eyes so untouched by time, speculatively murmured.

“Too outrageously. I want the truth.”

The truth evidently for Mr. Longdon was difficult to tell. “Well—it was certainly different.”

“From you and Lady Julia? I see. Well, of course with time SOME change is natural, isn’t it? But so different,” Vanderbank pressed, “that you were really shocked?”

His visitor smiled at this, but the smile somehow made the face graver. “I think I was rather frightened. Good-night.”

BOOK SECOND. LITTLE AGGIE

Mrs. Brookenham stopped on the threshold with the sharp surprise of the sight of her son, and there was disappointment, though rather of the afflicted than of the irritated sort, in the question that, slowly advancing, she launched at him. "If you're still lolling about why did you tell me two hours ago that you were leaving immediately?"

Deep in a large brocaded chair with his little legs stuck out to the fire, he was so much at his ease that he was almost flat on his back. She had evidently roused him from sleep, and it took him a couple of minutes—during which, without again looking at him, she directly approached a beautiful old French secretary, a fine piece of the period of Louis Seize—to justify his presence. "I changed my mind. I couldn't get off."

"Do you mean to say you're not going?"

"Well, I'm thinking it over. What's a fellow to do?" He sat up a little, staring with conscious solemnity at the fire, and if it had been—as it was not—one of the annoyances she in general expected from him, she might have received the impression that his flush was the heat of liquor.

"He's to keep out of the way," she returned—"when he has led one so deeply to hope it." There had been a bunch of keys dangling from the secretary, of which as she said these words Mrs. Brookenham took possession. Her air on observing them had promptly become that of having been in search of them, and a moment after she had passed across the room they were in her pocket. "If you don't go what excuse will you give?"

"Do you mean to YOU, mummy?"

She stood before him and now dismally looked at him. "What's the matter with you? What an extraordinary time to take a nap!"

He had fallen back in the chair, from the depths of which he met her eyes. "Why it's just THE time, mummy. I did it on purpose. I can always go to sleep when I like. I assure you it sees one through things!"

She turned away with impatience and, glancing about the room, perceived on a small table of the same type as the secretary a somewhat massive book with the label of a circulating library, which she proceeded to pick up as for refuge from the impression made on her by her boy. He watched her do this and watched her then slightly pause at the wide window that, in Buckingham Crescent, commanded the prospect they had ramified rearward to enjoy; a medley of smoky brick and spotty stucco, of other undressed backs, of glass invidiously opaque, of roofs and chimney-pots and stables unnaturally near—one of the private pictures that in London, in select situations, run up, as the phrase is, the rent. There was no indication of value now, however, in the character conferred on the scene by a cold spring rain. The place had moreover a confessed out-of-season vacancy. She appeared to have determined on silence for the present mark of her relation with Harold, yet she soon failed to resist a sufficiently poor reason for breaking it. "Be so good as to get out of my chair."

"What will you do for me," he asked, "if I oblige you?"

He never moved—but as if only the more directly and intimately to meet her—and she stood again before the fire and sounded his strange little face. "I don't know what it is, but you give me sometimes a kind of terror."

"A terror, mamma?"

She found another place, sinking sadly down and opening her book, and the next moment he got up and came over to kiss her, on which she drew her cheek wearily aside. "You bore me quite to death," she coldly said, "and I give you up to your fate."

"What do you call my fate?"

"Oh something dreadful—if only by its being publicly ridiculous." She turned vaguely the pages of her book. "You're too selfish—too sickening."

“Oh dear, dear!” he wonderingly whistled while he wandered back to the hearth-rug, on which, with his hands behind him, he lingered a while. He was small and had a slight stoop which somehow gave him character—character of the insidious sort carried out in the acuteness, difficult to trace to a source, of his smooth fair face, where the lines were all curves and the expression all needles. He had the voice of a man of forty and was dressed—as if markedly not for London—with an air of experience that seemed to match it. He pulled down his waistcoat, smoothing himself, feeling his neat hair and looking at his shoes.

“I took your five pounds. Also two of the sovereigns,” he went on. “I left you two pound ten.” His mother jerked up her head at this, facing him in dismay, and, immediately on her feet, passed back to the secretary. “It’s quite as I say,” he insisted; “you should have locked it BEFORE, don’t you know? It grinned at me there with all its charming brasses, and what was I to do? Darling mummy, I COULDN’T start—that was the truth. I thought I should find something—I had noticed; and I do hope you’ll let me keep it, because if you don’t it’s all up with me. I stopped over on purpose—on purpose, I mean, to tell you what I’ve done. Don’t you call that a sense of honour? And now you only stand and glower at me.”

Mrs. Brookenham was, in her forty-first year, still charmingly pretty, and the nearest approach she made at this moment to meeting her son’s description of her was by looking beautifully desperate. She had about her the pure light of youth—would always have it; her head, her figure, her flexibility, her flickering colour, her lovely silly eyes, her natural quavering tone, all played together toward this effect by some trick that had never yet been exposed. It was at the same time remarkable that—at least in the bosom of her family—she rarely wore an appearance of gaiety less qualified than at the present juncture; she suggested for the most part the luxury, the novelty of woe, the excitement of strange sorrows and the cultivation of fine indifferences. This was her special sign—an innocence dimly tragic. It gave immense effect to her other resources. She opened the secretary with the key she had quickly found, then with the aid of another rattled out a small drawer; after which she pushed the drawer back, closing the whole thing. “You terrify me—you terrify me,” she again said.

“How can you say that when you showed me just now how well you know me? Wasn’t it just on account of what you thought I might do that you took out the keys as soon as you came in?” Harold’s manner had a way of clearing up whenever he could talk of himself.

“You’re too utterly disgusting—I shall speak to your father,” with which, going to the chair he had given up, his mother sank down again with her heavy book. There was no anger, however, in her voice, and not even a harsh plaint; only a detached accepted disenchantment. Mrs. Brookenham’s supreme rebellion against fate was just to show with the last frankness how much she was bored.

“No, darling mummy, you won’t speak to my father—you’ll do anything in the world rather than that,” Harold replied, quite as if he were kindly explaining her to herself. “I thank you immensely for the charming way you take what I’ve done; it was because I had a conviction of that that I waited for you to know it. It was all very well to tell you I’d start on my visit—but how the deuce was I to start without a penny in the world? Don’t you see that if you want me to go about you must really enter into my needs?”

“I wish to heaven you’d leave me—I wish to heaven you’d get out of the house,” Mrs. Brookenham went on without looking up.

Harold took out his watch. “Well, mamma, now I AM ready: I wasn’t in the least before. But it will be going forth, you know, quite to seek my fortune. For do you really think—I must have from you what you do think—that it will be all right for me?”

She fixed him at last with her pretty pathos. “You mean for you to go to Brander?”

“You know,” he answered with his manner as of letting her see her own attitude, “you know you try to make me do things you wouldn’t at all do yourself. At least I hope you wouldn’t. And don’t you see that if I so far oblige you I must at least be paid for it?”

His mother leaned back in her chair, gazed for a moment at the ceiling and then closed her eyes. "You ARE frightful," she said. "You're appalling."

"You're always wanting to get me out of the house," he continued; "I think you want to get us ALL out, for you manage to keep Nanda from showing even more than you do me. Don't you think your children good ENOUGH, mummy dear? At any rate it's as plain as possible that if you don't keep us at home you must keep us in other places. One can't live anywhere for nothing—it's all bosh that a fellow saves by staying with people. I don't know how it is for a lady, but a man's practically let in—"

"Do you know you kill me, Harold?" Mrs. Brookenham woefully interposed. But it was with the same remote melancholy that she asked in the next breath: "It wasn't an INVITATION—to Brander?"

"It's as I told you. She said she'd write, fixing a time; but she never did write."

"But if YOU wrote—"

"It comes to the same thing? DOES it?—that's the question. If on my note she didn't write—that's what I mean. Should one simply take it that one's wanted? I like to have these things FROM you, mother. I do, I believe, everything you say; but to feel safe and right I must just HAVE them. Any one WOULD want me, eh?"

Mrs. Brookenham had opened her eyes, but she still attached them to the cornice. "If she hadn't wanted you she'd have written to keep you off. In a great house like that there's always room."

The young man watched her a moment. "How you DO like to tuck us in and then sit up yourself! What do you want to do, anyway? What ARE you up to, mummy?"

She rose at this, turning her eyes about the room as if from the extremity of martyrdom or the wistfulness of some deep thought. Yet when she spoke it was with a different expression, an expression that would have served for an observer as a marked illustration of that disconnectedness of her parts which frequently was laughable even to the degree of contributing to her social success. "You've spent then more than four pounds in five days. It was on Friday I gave them to you. What in the world do you suppose is going to become of me?"

Harold continued to look at her as if the question demanded some answer really helpful. "Do we live beyond our means?"

She now moved her gaze to the floor. "Will you PLEASE get away?"

"Anything to assist you. Only, if I SHOULD find I'm not wanted—?"

She met his look after an instant, and the wan loveliness and vagueness of her own had never been greater. "BE wanted, and you won't find it. You're odious, but you're not a fool."

He put his arms about her now for farewell, and she submitted as if it was absolutely indifferent to her to whose bosom she was pressed. "You do, dearest," he laughed, "say such sweet things!" And with that he reached the door, on opening which he pulled up at a sound from below. "The Duchess! She's coming up."

Mrs. Brookenham looked quickly round the room, but she spoke with utter detachment. "Well, let her come."

"As I'd let her go. I take it as a happy sign SHE won't be at Brander." He stood with his hand on the knob; he had another quick appeal. "But after Tuesday?"

Mrs. Brookenham had passed half round the room with the glide that looked languid but that was really a remarkable form of activity, and had given a transforming touch, on sofa and chairs, to three or four crushed cushions. It was all with the hanging head of a broken lily. "You're to stay till the twelfth."

"But if I AM kicked out?"

It was as a broken lily that she considered it. "Then go to the Mangers."

"Happy thought! And shall I write?"

His mother raised a little more a window-blind. "No—I will."

"Delicious mummy!" And Harold blew her a kiss.

“Yes, rather”—she corrected herself. “Do write—from Brander. It’s the sort of thing for the Mangers. Or even wire.”

“Both?” the young man laughed. “Oh you duck!” he cried. “And from where will YOU let them have it?”

