ГЕНРИ ДЖЕЙМС

WHAT MAISIE KNEW

Генри Джеймс

What Maisie Knew

Джеймс Г.

What Maisie Knew / Г. Джеймс — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Henry James
What Maisie Knew

The litigation seemed interminable and had in fact been complicated; but by the decision on the appeal the judgement of the divorce-court was confirmed as to the assignment of the child. The father, who, though bespattered from head to foot, had made good his case, was, in pursuance of this triumph, appointed to keep her: it was not so much that the mother's character had been more absolutely damaged as that the brilliancy of a lady's complexion (and this lady's, in court, was immensely remarked) might be more regarded as showing the spots. Attached, however, to the second pronouncement was a condition that detracted, for Beale Farange, from its sweetness—an order that he should refund to his late wife the twenty-six hundred pounds put down by her, as it was called, some three years before, in the interest of the child's maintenance and precisely on a proved understanding that he would take no proceedings: a sum of which he had had the administration and of which he could render not the least account. The obligation thus attributed to her adversary was no small balm to Ida's resentment; it drew a part of the sting from her defeat and compelled Mr. Farange perceptibly to lower his crest. He was unable to produce the money or to raise it in any way; so that after a squabble scarcely less public and scarcely more decent than the original shock of battle his only issue from his predicament was a compromise proposed by his legal advisers and finally accepted by hers.

His debt was by this arrangement remitted to him and the little girl disposed of in a manner worthy of the judgement-seat of Solomon. She was divided in two and the portions tossed impartially to the disputants. They would take her, in rotation, for six months at a time; she would spend half the year with each. This was odd justice in the eyes of those who still blinked in the fierce light projected from the tribunal—a light in which neither parent figured in the least as a happy example to youth and innocence. What was to have been expected on the evidence was the nomination, *in loco parentis*, of some proper third person, some respectable or at least some presentable friend. Apparently, however, the circle of the Faranges had been scanned in vain for any such ornament; so that the only solution finally meeting all the difficulties was, save that of sending Maisie to a Home, the partition of the tutelary office in the manner I have mentioned. There were more reasons for her parents to agree to it than there had ever been for them to agree to anything; and they now prepared with her help to enjoy the distinction that waits upon vulgarity sufficiently attested. Their rupture had resounded, and after being perfectly insignificant together they would be decidedly striking apart. Had they not produced an impression that warranted people in looking for appeals in the newspapers for the rescue of the little one—reverberation, amid a vociferous public, of the idea that some movement should be started or some benevolent person should come forward? A good lady came indeed a step or two: she was distantly related to Mrs. Farange, to whom she proposed that, having children and nurseries wound up and going, she should be allowed to take home the bone of contention and, by working it into her system, relieve at least one of the parents. This would make every time, for Maisie, after her inevitable six months with Beale, much more of a change.

"More of a change?" Ida cried. "Won't it be enough of a change for her to come from that low brute to the person in the world who detests him most?"

"No, because you detest him so much that you'll always talk to her about him. You'll keep him before her by perpetually abusing him."

Mrs. Farange stared. "Pray, then, am I to do nothing to counteract his villainous abuse of *me*?"

The good lady, for a moment, made no reply: her silence was a grim judgement of the whole point of view. "Poor little monkey!" she at last exclaimed; and the words were an epitaph for the tomb of Maisie's childhood. She was abandoned to her fate. What was clear to any spectator was that the only link binding her to either parent was this lamentable fact of her being a ready vessel for bitterness, a deep little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed. They had wanted her not

for any good they could do her, but for the harm they could, with her unconscious aid, do each other. She should serve their anger and seal their revenge, for husband and wife had been alike crippled by the heavy hand of justice, which in the last resort met on neither side their indignant claim to get, as they called it, everything. If each was only to get half this seemed to concede that neither was so base as the other pretended, or, to put it differently, offered them both as bad indeed, since they were only as good as each other. The mother had wished to prevent the father from, as she said, "so much as looking" at the child; the father's plea was that the mother's lightest touch was "simply contamination." These were the opposed principles in which Maisie was to be educated—she was to fit them together as she might. Nothing could have been more touching at first than her failure to suspect the ordeal that awaited her little unspotted soul. There were persons horrified to think what those in charge of it would combine to try to make of it: no one could conceive in advance that they would be able to make nothing ill.

This was a society in which for the most part people were occupied only with chatter, but the disunited couple had at last grounds for expecting a time of high activity. They girded their loins, they felt as if the quarrel had only begun. They felt indeed more married than ever, inasmuch as what marriage had mainly suggested to them was the unbroken opportunity to quarrel. There had been "sides" before, and there were sides as much as ever; for the sider too the prospect opened out, taking the pleasant form of a superabundance of matter for desultory conversation. The many friends of the Faranges drew together to differ about them; contradiction grew young again over teacups and cigars. Everybody was always assuring everybody of something very shocking, and nobody would have been jolly if nobody had been outrageous. The pair appeared to have a social attraction which failed merely as regards each other: it was indeed a great deal to be able to say for Ida that no one but Beale desired her blood, and for Beale that if he should ever have his eyes scratched out it would be only by his wife. It was generally felt, to begin with, that they were awfully good-looking—they had really not been analysed to a deeper residuum. They made up together for instance some twelve feet three of stature, and nothing was more discussed than the apportionment of this quantity. The sole flaw in Ida's beauty was a length and reach of arm conducive perhaps to her having so often beaten her ex-husband at billiards, a game in which she showed a superiority largely accountable, as she maintained, for the resentment finding expression in his physical violence. Billiards was her great accomplishment and the distinction her name always first produced the mention of. Notwithstanding some very long lines everything about her that might have been large and that in many women profited by the licence was, with a single exception, admired and cited for its smallness. The exception was her eyes, which might have been of mere regulation size, but which overstepped the modesty of nature; her mouth, on the other hand, was barely perceptible, and odds were freely taken as to the measurement of her waist. She was a person who, when she was out—and she was always out—produced everywhere a sense of having been seen often, the sense indeed of a kind of abuse of visibility, so that it would have been, in the usual places rather vulgar to wonder at her. Strangers only did that; but they, to the amusement of the familiar, did it very much: it was an inevitable way of betraying an alien habit. Like her husband she carried clothes, carried them as a train carries passengers: people had been known to compare their taste and dispute about the accommodation they gave these articles, though inclining on the whole to the commendation of Ida as less overcrowded, especially with jewellery and flowers. Beale Farange had natural decorations, a kind of costume in his vast fair beard, burnished like a gold breastplate, and in the eternal glitter of the teeth that his long moustache had been trained not to hide and that gave him, in every possible situation, the look of the joy of life. He had been destined in his youth for diplomacy and momentarily attached, without a salary, to a legation which enabled him often to say "In *my* time in the East": but contemporary history had somehow had no use for him, had hurried past him and left him in perpetual Piccadilly. Every one knew what he had—only twenty-five hundred. Poor Ida, who had run through everything, had now nothing but her carriage and her paralysed uncle. This old brute, as he was called, was supposed to have a lot put away. The child was

provided for, thanks to a crafty godmother, a defunct aunt of Beale's, who had left her something in such a manner that the parents could appropriate only the income.

I

The child was provided for, but the new arrangement was inevitably confounding to a young intelligence intensely aware that something had happened which must matter a good deal and looking anxiously out for the effects of so great a cause. It was to be the fate of this patient little girl to see much more than she at first understood, but also even at first to understand much more than any little girl, however patient, had perhaps ever understood before. Only a drummer-boy in a ballad or a story could have been so in the thick of the fight. She was taken into the confidence of passions on which she fixed just the stare she might have had for images bounding across the wall in the slide of a magic-lantern. Her little world was phantasmagoric—strange shadows dancing on a sheet. It was as if the whole performance had been given for her—a mite of a half-scared infant in a great dim theatre. She was in short introduced to life with a liberality in which the selfishness of others found its account, and there was nothing to avert the sacrifice but the modesty of her youth.

Her first term was with her father, who spared her only in not letting her have the wild letters addressed to her by her mother: he confined himself to holding them up at her and shaking them, while he showed his teeth, and then amusing her by the way he chucked them, across the room, bang into the fire. Even at that moment, however, she had a scared anticipation of fatigue, a guilty sense of not rising to the occasion, feeling the charm of the violence with which the stiff unopened envelopes, whose big monograms—Ida bristled with monograms—she would have liked to see, were made to whizz, like dangerous missiles, through the air. The greatest effect of the great cause was her own greater importance, chiefly revealed to her in the larger freedom with which she was handled, pulled hither and thither and kissed, and the proportionately greater niceness she was obliged to show. Her features had somehow become prominent; they were so perpetually nipped by the gentlemen who came to see her father and the smoke of whose cigarettes went into her face. Some of these gentlemen made her strike matches and light their cigarettes; others, holding her on knees violently jolted, pinched the calves of her legs till she shrieked—her shriek was much admired—and reproached them with being toothpicks. The word stuck in her mind and contributed to her feeling from this time that she was deficient in something that would meet the general desire. She found out what it was: it was a congenital tendency to the production of a substance to which Moddle, her nurse, gave a short ugly name, a name painfully associated at dinner with the part of the joint that she didn't like. She had left behind her the time when she had no desires to meet, none at least save Moddle's, who, in Kensington Gardens, was always on the bench when she came back to see if she had been playing too far. Moddle's desire was merely that she shouldn't do that, and she met it so easily that the only spots in that long brightness were the moments of her wondering what would become of her if, on her rushing back, there should be no Moddle on the bench. They still went to the Gardens, but there was a difference even there; she was impelled perpetually to look at the legs of other children and ask her nurse if *they* were toothpicks. Moddle was terribly truthful; she always said: "Oh my dear, you'll not find such another pair as your own." It seemed to have to do with something else that Moddle often said: "You feel the strain—that's where it is; and you'll feel it still worse, you know."

Thus from the first Maisie not only felt it, but knew she felt it. A part of it was the consequence of her father's telling her he felt it too, and telling Moddle, in her presence, that she must make a point of driving that home. She was familiar, at the age of six, with the fact that everything had been changed on her account, everything ordered to enable him to give himself up to her. She was to remember always the words in which Moddle impressed upon her that he did so give himself: "Your papa wishes you never to forget, you know, that he has been dreadfully put about." If the skin on Moddle's face had to Maisie the air of being unduly, almost painfully, stretched, it never presented that appearance so much as when she uttered, as she often had occasion to utter, such words. The child wondered if they didn't make it hurt more than usual; but it was only after some time that she

was able to attach to the picture of her father's sufferings, and more particularly to her nurse's manner about them, the meaning for which these things had waited. By the time she had grown sharper, as the gentlemen who had criticised her calves used to say, she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn't yet big enough to play. The great strain meanwhile was that of carrying by the right end the things her father said about her mother—things mostly indeed that Moddle, on a glimpse of them, as if they had been complicated toys or difficult books, took out of her hands and put away in the closet. A wonderful assortment of objects of this kind she was to discover there later, all tumbled up too with the things, shuffled into the same receptacle, that her mother had said about her father.

She had the knowledge that on a certain occasion which every day brought nearer her mother would be at the door to take her away, and this would have darkened all the days if the ingenious Moddle hadn't written on a paper in very big easy words ever so many pleasures that she would enjoy at the other house. These promises ranged from "a mother's fond love" to "a nice poached egg to your tea," and took by the way the prospect of sitting up ever so late to see the lady in question dressed, in silks and velvets and diamonds and pearls, to go out: so that it was a real support to Maisie, at the supreme hour, to feel how, by Moddle's direction, the paper was thrust away in her pocket and there clenched in her fist. The supreme hour was to furnish her with a vivid reminiscence, that of a strange outbreak in the drawing-room on the part of Moddle, who, in reply to something her father had just said, cried aloud: "You ought to be perfectly ashamed of yourself—you ought to blush, sir, for the way you go on!" The carriage, with her mother in it, was at the door; a gentleman who was there, who was always there, laughed out very loud; her father, who had her in his arms, said to Moddle: "My dear woman, I'll settle you presently!"—after which he repeated, showing his teeth more than ever at Maisie while he hugged her, the words for which her nurse had taken him up. Maisie was not at the moment so fully conscious of them as of the wonder of Moddle's sudden disrespect and crimson face; but she was able to produce them in the course of five minutes when, in the carriage, her mother, all kisses, ribbons, eyes, arms, strange sounds and sweet smells, said to her: "And did your beastly papa, my precious angel, send any message to your own loving mamma?" Then it was that she found the words spoken by her beastly papa to be, after all, in her little bewildered ears, from which, at her mother's appeal, they passed, in her clear shrill voice, straight to her little innocent lips. "He said I was to tell you, from him," she faithfully reported, "that you're a nasty horrid pig!"

II

In that lively sense of the immediate which is the very air of a child's mind the past, on each occasion, became for her as indistinct as the future: she surrendered herself to the actual with a good faith that might have been touching to either parent. Crudely as they had calculated they were at first justified by the event: she was the little feathered shuttlecock they could fiercely keep flying between them. The evil they had the gift of thinking or pretending to think of each other they poured into her little gravely-gazing soul as into a boundless receptacle, and each of them had doubtless the best conscience in the world as to the duty of teaching her the stern truth that should be her safeguard against the other. She was at the age for which all stories are true and all conceptions are stories. The actual was the absolute, the present alone was vivid. The objurgation for instance launched in the carriage by her mother after she had at her father's bidding punctually performed was a missive that dropped into her memory with the dry rattle of a letter falling into a pillar-box. Like the letter it was, as part of the contents of a well-stuffed post-bag, delivered in due course at the right address. In the presence of these overflowings, after they had continued for a couple of years, the associates of either party sometimes felt that something should be done for what they called "the real good, don't you know?" of the child. The only thing done, however, in general, took place when it was sighingly remarked that she fortunately wasn't all the year round where she happened to be at the awkward moment, and that, furthermore, either from extreme cunning or from extreme stupidity, she appeared not to take things in.

The theory of her stupidity, eventually embraced by her parents, corresponded with a great date in her small still life: the complete vision, private but final, of the strange office she filled. It was literally a moral revolution and accomplished in the depths of her nature. The stiff dolls on the dusky shelves began to move their arms and legs; old forms and phrases began to have a sense that frightened her. She had a new feeling, the feeling of danger; on which a new remedy rose to meet it, the idea of an inner self or, in other words, of concealment. She puzzled out with imperfect signs, but with a prodigious spirit, that she had been a centre of hatred and a messenger of insult, and that everything was bad because she had been employed to make it so. Her parted lips locked themselves with the determination to be employed no longer. She would forget everything, she would repeat nothing, and when, as a tribute to the successful application of her system, she began to be called a little idiot, she tasted a pleasure new and keen. When therefore, as she grew older, her parents in turn announced before her that she had grown shockingly dull, it was not from any real contraction of her little stream of life. She spoiled their fun, but she practically added to her own. She saw more and more; she saw too much. It was Miss Overmore, her first governess, who on a momentous occasion had sown the seeds of secrecy; sown them not by anything she said, but by a mere roll of those fine eyes which Maisie already admired. Moddle had become at this time, after alternations of residence of which the child had no clear record, an image faintly embalmed in the remembrance of hungry disappearances from the nursery and distressful lapses in the alphabet, sad embarrassments, in particular, when invited to recognise something her nurse described as "the important letter haitch." Miss Overmore, however hungry, never disappeared: this marked her somehow as of higher rank, and the character was confirmed by a prettiness that Maisie supposed to be extraordinary. Mrs. Farange had described her as almost too pretty, and some one had asked what that mattered so long as Beale wasn't there. "Beale or no Beale," Maisie had heard her mother reply, "I take her because she's a lady and yet awfully poor. Rather nice people, but there are seven sisters at home. What do people mean?"

Maisie didn't know what people meant, but she knew very soon all the names of all the sisters; she could say them off better than she could say the multiplication-table. She privately wondered moreover, though she never asked, about the awful poverty, of which her companion also never spoke. Food at any rate came up by mysterious laws; Miss Overmore never, like Moddle, had on an apron,

and when she ate she held her fork with her little finger curled out. The child, who watched her at many moments, watched her particularly at that one. "I think you're lovely," she often said to her; even mamma, who was lovely too, had not such a pretty way with the fork. Maisie associated this showier presence with her now being "big," knowing of course that nursery-governesses were only for little girls who were not, as she said, "really" little. She vaguely knew, further, somehow, that the future was still bigger than she, and that a part of what made it so was the number of governesses lurking in it and ready to dart out. Everything that had happened when she was really little was dormant, everything but the positive certitude, bequeathed from afar by Moddle, that the natural way for a child to have her parents was separate and successive, like her mutton and her pudding or her bath and her nap.

"*Does* he know he lies?"—that was what she had vivaciously asked Miss Overmore on the occasion which was so suddenly to lead to a change in her life.

"Does he know—" Miss Overmore stared; she had a stocking pulled over her hand and was pricking at it with a needle which she poised in the act. Her task was homely, but her movement, like all her movements, graceful.

"Why papa."

"That he 'lies'?"

"That's what mamma says I'm to tell him—'that he lies and he knows he lies.'" Miss Overmore turned very red, though she laughed out till her head fell back; then she pricked again at her muffled hand so hard that Maisie wondered how she could bear it. "*Am* I to tell him?" the child went on. It was then that her companion addressed her in the unmistakeable language of a pair of eyes of deep dark grey. "I can't say No," they replied as distinctly as possible; "I can't say No, because I'm afraid of your mamma, don't you see? Yet how can I say Yes after your papa has been so kind to me, talking to me so long the other day, smiling and flashing his beautiful teeth at me the time we met him in the Park, the time when, rejoicing at the sight of us, he left the gentlemen he was with and turned and walked with us, stayed with us for half an hour?" Somehow in the light of Miss Overmore's lovely eyes that incident came back to Maisie with a charm it hadn't had at the time, and this in spite of the fact that after it was over her governess had never but once alluded to it. On their way home, when papa had quitted them, she had expressed the hope that the child wouldn't mention it to mamma. Maisie liked her so, and had so the charmed sense of being liked by her, that she accepted this remark as settling the matter and wonderingly conformed to it. The wonder now lived again, lived in the recollection of what papa had said to Miss Overmore: "I've only to look at you to see you're a person I can appeal to for help to save my daughter." Maisie's ignorance of what she was to be saved from didn't diminish the pleasure of the thought that Miss Overmore was saving her. It seemed to make them cling together as in some wild game of "going round."

III

She was therefore all the more startled when her mother said to her in connexion with something to be done before her next migration: "You understand of course that she's not going with you."

Maisie turned quite faint. "Oh I thought she was."

"It doesn't in the least matter, you know, what you think," Mrs. Farange loudly replied; "and you had better indeed for the future, miss, learn to keep your thoughts to yourself." This was exactly what Maisie had already learned, and the accomplishment was just the source of her mother's irritation. It was of a horrid little critical system, a tendency, in her silence, to judge her elders, that this lady suspected her, liking as she did, for her own part, a child to be simple and confiding. She liked also to hear the report of the whacks she administered to Mr. Farange's character, to his pretensions to peace of mind: the satisfaction of dealing them diminished when nothing came back. The day was at hand, and she saw it, when she should feel more delight in hurling Maisie at him than in snatching her away; so much so that her conscience winced under the acuteness of a candid friend who had remarked that the real end of all their tugging would be that each parent would try to make the little girl a burden to the other—a sort of game in which a fond mother clearly wouldn't show to advantage. The prospect of not showing to advantage, a distinction in which she held she had never failed, begot in Ida Farange an ill humour of which several persons felt the effect. She determined that Beale at any rate should feel it; she reflected afresh that in the study of how to be odious to him she must never give way. Nothing could incommode him more than not to get the good, for the child, of a nice female appendage who had clearly taken a fancy to her. One of the things Ida said to the appendage was that Beale's was a house in which no decent woman could consent to be seen. It was Miss Overmore herself who explained to Maisie that she had had a hope of being allowed to accompany her to her father's, and that this hope had been dashed by the way her mother took it. "She says that if I ever do such a thing as enter his service I must never expect to show my face in this house again. So I've promised not to attempt to go with you. If I wait patiently till you come back here we shall certainly be together once more."

Waiting patiently, and above all waiting till she should come back there, seemed to Maisie a long way round—it reminded her of all the things she had been told, first and last, that she should have if she'd be good and that in spite of her goodness she had never had at all. "Then who'll take care of me at papa's?"

"Heaven only knows, my own precious!" Miss Overmore replied, tenderly embracing her. There was indeed no doubt that she was dear to this beautiful friend. What could have proved it better than the fact that before a week was out, in spite of their distressing separation and her mother's prohibition and Miss Overmore's scruples and Miss Overmore's promise, the beautiful friend had turned up at her father's? The little lady already engaged there to come by the hour, a fat dark little lady with a foreign name and dirty fingers, who wore, throughout, a bonnet that had at first given her a deceptive air, too soon dispelled, of not staying long, besides asking her pupil questions that had nothing to do with lessons, questions that Beale Farange himself, when two or three were repeated to him, admitted to be awfully low—this strange apparition faded before the bright creature who had braved everything for Maisie's sake. The bright creature told her little charge frankly what had happened—that she had really been unable to hold out. She had broken her vow to Mrs. Farange; she had struggled for three days and then had come straight to Maisie's papa and told him the simple truth. She adored his daughter; she couldn't give her up; she'd make for her any sacrifice. On this basis it had been arranged that she should stay; her courage had been rewarded; she left Maisie in no doubt as to the amount of courage she had required. Some of the things she said made a particular impression on the child—her declaration for instance that when her pupil should get older she'd understand better just how "dreadfully bold" a young lady, to do exactly what she had done, had to be.

"Fortunately your papa appreciates it; he appreciates it *immensely*"—that was one of the things Miss Overmore also said, with a striking insistence on the adverb. Maisie herself was no less impressed with what this martyr had gone through, especially after hearing of the terrible letter that had come from Mrs. Farange. Mamma had been so angry that, in Miss Overmore's own words, she had loaded her with insult—proof enough indeed that they must never look forward to being together again under mamma's roof. Mamma's roof, however, had its turn, this time, for the child, of appearing but remotely contingent, so that, to reassure her, there was scarce a need of her companion's secret, solemnly confided—the probability there would be no going back to mamma at all. It was Miss Overmore's private conviction, and a part of the same communication, that if Mr. Farange's daughter would only show a really marked preference she would be backed up by "public opinion" in holding on to him. Poor Maisie could scarcely grasp that incentive, but she could surrender herself to the day. She had conceived her first passion, and the object of it was her governess. It hadn't been put to her, and she couldn't, or at any rate she didn't, put it to herself, that she liked Miss Overmore better than she liked papa; but it would have sustained her under such an imputation to feel herself able to reply that papa too liked Miss Overmore exactly as much. He had particularly told her so. Besides she could easily see it.

IV

All this led her on, but it brought on her fate as well, the day when her mother would be at the door in the carriage in which Maisie now rode on no occasions but these. There was no question at present of Miss Overmore's going back with her: it was universally recognised that her quarrel with Mrs. Farange was much too acute. The child felt it from the first; there was no hugging nor exclaiming as that lady drove her away—there was only a frightening silence, unenlivened even by the invidious enquiries of former years, which culminated, according to its stern nature, in a still more frightening old woman, a figure awaiting her on the very doorstep. "You're to be under this lady's care," said her mother. "Take her, Mrs. Wix," she added, addressing the figure impatiently and giving the child a push from which Maisie gathered that she wished to set Mrs. Wix an example of energy. Mrs. Wix took her and, Maisie felt the next day, would never let her go. She had struck her at first, just after Miss Overmore, as terrible; but something in her voice at the end of an hour touched the little girl in a spot that had never even yet been reached. Maisie knew later what it was, though doubtless she couldn't have made a statement of it: these were things that a few days' talk with Mrs. Wix quite lighted up. The principal one was a matter Mrs. Wix herself always immediately mentioned: she had had a little girl quite of her own, and the little girl had been killed on the spot. She had had absolutely nothing else in all the world, and her affliction had broken her heart. It was comfortably established between them that Mrs. Wix's heart was broken. What Maisie felt was that she had been, with passion and anguish, a mother, and that this was something Miss Overmore was not, something (strangely, confusingly) that mamma was even less.