“From Pewbury,” she replied without wincing. “I’ll write on Sunday.”

“Good. How d’ye do, Duchess?”—and Harold, before he disappeared, greeted with a rapid concentration of all the shades of familiarity a large high lady, the visitor he had announced, who rose in the doorway with the manner of a person used to arriving on thresholds very much as people arrive at stations—with the expectation of being “met.”

II

“Good-bye. He’s off,” Mrs. Brookenham, who had remained quite on her own side of the room, explained to her friend.

“Where’s he off to?” this friend enquired with a casual advance and a look not so much at her hostess as at the cushions just rearranged.

“Oh to some places. To Brander to-day.”

“How he does run about!” And the Duchess, still with a glance hither and yon, sank upon the sofa to which she had made her way unaided. Mrs. Brookenham knew perfectly the meaning of this glance: she had but three or four comparatively good pieces, whereas the Duchess, rich with the spoils of Italy, had but three or four comparatively bad. This was the relation, as between intimate friends, that the Duchess visibly preferred, and it was quite groundless, in Buckingham Crescent, ever to enter the drawing-room with an expression suspicious of disloyalty. The Duchess was a woman who so cultivated her passions that she would have regarded it as disloyal to introduce there a new piece of furniture in an underhand way—that is without a full appeal to herself, the highest authority, and the consequent bestowal of opportunity to nip the mistake in the bud. Mrs. Brookenham had repeatedly asked herself where in the world she might have found the money to be disloyal. The Duchess’s standard was of a height—! It matched for that matter her other elements, which were wontedly conspicuous as usual as she sat there suggestive of early tea. She always suggested tea before the hour, and her friend always, but with so different a wistfulness, rang for it. “Who’s to be at Brander?” she asked.

“I haven’t the least idea—he didn’t tell me. But they’ve always a lot of people.”

“Oh I know—extraordinary mixtures. Has he been there before?”

Mrs. Brookenham thought. “Oh yes—if I remember—more than once. In fact her note—which he showed me, but which only mentioned ‘some friends’—was a sort of appeal on the ground of something or other that had happened the last time.”

The Duchess dealt with it. “She writes the most extraordinary notes.”

“Well, this was nice, I thought,” Mrs. Brookenham said—“from a woman of her age and her immense position to so young a man.”

Again the Duchess reflected. “My dear, she’s not an American and she’s not on the stage. Aren’t those what you call positions in this country? And she’s also not a hundred.”

“Yes, but Harold’s a mere baby.”

“Then he doesn’t seem to want for nurses!” the Duchess replied. She smiled at her hostess. “Your children are like their mother—they’re eternally young.”

“Well, I’M not a hundred!” moaned Mrs. Brookenham as if she wished with dim perversity she were.

“Every one’s at any rate awfully kind to Harold.” She waited a moment to give her visitor the chance to pronounce that eminently natural, but no pronouncement came—nothing but the footman

who had answered her ring and of whom she ordered tea. “And where did you say YOU’RE going?” she enquired after this.

“For Easter?” The Duchess achieved a direct encounter with her charming eyes—which was not in general an easy feat. “I didn’t say I was going anywhere. I haven’t of a sudden changed my habits. You know whether I leave my child—except in the sense of having left her an hour ago at Mr. Garlick’s class in Modern Light Literature. I confess I’m a little nervous about the subjects and am going for her at five.”

“And then where do you take her?”

“Home to her tea. Where should you think?”

Mrs. Brookenham declined, in connexion with the matter, any responsibility of thought; she did indeed much better by saying after a moment: “You ARE devoted!”

“Miss Merriman has her afternoon—I can’t imagine what they do with their afternoons,” the Duchess went on. “But she’s to be back in the school-room at seven.”

“And you have Aggie till then?”

“Till then,” said the Duchess cheerfully. “You’re off for Easter to—where is it?” she continued.

Mrs. Brookenham had received with no flush of betrayal the various discriminations thus conveyed by her visitor, and her only revenge for the moment was to look as sweetly resigned as if she really saw what was in them. Where were they going for Easter? She had to think an instant, but she brought it out. “Oh to Pewbury—we’ve been engaged so long that I had forgotten. We go once a year—one does it for Edward.”

“Ah you spoil him!” smiled the Duchess. “Who’s to be there?”

“Oh the usual thing, I suppose. A lot of my lord’s tiresome supporters.”

“To pay his debt? Then why are you poor things asked?”

Mrs. Brookenham looked, on this, quite adorably—that is most wonderingly—grave. “How do I know, my dear Jane, why in the world we’re ever asked anywhere? Fancy people wanting Edward!” she exhaled with stupefaction. “Yet we can never get off Pewbury.”

“You’re better for getting on, cara mia, than for getting off!” the Duchess blandly returned. She was a person of no small presence, filling her place, however, without ponderosity, with a massiveness indeed rather artfully kept in bounds. Her head, her chin, her shoulders were well aloft, but she had not abandoned the cultivation of a “figure” or any of the distinctively finer reasons for passing as a handsome woman. She was secretly at war moreover, in this endeavour, with a lurking no less than with a public foe, and thoroughly aware that if she didn’t look well she might at times only, and quite dreadfully, look good. There were definite ways of escape, none of which she neglected and from the total of which, as she flattered herself, the air of distinction almost mathematically resulted. This air corresponded superficially with her acquired Calabrian sonorities, from her voluminous title down, but the colourless hair, the passionless forehead, the mild cheek and long lip of the British matron, the type that had set its trap for her earlier than any other, were elements difficult to deal with and were at moments all a sharp observer saw. The battle-ground then was the haunting danger of the bourgeois. She gave Mrs. Brookenham no time to resent her last note before enquiring if Nanda were to accompany the couple.

“Mercy mercy, no—she’s not asked.” Mrs. Brookenham, on Nanda’s behalf, fairly radiated obscurity. “My children don’t go where they’re not asked.”

“I never said they did, love,” the Duchess returned. “But what then do you do with her?”

“If you mean socially”—Mrs. Brookenham looked as if there might be in some distant sphere, for which she almost yearned, a maternal opportunity very different from that—“if you mean socially, I don’t do anything at all. I’ve never pretended to do anything. You know as well as I do, dear Jane, that I haven’t begun yet.” Jane’s hostess now spoke as simply as an earnest anxious child. She gave a vague patient sigh. “I suppose I must begin!”

The Duchess remained for a little rather grimly silent. “How old is she—twenty?”

“Thirty!” said Mrs. Brookenham with distilled sweetness. Then with no transition of tone: “She has gone for a few days to Tishy Grendon.”

“In the country?”

“She stays with her to-night in Hill Street. They go down together to-morrow. Why hasn’t Aggie been?” Mrs. Brookenham went on.

The Duchess handsomely stared. “Been where?”

“Why here, to see Nanda.”

“Here?” the Duchess echoed, fairly looking again about the room. “When is Nanda ever here?”

“Ah you know I’ve given her a room of her own—the sweetest little room in the world.” Mrs. Brookenham never looked so comparatively hopeful as when obliged to explain. “She has everything there a girl can want.”

“My dear woman,” asked the Duchess, “has she sometimes her own mother?”

The men had now come in to place the tea-table, and it was the movements of the red-haired footman that Mrs. Brookenham followed. “You had better ask my child herself.”

The Duchess was frank and jovial. “I would, I promise you, if I could get at her! But isn’t that woman always with her?”

Mrs. Brookenham smoothed the little embroidered tea-cloth. “Do you call Tishy Grendon a woman?”

Again the Duchess had one of her pauses, which were indeed so frequent in her talks with this intimate that an auditor could sometimes wonder what particular form of relief they represented. They might have been a habit proceeding from the fear of undue impatience. If the Duchess had been as impatient with Mrs. Brookenham as she would possibly have seemed without them her frequent visits in the face of irritation would have had to be accounted for. “What do YOU call her?” she demanded.

“Why Nanda’s best friend—if not her only one. That’s the place I SHOULD have liked for Aggie,” Mrs. Brookenham ever so graciously smiled.

The Duchess hereupon, going beyond her, gave way to free mirth. “My dear thing, you’re delightful. Aggie OR Tishy is a sweet thought. Since you’re so good as to ask why Aggie has fallen off you’ll excuse my telling you that you’ve just named the reason. You’ve known ever since we came to England what I feel about the proper persons—and the most improper—for her to meet. The Tishy Grendons are not a bit the proper.”

Mrs. Brookenham continued to assist a little in the preparations for tea. “Why not say at once, Jane”—and her tone, in its appeal, was almost infantine—“that you’ve come at last to placing even poor Nanda, for Aggie’s wonderful purpose, in the same impossible class?”

The Duchess took her time, but at last she accepted her duty. “Well, if you will have it. You know my ideas. If it isn’t my notion of the way to bring up a girl to give her up, in extreme youth, to an intimacy with a young married woman who’s both unhappy and silly, whose conversation has absolutely no limits, who says everything that comes into her head and talks to the poor child about God only knows what—if I should never dream of such an arrangement for my niece I can almost as little face the prospect of throwing her MUCH, don’t you see? with any young person exposed to such an association. It would be in the natural order certainly”—in spite of which natural order the Duchess made the point with but moderate emphasis—“that, since dear Edward is my cousin, Aggie should see at least as much of Nanda as of any other girl of their age. But what will you have? I must recognise the predicament I’m placed in by the more and more extraordinary development of English manners. Many things have altered, goodness knows, since I was Aggie’s age, but nothing’s so different as what you all do with your girls. It’s all a muddle, a compromise, a monstrosity, like everything else you produce; there’s nothing in it that goes on all-fours. I see but one consistent way, which is our fine old foreign way and which makes—in the upper classes, mind you, for it’s with them only I’m concerned—des femmes bien gracieuses. I allude to the immemorial custom of my husband’s race, which was good enough for his mother and his mother’s mother, for Aggie’s own, for

his other sisters, for toutes ces dames. It would have been good enough for my child, as I call her—my dear husband called her HIS—if, not losing her parents, she had remained in her own country. She would have been brought up there under an anxious eye—that’s the great point; privately, carefully, tenderly, and with what she was NOT to learn—till the proper time—looked after quite as much as the rest. I can only go on with her in that spirit and make of her, under Providence, what I consider any young person of her condition, of her name, of her particular traditions, should be. Voila, ma chere. Should you put it to me whether I think you’re surrounding Nanda with any such security as that—well, I shouldn’t be able to help it if I offended you by an honest answer. What it comes to, simply stated, is that really she must choose between Aggie and Tishy. I’m afraid I should shock you were I to tell you what I should think of myself for packing MY child, all alone, off for a week with Mrs. Grendon.”