So it was that in the course of an extraordinarily short time she found herself as deeply absorbed in the image of the little dead Clara Matilda, who, on a crossing in the Harrow Road, had been knocked down and crushed by the cruellest of hansoms, as she had ever found herself in the family group made vivid by one of seven. "She's your little dead sister," Mrs. Wix ended by saying, and Maisie, all in a tremor of curiosity and compassion, addressed from that moment a particular piety to the small accepted acquisition. Somehow she wasn't a real sister, but that only made her the more romantic. It contributed to this view of her that she was never to be spoken of in that character to any one else—least of all to Mrs. Farange, who wouldn't care for her nor recognise the relationship: it was to be just an unutterable and inexhaustible little secret with Mrs. Wix. Maisie knew everything about her that could be known, everything she had said or done in her little mutilated life, exactly how lovely she was, exactly how her hair was curled and her frocks were trimmed. Her hair came down far below her waist—it was of the most wonderful golden brightness, just as Mrs. Wix's own had been a long time before. Mrs. Wix's own was indeed very remarkable still, and Maisie had felt at first that she should never get on with it. It played a large part in the sad and strange appearance, the appearance as of a kind of greasy greyness, which Mrs. Wix had presented on the child's arrival. It had originally been yellow, but time had turned that elegance to ashes, to a turbid sallow unvenerable white. Still excessively abundant, it was dressed in a manner of which the poor lady appeared not yet to have recognised the supersession, with a glossy braid, like a large diadem, on the top of the head, and behind, at the nape of the neck, a dingy rosette like a large button. She wore glasses which, in humble reference to a divergent obliquity of vision, she called her straighteners, and a little ugly snuff-coloured dress trimmed with satin bands in the form of scallops and glazed with antiquity. The straighteners, she explained to Maisie, were put on for the sake of others, whom, as she believed, they helped to recognise the bearing, otherwise doubtful, of her regard; the rest of the melancholy garb could only have been put on for herself. With the added suggestion of her goggles it reminded her pupil of the polished shell or corslet of a horrid beetle. At first she had looked cross and almost cruel; but this impression passed away with the child's increased perception of her being in the eyes of the world a figure mainly to laugh at. She was as droll as a charade or an animal toward the end of the

"natural history"—a person whom people, to make talk lively, described to each other and imitated. Every one knew the straighteners; every one knew the diadem and the button, the scallops and satin bands; every one, though Maisie had never betrayed her, knew even Clara Matilda.

It was on account of these things that mamma got her for such low pay, really for nothing: so much, one day when Mrs. Wix had accompanied her into the drawing-room and left her, the child heard one of the ladies she found there—a lady with eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes and thick black stitching, like ruled lines for musical notes on beautiful white gloves—announce to another. She knew governesses were poor; Miss Overmore was unmentionably and Mrs. Wix ever so publicly so. Neither this, however, nor the old brown frock nor the diadem nor the button, made a difference for Maisie in the charm put forth through everything, the charm of Mrs. Wix's conveying that somehow, in her ugliness and her poverty, she was peculiarly and soothingly safe; safer than any one in the world, than papa, than mamma, than the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful, than Miss Overmore, on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one couldn't rest with quite the same tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling. Mrs. Wix was as safe as Clara Matilda, who was in heaven and yet, embarrassingly, also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave. It was from something in Mrs. Wix's tone, which in spite of caricature remained indescribable and inimitable, that Maisie, before her term with her mother was over, drew this sense of a support, like a breast-high banister in a place of "drops," that would never give way. If she knew her instructress was poor and queer she also knew she was not nearly so "qualified" as Miss Overmore, who could say lots of dates straight off (letting you hold the book yourself), state the position of Malabar, play six pieces without notes and, in a sketch, put in beautifully the trees and houses and difficult parts. Maisie herself could play more pieces than Mrs. Wix, who was moreover visibly ashamed of her houses and trees and could only, with the help of a smutty forefinger, of doubtful legitimacy in the field of art, do the smoke coming out of the chimneys. They dealt, the governess and her pupil, in "subjects," but there were many the governess put off from week to week and that they never got to at all: she only used to say "We'll take that in its proper order." Her order was a circle as vast as the untravelled globe. She had not the spirit of adventure—the child could perfectly see how many subjects she was afraid of. She took refuge on the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth. She knew swarms of stories, mostly those of the novels she had read; relating them with a memory that never faltered and a wealth of detail that was Maisie's delight. They were all about love and beauty and countesses and wickedness. Her conversation was practically an endless narrative, a great garden of romance, with sudden vistas into her own life and gushing fountains of homeliness. These were the parts where they most lingered; she made the child take with her again every step of her long, lame course and think it beyond magic or monsters. Her pupil acquired a vivid vision of every one who had ever, in her phrase, knocked against her—some of them oh so hard!—every one literally but Mr. Wix, her husband, as to whom nothing was mentioned save that he had been dead for ages. He had been rather remarkably absent from his wife's career, and Maisie was never taken to see his grave.

V

The second parting from Miss Overmore had been bad enough, but this first parting from Mrs. Wix was much worse. The child had lately been to the dentist's and had a term of comparison for the screwed-up intensity of the scene. It was dreadfully silent, as it had been when her tooth was taken out; Mrs. Wix had on that occasion grabbed her hand and they had clung to each other with the frenzy of their determination not to scream. Maisie, at the dentist's, had been heroically still, but just when she felt most anguish had become aware of an audible shriek on the part of her companion, a spasm of stifled sympathy. This was reproduced by the only sound that broke their supreme embrace when, a month later, the "arrangement," as her periodical uprootings were called, played the part of the horrible forceps. Embedded in Mrs. Wix's nature as her tooth had been socketed in her gum, the operation of extracting her would really have been a case for chloroform. It was a hug that fortunately left nothing to say, for the poor woman's want of words at such an hour seemed to fall in with her want of everything. Maisie's alternate parent, in the outermost vestibule—he liked the impertinence of crossing as much as that of his late wife's threshold—stood over them with his open watch and his still more open grin, while from the only corner of an eye on which something of Mrs. Wix's didn't impinge the child saw at the door a brougham in which Miss Overmore also waited. She remembered the difference when, six months before, she had been torn from the breast of that more spirited protectress. Miss Overmore, then also in the vestibule, but of course in the other one, had been thoroughly audible and voluble; her protest had rung out bravely and she had declared that something—her pupil didn't know exactly what—was a regular wicked shame. That had at the time dimly recalled to Maisie the far-away moment of Moddle's great outbreak: there seemed always to be "shames" connected in one way or another with her migrations. At present, while Mrs. Wix's arms tightened and the smell of her hair was strong, she further remembered how, in pacifying Miss Overmore, papa had made use of the words "you dear old duck!"—an expression which, by its oddity, had stuck fast in her young mind, having moreover a place well prepared for it there by what she knew of the governess whom she now always mentally characterised as the pretty one. She wondered whether this affection would be as great as before: that would at all events be the case with the prettiness Maisie could see in the face which showed brightly at the window of the brougham.

The brougham was a token of harmony, of the fine conditions papa would this time offer: he had usually come for her in a hansom, with a four-wheeler behind for the boxes. The four-wheeler with the boxes on it was actually there, but mamma was the only lady with whom she had ever been in a conveyance of the kind always of old spoken of by Moddle as a private carriage. Papa's carriage was, now that he had one, still more private, somehow, than mamma's; and when at last she found herself quite on top, as she felt, of its inmates and gloriously rolling away, she put to Miss Overmore, after another immense and talkative squeeze, a question of which the motive was a desire for information as to the continuity of a certain sentiment. "Did papa like you just the same while I was gone?" she enquired—full of the sense of how markedly his favour had been established in her presence. She had bethought herself that this favour might, like her presence and as if depending on it, be only intermittent and for the season. Papa, on whose knee she sat, burst into one of those loud laughs of his that, however prepared she was, seemed always, like some trick in a frightening game, to leap forth and make her jump. Before Miss Overmore could speak he replied: "Why, you little donkey, when you're away what have I left to do but just to love her?" Miss Overmore hereupon immediately took her from him, and they had a merry little scrimmage over her of which Maisie caught the surprised perception in the white stare of an old lady who passed in a victoria. Then her beautiful friend remarked to her very gravely: "I shall make him understand that if he ever again says anything as horrid as that to you I shall carry you straight off and we'll go and live somewhere together and be good quiet little girls." The child couldn't quite make out why her father's speech had been

horrid, since it only expressed that appreciation which their companion herself had of old described as "immense." To enter more into the truth of the matter she appealed to him again directly, asked if in all those months Miss Overmore hadn't been with him just as she had been before and just as she would be now. "Of course she has, old girl—where else could the poor dear be?" cried Beale Farange, to the still greater scandal of their companion, who protested that unless he straightway "took back" his nasty wicked fib it would be, this time, not only him she would leave, but his child too and his house and his tiresome trouble—all the impossible things he had succeeded in putting on her. Beale, under this frolic menace, took nothing back at all; he was indeed apparently on the point of repeating his extravagance, but Miss Overmore instructed her little charge that she was not to listen to his bad jokes: she was to understand that a lady couldn't stay with a gentleman that way without some awfully proper reason.

Maisie looked from one of her companions to the other; this was the freshest gayest start she had yet enjoyed, but she had a shy fear of not exactly believing them. "Well, what reason *is* proper?" she thoughtfully demanded.

"Oh a long-legged stick of a tomboy: there's none so good as that." Her father enjoyed both her drollery and his own and tried again to get possession of her—an effort deprecated by their comrade and leading again to something of a public scuffle. Miss Overmore declared to the child that she had been all the while with good friends; on which Beale Farange went on: "She means good friends of mine, you know—tremendous friends of mine. There has been no end of *them* about—that I *will* say for her!" Maisie felt bewildered and was afterwards for some time conscious of a vagueness, just slightly embarrassing, as to the subject of so much amusement and as to where her governess had really been. She didn't feel at all as if she had been seriously told, and no such feeling was supplied by anything that occurred later. Her embarrassment, of a precocious instinctive order, attached itself to the idea that this was another of the matters it was not for her, as her mother used to say, to go into. Therefore, under her father's roof during the time that followed, she made no attempt to clear up her ambiguity by an ingratiating way with housemaids; and it was an odd truth that the ambiguity itself took nothing from the fresh pleasure promised her by renewed contact with Miss Overmore. The confidence looked for by that young lady was of the fine sort that explanation can't improve, and she herself at any rate was a person superior to any confusion. For Maisie moreover concealment had never necessarily seemed deception; she had grown up among things as to which her foremost knowledge was that she was never to ask about them. It was far from new to her that the questions of the small are the peculiar diversion of the great: except the affairs of her doll Lisette there had scarcely ever been anything at her mother's that was explicable with a grave face. Nothing was so easy to her as to send the ladies who gathered there off into shrieks, and she might have practised upon them largely if she had been of a more calculating turn. Everything had something behind it: life was like a long, long corridor with rows of closed doors. She had learned that at these doors it was wise not to knock—this seemed to produce from within such sounds of derision. Little by little, however, she understood more, for it befell that she was enlightened by Lisette's questions, which reproduced the effect of her own upon those for whom she sat in the very darkness of Lisette. Was she not herself convulsed by such innocence? In the presence of it she often imitated the shrieking ladies. There were at any rate things she really couldn't tell even a French doll. She could only pass on her lessons and study to produce on Lisette the impression of having mysteries in her life, wondering the while whether she succeeded in the air of shading off, like her mother, into the unknowable. When the reign of Miss Overmore followed that of Mrs. Wix she took a fresh cue, emulating her governess and bridging over the interval with the simple expectation of trust. Yes, there were matters one couldn't "go into" with a pupil. There were for instance days when, after prolonged absence, Lisette, watching her take off her things, tried hard to discover where she had been. Well, she discovered a little, but never discovered all. There was an occasion when, on her being particularly indiscreet, Maisie replied to her—and precisely about the motive of a disappearance—as she, Maisie, had once been replied to

by Mrs. Farange: "Find out for yourself!" She mimicked her mother's sharpness, but she was rather ashamed afterwards, though as to whether of the sharpness or of the mimicry was not quite clear.

VI

She became aware in time that this phase wouldn't have shone by lessons, the care of her education being now only one of the many duties devolving on Miss Overmore; a devolution as to which she was present at various passages between that lady and her father—passages significant, on either side, of dissent and even of displeasure. It was gathered by the child on these occasions that there was something in the situation for which her mother might "come down" on them all, though indeed the remark, always dropped by her father, was greeted on his companion's part with direct contradiction. Such scenes were usually brought to a climax by Miss Overmore's demanding, with more asperity than she applied to any other subject, in what position under the sun such a person as Mrs. Farange would find herself for coming down. As the months went on the little girl's interpretations thickened, and the more effectually that this stretch was the longest she had known without a break. She got used to the idea that her mother, for some reason, was in no hurry to reinstate her: that idea was forcibly expressed by her father whenever Miss Overmore, differing and decided, took him up on the question, which he was always putting forward, of the urgency of sending her to school. For a governess Miss Overmore differed surprisingly; far more for instance than would have entered into the bowed head of Mrs. Wix. She observed to Maisie many times that she was quite conscious of not doing her justice, and that Mr. Farange equally measured and equally lamented this deficiency. The reason of it was that she had mysterious responsibilities that interfered —responsibilities, Miss Overmore intimated, to Mr. Farange himself and to the friendly noisy little house and those who came there. Mr. Farange's remedy for every inconvenience was that the child should be put at school—there were such lots of splendid schools, as everybody knew, at Brighton and all over the place. That, however, Maisie learned, was just what would bring her mother down: from the moment he should delegate to others the housing of his little charge he hadn't a leg to stand on before the law. Didn't he keep her away from her mother precisely because Mrs. Farange was one of these others?

There was also the solution of a second governess, a young person to come in by the day and really do the work; but to this Miss Overmore wouldn't for a moment listen, arguing against it with great public relish and wanting to know from all comers—she put it even to Maisie herself—they didn't see how frightfully it would give her away. "What am I supposed to be at all, don't you see, if I'm not here to look after her?" She was in a false position and so freely and loudly called attention to it that it seemed to become almost a source of glory. The way out of it of course was just to do her plain duty; but that was unfortunately what, with his excessive, his exorbitant demands on her, which every one indeed appeared quite to understand, he practically, he selfishly prevented. Beale Farange, for Miss Overmore, was now never anything but "he," and the house was as full as ever of lively gentlemen with whom, under that designation, she chaffingly talked about him. Maisie meanwhile, as a subject of familiar gossip on what was to be done with her, was left so much to herself that she had hours of wistful thought of the large loose discipline of Mrs. Wix; yet she none the less held it under her father's roof a point of superiority that none of his visitors were ladies. It added to this odd security that she had once heard a gentleman say to him as if it were a great joke and in obvious reference to Miss Overmore: "Hanged if she'll let another woman come near you—hanged if she ever will. She'd let fly a stick at her as they do at a strange cat!" Maisie greatly preferred gentlemen as inmates in spite of their also having their way—louder but sooner over—of laughing out at her. They pulled and pinched, they teased and tickled her; some of them even, as they termed it, shied things at her, and all of them thought it funny to call her by names having no resemblance to her own. The ladies on the other hand addressed her as "You poor pet" and scarcely touched her even to kiss her. But it was of the ladies she was most afraid.

She was now old enough to understand how disproportionate a stay she had already made with her father; and also old enough to enter a little into the ambiguity attending this excess, which oppressed her particularly whenever the question had been touched upon in talk with her governess. "Oh you needn't worry: she doesn't care!" Miss Overmore had often said to her in reference to any fear that her mother might resent her prolonged detention. "She has other people than poor little *you* to think about, and has gone abroad with them; so you needn't be in the least afraid she'll stickle this time for her rights." Maisie knew Mrs. Farange had gone abroad, for she had had weeks and weeks before a letter from her beginning "My precious pet" and taking leave of her for an indeterminate time; but she had not seen in it a renunciation of hatred or of the writer's policy of asserting herself, for the sharpest of all her impressions had been that there was nothing her mother would ever care so much about as to torment Mr. Farange. What at last, however, was in this connexion bewildering and a little frightening was the dawn of a suspicion that a better way had been found to torment Mr. Farange than to deprive him of his periodical burden. This was the question that worried our young lady and that Miss Overmore's confidences and the frequent observations of her employer only rendered more mystifying. It was a contradiction that if Ida had now a fancy for waiving the rights she had originally been so hot about her late husband shouldn't jump at the monopoly for which he had also in the first instance so fiercely fought; but when Maisie, with a subtlety beyond her years, sounded this new ground her main success was in hearing her mother more freshly abused. Miss Overmore had up to now rarely deviated from a decent reserve, but the day came when she expressed herself with a vividness not inferior to Beale's own on the subject of the lady who had fled to the Continent to wriggle out of her job. It would serve this lady right, Maisie gathered, if that contract, in the shape of an overgrown and underdressed daughter, should be shipped straight out to her and landed at her feet in the midst of scandalous excesses.

The picture of these pursuits was what Miss Overmore took refuge in when the child tried timidly to ascertain if her father were disposed to feel he had too much of her. She evaded the point and only kicked up all round it the dust of Ida's heartlessness and folly, of which the supreme proof, it appeared, was the fact that she was accompanied on her journey by a gentleman whom, to be painfully plain on it, she had—well, "picked up." The terms on which, unless they were married, ladies and gentlemen might, as Miss Overmore expressed it, knock about together, were the terms on which she and Mr. Farange had exposed themselves to possible misconception. She had indeed, as has been noted, often explained this before, often said to Maisie: "I don't know what in the world, darling, your father and I should do without you, for you just make the difference, as I've told you, of keeping us perfectly proper." The child took in the office it was so endearingly presented to her that she performed a comfort that helped her to a sense of security even in the event of her mother's giving her up. Familiar as she had grown with the fact of the great alternative to the proper, she felt in her governess and her father a strong reason for not emulating that detachment. At the same time she had heard somehow of little girls—of exalted rank, it was true—whose education was carried on by instructors of the other sex, and she knew that if she were at school at Brighton it would be thought an advantage to her to be more or less in the hands of masters. She turned these things over and remarked to Miss Overmore that if she should go to her mother perhaps the gentleman might become her tutor.

"The gentleman?" The proposition was complicated enough to make Miss Overmore stare.

"The one who's with mamma. Mightn't that make it right—as right as your being my governess makes it for you to be with papa?"

Miss Overmore considered; she coloured a little; then she embraced her ingenious friend. "You're too sweet! I'm a *real* governess."

"And couldn't he be a real tutor?"

"Of course not. He's ignorant and bad."

"Bad—?" Maisie echoed with wonder.

Her companion gave a queer little laugh at her tone. "He's ever so much younger—" But that was all.

"Younger than you?"

Miss Overmore laughed again; it was the first time Maisie had seen her approach so nearly to a giggle.

"Younger than—no matter whom. I don't know anything about him and don't want to," she rather inconsequently added. "He's not my sort, and I'm sure, my own darling, he's not yours." And she repeated the free caress into which her colloquies with Maisie almost always broke and which made the child feel that *her* affection at least was a gage of safety. Parents had come to seem vague, but governesses were evidently to be trusted. Maisie's faith in Mrs. Wix for instance had suffered no lapse from the fact that all communication with her had temporarily dropped. During the first weeks of their separation Clara Matilda's mamma had repeatedly and dolefully written to her, and Maisie had answered with an enthusiasm controlled only by orthographical doubts; but the correspondence had been duly submitted to Miss Overmore, with the final effect of its not suiting her. It was this lady's view that Mr. Farange wouldn't care for it at all, and she ended by confessing—since her pupil pushed her—that she didn't care for it herself. She was furiously jealous, she said; and that weakness was but a new proof of her disinterested affection. She pronounced Mrs. Wix's effusions moreover illiterate and unprofitable; she made no scruple of declaring it monstrous that a woman in her senses should have placed the formation of her daughter's mind in such ridiculous hands. Maisie was well aware that the proprietress of the old brown dress and the old odd headgear was lower in the scale of "form" than Miss Overmore; but it was now brought home to her with pain that she was educationally quite out of the question. She was buried for the time beneath a conclusive remark of her critic's: "She's really beyond a joke!" This remark was made as that charming woman held in her hand the last letter that Maisie was to receive from Mrs. Wix; it was fortified by a decree proscribing the preposterous tie. "Must I then write and tell her?" the child bewilderedly asked: she grew pale at the dreadful things it appeared involved for her to say. "Don't dream of it, my dear—I'll write: you may trust me!" cried Miss Overmore; who indeed wrote to such purpose that a hush in which you could have heard a pin drop descended upon poor Mrs. Wix. She gave for weeks and weeks no sign whatever of life: it was as if she had been as effectually disposed of by Miss Overmore's communication as her little girl, in the Harrow Road, had been disposed of by the terrible hansom. Her very silence became after this one of the largest elements of Maisie's consciousness; it proved a warm and habitable air, into which the child penetrated further than she dared ever to mention to her companions. Somewhere in the depths of it the dim straighteners were fixed upon her; somewhere out of the troubled little current Mrs. Wix intensely waited.

VII

It quite fell in with this intensity that one day, on returning from a walk with the housemaid, Maisie should have found her in the hall, seated on the stool usually occupied by the telegraph-boys who haunted Beale Farange's door and kicked their heels while, in his room, answers to their missives took form with the aid of smoke-puffs and growls. It had seemed to her on their parting that Mrs. Wix had reached the last limits of the squeeze, but she now felt those limits to be transcended and that the duration of her visitor's hug was a direct reply to Miss Overmore's veto. She understood in a flash how the visit had come to be possible—that Mrs. Wix, watching her chance, must have slipped in under protection of the fact that papa, always tormented in spite of arguments with the idea of a school, had, for a three days' excursion to Brighton, absolutely insisted on the attendance of her adversary. It was true that when Maisie explained their absence and their important motive Mrs. Wix wore an expression so peculiar that it could only have had its origin in surprise. This contradiction indeed peeped out only to vanish, for at the very moment that, in the spirit of it, she threw herself afresh upon her young friend a hansom crested with neat luggage rattled up to the door and Miss Overmore bounded out. The shock of her encounter with Mrs. Wix was less violent than Maisie had feared on seeing her and didn't at all interfere with the sociable tone in which, under her rival's eyes, she explained to her little charge that she had returned, for a particular reason, a day sooner than she first intended. She had left papa—in such nice lodgings—at Brighton; but he would come back to his dear little home on the morrow. As for Mrs. Wix, papa's companion supplied Maisie in later converse with the right word for the attitude of this personage: Mrs. Wix "stood up" to her in a manner that the child herself felt at the time to be astonishing. This occurred indeed after Miss Overmore had so far raised her interdict as to make a move to the dining-room, where, in the absence of any suggestion of sitting down, it was scarcely more than natural that even poor Mrs. Wix should stand up. Maisie at once enquired if at Brighton, this time, anything had come of the possibility of a school; to which, much to her surprise, Miss Overmore, who had always grandly repudiated it, replied after an instant, but quite as if Mrs. Wix were not there:

"It may be, darling, that something *will* come. The objection, I must tell you, has been quite removed."