Mrs. Brookenham, who had many talents, had none perhaps that she oftener found useful than that of listening with the appearance of being fairly hypnotised. It was the way she listened to her housekeeper at their regular morning conference, and if the rejoinder ensuing upon it frequently appeared to have nothing to do with her manner this was a puzzle for her interlocutor alone. “Oh of course I know your theory, dear Jane, and I dare say it’s very charming and old-fashioned and, if you like, aristocratic, in a frowsy foolish old way—though even upon that, at the same time, there would be something too to be said. But I can only congratulate you on finding it more workable than there can be any question of MY finding it. If you’re all armed for the sacrifices you speak of I simply am not. I don’t think I’m quite a monster, but I don’t pretend to be a saint. I’m an English wife and an English mother—I live in the mixed English world. My daughter, at any rate, is just my daughter, I thank my stars, and one of a good English bunch: she’s not the unique niece of my dead Italian husband, nor doubtless either, in spite of her excellent birth, of a lineage, like Aggie’s, so very tremendous. I’ve my life to lead and she’s a part of it. Sugar?” she wound up on a still softer note as she handed the cup of tea.

“Never! Well, with ME” said the Duchess with spirit, “she would be all.”

“All’ is soon said! Life is composed of many things,” Mrs. Brookenham gently rang out—“of such mingled intertwined strands!” Then still with the silver bell, “Don’t you really think Tishy nice?” she asked.

“I think little girls should live with little girls and young femmes du monde so immensely initiated should—well,” said the Duchess with a toss of her head, “let them alone. What do they want of them ‘at all at all?’”

“Well, my dear, if Tishy strikes you as ‘initiated’ all one can ask is ‘Initiated into what?’ I should as soon think of applying such a term to a little shivering shorn lamb. Is it your theory,” Mrs. Brookenham pursued, “that our unfortunate unmarried daughters are to have no intelligent friends?”

“Unfortunate indeed,” cried the Duchess, “precisely BECAUSE they’re unmarried, and unmarried, if you don’t mind my saying so, a good deal because they’re unmarriageable. Men, after all, the nice ones—by which I mean the possible ones—are not on the lookout for little brides whose usual associates are so up to snuff. It’s not their idea that the girls they marry shall already have been pitchforked—by talk and contacts and visits and newspapers and by the way the poor creatures rush about and all the extraordinary things they do—quite into EVERYTHING. A girl’s most intelligent friend is her mother—or the relative acting as such. Perhaps you consider that Tishy takes your place!”

Mrs. Brookenham waited so long to say what she considered that before she next spoke the question appeared to have dropped. Then she only replied as if suddenly remembering her manners: “Won’t you eat something?” She indicated a particular plate. “One of the nice little round ones?” The Duchess appropriated a nice little round one and her hostess presently went on: “There’s one thing I mustn’t forget—don’t let us eat them ALL. I believe they’re what Lord Petherton really comes for.”

The Duchess finished her mouthful imperturbably before she took this up. “Does he come so often?”

Mrs. Brookenham might have been, for judicious candour, the Muse of History. “I don’t know what he calls it; but he said yesterday that he’d come today. I’ve had tea earlier for you,” she went on with her most melancholy kindness—“and he’s always late. But we mustn’t, between us, lick the platter clean.”

The Duchess entered very sufficiently into her companion’s tone. “Oh I don’t feel at all obliged to consider him, for he has not of late particularly put himself out for me. He has not been to see me since I don’t know when, and the last time he did come he brought Mr. Mitchett.”

“Here it was the other way round. It was Mr. Mitchett, the other year, who first brought Lord Petherton.”

“And who,” asked the Duchess, “had first brought Mr. Mitchett?”

Mrs. Brookenham, meeting her friend’s eyes, looked for an instant as if trying to recall. “I give it up. I muddle beginnings.”

“That doesn’t matter if you only MAKE them,” the Duchess smiled.

“No, does it?” To which Mrs. Brookenham added: “Did he bring Mr. Mitchett for Aggie?”

“If he did they’ll have been disappointed. Neither of them has seen, in my house, the tip of her nose.” The Duchess announced it with a pomp of pride.

“Ah but with your ideas that doesn’t prevent.”

“Prevent what?”

“Why what I suppose you call the pourparlers.”

“For Aggie’s hand? My dear,” said the Duchess, “I’m glad you do me the justice of feeling that I’m a person to take time by the forelock. It was not, as you seem to remember, with the sight of Mr. Mitchett that the question of Aggie’s hand began to occupy me. I should be ashamed of myself if it weren’t constantly before me and if I hadn’t my feelers out in more quarters than one. But I’ve not so much as thought of Mr. Mitchett—who, rich as he may be, is the son of a shoemaker and superlatively hideous—for a reason I don’t at all mind telling you. Don’t be outraged if I say that I’ve for a long time hoped you yourself would find the right use for him.” She paused—at present with a momentary failure of assurance, from which she rallied, however, to proceed with a burst of earnestness that was fairly noble. “Forgive me if I just tell you once for all how it strikes me, I’m stupefied at your not seeming to recognise either your interest or your duty. Oh I know you want to, but you appear to me—in your perfect good faith of course—utterly at sea. They’re one and the same thing, don’t you make out? your interest and your duty. Why isn’t it convincingly plain to you that the thing to do with Nanda is just to marry her—and to marry her soon? That’s the great thing—do it while you CAN. If you don’t want her downstairs—at which, let me say, I don’t in the least wonder—your remedy is to take the right alternative. Don’t send her to Tishy—”

“Send her to Mr. Mitchett?” Mrs. Brookenham unresentfully quavered. Her colour, during her visitor’s address had distinctly risen, but there was no irritation in her voice. “How do you know, Jane, that I don’t want her downstairs?”

The Duchess looked at her with an audacity confirmed by the absence from her face of everything but the plaintive. “There you are, with your eternal English false positions! J’aime, moi, les situations nettes—je rien comprends pas d’autres. It wouldn’t be to your honour—to that of your delicacy—that with your impossible house you SHOULD wish to plant your girl in your drawing-room. But such a way of keeping her out of it as throwing her into a worse—!”

“Well, Jane, you do say things to me!” Mrs. Brookenham blandly broke in. She had sunk back into her chair; her hands, in her lap pressed themselves together and her wan smile brought a tear into each of her eyes by the very effort to be brighter. It might have been guessed of her that she hated to seem to care, but that she had other dislikes too. “If one were to take up, you know, some of the things you say—!” And she positively sighed for the wealth of amusement at them of which her tears were the sign. Her friend could quite match her indifference. “Well, my child, TAKE them up; if you were to do that with them candidly, one by one, you would do really very much what I should like to bring

you to. Do you see?” Mrs. Brookenham’s failure to repudiate the vision appeared to suffice, and her visitor cheerfully took a further jump. “As much of Tishy as she wants—AFTER. But not before.”

“After what?”

“Well—say after Mr. Mitchett. Mr. Mitchett won’t take her after Mrs. Grendon.”

“And what are your grounds for assuming that he’ll take her at all?” Then as the Duchess hung fire a moment: “Have you got it by chance from Lord Petherton?”

The eyes of the two women met for a little on this, and there might have been a consequence of it in the manner of what came. “I’ve got it from not being a fool. Men, I repeat, like the girls they marry—”

“Oh I already know your old song! The way they like the girls they DON’T marry seems to be,” Mrs. Brookenham mused, “what more immediately concerns us. You had better wait till you HAVE made Aggie’s fortune perhaps—to be so sure of the working of your system. Pardon me, darling, if I don’t take you for an example until you’ve a little more successfully become one. I know what the sort of men worth speaking of are not looking for. They ARE looking for smart safe sensible English girls.”

The Duchess glanced at the clock. “What’s Mr. Vanderbank looking for?”

Her companion appeared to oblige her by anxiously thinking. “Oh, HE, I’m afraid, poor dear—for nothing at all!”

The Duchess had taken off a glove to appease her appetite, and now, drawing it on, she smoothed it down. “I think he has his ideas.”

“The same as yours?”

“Well, more like them than like yours.”

“Ah perhaps then—for he and I,” said Mrs. Brookenham, “don’t agree, I feel, on two things in the world. So you think poor Mitchy,” she went on, “who’s the son of a shoemaker and who might be the grandson of a grasshopper, good enough for my child.”

The Duchess appreciated for a moment the superior fit of her glove. “I look facts in the face. It’s exactly what I’m doing for Aggie.” Then she grew easy to extravagance. “What are you giving her?”

But Mrs. Brookenham took without wincing whatever, as between a masterful relative and an exposed frivolity, might have been the sting of it. “That you must ask Edward. I haven’t the least idea.”

“There you are again—the virtuous English mother! I’ve got Aggie’s little fortune in an old stocking and I count it over every night. If you’ve no old stocking for Nanda there are worse fates than shoemakers and grasshoppers. Even WITH one, you know, I don’t at all say that I should sniff at poor Mitchy. We must take what we can get and I shall be the first to take it. You can’t have everything for ninepence.” And the Duchess got up—shining, however, with a confessed light of fantasy. “Speak to him, my dear—speak to him!”

“Do you mean offer him my child?”

She laughed at the intonation. “There you are once more—vous autres! If you’re shocked at the idea you place drolement your delicacy. I’d offer mine to the son of a chimney-sweep if the principal guarantees were there. Nanda’s charming—you don’t do her justice. I don’t say Mr. Mitchett’s either beautiful or noble, and he certainly hasn’t as much distinction as would cover the point of a pin. He doesn’t mind moreover what he says—the lengths he sometimes goes to!—but that,” added the Duchess with decision, “is no doubt much a matter of how he finds you’ll take it. And after marriage what does it signify? He has forty thousand a year, an excellent idea of how to take care of it and a good disposition.”

Mrs. Brookenham sat still; she only looked up at her friend. “Is it by Lord Petherton that you know of his excellent idea?”

The Duchess showed she was challenged, but also that she made allowances. “I go by my impression. But Lord Petherton HAS spoken for him.”

“He ought to do that,” said Mrs. Brookenham—“since he wholly lives on him.”