At this it was still more startling to hear Mrs. Wix speak out with great firmness. "I don't think, if you'll allow me to say so, that there's any arrangement by which the objection *can* be 'removed.' What has brought me here to-day is that I've a message for Maisie from dear Mrs. Farange."

The child's heart gave a great thump. "Oh mamma's come back?"

"Not yet, sweet love, but she's coming," said Mrs. Wix, "and she has—most thoughtfully, you know—sent me on to prepare you."

"To prepare her for what, pray?" asked Miss Overmore, whose first smoothness began, with this news, to be ruffled.

Mrs. Wix quietly applied her straighteners to Miss Overmore's flushed beauty. "Well, miss, for a very important communication."

"Can't dear Mrs. Farange, as you so oddly call her, make her communications directly? Can't she take the trouble to write to her only daughter?" the younger lady demanded. "Maisie herself will tell you that it's months and months since she has had so much as a word from her."

"Oh but I've written to mamma!" cried the child as if this would do quite as well.

"That makes her treatment of you all the greater scandal," the governess in possession promptly declared.

"Mrs. Farange is too well aware," said Mrs. Wix with sustained spirit, "of what becomes of her letters in this house."

Maisie's sense of fairness hereupon interposed for her visitor. "You know, Miss Overmore, that papa doesn't like everything of mamma's."

"No one likes, my dear, to be made the subject of such language as your mother's letters contain. They were not fit for the innocent child to see," Miss Overmore observed to Mrs. Wix.

"Then I don't know what you complain of, and she's better without them. It serves every purpose that I'm in Mrs. Farange's confidence."

Miss Overmore gave a scornful laugh. "Then you must be mixed up with some extraordinary proceedings!"

"None so extraordinary," cried Mrs. Wix, turning very pale, "as to say horrible things about the mother to the face of the helpless daughter!"

"Things not a bit more horrible, I think," Miss Overmore returned, "than those you, madam, appear to have come here to say about the father!"

Mrs. Wix looked for a moment hard at Maisie, and then, turning again to this witness, spoke with a trembling voice. "I came to say nothing about him, and you must excuse Mrs. Farange and me if we're not so above all reproach as the companion of his travels."

The young woman thus described stared at the apparent breadth of the description—she needed a moment to take it in. Maisie, however, gazing solemnly from one of the disputants to the other, noted that her answer, when it came, perched upon smiling lips. "It will do quite as well, no doubt, if you come up to the requirements of the companion of Mrs. Farange's!"

Mrs. Wix broke into a queer laugh; it sounded to Maisie an unsuccessful imitation of a neigh. "That's just what I'm here to make known—how perfectly the poor lady comes up to them herself." She held up her head at the child. "You must take your mamma's message, Maisie, and you must feel that her wishing me to come to you with it this way is a great proof of interest and affection. She sends you her particular love and announces to you that she's engaged to be married to Sir Claude."

"Sir Claude?" Maisie wonderingly echoed. But while Mrs. Wix explained that this gentleman was a dear friend of Mrs. Farange's, who had been of great assistance to her in getting to Florence and in making herself comfortable there for the winter, she was not too violently shaken to perceive her old friend's enjoyment of the effect of this news on Miss Overmore. That young lady opened her eyes very wide; she immediately remarked that Mrs. Farange's marriage would of course put an end to any further pretension to take her daughter back. Mrs. Wix enquired with astonishment why it should do anything of the sort, and Miss Overmore gave as an instant reason that it was clearly but another dodge in a system of dodges. She wanted to get out of the bargain: why else had she now left Maisie on her father's hands weeks and weeks beyond the time about which she had originally made such a fuss? It was vain for Mrs. Wix to represent—as she speciously proceeded to do—that all this time would be made up as soon as Mrs. Farange returned: she, Miss Overmore, knew nothing, thank heaven, about her confederate, but was very sure any person capable of forming that sort of relation with the lady in Florence would easily agree to object to the presence in his house of the fruit of a union that his dignity must ignore. It was a game like another, and Mrs. Wix's visit was clearly the first move in it. Maisie found in this exchange of asperities a fresh incitement to the unformulated fatalism in which her sense of her own career had long since taken refuge; and it was the beginning for her of a deeper prevision that, in spite of Miss Overmore's brilliancy and Mrs. Wix's passion, she should live to see a change in the nature of the struggle she appeared to have come into the world to produce. It would still be essentially a struggle, but its object would now be *not* to receive her.

Mrs. Wix, after Miss Overmore's last demonstration, addressed herself wholly to the little girl, and, drawing from the pocket of her dingy old pelisse a small flat parcel, removed its envelope and wished to know if *that* looked like a gentleman who wouldn't be nice to everybody—let alone to a person he would be so sure to find so nice. Mrs. Farange, in the candour of new-found happiness, had enclosed a "cabinet" photograph of Sir Claude, and Maisie lost herself in admiration of the fair smooth face, the regular features, the kind eyes, the amiable air, the general glossiness and smartness

of her prospective stepfather—only vaguely puzzled to suppose herself now with two fathers at once. Her researches had hitherto indicated that to incur a second parent of the same sex you had usually to lose the first. "*Isn't* he sympathetic?" asked Mrs. Wix, who had clearly, on the strength of his charming portrait, made up her mind that Sir Claude promised her a future. "You can see, I hope," she added with much expression, "that *he's* a perfect gentleman!" Maisie had never before heard the word "sympathetic" applied to anybody's face; she heard it with pleasure and from that moment it agreeably remained with her. She testified moreover to the force of her own perception in a small soft sigh of response to the pleasant eyes that seemed to seek her acquaintance, to speak to her directly. "He's quite lovely!" she declared to Mrs. Wix. Then eagerly, irrepressibly, as she still held the photograph and Sir Claude continued to fraternise, "Oh can't I keep it?" she broke out. No sooner had she done so than she looked up from it at Miss Overmore: this was with the sudden instinct of appealing to the authority that had long ago impressed on her that she mustn't ask for things. Miss Overmore, to her surprise, looked distant and rather odd, hesitating and giving her time to turn again to Mrs. Wix. Then Maisie saw that lady's long face lengthen; it was stricken and almost scared, as if her young friend really expected more of her than she had to give. The photograph was a possession that, direly denuded, she clung to, and there was a momentary struggle between her fond clutch of it and her capability of every sacrifice for her precarious pupil. With the acuteness of her years, however, Maisie saw that her own avidity would triumph, and she held out the picture to Miss Overmore as if she were quite proud of her mother. "Isn't he just lovely?" she demanded while poor Mrs. Wix hungrily wavered, her straighteners largely covering it and her pelisse gathered about her with an intensity that strained its ancient seams.

"It was to *me*, darling," the visitor said, "that your mamma so generously sent it; but of course if it would give you particular pleasure—" she faltered, only gasping her surrender.

Miss Overmore continued extremely remote. "If the photograph's your property, my dear, I shall be happy to oblige you by looking at it on some future occasion. But you must excuse me if I decline to touch an object belonging to Mrs. Wix."

That lady had by this time grown very red. "You might as well see him this way, miss," she retorted, "as you certainly never will, I believe, in any other! Keep the pretty picture, by all means, my precious," she went on: "Sir Claude will be happy himself, I dare say, to give me one with a kind inscription." The pathetic quaver of this brave boast was not lost on Maisie, who threw herself so gratefully on the speaker's neck that, when they had concluded their embrace, the public tenderness of which, she felt, made up for the sacrifice she imposed, their companion had had time to lay a quick hand on Sir Claude and, with a glance at him or not, whisk him effectually out of sight. Released from the child's arms Mrs. Wix looked about for the picture; then she fixed Miss Overmore with a hard dumb stare; and finally, with her eyes on the little girl again, achieved the grimmest of smiles. "Well, nothing matters, Maisie, because there's another thing your mamma wrote about. She has made sure of me." Even after her loyal hug Maisie felt a bit of a sneak as she glanced at Miss Overmore for permission to understand this. But Mrs. Wix left them in no doubt of what it meant. "She has definitely engaged me—for her return and for yours. Then you'll see for yourself." Maisie, on the spot, quite believed she should; but the prospect was suddenly thrown into confusion by an extraordinary demonstration from Miss Overmore.

"Mrs. Wix," said that young lady, "has some undiscoverable reason for regarding your mother's hold on you as strengthened by the fact that she's about to marry. I wonder then—on that system—what our visitor will say to your father's."

Miss Overmore's words were directed to her pupil, but her face, lighted with an irony that made it prettier even than ever before, was presented to the dingy figure that had stiffened itself for departure. The child's discipline had been bewildering—had ranged freely between the prescription that she was to answer when spoken to and the experience of lively penalties on obeying that prescription. This time, nevertheless, she felt emboldened for risks; above all as something portentous

seemed to have leaped into her sense of the relations of things. She looked at Miss Overmore much as she had a way of looking at persons who treated her to "grown up" jokes. "Do you mean papa's hold on me—do you mean *he's* about to marry?"

"Papa's not about to marry—papa *is* married, my dear. Papa was married the day before yesterday at Brighton." Miss Overmore glittered more gaily; meanwhile it came over Maisie, and quite dazzlingly, that her "smart" governess was a bride. "He's my husband, if you please, and I'm his little wife. So *now* we'll see who's your little mother!" She caught her pupil to her bosom in a manner that was not to be outdone by the emissary of her predecessor, and a few moments later, when things had lurched back into their places, that poor lady, quite defeated of the last word, had soundlessly taken flight.

VIII

After Mrs. Wix's retreat Miss Overmore appeared to recognise that she was not exactly in a position to denounce Ida Farange's second union; but she drew from a table-drawer the photograph of Sir Claude and, standing there before Maisie, studied it at some length.

"Isn't he beautiful?" the child ingenuously asked.

Her companion hesitated. "No—he's horrid," she, to Maisie's surprise, sharply returned. But she debated another minute, after which she handed back the picture. It appeared to Maisie herself to exhibit a fresh attraction, and she was troubled, having never before had occasion to differ from her lovely friend. So she only could ask what, such being the case, she should do with it: should she put it quite away—where it wouldn't be there to offend? On this Miss Overmore again cast about; after which she said unexpectedly: "Put it on the schoolroom mantelpiece."

Maisie felt a fear. "Won't papa dislike to see it there?"

"Very much indeed; but that won't matter *now*." Miss Overmore spoke with peculiar significance and to her pupil's mystification.

"On account of the marriage?" Maisie risked.

Miss Overmore laughed, and Maisie could see that in spite of the irritation produced by Mrs. Wix she was in high spirits. "Which marriage do you mean?"

With the question put to her it suddenly struck the child she didn't know, so that she felt she looked foolish. So she took refuge in saying: "Shall *you* be different—" This was a full implication that the bride of Sir Claude would be.

"As your father's wedded wife? Utterly!" Miss Overmore replied. And the difference began of course in her being addressed, even by Maisie, from that day and by her particular request, as Mrs. Beale. It was there indeed principally that it ended, for except that the child could reflect that she should presently have four parents in all, and also that at the end of three months the staircase, for a little girl hanging over banisters, sent up the deepening rustle of more elaborate advances, everything made the same impression as before. Mrs. Beale had very pretty frocks, but Miss Overmore's had been quite as good, and if papa was much fonder of his second wife than he had been of his first Maisie had foreseen that fondness, had followed its development almost as closely as the person more directly involved. There was little indeed in the commerce of her companions that her precocious experience couldn't explain, for if they struck her as after all rather deficient in that air of the honeymoon of which she had so often heard—in much detail, for instance, from Mrs. Wix—it was natural to judge the circumstance in the light of papa's proved disposition to contest the empire of the matrimonial tie. His honeymoon, when he came back from Brighton—not on the morrow of Mrs. Wix's visit, and not, oddly, till several days later—his honeymoon was perhaps perceptibly tinged with the dawn of a later stage of wedlock. There were things dislike of which, as the child knew it, wouldn't matter to Mrs. Beale now, and their number increased so that such a trifle as his hostility to the photograph of Sir Claude quite dropped out of view. This pleasing object found a conspicuous place in the schoolroom, which in truth Mr. Farange seldom entered and in which silent admiration formed, during the time I speak of, almost the sole scholastic exercise of Mrs. Beale's pupil.