“Lord Petherton—on Mr. Mitchett?” The Duchess stared, but rather in amusement than in horror. “Why, hasn’t he a—property?”

“The loveliest. Mr. Mitchett’s his property. Didn’t you KNOW?” There was an artless wail in Mrs. Brookenham’s surprise.

“How should I know—still a stranger as I’m often rather happy to feel myself here and choosing my friends and picking my steps very much, I can assure you—how should I know about all your social scandals and things?”

“Oh we don’t call THAT a social scandal!” Mrs. Brookenham inimitably returned.

“Well, if you should wish to you’d have the way I tell you of to stop it. Divert the stream of Mr. Mitchett’s wealth.”

“Oh there’s plenty for every one!”—Mrs. Brookenham kept up her tone. “He’s always giving us things—bonbons and dinners and opera-boxes.”

“He has never given ME any,” the Duchess contentedly declared.

Mrs. Brookenham waited a little. “Lord Petherton has the giving of some. He has never in his life before, I imagine, made so many presents.”

“Ah then it’s a shame one has nothing!” On which before reaching the door, the Duchess changed the subject. “You say I never bring Aggie. If you like I’ll bring her back.”

Mrs. Brookenham wondered. “Do you mean today?”

“Yes, when I’ve picked her up. It will be something to do with her till Miss Merriman can take her.”

“Delighted, dearest; do bring her. And I think she should SEE Mr. Mitchett.”

“Shall I find him here too then?”

“Oh take the chance.”

The two women, on this, exchanged, tacitly and across the room—the Duchess at the door, which a servant had arrived to open for her, and Mrs. Brookenham still at her tea-table—a further stroke of intercourse, over which the latter was not on this occasion the first to lower her lids. “I think I’ve shown high scruples,” the departing guest said, “but I understand then that I’m free.”

“Free as air, dear Jane.”

“Good.” Then just as she was off, “Ah dear old Edward!” the guest exclaimed. Her kinsman, as she was fond of calling him, had reached the top of the staircase, and Mrs. Brookenham, by the fire, heard them meet on the landing—heard also the Duchess protest against his turning to see her down. Mrs. Brookenham, listening to them, hoped Edward would accept the protest and think it sufficient to leave her with the footman. Their common consciousness that she was a kind of cousin, a consciousness not devoid of satisfaction, was quite consistent with a view, early arrived at, of the absurdity of any fuss about her.

III

When Mr. Brookenham appeared his wife was prompt. “She’s coming back for Lord Petherton.”

“Oh!” he simply said.

“There’s something between them.”

“Oh!” he merely repeated. And it would have taken many such sounds on his part to represent a spirit of response discernible to any one but his mate.

“There have been things before,” she went on, “but I haven’t felt sure. Don’t you know how one has sometimes a flash?”

It couldn’t be said of Edward Brookenham, who seemed to bend for sitting down more hinges than most men, that he looked as if he knew either this or anything else. He had a pale cold face, marked and made regular, made even in a manner handsome, by a hardness of line in which, oddly,

there was no significance, no accent. Clean-shaven, slightly bald, with unlighted grey eyes and a mouth that gave the impression of not working easily, he suggested a stippled drawing by an inferior master. Lean moreover and stiff, and with the air of having here and there in his person a bone or two more than his share, he had once or twice, at fancy-balls, been thought striking in a dress copied from one of Holbein's English portraits. But when once some such meaning as that had been put into him it took a long time to put another, a longer time than even his extreme exposure or anybody's study of the problem had yet made possible. If anything particular had finally been expected from him it might have been a summary or an explanation of the things he had always not said; but there was something in him that had long since pacified all impatience, drugged all curiosity. He had never in his life answered such a question as his wife had just put him and which she would not have put had she feared a reply. So dry and decent and even distinguished did he look, as if he had positively been created to meet a propriety and match some other piece, that lady, with her famous perceptions, would no more have appealed to him seriously on a general proposition than she would, for such a response, have rung the drawing-room bell. He was none the less held to have a great promiscuous wisdom. "What is it that's between them?" he demanded.

"What's between any woman and the man she's making up to?"

"Why there may often be nothing. I didn't know she even particularly knew him," Brookenham added.

"It's exactly what she would like to prevent any one's knowing, and her coming here to be with him when she knows I know SHE knows—don't you see?—that he's to be here, is just one of those calculations that ARE subtle enough to put off the scent a woman who has but half a nose." Mrs. Brookenham as she spoke appeared to attest by the pretty star-gazing way she thrust it into the air her own possession of the totality of such a feature. "I don't know yet quite what I think, but one wakes up to such things soon enough."

"Do you suppose it's her idea that he'll marry her?" Brookenham asked in his colourless way.

"My dear Edward!" his wife murmured for all answer.

"But if she can see him in other places why should she want to see him here?" Edward persisted in a voice destitute of expression.

Mrs. Brookenham now had plenty of that. "Do you mean if she can see him in his own house?"

"No cream, please," her husband said. "Hasn't she a house too?"

"Yes, but so pervaded all over by Aggie and Miss Merriman."

"Oh!" Brookenham commented.

"There has always been some man—I've always known there has. And now it's Petherton," said his companion.

"But where's the attraction?"

"In HIM? Why lots of women could tell you. Petherton has had a career."

"But I mean in old Jane."

"Well, I dare say lots of men could tell you. She's no older than any one else. She has also such great elements."

"Oh I dare say she's all right," Brookenham returned as if his interest in the case had dropped. You might have felt you got a little nearer to him on guessing that in so peopled a circle satiety was never far from him.

"I mean for instance she has such a grand idea of duty. She thinks we're nowhere!"

"Nowhere?"

"With our children—with our home life. She's awfully down on Tishy."

"Tishy?"—Edward appeared for a moment at a loss.

"Tishy Grendon—and her craze for Nanda."

"Has she a craze for Nanda?"

"Surely I told you Nanda's to be with her for Easter."

“I believe you did,” he bethought himself, “but you didn’t say anything about a craze. And where’s Harold?” he went on.

“He’s at Brander. That is he will be by dinner. He has just gone.”

“And how does he get there?”

“Why by the South-Western. They’ll send to meet him.”

Brookenham appeared for a moment to view this statement in the dry light of experience. “They’ll only send if there are others too.”

“Of course then there’ll be others—lots. The more the better for Harold.”

This young man’s father was silent a little. “Perhaps—if they don’t play high.”

“Ah,” said his mother, “however Harold plays he has a way of winning.”

“He has a way too of being a hopeless ass. What I meant was how he comes there at all,” Edward explained.

“Why as any one comes—by being invited. She wrote to him—weeks ago.”

Brookenham just traceably took this in, but to what profit was not calculable. “To Harold? Very good-natured.” He had another short reflexion, after which he continued: “If they don’t send he’ll be in for five miles in a fly—and the man will see that he gets his money.”

“They WILL send—after her note.”

“Did it say so?”

Her melancholy eyes seemed, from afar, to run over the page. “I don’t remember—but it was so cordial.”

Again he meditated. “That often doesn’t prevent one’s being let in for ten shillings.”

There was more gloom in this forecast than his wife had desired to produce. “Well, my dear Edward, what do you want me to do? Whatever a young man does, it seems to me, he’s let in for ten shillings.”

“Ah but he needn’t be—that’s my point. *I* wasn’t at his age.”

Harold’s mother took up her book again. “Perhaps you weren’t the same success! I mean at such places.”

“Well, I didn’t borrow money to make me one—as I’ve a sharp idea our young scamp does.”

Mrs. Brookenham hesitated. “From whom do you mean—the Jews?”

He looked at her as if her vagueness might be assumed. “No. They, I take it, are not quite so cordial to him, since you call it so, as the old ladies. He gets it from Mitchy.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Brookenham. “Are you very sure?” she then demanded.

He had got up and put his empty cup back on the tea-table, wandering afterwards a little about the room and looking out, as his wife had done half an hour before, at the dreary rain and the now duskier ugliness. He reverted in this attitude, with a complete unconsciousness of making for irritation, to an issue they might be supposed to have dropped. “He’ll have a lovely drive for his money!” His companion, however, said nothing and he presently came round again. “No, I’m not absolutely sure—of his having had it from Mitchy. If I were I should do something.”

“What would you do?” She put it as if she couldn’t possibly imagine.

“I’d speak to him.”

“To Harold?”

“No—that might just put it into his head.” Brookenham walked up and down a little with his hands in his pockets, after which, with a complete concealment of the steps of the transition, “Where are we dining to-night?” he brought out.

“Nowhere, thank heaven. We grace our own board.”

“Oh—with those fellows, as you said, and Jane?”

“That’s not for dinner. The Baggers and Mary Pinthorpe and—upon my word I forget.”

“You’ll see when she comes,” suggested Brookenham, who was again at the window.

“It isn’t a she—it’s two or three he’s, I think,” his wife replied with her indifferent anxiety. “But I don’t know what dinner it is,” she bethought herself; “it may be the one that’s after Easter. Then that one’s this one,” she added with her eyes once more on her book.

“Well, it’s a relief to dine at home”—and Brookenham faced about. “Would you mind finding out?” he asked with some abruptness.

“Do you mean who’s to dine?”

“No, that doesn’t matter. But whether Mitchy HAS come down.”

“I can only find out by asking him.”

“Oh *I* could ask him.” He seemed disappointed at his wife’s want of resource.

“And you don’t want to?”

He looked coldly, from before the fire, over the prettiness of her brown bent head. “It will be such a beastly bore if he admits it.”

“And you think poor I can make him not admit it?” She put the question as if it were really her own thought too, but they were a couple who could, even face to face and unlike the augurs behind the altar, think these things without laughing. “If he SHOULD admit it,” Mrs. Brookenham threw in, “will you give me the money?”

“The money?”

“To pay Mitchy back.”

She had now raised her eyes to her husband, but, turning away, he failed to meet them. “He’ll deny it.”

“Well, if they all deny it,” she presently remarked, “it’s a simple enough matter. I’m sure *I* don’t want them to come down on us! But that’s the advantage,” she almost prattled on, “of having so many such charming friends. They DON’T come down.”

This again was a remark of a sweep that there appeared to be nothing in Brookenham’s mind to match; so that, scarcely pausing in the walk he had resumed, he only said: “Who do you mean by ‘all’?”

“Why if he has had anything from Mitchy I dare say he has had something from Van.”

“Oh!” Brookenham returned as if with a still deeper drop of interest.

“They oughtn’t to do it,” she declared; “they ought to tell us, and when they don’t it serves them right.” Even this observation, however, failed to rouse in her husband a response, and, as she had quite formed the habit of doing, she philosophically answered herself. “But I don’t suppose they do it on spec.”

It was less apparent than ever what Edward supposed. “Oh Van hasn’t money to chuck about.”

“Ah I only mean a sovereign here and there.”

“Well,” Brookenham threw out after another turn, “I think Van, you know, is your affair.”

“It ALL seems to be my affair!” she lamented too woefully to have other than a comic effect. “And of course then it will be still more so if he should begin to apply to Mr. Longdon.”

“We must stop that in time.”

“Do you mean by warning Mr. Longdon and requesting him immediately to tell us? That won’t be very pleasant,” Mrs. Brookenham noted.

“Well then wait and see.”

She waited only a minute—it might have appeared she already saw. “I want him to be kind to Harold and can’t help thinking he will.”

“Yes, but I fancy that that will be his notion of it—keeping him from making debts. I dare say one needn’t trouble about him,” Brookenham added. “He can take care of himself.”

“He appears to have done so pretty well all these years,” she mused. “As I saw him in my childhood I see him now, and I see now that I saw then even how awfully in love he was with mamma. He’s too lovely about mamma,” Mrs. Brookenham pursued.

“Oh!” her husband replied.

The vivid past held her a moment. “I see now I must have known a lot as a child.”

“Oh!” her companion repeated.

“I want him to take an interest in us. Above all in the children. He ought to like us”—she followed it up. “It will be a sort of ‘poetic justice.’ He sees the reasons for himself and we mustn’t prevent it.” She turned the possibilities over, but they produced a reserve. “The thing is I don’t see how he CAN like Harold.”

“Then he won’t lend him money,” said Brookenham with all his grimness.

This contingency too she considered. “You make me feel as if I wished he would—which is too dreadful. And I don’t think he really likes ME!” she went on.

“Oh!” her husband again ejaculated. “I mean not utterly REALLY. He has to try to. But it won’t make any difference,” she next remarked. “Do you mean his trying?”

“No, I mean his not succeeding. He’ll be just the same.” She saw it steadily and saw it whole. “On account of mamma.”

Brookenham also, with his perfect propriety, put it before himself. “And will he—on account of your mother—also like ME?”

She weighed it. “No, Edward.” She covered him with her loveliest expression. “No, not really either. But it won’t make any difference.” This time she had pulled him up.

“Not if he doesn’t like Harold or like you or like me?” Edward clearly found himself able to accept only the premise.

“He’ll be perfectly loyal. It will be the advantage of mamma!” Mrs. Brookenham cried. “Mamma, Edward,” she brought out with a flash of solemnity—“mamma WAS wonderful. There have been times when I’ve always felt her still with us, but Mr. Longdon makes it somehow so real. Whether she’s with me or not, at any rate, she’s with HIM; so that when HE’S with me, don’t you see—?”

“It comes to the same thing?” her husband intelligently asked. “I see. And when was he with you last?”

“Not since the day he dined—but that was only last week. He’ll come soon—I know from Van.”

“And what does Van know?”

“Oh all sorts of things. He has taken the greatest fancy to him.”

“The old boy—to Van?”

“Van to Mr. Longdon. And the other way too. Mr. Longdon has been most kind to him.”

Brookenham still moved about. “Well, if he likes Van and doesn’t like US, what good will that do us?”

“You’d understand soon enough if you felt Van’s loyalty.”

“Oh the things you expect me to feel, my dear!” Edward Brookenham lightly moaned.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. But he IS as loyal to me as Mr. Longdon to mamma.”

The statement produced on his part an unusual vision of the comedy of things. “Every Jenny has her Jockey!” Yet perhaps—remarkably enough—there was even more imagination in his next words. “And what sort of means?”

“Mr. Longdon? Oh very good. Mamma wouldn’t have been the loser. Not that she cared. He MUST like Nanda,” Mrs. Brookenham wound up.

Her companion appeared to look at the idea and then meet it. “He’ll have to see her first.”

“Oh he shall see her!” she rang out. “It’s time for her at any rate to sit downstairs.”

“It was time, you know, *I* thought, a year ago.”

“Yes, I know what you thought. But it wasn’t.”

She had spoken with decision, but he seemed unwilling to concede the point. “You allowed yourself she was all ready.”

“SHE was all ready—yes. But I wasn’t. I am now,” Mrs. Brookenham, with a fine emphasis on her adverb, proclaimed as she turned to meet the opening of the door and the appearance of

the butler, whose announcement—“Lord Petherton and Mr. Mitchett”—might for an observer have seemed immediately to offer support to her changed state.

IV

Lord Petherton, a man of five-and-thirty, whose robust but symmetrical proportions gave to his dark blue double-breasted coat an air of tightness that just failed of compromising his tailor, had for his main facial sign a certain pleasant brutality, the effect partly of a bold handsome parade of carnivorous teeth, partly of an expression of nose suggesting that this feature had paid a little, in the heat of youth, for some aggression at the time admired and even publicly commemorated. He would have been ugly, he substantively granted, had he not been happy; he would have been dangerous had he not been warranted. Many things doubtless performed for him this last service, but none so much as the delightful sound of his voice, the voice, as it were, of another man, a nature reclaimed, supercivilised, adjusted to the perpetual “chaff” which kept him smiling in a way that would have been a mistake and indeed an impossibility if he had really been witty. His bright familiarity was that of a young prince whose confidence had never had to falter, and the only thing that at all qualified the resemblance was the equal familiarity excited in his subjects.

Mr. Mitchett had so little intrinsic appearance that an observer would have felt indebted for help in placing him to the rare prominence of his colourless eyes and the positive attention drawn to his chin by the precipitation of its retreat from discovery. Dressed on the other hand not as gentlemen dress in London to pay their respects to the fair, he excited by the exhibition of garments that had nothing in common save the violence and the independence of their pattern a belief that in the desperation of humility he wished to render public his having thrown to the winds the effort to please. It was written all over him that he had judged once for all his personal case and that, as his character, superficially disposed to gaiety, deprived him of the resource of shyness and shade, the effect of comedy might not escape him if secured by a real plunge. There was comedy therefore in the form of his pot-hat and the colour of his spotted shirt, in the systematic disagreement, above all, of his coat, waistcoat and trousers. It was only on long acquaintance that his so many ingenious ways of showing he appreciated his commonness could present him as secretly rare.

“And where’s the child this time?” he asked of his hostess as soon as he was seated near her.

“Why do you say ‘this time’ as if it were different from any other time?” she replied as she gave him his tea.

“Only because, as the months and the years elapse, it’s more and more of a wonder, whenever I don’t see her, to think what she does with herself—or what you do with her. What it does show, I suppose,” Mr. Mitchett went on, “is that she takes no trouble to meet me.”

“My dear Mitchy,” said Mrs. Brookenham, “what do YOU know about ‘trouble’—either poor Nanda’s or mine or anybody’s else? You’ve never had to take any in your life, you’re the spoiled child of fortune and you skim over the surface of things in a way that seems often to represent you as supposing everybody else has wings. Most other people are sticking fast in their native mud.”

“Mud, Mrs. Brook—mud, mud!” he protestingly cried as, while he watched his fellow visitor move to a distance with their host, he glanced about the room, taking in afresh the Louis Seize secretary which looked better closed than open and for which he always had a knowing eye. “Remarkably charming—mud!”

“Well, that’s what a great deal of the element really appears to-day to be thought; and precisely as a specimen, Mitchy dear, those two French books you were so good as to send me and which—really this time, you extraordinary man!” She fell back, intimately reproachful, from the effect produced on her, renouncing all expression save that of the rolled eye.

“Why, were they particularly dreadful?”—Mitchy was honestly surprised. “I rather liked the one in the pink cover—what’s the confounded thing called?—I thought it had a sort of a something-

or-other.” He had cast his eye about as if for a glimpse of the forgotten title, and she caught the question as he vaguely and good-humouredly dropped it.

“A kind of a morbid modernity? There IS that,” she dimly conceded.

“Is that what they call it? Awfully good name. You must have got it from old Van!” he gaily declared.

“I dare say I did. I get the good things from him and the bad ones from you. But you’re not to suppose,” Mrs. Brookenham went on, “that I’ve discussed your horrible book with him.”

“Come, I say!” Mr. Mitchett protested; “I’ve seen you with books from Vanderbank which if you HAVE discussed them with him—well,” he laughed, “I should like to have been there!”

“You haven’t seen me with anything like yours—no, no, never, never!” She was particularly positive. “Van on the contrary gives tremendous warnings, makes apologies, in advance, for things that—well, after all, haven’t killed one.”

“That have even perhaps a little, after the warnings, let one down?”

She took no notice of this coarse pleasantry, she simply adhered to her thesis. “One has taken one’s dose and one isn’t such a fool as to be deaf to some fresh true note if it happens to turn up. But for abject horrid unredeemed vileness from beginning to end—”

“So you read to the end?” Mr. Mitchett interposed.

“I read to see what you could possibly have sent such things to me for, and because so long as they were in my hands they were not in the hands of others. Please to remember in future that the children are all over the place and that Harold and Nanda have their nose in everything.”

“I promise to remember,” Mr. Mitchett returned, “as soon as you make old Van do the same.”

“I do make old Van—I pull old Van up much oftener than I succeed in pulling you. I must say,” Mrs. Brookenham went on, “you’re all getting to require among you in general an amount of what one may call editing!” She gave one of her droll universal sighs. “I’ve got your books at any rate locked up and I wish you’d send for them quickly again; one’s too nervous about anything happening and their being perhaps found among one’s relics. Charming literary remains!” she laughed.

The friendly Mitchy was also much amused. “By Jove, the most awful things ARE found! Have you heard about old Randage and what his executors have just come across? The most abominable—”

“I haven’t heard,” she broke in, “and I don’t want to; but you give me a shudder and I beg you’ll have your offerings removed, since I can’t think of confiding them for the purpose to any one in this house. I might burn them up in the dead of night, but even then I should be fearfully nervous.”