Maisie was not long in seeing just what her stepmother had meant by the difference she should show in her new character. If she was her father's wife she was not her own governess, and if her presence had had formerly to be made regular by the theory of a humble function she was now on a footing that dispensed with all theories and was inconsistent with all servitude. That was what she had meant by the drop of the objection to a school; her small companion was no longer required at home as—it was Mrs. Beale's own amusing word—a little duenna. The argument against a successor to Miss Overmore remained: it was composed frankly of the fact, of which Mrs. Beale granted the full absurdity, that she was too awfully fond of her stepdaughter to bring herself to see her in vulgar

and mercenary hands. The note of this particular danger emboldened Maisie to put in a word for Mrs. Wix, the modest measure of whose avidity she had taken from the first; but Mrs. Beale disposed afresh and effectually of a candidate who would be sure to act in some horrible and insidious way for Ida's interest and who moreover was personally loathsome and as ignorant as a fish. She made also no more of a secret of the awkward fact that a good school would be hideously expensive, and of the further circumstance, which seemed to put an end to everything, that when it came to the point papa, in spite of his previous clamour, was really most nasty about paying. "Would you believe," Mrs. Beale confidentially asked of her little charge, "that he says I'm a worse expense than ever, and that a daughter and a wife together are really more than he can afford?" It was thus that the splendid school at Brighton lost itself in the haze of larger questions, though the fear that it would provoke Ida to leap into the breach subsided with her prolonged, her quite shameless non-appearance. Her daughter and her successor were therefore left to gaze in united but helpless blankness at all Maisie was not learning.

This quantity was so great as to fill the child's days with a sense of intermission to which even French Lisette gave no accent—with finished games and unanswered questions and dreaded tests; with the habit, above all, in her watch for a change, of hanging over banisters when the door-bell sounded. This was the great refuge of her impatience, but what she heard at such times was a clatter of gaiety downstairs; the impression of which, from her earliest childhood, had built up in her the belief that the grown-up time was the time of real amusement and above all of real intimacy. Even Lisette, even Mrs. Wix had never, she felt, in spite of hugs and tears, been so intimate with her as so many persons at present were with Mrs. Beale and as so many others of old had been with Mrs. Farange. The note of hilarity brought people together still more than the note of melancholy, which was the one exclusively sounded, for instance, by poor Mrs. Wix. Maisie in these days preferred none the less that domestic revels should be wafted to her from a distance: she felt sadly unsupported for facing the inquisition of the drawing-room. That was a reason the more for making the most of Susan Ash, who in her quality of under-housemaid moved at a very different level and who, none the less, was much depended upon out of doors. She was a guide to peregrinations that had little in common with those intensely definite airings that had left with the child a vivid memory of the regulated mind of Moddle. There had been under Moddle's system no dawdles at shop-windows and no nudges, in Oxford Street, of "I *say*, look at *'er*!" There had been an inexorable treatment of crossings and a serene exemption from the fear that—especially at corners, of which she was yet weakly fond—haunted the housemaid, the fear of being, as she ominously said, "spoken to." The dangers of the town equally with its diversions added to Maisie's sense of being untutored and unclaimed.

The situation however, had taken a twist when, on another of her returns, at Susan's side, extremely tired, from the pursuit of exercise qualified by much hovering, she encountered another emotion. She on this occasion learnt at the door that her instant attendance was requested in the drawing-room. Crossing the threshold in a cloud of shame she discerned through the blur Mrs. Beale seated there with a gentleman who immediately drew the pain from her predicament by rising before her as the original of the photograph of Sir Claude. She felt the moment she looked at him that he was by far the most shining presence that had ever made her gape, and her pleasure in seeing him, in knowing that he took hold of her and kissed her, as quickly throbbed into a strange shy pride in him, a perception of his making up for her fallen state, for Susan's public nudges, which quite bruised her, and for all the lessons that, in the dead schoolroom, where at times she was almost afraid to stay alone, she was bored with not having. It was as if he had told her on the spot that he belonged to her, so that she could already show him off and see the effect he produced. No, nothing else that was most beautiful ever belonging to her could kindle that particular joy—not Mrs. Beale at that very moment, not papa when he was gay, nor mamma when she was dressed, nor Lisette when she was new. The joy almost overflowed in tears when he laid his hand on her and drew her to him, telling her, with a smile of which the promise was as bright as that of a Christmas-tree, that he knew her ever so well by

her mother, but had come to see her now so that he might know her for himself. She could see that his view of this kind of knowledge was to make her come away with him, and, further, that it was just what he was there for and had already been some time: arranging it with Mrs. Beale and getting on with that lady in a manner evidently not at all affected by her having on the arrival of his portrait thought of him so ill. They had grown almost intimate—or had the air of it—over their discussion; and it was still further conveyed to Maisie that Mrs. Beale had made no secret, and would make yet less of one, of all that it cost to let her go. "You seem so tremendously eager," she said to the child, "that I hope you're at least clear about Sir Claude's relation to you. It doesn't appear to occur to him to give you the necessary reassurance."

Maisie, a trifle mystified, turned quickly to her new friend. "Why it's of course that you're *married* to her, isn't it?"

Her anxious emphasis started them off, as she had learned to call it; this was the echo she infallibly and now quite resignedly produced; moreover Sir Claude's laughter was an indistinguishable part of the sweetness of his being there. "We've been married, my dear child, three months, and my interest in you is a consequence, don't you know? of my great affection for your mother. In coming here it's of course for your mother I'm acting."

"Oh I know," Maisie said with all the candour of her competence. "She can't come herself—except just to the door." Then as she thought afresh: "Can't she come even to the door now?"

"There you are!" Mrs. Beale exclaimed to Sir Claude. She spoke as if his dilemma were ludicrous.

His kind face, in a hesitation, seemed to recognise it; but he answered the child with a frank smile. "No—not very well."

"Because she has married you?"

He promptly accepted this reason. "Well, that has a good deal to do with it."

He was so delightful to talk to that Maisie pursued the subject. "But papa—*he* has married Miss Overmore."

"Ah you'll see that he won't come for you at your mother's," that lady interposed.

"Yes, but that won't be for a long time," Maisie hastened to respond.

"We won't talk about it now—you've months and months to put in first." And Sir Claude drew her closer.

"Oh that's what makes it so hard to give her up!" Mrs. Beale made this point with her arms out to her stepdaughter. Maisie, quitting Sir Claude, went over to them and, clasped in a still tenderer embrace, felt entrancingly the extension of the field of happiness. "*I'll* come for you," said her stepmother, "if Sir Claude keeps you too long: we must make him quite understand that! Don't talk to me about her ladyship!" she went on to their visitor so familiarly that it was almost as if they must have met before. "I know her ladyship as if I had made her. They're a pretty pair of parents!" cried Mrs. Beale.

Maisie had so often heard them called so that the remark diverted her but an instant from the agreeable wonder of this grand new form of allusion to her mother; and that, in its turn, presently left her free to catch at the pleasant possibility, in connexion with herself, of a relation much happier as between Mrs. Beale and Sir Claude than as between mamma and papa. Still the next thing that happened was that her interest in such a relation brought to her lips a fresh question.

"Have you seen papa?" she asked of Sir Claude.

It was the signal for their going off again, as her small stoicism had perfectly taken for granted that it would be. All that Mrs. Beale had nevertheless to add was the vague apparent sarcasm: "Oh papa!"

"I'm assured he's not at home," Sir Claude replied to the child; "but if he had been I should have hoped for the pleasure of seeing him."

"Won't he mind your coming?" Maisie asked as with need of the knowledge.

"Oh you bad little girl!" Mrs. Beale humorously protested.

The child could see that at this Sir Claude, though still moved to mirth, coloured a little; but he spoke to her very kindly. "That's just what I came to see, you know—whether your father *would* mind. But Mrs. Beale appears strongly of the opinion that he won't."

This lady promptly justified that view to her stepdaughter. "It will be very interesting, my dear, you know, to find out what it is to-day that your father does mind. I'm sure *I* don't know!"—and she seemed to repeat, though with perceptible resignation, her plaint of a moment before. "Your father, darling, is a very odd person indeed." She turned with this, smiling, to Sir Claude. "But perhaps it's hardly civil for me to say that of his not objecting to have *you* in the house. If you knew some of the people he does have!"

Maisie knew them all, and none indeed were to be compared to Sir Claude. He laughed back at Mrs. Beale; he looked at such moments quite as Mrs. Wix, in the long stories she told her pupil, always described the lovers of her distressed beauties—"the perfect gentleman and strikingly handsome." He got up, to the child's regret, as if he were going. "Oh I dare say we should be all right!"

Mrs. Beale once more gathered in her little charge, holding her close and looking thoughtfully over her head at their visitor. "It's so charming—for a man of your type—to have wanted her so much!"

"What do you know about my type?" Sir Claude laughed. "Whatever it may be I dare say it deceives you. The truth about me is simply that I'm the most unappreciated of—what do you call the fellows?—'family-men.' Yes, I'm a family-man; upon my honour I am!"

"Then why on earth," cried Mrs. Beale, "didn't you marry a family-woman?"

Sir Claude looked at her hard. "*You* know who one marries, I think. Besides, there *are* no family-women—hanged if there are! None of them want any children—hanged if they do!"

His account of the matter was most interesting, and Maisie, as if it were of bad omen for her, stared at the picture in some dismay. At the same time she felt, through encircling arms, her protectress hesitate. "You do come out with things! But you mean her ladyship doesn't want any—really?"

"Won't hear of them—simply. But she can't help the one she *has* got." And with this Sir Claude's eyes rested on the little girl in a way that seemed to her to mask her mother's attitude with the consciousness of his own. "She must make the best of her, don't you see? If only for the look of the thing, don't you know? one wants one's wife to take the proper line about her child."

"Oh I know what one wants!" Mrs. Beale cried with a competence that evidently impressed her interlocutor.

"Well, if you keep *him* up—and I dare say you've had worry enough—why shouldn't I keep Ida? What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander—or the other way round, don't you know? I mean to see the thing through."

Mrs. Beale, for a minute, still with her eyes on him as he leaned upon the chimneypiece, appeared to turn this over. "You're just a wonder of kindness—that's what you are!" she said at last. "A lady's expected to have natural feelings. But *your* horrible sex—! Isn't it a horrible sex, little love?" she demanded with her cheek upon her stepdaughter's.

"Oh I like gentlemen best," Maisie lucidly replied.

The words were taken up merrily. "That's a good one for *you*!" Sir Claude exclaimed to Mrs. Beale.

"No," said that lady: "I've only to remember the women she sees at her mother's."

"Ah they're very nice now," Sir Claude returned.

"What do you call 'nice'?"

"Well, they're all right."

"That doesn't answer me," said Mrs. Beale; "but I dare say you do take care of them. That makes you more of an angel to want this job too." And she playfully whacked her smaller companion.

"I'm not an angel—I'm an old grandmother," Sir Claude declared. "I like babies—I always did. If we go to smash I shall look for a place as responsible nurse."

Maisie, in her charmed mood, drank in an imputation on her years which at another moment might have been bitter; but the charm was sensibly interrupted by Mrs. Beale's screwing her round and gazing fondly into her eyes, "You're willing to leave me, you wretch?"

The little girl deliberated; even this consecrated tie had become as a cord she must suddenly snap. But she snapped it very gently. "Isn't it my turn for mamma?"

"You're a horrible little hypocrite! The less, I think, now said about 'turns' the better," Mrs. Beale made answer. "*I* know whose turn it is. You've not such a passion for your mother!"

"I say, I say: *do* look out!" Sir Claude quite amiably protested.

"There's nothing she hasn't heard. But it doesn't matter—it hasn't spoiled her. If you knew what it costs me to part with you!" she pursued to Maisie.