“I’ll send then my usual messenger,” said Mitchy, “a person I keep for such jobs, thoroughly seasoned, as you may imagine, and of a discretion—what do you call it?—a *toute epreuve*. Only you must let me say that I like your terror about Harold! Do you think he spends his time over Dr. Watts’s hymns?”

Mrs. Brookenham just hesitated, and nothing, in general, was so becoming to her as the act of hesitation. “Dear Mitchy, do you know I want awfully to talk to you about Harold?”

“About his French reading, Mrs. Brook?” Mitchy responded with interest. “The worse things are, let me just mention to you about that, the better they seem positively to be for one’s feeling up in the language. They’re more difficult, the bad ones—and there’s a lot in that. All the young men know it—those who are going up for exams.”

She had her eyes for a little on Lord Petherton and her husband; then as if she had not heard what her interlocutor had just said she overcame her last scruple. “Dear Mitchy, has he had money from you?”

He stared with his good goggle eyes—he laughed out. “Why on earth—? But do you suppose I’d tell you if he had?”

“He hasn’t really borrowed the most dreadful sums?”

Mitchy was highly diverted. “Why should he? For what, please?”

“That’s just it—for what? What does he do with it all? What in the world becomes of it?”

“Well,” Mitchy suggested, “he’s saving up to start a business. Harold’s irreproachable—hasn’t a vice. Who knows in these days what may happen? He sees further than any young man I know. Do let him save.”

She looked far away with her sweet world-weariness. “If you weren’t an angel it would be a horror to be talking to you. But I insist on knowing.” She insisted now with her absurdly pathetic eyes on him. “What kind of sums?”

“You shall never, never find out—not if you were never to speak to me again,” Mr. Mitchett replied with extravagant firmness. “Harold’s one of my great amusements—I really have awfully few; and if you deprive me of him you’ll be a fiend. There are only one or two things I want to live for, but one of them is to see how far Harold will go. Please give me some more tea.”

“Do you positively swear?” she asked with intensity as she helped him. Then without waiting for his answer: “You have the common charity to US, I suppose, to see the position you’d put us in. Fancy Edward!” she quite austere threw off.

Mr. Mitchett, at this, had on his side a wonder. “Does Edward imagine—?”

“My dear man, Edward never ‘imagined’ anything in life.” She still had her eyes on him. “Therefore if he SEES a thing, don’t you know? it must exist.”

Mitchy for a little fixed the person mentioned as he sat with his other guest, but whatever this person saw he failed just then to see his wife’s companion, whose eyes he never met. His face only offered itself after the fashion of a clean domestic vessel, a receptacle with the peculiar property of constantly serving yet never filling, to Lord Petherton’s talkative splash. “Well, only don’t let him take it up. Let it be only between you and me,” Mr. Mitchett pleaded; “keep him quiet—don’t let him speak to me.” He appeared to convey with his pleasant extravagance that Edward looked dangerous, and he went on with a rigour of levity: “It must be OUR little quarrel.”

There were different ways of meeting such a tone, but Mrs. Brookenham’s choice was remarkably prompt. “I don’t think I quite understand what dreadful joke you may be making, but I dare say if you HAD let Harold borrow you’d have another manner, and I was at any rate determined to have the question out with you.”

“Let us always have everything out—that’s quite my own idea. It’s you,” said Mr. Mitchett, “who are by no means always so frank with me as I recognise—oh, I do THAT!—what it must have cost you to be over this little question of Harold. There’s one thing, Mrs. Brook, you do dodge.”

“What do I ever dodge, dear Mitchy?” Mrs. Brook quite tenderly asked.

“Why, when I ask you about your other child you’re off like a frightened fawn. When have you ever, on my doing so, said ‘my darling Mitchy, I’ll ring for her to be asked to come down so that you can see her for yourself’—when have you ever said anything like that?”

“I see,” Mrs. Brookenham mused; “you think I sacrifice her. You’re very interesting among you all, and I’ve certainly a delightful circle. The Duchess has just been letting me have it most remarkably hot, and as she’s presently coming back you’ll be able to join forces with her.”

Mitchy looked a little at a loss. “On the subject of your sacrifice—”

“Of my innocent and helpless, yet somehow at the same time, as a consequence of my cynicism, dreadfully damaged and depraved daughter.” She took in for an instant the slight bewilderment against which, as a result of her speech, even so expert an intelligence as Mr. Mitchett’s had not been proof; then with a small jerk of her head at the other side of the room made the quickest of transitions. “What IS there between her and him?”

Mitchy wondered at the other two. “Between Edward and the girl?”

“Don’t talk nonsense. Between Petherton and Jane.”

Mitchy could only stare, and the wide noonday light of his regard was at such moments really the redemption of his ugliness. “What ‘is’ there? Is there anything?”

“It’s too beautiful,” Mrs. Brookenham appreciatively sighed, “your relation with him! You won’t compromise him.”

“It would be nicer of me,” Mitchy laughed, “not to want to compromise HER!”

“Oh Jane!” Mrs. Brookenham dropped. “DOES he like her?” she continued. “You must know.”

“Ah it’s just my knowing that constitutes the beauty of my loyalty—of my delicacy.” He had his quick jumps too. “Am I never, never to see the child?”

This enquiry appeared only to confirm his friend in the view of what was touching in him. “You’re the most delicate thing I know, and it crops up with effect the oddest in the intervals of your corruption. Your talk’s half the time impossible; you respect neither age nor sex nor condition; one doesn’t know what you’ll say or do next; and one has to return your books—c’est tout dire—under cover of darkness. Yet there’s in the midst of all this and in the general abyss of you a little deepdown delicious niceness, a sweet sensibility, that one has actually one’s self, shocked as one perpetually is at you, quite to hold one’s breath and stay one’s hand for fear of ruffling or bruising. There’s no one in talk with whom,” she balmily continued, “I find myself half so often suddenly moved to pull up short. You’ve more little toes to tread on—though you pretend you haven’t: I mean morally speaking, don’t you know?—than even I have myself, and I’ve so many that I could wish most of them cut off. You never spare me a shock—no, you don’t do that: it isn’t the form your delicacy takes. But you’ll know what I mean, all the same, I think, when I tell you that there are lots I spare YOU!”

Mr. Mitchett fairly glowed with the candour of his attention. “Know what you mean, dearest lady? How can a man handicapped to death, a man of my origin, my appearance, my general weaknesses, drawbacks, immense indebtedness, all round, for the start, as it were, that I feel my friends have been so good as to allow me: how can such a man not be conscious every moment that every one about him goes on tiptoe and winks at every one else? What CAN you all mention in my presence, poor things, that isn’t personal?”

Mrs. Brookenham’s face covered him for an instant as no painted Madonna’s had ever covered the little charge at the breast beneath it. “And the finest thing of all in you is your beautiful, beautiful pride! You’re prouder than all of us put together.” She checked a motion that he had apparently meant as a protest—she went on with her muffled wisdom. “There isn’t a man but YOU whom Petherton wouldn’t have made vulgar. He isn’t vulgar himself—at least not exceptionally; but he’s just one of those people, a class one knows well, who are so fearfully, in this country, the cause of it in others. For all I know he’s the cause of it in me—the cause of it even in poor Edward. For I’m vulgar, Mitchy dear—very often; and the marvel of you is that you never are.”

“Thank you for everything. Thank you above all for ‘marvel’!” Mitchy grinned.

“Oh I know what I say!”—she didn’t in the least blush. “I’ll tell you something,” she pursued with the same gravity, “if you’ll promise to tell no one on earth. If you’re proud I’m not. There! It’s most extraordinary and I try to conceal it even to myself; but there’s no doubt whatever about it—I’m not proud pour deux sous. And some day, on some awful occasion, I shall show it. So—I notify you. Shall you love me still?”

“To the bitter end,” Mitchy loyally responded. “For how CAN, how need, a woman be ‘proud’ who’s so preternaturally clever? Pride’s only for use when wit breaks down—it’s the train the cyclist takes when his tire’s deflated. When that happens to YOUR tire, Mrs. Brook, you’ll let me know. And you do make me wonder just now,” he confessed, “why you’re taking such particular precautions and throwing out such a cloud of skirmishers. If you want to shoot me dead a single bullet will do.” He faltered but an instant before completing his sense. “Where you really want to come out is at the fact that Nanda loathes me and that I might as well give up asking for her.”

“Are you quite serious?” his companion after a moment resumed. “Do you really and truly like her, Mitchy?”

“I like her as much as I dare to—as much as a man can like a girl when from the very first of his seeing her and judging her he has also seen, and seen with all the reasons, that there’s no chance for him whatever. Of course, with all that, he has done his best not to let himself go. But there are

moments,” Mr. Mitchett ruefully added, “when it would relieve him awfully to feel free for a good spin.”

“I think you exaggerate,” his hostess replied, “the difficulties in your way. What do you mean by all the ‘reasons’?”

“Why one of them I’ve already mentioned. I make her flesh creep.”

“My own Mitchy!” Mrs. Brookenham protestingly moaned.

“The other is that—very naturally—she’s in love.”

“With whom under the sun?”

Mrs. Brookenham had, with her startled stare, met his eyes long enough to have taken something from him before he next spoke.

“You really have never suspected? With whom conceivably but old Van?”

“Nanda’s in love with old Van?”—the degree to which she had never suspected was scarce to be expressed. “Why he’s twice her age—he has seen her in a pinafore with a dirty face and well slapped for it: he has never thought of her in the world.”

“How can a person of your acuteness, my dear woman,” Mitchy asked, “mention such trifles as having the least to do with the case? How can you possibly have such a fellow about, so beastly good-looking, so infernally well turned out in the way of ‘culture,’ and so bringing them down in short on every side, and expect in the bosom of your family the absence of history of the reigns of the good kings? If YOU were a girl wouldn’t YOU turn purple? If I were a girl shouldn’t I—unless, as is more likely, I turned green?”

Mrs. Brookenham was deeply affected. “Nanda does turn purple—?”

“The loveliest shade you ever saw. It’s too absurd that you haven’t noticed.”

It was characteristic of Mrs. Brookenham’s amiability that, with her sudden sense of the importance of this new light, she should be quite ready to abase herself. “There are so many things in one’s life. One follows false scents. One doesn’t make out everything at once. If you’re right you must help me. We must see more of her.”

“But what good will that do me?” Mitchy appealed.

“Don’t you care enough for her to want to help HER?” Then before he could speak, “Poor little darling dear!” his hostess tenderly ejaculated. “What does she think or dream? Truly she’s laying up treasure!”

“Oh he likes her,” said Mitchy. “He likes her in fact extremely.”

“Do you mean he has told you so?”

“Oh no—we never mention it! But he likes her,” Mr. Mitchett stubbornly repeated. “And he’s thoroughly straight.”

Mrs. Brookenham for a moment turned these things over; after which she came out in a manner that visibly surprised him. “It isn’t as if you wished to be nasty about him, is it?—because I know you like him yourself. You’re so wonderful to your friends”—oh she could let him see that she knew! —“and in such different and exquisite ways. There are those like HIM”—she signified her other visitor—“who get everything out of you and whom you really appear fond of, or at least to put up with, just FOR that. Then there are those who ask nothing—and whom you’re fond of in spite of it.”

Mitchy leaned back from this, fist within fist, watching her with a certain disguised emotion. He grinned almost too much for mere amusement. “That’s the class to which YOU belong.”

“It’s the best one,” she returned, “and I’m careful to remain in it. You try to get us, by bribery, into the inferior place, because, proud as you are, it bores you a little that you like us so much. But we won’t go—at least I won’t. You may make Van,” she wonderfully continued. “There’s nothing you wouldn’t do for him or give him.” Mitchy admired her from his position, slowly shaking his head with it. “He’s the man—with no fortune and just as he is, to the smallest particular—whom you would have liked to be, whom you intensely envy, and yet to whom you’re magnanimous enough for almost any sacrifice.”

Mitchy's appreciation had fairly deepened to a flush. "Magnificent, magnificent Mrs. Brook! What ARE you in thunder up to?"

"Therefore, as I say," she imperturbably went on, "it's not to do him an ill turn that you make a point of what you've just told me."

Mr. Mitchett for a minute gave no sign but his high colour and his queer glare. "How could it do him an ill turn?"

"Oh it WOULD be a way, don't you see? to put before me the need of getting rid of him. For he may 'like' Nanda as much as you please: he'll never, never," Mrs. Brookenham resolutely quavered—"he'll never come to the scratch. And to feel that as *I* do," she explained, "can only be, don't you also see? to want to save her."

It would have appeared at last that poor Mitchy did see. "By taking it in time? By forbidding him the house?"

She seemed to stand with little nipping scissors in a garden of alternatives. "Or by shipping HER off. Will you help me to save her?" she broke out again after a moment. "It isn't true," she continued, "that she has any aversion to you."

"Have you charged her with it?" Mitchy demanded with a courage that amounted to high gallantry.

It inspired on the spot his interlocutress, and her own pluck, of as fine a quality now as her diplomacy, which was saying much, fell but little below. "Yes, my dear friend—frankly."

"Good. Then I know what she said."

"She absolutely denied it."

"Oh yes—they always do, because they pity me," Mitchy smiled. "She said what they always say—that the effect I produce is, though at first upsetting, one that little by little they find it possible to get used to. The world's full of people who are getting used to me," Mr. Mitchett concluded.

"It's what *I* shall never do, for you're quite too great a luxury!" Mrs. Brookenham declared. "If I haven't threshed you out really MORE with Nanda," she continued, "it has been from a scruple of a sort you people never do a woman the justice to impute. You're the object of views that have so much more to set them off."

Mr. Mitchett on this jumped up; he was clearly conscious of his nerves; he fidgeted away a few steps and then, his hands in his pockets, fixed on his hostess a countenance more controlled. "What does the Duchess mean by your daughter's being—as I understood you to quote her just now—'damaged and depraved'?"

Mrs. Brookenham came up—she literally rose—smiling. "You fit the cap. You know how she'd like you for little Aggie!"

"What does she mean, what does she mean?" Mitchy repeated.

The door, as he spoke, was thrown open; Mrs. Brookenham glanced round. "You've the chance to find out from herself!" The Duchess had come back and little Aggie was in her wake.

V

That young lady, in this relation, was certainly a figure to have offered a foundation for the highest hopes. As slight and white, as delicately lovely, as a gathered garden lily, her admirable training appeared to hold her out to them all as with precautionary finger-tips. She presumed, however, so little on any introduction that, shyly and submissively, waiting for the word of direction, she stopped short in the centre of the general friendliness till Mrs. Brookenham fairly became, to meet her, also a shy little girl—put out a timid hand with wonder-struck innocent eyes that hesitated whether a kiss of greeting might be dared. "Why you dear good strange 'ickle' thing, you haven't been here for ages, but it IS a joy to see you and I do hope you've brought your doll!"—such might have been the sense of our friend's fond murmur while, looking at her up and down with pure pleasure, she drew the rare

creature to a sofa. Little Aggie presented, up and down, an arrangement of dress exactly in the key of her age, her complexion, her emphasised virginity. She might have been prepared for her visit by a cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products, whose taste, hereditarily good, had grown, out of the world and most delightfully, so queer as to leave on everything they touched a particular shade of distinction. The Duchess had brought in with the child an air of added confidence for which an observer would in a moment have seen the grounds, the association of the pair being so markedly favourable to each. Its younger member carried out the style of her aunt's presence quite as one of the accessory figures effectively thrown into old portraits. The Duchess on the other hand seemed, with becoming blandness, to draw from her niece the dignity of a kind of office of state—hereditary governess of the children of the blood. Little Aggie had a smile as softly bright as a Southern dawn, and the friends of her relative looked at each other, according to a fashion frequent in Mrs. Brookenham's drawing-room, in free exchange of their happy impression. Mr. Mitchett was none the less scantily diverted from his estimate of the occasion Mrs. Brookenham had just named to him.

“My dear Duchess,” he promptly asked, “do you mind explaining to me an opinion I've just heard of your—with marked originality—holding?”

The Duchess, her head all in the air, considered an instant her little ivory princess. “I'm always ready, Mr. Mitchett, to defend my opinions; but if it's a question of going much into the things that are the subjects of some of them perhaps we had better, if you don't mind, choose our time and our place.”

“No 'time,' gracious lady, for my impatience,” Mr. Mitchett replied, “could be better than the present—but if you've reasons for wanting a better place why shouldn't we go on the spot into another room?”

Lord Petherton, at this enquiry, broke into instant mirth. “Well, of all the coolness, Mitchy!—he does go at it, doesn't he, Mrs. Brook? What do you want to do in another room?” he demanded of his friend. “Upon my word, Duchess, under the nose of those—”

The Duchess, on the first blush, lent herself to the humour of the case. “Well, Petherton, of 'those'?—I defy him to finish his sentence!” she smiled to the others.

“Of those,” said his lordship, “who flatter themselves that when you do happen to find them somewhere your first idea is not quite to jump at a pretext for getting off somewhere else. Especially,” he continued to jest, “with a man of Mitchy's vile reputation.”

“Oh!” Edward Brookenham exclaimed at this, but only as with quiet relief.

“Mitchy's offer is perfectly safe, I may let him know,” his wife remarked, “for I happen to be sure that nothing would really induce Jane to leave Aggie five minutes among us here without remaining herself to see that we don't become improper.”

“Well then if we're already pretty far on the way to it,” Lord Petherton resumed, “what on earth MIGHT we arrive at in the absence of your control? I warn you, Duchess,” he joyously pursued, “that if you go out of the room with Mitchy I shall rapidly become quite awful.”

The Duchess during this brief passage never took her eyes from her niece, who rewarded her attention with the sweetness of consenting dependence. The child's foreign origin was so delicately but unmistakably written in all her exquisite lines that her look might have expressed the modest detachment of a person to whom the language of her companions was unknown. Her protectress then glanced round the circle. “You're very odd people all of you, and I don't think you quite know how ridiculous you are. Aggie and I are simple stranger-folk; there's a great deal we don't understand, yet we're none the less not easily frightened. In what is it, Mr. Mitchett,” the Duchess asked, “that I've wounded your susceptibilities?”

Mr. Mitchett cast about; he had apparently found time to reflect on his precipitation. “I see what Petherton's up to, and I won't, by drawing you aside just now, expose your niece to anything that might immediately oblige Mrs. Brook to catch her up and flee with her. But the first time I find

you more isolated—well,” he laughed, though not with the clearest ring, “all I can say is Mind your eyes dear Duchess!”

“It’s about your thinking, Jane,” Mrs. Brookenham placidly explained, “that Nanda suffers—in her morals, don’t you know?—by my neglect. I wouldn’t say anything about you that I can’t bravely say TO you; therefore since he has plumped out with it I do confess that I’ve appealed to him on what, as so good an old friend, HE thinks of your contention.”

“What in the world IS Jane’s contention?” Edward Brookenham put the question as if they were “stuck” at cards.

“You really all of you,” the Duchess replied with excellent coolness, “choose extraordinary conditions for the discussion of delicate matters. There are decidedly too many things on which we don’t feel alike. You’re all inconceivable just now. *Je ne peux pourtant pas la mettre a la porte, cette cherie*”—whom she covered again with the gay solicitude that seemed to have in it a vibration of private entreaty: “Don’t understand, my own darling—don’t understand!”

Little Aggie looked about with an impartial politeness that, as an expression of the general blind sense of her being as to every particular in hands at full liberty either to spot or to spare her, was touching enough to bring tears to all eyes. It perhaps had to do with the sudden emotion with which—using now quite a different manner—Mrs. Brookenham again embraced her, and even with this lady’s equally abrupt and altogether wonderful address to her: “Between you and me straight, my dear, and as from friend to friend, I know you’ll never doubt that everything must be all right!—What I spoke of to poor Mitchy,” she went on to the Duchess, “is the dreadful view you take of my letting Nanda go to Tishy—and indeed of the general question of any acquaintance between young unmarried and young married females. Mr. Mitchett’s sufficiently interested in us, Jane, to make it natural of me to take him into our confidence in one of our difficulties. On the other hand we feel your solicitude, and I needn’t tell you at this time of day what weight in every respect we attach to your judgement. Therefore it WILL be a difficulty for us, *cara mia*, don’t you see? if we decide suddenly, under the spell of your influence, that our daughter must break off a friendship—it WILL be a difficulty for us to put the thing to Nanda herself in such a way as that she shall have some sort of notion of what suddenly possesses us. Then there’ll be the much stiffer job of putting it to poor Tishy. Yet if her house IS an impossible place what else is one to do? Carrie Donner’s to be there, and Carrie Donner’s a nature apart; but how can we ask even a little lamb like Tishy to give up her own sister?”