Sir Claude watched her as she charmingly clung to the child. "I'm so glad you really care for her. That's so much to the good."

Mrs. Beale slowly got up, still with her hands on Maisie, but emitting a soft exhalation. "Well, if you're glad, that may help us; for I assure you that I shall never give up any rights in her that I may consider I've acquired by my own sacrifices. I shall hold very fast to my interest in her. What seems to have happened is that she has brought you and me together."

"She has brought you and me together," said Sir Claude.

His cheerful echo prolonged the happy truth, and Maisie broke out almost with enthusiasm: "I've brought you and her together!"

Her companions of course laughed anew and Mrs. Beale gave her an affectionate shake. "You little monster—take care what you do! But that's what she does do," she continued to Sir Claude. "She did it to me and Beale."

"Well then," he said to Maisie, "you must try the trick at *our* place." He held out his hand to her again. "Will you come now?"

"Now—just as I am?" She turned with an immense appeal to her stepmother, taking a leap over the mountain of "mending," the abyss of packing that had loomed and yawned before her. "Oh *may* I?"

Mrs. Beale addressed her assent to Sir Claude. "As well so as any other way. I'll send on her things to-morrow." Then she gave a tug to the child's coat, glancing at her up and down with some ruefulness.

"She's not turned out as I should like—her mother will pull her to pieces. But what's one to do—with nothing to do it on? And she's better than when she came—you can tell her mother that. I'm sorry to have to say it to you—but the poor child was a sight."

"Oh I'll turn her out myself!" the visitor cordially said.

"I shall like to see how!"—Mrs. Beale appeared much amused. "You must bring her to show me—we can manage that. Good-bye, little fright!" And her last word to Sir Claude was that she would keep him up to the mark.

IX

The idea of what she was to make up and the prodigious total it came to were kept well before Maisie at her mother's. These things were the constant occupation of Mrs. Wix, who arrived there by the back stairs, but in tears of joy, the day after her own arrival. The process of making up, as to which the good lady had an immense deal to say, took, through its successive phases, so long that it heralded a term at least equal to the child's last stretch with her father. This, however, was a fuller and richer time: it bounded along to the tune of Mrs. Wix's constant insistence on the energy they must both put forth. There was a fine intensity in the way the child agreed with her that under Mrs. Beale and Susan Ash she had learned nothing whatever; the wildness of the rescued castaway was one of the forces that would henceforth make for a career of conquest. The year therefore rounded itself as a receptacle of retarded knowledge—a cup brimming over with the sense that now at least she was learning. Mrs. Wix fed this sense from the stores of her conversation and with the immense bustle of her reminder that they must cull the fleeting hour. They were surrounded with subjects they must take at a rush and perpetually getting into the attitude of triumphant attack. They had certainly no idle hours, and the child went to bed each night as tired as from a long day's play. This had begun from the moment of their reunion, begun with all Mrs. Wix had to tell her young friend of the reasons of her ladyship's extraordinary behaviour at the very first.

It took the form of her ladyship's refusal for three days to see her little girl—three days during which Sir Claude made hasty merry dashes into the schoolroom to smooth down the odd situation, to say "She'll come round, you know; I assure you she'll come round," and a little even to compensate Maisie for the indignity he had caused her to suffer. There had never in the child's life been, in all ways, such a delightful amount of reparation. It came out by his sociable admission that her ladyship had not known of his visit to her late husband's house and of his having made that person's daughter a pretext for striking up an acquaintance with the dreadful creature installed there. Heaven knew she wanted her child back and had made every plan of her own for removing her; what she couldn't for the present at least forgive any one concerned was such an officious underhand way of bringing about the transfer. Maisie carried more of the weight of this resentment than even Mrs. Wix's confidential ingenuity could lighten for her, especially as Sir Claude himself was not at all ingenious, though indeed on the other hand he was not at all crushed. He was amused and intermittent and at moments most startling; he impressed on his young companion, with a frankness that agitated her much more than he seemed to guess, that he depended on her not letting her mother, when she should see her, get anything out of her about anything Mrs. Beale might have said to him. He came in and out; he professed, in joke, to take tremendous precautions; he showed a positive disposition to romp. He chaffed Mrs. Wix till she was purple with the pleasure of it, and reminded Maisie of the reticence he expected of her till she set her teeth like an Indian captive. Her lessons these first days and indeed for long after seemed to be all about Sir Claude, and yet she never really mentioned to Mrs. Wix that she was prepared, under his inspiring injunction, to be vainly tortured. This lady, however, had formulated the position of things with an acuteness that showed how little she needed to be coached. Her explanation of everything that seemed not quite pleasant—and if her own footing was perilous it met that danger as well—that her ladyship was passionately in love. Maisie accepted this hint with infinite awe and pressed upon it much when she was at last summoned into the presence of her mother.

There she encountered matters amid which it seemed really to help to give her a clue—an almost terrifying strangeness, full, none the less, after a little, of reverberations of Ida's old fierce and demonstrative recoveries of possession. They had been some time in the house together, and this demonstration came late. Preoccupied, however, as Maisie was with the idea of the sentiment Sir Claude had inspired, and familiar, in addition, by Mrs. Wix's anecdotes, with the ravages that in general such a sentiment could produce, she was able to make allowances for her ladyship's

remarkable appearance, her violent splendour, the wonderful colour of her lips and even the hard stare, the stare of some gorgeous idol described in a story-book, that had come into her eyes in consequence of a curious thickening of their already rich circumference. Her professions and explanations were mixed with eager challenges and sudden drops, in the midst of which Maisie recognised as a memory of other years the rattle of her trinkets and the scratch of her endearments, the odour of her clothes and the jumps of her conversation. She had all her old clever way—Mrs. Wix said it was "aristocratic"—of changing the subject as she might have slammed the door in your face. The principal thing that was different was the tint of her golden hair, which had changed to a coppery red and, with the head it profusely covered, struck the child as now lifted still further aloft. This picturesque parent showed literally a grander stature and a nobler presence, things which, with some others that might have been bewildering, were handsomely accounted for by the romantic state of her affections. It was her affections, Maisie could easily see, that led Ida to break out into questions as to what had passed at the other house between that horrible woman and Sir Claude; but it was also just here that the little girl was able to recall the effect with which in earlier days she had practised the pacific art of stupidity. This art again came to her aid: her mother, in getting rid of her after an interview in which she had achieved a hollowness beyond her years, allowed her fully to understand she had not grown a bit more amusing.

She could bear that; she could bear anything that helped her to feel she had done something for Sir Claude. If she hadn't told Mrs. Wix how Mrs. Beale seemed to like him she certainly couldn't tell her ladyship. In the way the past revived for her there was a queer confusion. It was because mamma hated papa that she used to want to know bad things of him; but if at present she wanted to know the same of Sir Claude it was quite from the opposite motive. She was awestruck at the manner in which a lady might be affected through the passion mentioned by Mrs. Wix; she held her breath with the sense of picking her steps among the tremendous things of life. What she did, however, now, after the interview with her mother, impart to Mrs. Wix was that, in spite of her having had her "good" effect, as she called it—the effect she studied, the effect of harmless vacancy—her ladyship's last words had been that her ladyship's duty by her would be thoroughly done. Over this announcement governess and pupil looked at each other in silent profundity; but as the weeks went by it had no consequences that interfered gravely with the breezy gallop of making up. Her ladyship's duty took at times the form of not seeing her child for days together, and Maisie led her life in great prosperity between Mrs. Wix and kind Sir Claude. Mrs. Wix had a new dress and, as she was the first to proclaim, a better position; so it all struck Maisie as a crowded brilliant life, with, for the time, Mrs. Beale and Susan Ash simply "left out" like children not invited to a Christmas party. Mrs. Wix had a secret terror which, like most of her secret feelings, she discussed with her little companion, in great solemnity, by the hour: the possibility of her ladyship's coming down on them, in her sudden highbred way, with a school. But she had also a balm to this fear in a conviction of the strength of Sir Claude's grasp of the situation. He was too pleased—didn't he constantly say as much?—with the good impression made, in a wide circle, by Ida's sacrifices; and he came into the schoolroom repeatedly to let them know how beautifully he felt everything had gone off and everything would go on.

He disappeared at times for days, when his patient friends understood that her ladyship would naturally absorb him; but he always came back with the drollest stories of where he had been, a wonderful picture of society, and even with pretty presents that showed how in absence he thought of his home. Besides giving Mrs. Wix by his conversation a sense that they almost themselves "went out," he gave her a five-pound note and the history of France and an umbrella with a malachite knob, and to Maisie both chocolate-creams and story-books, besides a lovely greatcoat (which he took her out all alone to buy) and ever so many games in boxes, with printed directions, and a bright red frame for the protection of his famous photograph. The games were, as he said, to while away the evening hour; and the evening hour indeed often passed in futile attempts on Mrs. Wix's part to master what "it said" on the papers. When he asked the pair how they liked the games they always replied "Oh

immensely!" but they had earnest discussions as to whether they hadn't better appeal to him frankly for aid to understand them. This was a course their delicacy shrank from; they couldn't have told exactly why, but it was a part of their tenderness for him not to let him think they had trouble. What dazzled most was his kindness to Mrs. Wix, not only the five-pound note and the "not forgetting" her, but the perfect consideration, as she called it with an air to which her sounding of the words gave the only grandeur Maisie was to have seen her wear save on a certain occasion hereafter to be described, an occasion when the poor lady was grander than all of them put together. He shook hands with her, he recognised her, as she said, and above all, more than once, he took her, with his stepdaughter, to the pantomime and, in the crowd, coming out, publicly gave her his arm. When he met them in sunny Piccadilly he made merry and turned and walked with them, heroically suppressing his consciousness of the stamp of his company, a heroism that—needless for Mrs. Wix to sound *those* words—her ladyship, though a blood-relation, was little enough the woman to be capable of. Even to the hard heart of childhood there was something tragic in such elation at such humanities: it brought home to Maisie the way her humble companion had sidled and ducked through life. But it settled the question of the degree to which Sir Claude was a gentleman: he was more of one than anybody else in the world—"I don't care," Mrs. Wix repeatedly remarked, "whom you may meet in grand society, nor even to whom you may be contracted in marriage." There were questions that Maisie never asked; so her governess was spared the embarrassment of telling her if he were more of a gentleman than papa. This was not moreover from the want of opportunity, for there were no moments between them at which the topic could be irrelevant, no subject they were going into, not even the principal dates or the auxiliary verbs, in which it was further off than the turn of the page. The answer on the winter nights to the puzzle of cards and counters and little bewildering pamphlets was just to draw up to the fire and talk about him; and if the truth must be told this edifying interchange constituted for the time the little girl's chief education.

It must also be admitted that he took them far, further perhaps than was always warranted by the old-fashioned conscience, the dingy decencies, of Maisie's simple instructress. There were hours when Mrs. Wix sighingly testified to the scruples she surmounted, seemed to ask what other line one *could* take with a young person whose experience had been, as it were, so peculiar. "It isn't as if you didn't already know everything, is it, love?" and "I can't make you any worse than you *are*, can I, darling?"—these were the terms in which the good lady justified to herself and her pupil her pleasant conversational ease. What the pupil already knew was indeed rather taken for granted than expressed, but it performed the useful function of transcending all textbooks and supplanting all studies. If the child couldn't be worse it was a comfort even to herself that she was bad—a comfort offering a broad firm support to the fundamental fact of the present crisis: the fact that mamma was fearfully jealous. This was another side of the circumstance of mamma's passion, and the deep couple in the schoolroom were not long in working round to it. It brought them face to face with the idea of the inconvenience suffered by any lady who marries a gentleman producing on other ladies the charming effect of Sir Claude. That such ladies wouldn't be able to help falling in love with him was a reflexion naturally irritating to his wife. One day when some accident, some crash of a banged door or some scurry of a scared maid, had rendered this truth particularly vivid, Maisie, receptive and profound, suddenly said to her companion: "And you, my dear, are you in love with him too?" Even her profundity had left a margin for a laugh; so she was a trifle startled by the solemn promptitude with which Mrs. Wix plumped out: "Over head and ears. I've *never* since you ask me, been so far gone."