The question had been launched with an argumentative sharpness that made it for a moment keep possession of the air, and during this moment, before a single member of the circle could rally, Mrs. Brookenham’s effect was superseded by that of the reappearance of the butler. “I say, my dear, don’t shriek!”—Edward Brookenham had only time to sound this warning before a lady, presenting herself in the open doorway, followed close on the announcement of her name. “Mrs. Beach Donner!”—the impression was naturally marked. Every one betrayed it a little but Mrs. Brookenham, who, more than the others, appeared to have the help of seeing that by a merciful stroke her visitor had just failed to hear. This visitor, a young woman of striking, of startling appearance, who, in the manner of certain shiny house-doors and railings, instantly created a presumption of the lurking label “Fresh paint,” found herself, with an embarrassment oddly opposed to the positive pitch of her complexion, in the presence of a group in which it was yet immediately evident that every one was a friend. Every one, to show no one had been caught, said something extremely easy; so that it was after a moment only poor Mrs. Donner who, seated close to her hostess, seemed to be in any degree in the wrong. This moreover was essentially her fault, so extreme was the anomaly of her having, without the means to back it up, committed herself to a “scheme of colour” that was practically an advertisement of courage. Irregularly pretty and painfully shy, she was retouched from brow to chin like a suburban photograph—the moral of which was simply that she should either have left more to nature or taken more from art. The Duchess had quickly reached her kinsman with a smothered hiss, an “Edward dear, for God’s sake take Aggie!” and at the end of a few minutes had

formed for herself in one of Mrs. Brookenham's admirable "corners" a society consisting of Lord Petherton and Mr. Mitchett, the latter of whom regarded Mrs. Donner across the room with articulate wonder and compassion.

"It's all right, it's all right—she's frightened only at herself!"

The Duchess watched her as from a box at the play, comfortably shut in, as in the old operatic days at Naples, with a pair of entertainers. "You're the most interesting nation in the world. One never gets to the end of your hatred of the nuance. The sense of the suitable, the harmony of parts—what on earth were you doomed to do that, to be punished sufficiently in advance, you had to be deprived of it in your very cradles? Look at her little black dress—rather good, but not so good as it ought to be, and, mixed up with all the rest, see her type, her beauty, her timidity, her wickedness, her notoriety and her impudeur. It's only in this country that a woman is both so shocking and so shaky." The Duchess's displeasure overflowed. "If she doesn't know how to be good—"

"Let her at least know how to be bad? Ah," Mitchy replied, "your irritation testifies more than anything else could do to our peculiar genius or our peculiar want of it. Our vice is intolerably clumsy—if it can possibly be a question of vice in regard to that charming child, who looks like one of the new-fashioned bill-posters, only, in the way of 'morbid modernity,' as Mrs. Brook would say, more extravagant and funny than any that have yet been risked. I remember," he continued, "Mrs. Brook's having spoken of her to me lately as 'wild.' Wild?—why, she's simply tameness run to seed. Such an expression shows the state of training to which Mrs. Brook has reduced the rest of us."

"It doesn't prevent at any rate, Mrs. Brook's training, some of the rest of you from being horrible," the Duchess declared. "What did you mean just now, really, by asking me to explain before Aggie this so serious matter of Nanda's exposure?" Then instantly taking herself up before Mr. Mitchett could answer: "What on earth do you suppose Edward's saying to my darling?"

Brookenham had placed himself, side by side with the child, on a distant little settee, but it was impossible to make out from the countenance of either if a sound had passed between them. Aggie's little manner was too developed to show, and her host's not developed enough. "Oh he's awfully careful," Lord Petherton reassuringly observed. "If you or I or Mitchy say anything bad it's sure to be before we know it and without particularly meaning it. But old Edward means it—"

"So much that as a general thing he doesn't dare to say it?" the Duchess asked. "That's a pretty picture of him, inasmuch as for the most part he never speaks. What therefore must he mean?"

"He's an abyss—he's magnificent!" Mr. Mitchett laughed. "I don't know a man of an understanding more profound, and he's equally incapable of uttering and of wincing. If by the same token I'm 'horrible,' as you call me," he pursued, "it's only because I'm in everyway so beastly superficial. All the same I do sometimes go into things, and I insist on knowing," he again broke out, "what it exactly was you had in mind in saying to Mrs. Brook the things about Nanda and myself that she repeated to me."

"You 'insist,' you silly man?"—the Duchess had veered a little to indulgence. "Pray on what ground of right, in such a connexion, do you do anything of the sort?"

Poor Mitchy showed but for a moment that he felt pulled up. "Do you mean that when a girl liked by a fellow likes him so little in return—?"

"I don't mean anything," said the Duchess, "that may provoke you to suppose me vulgar and odious enough to try to put you out of conceit of a most interesting and unfortunate creature; and I don't quite as yet see—though I dare say I shall soon make out!—what our friend has in her head in tattling to you on these matters as soon as my back's turned. Petherton will tell you—I wonder he hasn't told you before—why Mrs. Grendon, though not perhaps herself quite the rose, is decidedly in these days too near it."

"Oh Petherton never tells me anything!" Mitchy's answer was brisk and impatient, but evidently quite as sincere as if the person alluded to had not been there.

The person alluded to meanwhile, fidgeting frankly in his chair, alternately stretching his legs and resting his elbows on his knees, had reckoned as small the profit he might derive from this colloquy. His bored state indeed—if he was bored—prompted in him the honest impulse to clear, as he would have perhaps considered it, the atmosphere. He indicated Mrs. Donner with a remarkable absence of precautions. “Why, what the Duchess alludes to is my poor sister Fanny’s stupid grievance—surely you know about that.” He made oddly vivid for a moment the nature of his relative’s allegation, his somewhat cynical treatment of which became peculiarly derisive in the light of the attitude and expression, at that minute, of the figure incriminated. “My brother-in-law’s too thick with her. But Cashmore’s such a fine old ass. It’s excessively unpleasant,” he added, “for affairs are just in that position in which, from one day to another, there may be something that people will get hold of. Fancy a man,” he robustly reflected while the three took in more completely the subject of Mrs. Brookenham’s attention—“fancy a man with THAT odd piece on his hands! The beauty of it is that the two women seem never to have broken off. Blest if they don’t still keep seeing each other!”

The Duchess, as on everything else, passed succinctly on this. “Ah how can hatreds comfortably flourish without the nourishment of such regular ‘seeing’ as what you call here bosom friendship alone supplies? What are parties given for in London but—that enemies may meet? I grant you it’s inconceivable that the husband of a superb creature like your sister should find his requirements better met by an object *comme cette petite*, who looks like a pen-wiper—an actress’s idea of one—made up for a theatrical bazaar. At the same time, if you’ll allow me to say so, it scarcely strikes one that your sister’s prudence is such as to have placed all the cards in her hands. She’s the most beautiful woman in England, but her *esprit de conduite* isn’t quite on a level. One can’t have everything!” she philosophically sighed.

Lord Petherton met her comfortably enough on this assumption of his detachments. “If you mean by that her being the biggest fool alive I’m quite ready to agree with you. It’s exactly what makes me afraid. Yet how can I decently say in especial,” he asked, “of what?”

The Duchess still perched on her critical height. “Of what but one of your amazing English periodical public washings of dirty linen? There’s not the least necessity to ‘say’!” she laughed. “If there’s anything more remarkable than these purifications it’s the domestic comfort with which, when all has come and gone, you sport the articles purified.”

“It comes back, in all that sphere,” Mr. Mitchett instructively opined, “to our national, our fatal want of style. We can never, dear Duchess, take too many lessons, and there’s probably at the present time no more useful function to be performed among us than that dissemination of neater methods to which you’re so good as to contribute.”

He had had another idea, but before he reached it his companion had gaily broken in. “Awfully good one for you, Duchess—and I’m bound to say that, for a clever woman, you exposed yourself! I’ve at any rate a sense of comfort,” Lord Petherton pursued, “in the good relations now more and more established between poor Fanny and Mrs. Brook. Mrs. Brook’s awfully kind to her and awfully sharp, and Fanny will take things from her that she won’t take from me. I keep saying to Mrs. Brook—don’t you know?—‘Do keep hold of her and let her have it strong.’ She hasn’t, upon my honour, any one in the world but me.”

“And we know the extent of THAT resource!” the Duchess freely commented.

“That’s exactly what Fanny says—that SHE knows it,” Petherton good-humouredly agreed. “She says my beastly hypocrisy makes her sick. There are people,” he pleasantly rambled on, “who are awfully free with their advice, but it’s mostly fearful rot. Mrs. Brook’s isn’t, upon my word—I’ve tried some myself!”

“You talk as if it were something nasty and homemade—gooseberry wine!” the Duchess laughed; “but one can’t know the dear soul, of course, without knowing that she has set up, for the convenience of her friends, a little office for consultations. She listens to the case, she strokes her chin and prescribes—”

“And the beauty of it is,” cried Lord Petherton, “that she makes no charge whatever!”

“She doesn’t take a guinea at the time, but you may still get your account,” the Duchess returned. “Of course we know that the great business she does is in husbands and wives.”

“This then seems the day of the wives!” Mr. Mitchett interposed as he became aware, the first, of the illustration the Duchess’s image was in the act of receiving. “Lady Fanny Cashmore!”—the butler was already in the field, and the company, with the exception of Mrs. Donner, who remained seated, was apparently conscious of a vibration that brought it afresh, but still more nimbly than on Aggie’s advent, to its feet.

VI

“Go to her straight—be nice to her: you must have plenty to say. YOU stay with me—we have our affair.” The latter of these commands the Duchess addressed to Mr. Mitchett, while their companion, in obedience to the former and affected, as it seemed, by an unrepressed familiar accent that stirred a fresh flicker of Mitchy’s grin, met the new arrival in the middle of the room before Mrs. Brookenham had had time to reach her. The Duchess, quickly reseated, watched an instant the inexpressive concussion of the tall brother and sister; then while Mitchy again subsided into his place, “You’re not, as a race, clever, you’re not delicate, you’re not sane, but you’re capable of extraordinary good looks,” she resumed. “Vous avez parfois la grande beaute.”

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