This boldness had none the less no effect of deterrence for her when, a few days later—it was because several had elapsed without a visit from Sir Claude—her governess turned the tables. "May I ask you, miss, if *you* are?" Mrs. Wix brought it out, she could see, with hesitation, but clearly intending a joke. "Why *rather*!" the child made answer, as if in surprise at not having long ago seemed sufficiently to commit herself; on which her friend gave a sigh of apparent satisfaction. It might in fact have expressed positive relief. Everything was as it should be.

Yet it was not with them, they were very sure, that her ladyship was furious, nor because she had forbidden it that there befell at last a period—six months brought it round—when for days together he scarcely came near them. He was "off," and Ida was "off," and they were sometimes off together and sometimes apart; there were seasons when the simple students had the house to themselves, when the very servants seemed also to be "off" and dinner became a reckless forage in pantries and sideboards. Mrs. Wix reminded her disciple on such occasions—hungry moments often, when all the support of the reminder was required—that the "real life" of their companions, the brilliant society in which it was inevitable they should move and the complicated pleasures in which it was almost presumptuous of the mind to follow them, must offer features literally not to be imagined without being seen. At one of these times Maisie found her opening it out that, though the difficulties were many, it was Mrs. Beale who had now become the chief. Then somehow it was brought fully to the child's knowledge that her stepmother had been making attempts to see her, that her mother had deeply resented it, that her stepfather had backed her stepmother up, that the latter had pretended to be acting as the representative of her father, and that her mother took the whole thing, in plain terms, very hard. The situation was, as Mrs. Wix declared, an extraordinary muddle to be sure. Her account of it brought back to Maisie the happy vision of the way Sir Claude and Mrs. Beale had made acquaintance—an incident to which, with her stepfather, though she had had little to say about it to Mrs. Wix, she had during the first weeks of her stay at her mother's found more than one opportunity to revert. As to what had taken place the day Sir Claude came for her, she had been vaguely grateful to Mrs. Wix for not attempting, as her mother had attempted, to put her through. That was what Sir Claude had called the process when he warned her of it, and again afterwards when he told her she was an awfully good "chap" for having foiled it. Then it was that, well aware Mrs. Beale hadn't in the least really given her up, she had asked him if he remained in communication with her and if for the time everything must really be held to be at an end between her stepmother and herself. This conversation had occurred in consequence of his one day popping into the schoolroom and finding Maisie alone.

X

He was smoking a cigarette and he stood before the fire and looked at the meagre appointments of the room in a way that made her rather ashamed of them. Then before (on the subject of Mrs. Beale) he let her "draw" him—that was another of his words; it was astonishing how many she gathered in—he remarked that really mamma kept them rather low on the question of decorations. Mrs. Wix had put up a Japanese fan and two rather grim texts; she had wished they were gayer, but they were all she happened to have. Without Sir Claude's photograph, however, the place would have been, as he said, as dull as a cold dinner. He had said as well that there were all sorts of things they ought to have; yet governess and pupil, it had to be admitted, were still divided between discussing the places where any sort of thing would look best if any sort of thing should ever come and acknowledging that mutability in the child's career which was naturally unfavourable to accumulation. She stayed long enough only to miss things, not half long enough to deserve them. The way Sir Claude looked about the schoolroom had made her feel with humility as if it were not very different from the shabby attic in which she had visited Susan Ash. Then he had said in abrupt reference to Mrs. Beale: "Do you think she really cares for you?"

"Oh awfully!" Maisie had replied.

"But, I mean, does she love you for yourself, as they call it, don't you know? Is she as fond of you, now, as Mrs. Wix?"

The child turned it over. "Oh I'm not every bit Mrs. Beale has!"

Sir Claude seemed much amused at this. "No; you're not every bit she has!"

He laughed for some moments, but that was an old story to Maisie, who was not too much disconcerted to go on: "But she'll never give me up."

"Well, I won't either, old boy: so that's not so wonderful, and she's not the only one. But if she's so fond of you, why doesn't she write to you?"

"Oh on account of mamma." This was rudimentary, and she was almost surprised at the simplicity of Sir Claude's question.

"I see—that's quite right," he answered. "She might get at you—there are all sorts of ways. But of course there's Mrs. Wix."

"There's Mrs. Wix," Maisie lucidly concurred. "Mrs. Wix can't abide her."

Sir Claude seemed interested. "Oh she can't abide her? Then what does she say about her?"

"Nothing at all—because she knows I shouldn't like it. Isn't it sweet of her?" the child asked.

"Certainly; rather nice. Mrs. Beale wouldn't hold her tongue for any such thing as that, would she?"

Maisie remembered how little she had done so; but she desired to protect Mrs. Beale too. The only protection she could think of, however, was the plea: "Oh at papa's, you know, they don't mind!"

At this Sir Claude only smiled. "No, I dare say not. But here we mind, don't we?—we take care what we say. I don't suppose it's a matter on which I ought to prejudice you," he went on; "but I think we must on the whole be rather nicer here than at your father's. However, I don't press that; for it's the sort of question on which it's awfully awkward for you to speak. Don't worry, at any rate: I assure you I'll back you up." Then after a moment and while he smoked he reverted to Mrs. Beale and the child's first enquiry. "I'm afraid we can't do much for her just now. I haven't seen her since that day—upon my word I haven't seen her." The next instant, with a laugh the least bit foolish, the young man slightly coloured: he must have felt this profession of innocence to be excessive as addressed to Maisie. It was inevitable to say to her, however, that of course her mother loathed the lady of the other house. He couldn't go there again with his wife's consent, and he wasn't the man—he begged her to believe, falling once more, in spite of himself, into the scruple of showing the child he didn't trip—to go there without it. He was liable in talking with her to take the tone of her being also a man

of the world. He had gone to Mrs. Beale's to fetch away Maisie, but that was altogether different. Now that she was in her mother's house what pretext had he to give her mother for paying calls on her father's wife? And of course Mrs. Beale couldn't come to Ida's—Ida would tear her limb from limb. Maisie, with this talk of pretexts, remembered how much Mrs. Beale had made of her being a good one, and how, for such a function, it was her fate to be either much depended on or much missed. Sir Claude moreover recognised on this occasion that perhaps things would take a turn later on; and he wound up by saying: "I'm sure she does sincerely care for you—how can she possibly help it? She's very young and very pretty and very clever: I think she's charming. But we must walk very straight. If you'll help me, you know, I'll help *you*," he concluded in the pleasant fraternising, equalising, not a bit patronising way which made the child ready to go through anything for him and the beauty of which, as she dimly felt, was that it was so much less a deceitful descent to her years than a real indifference to them.

It gave her moments of secret rapture—moments of believing she might help him indeed. The only mystification in this was the imposing time of life that her elders spoke of as youth. For Sir Claude then Mrs. Beale was "young," just as for Mrs. Wix Sir Claude was: that was one of the merits for which Mrs. Wix most commended him. What therefore was Maisie herself, and, in another relation to the matter, what therefore was mamma? It took her some time to puzzle out with the aid of an experiment or two that it wouldn't do to talk about mamma's youth. She even went so far one day, in the presence of that lady's thick colour and marked lines, as to wonder if it would occur to any one but herself to do so. Yet if she wasn't young then she was old; and this threw an odd light on her having a husband of a different generation. Mr. Farange was still older—that Maisie perfectly knew; and it brought her in due course to the perception of how much more, since Mrs. Beale was younger than Sir Claude, papa must be older than Mrs. Beale. Such discoveries were disconcerting and even a trifle confounding: these persons, it appeared, were not of the age they ought to be. This was somehow particularly the case with mamma, and the fact made her reflect with some relief on her not having gone with Mrs. Wix into the question of Sir Claude's attachment to his wife. She was conscious that in confining their attention to the state of her ladyship's own affections they had been controlled—Mrs. Wix perhaps in especial—by delicacy and even by embarrassment. The end of her colloquy with her stepfather in the schoolroom was her saying: "Then if we're not to see Mrs. Beale at all it isn't what she seemed to think when you came for me."

He looked rather blank. "What did she seem to think?"

"Why that I've brought you together."

"She thought that?" Sir Claude asked.

Maisie was surprised at his already forgetting it. "Just as I had brought papa and her. Don't you remember she said so?"

It came back to Sir Claude in a peal of laughter. "Oh yes—she said so!"

"And *you* said so," Maisie lucidly pursued.

He recovered, with increasing mirth, the whole occasion. "And *you* said so!" he retorted as if they were playing a game.

"Then were we all mistaken?"

He considered a little. "No, on the whole not. I dare say it's just what you *have* done. We *are* together—it's really most odd. She's thinking of us—of you and me—though we don't meet. And I've no doubt you'll find it will be all right when you go back to her."

"Am I going back to her?" Maisie brought out with a little gasp which was like a sudden clutch of the happy present.

It appeared to make Sir Claude grave a moment; it might have made him feel the weight of the pledge his action had given. "Oh some day, I suppose! We've plenty of time."

"I've such a tremendous lot to make up," Maisie said with a sense of great boldness.

"Certainly, and you must make up every hour of it. Oh I'll *see* that you do!"

This was encouraging; and to show cheerfully that she was reassured she replied: "That's what Mrs. Wix sees too."

"Oh yes," said Sir Claude; "Mrs. Wix and I are shoulder to shoulder."

Maisie took in a little this strong image; after which she exclaimed: "Then I've done it also to you and her—I've brought *you* together!"

"Blest if you haven't!" Sir Claude laughed. "And more, upon my word, than any of the lot. Oh you've done for *us*! Now if you could—as I suggested, you know, that day—only manage me and your mother!"

The child wondered. "Bring you and *her* together?"

"You see we're not together—not a bit. But I oughtn't to tell you such things; all the more that you won't really do it—not you. No, old chap," the young man continued; "there you'll break down. But it won't matter—we'll rub along. The great thing is that you and I are all right."

"*We're* all right!" Maisie echoed devoutly. But the next moment, in the light of what he had just said, she asked: "How shall I ever leave you?" It was as if she must somehow take care of him.

His smile did justice to her anxiety. "Oh well, you needn't! It won't come to that."

"Do you mean that when I do go you'll go with me?"

Sir Claude cast about. "Not exactly 'with' you perhaps; but I shall never be far off."

"But how do you know where mamma may take you?"

He laughed again. "I don't, I confess!" Then he had an idea, though something too jocose. "That will be for you to see—that she shan't take me too far."

"How can I help it?" Maisie enquired in surprise. "Mamma doesn't care for me," she said very simply. "Not really." Child as she was, her little long history was in the words; and it was as impossible to contradict her as if she had been venerable.

Sir Claude's silence was an admission of this, and still more the tone in which he presently replied: "That won't prevent her from—some time or other—leaving me with you."

"Then we'll live together?" she eagerly demanded.

"I'm afraid," said Sir Claude, smiling, "that that will be Mrs. Beale's real chance."

Her eagerness just slightly dropped at this; she remembered Mrs. Wix's pronouncement that it was all an extraordinary muddle. "To take me again? Well, can't you come to see me there?"

"Oh I dare say!"

Though there were parts of childhood Maisie had lost she had all childhood's preference for the particular promise. "Then you *will* come—you'll come often, won't you?" she insisted; while at the moment she spoke the door opened for the return of Mrs. Wix. Sir Claude hereupon, instead of replying, gave her a look which left her silent and embarrassed.

When he again found privacy convenient, however—which happened to be long in coming—he took up their conversation very much where it had dropped. "You see, my dear, if I shall be able to go to you at your father's it yet isn't at all the same thing for Mrs. Beale to come to you here." Maisie gave a thoughtful assent to this proposition, though conscious she could scarcely herself say just where the difference would lie. She felt how much her stepfather saved her, as he said with his habitual amusement, the trouble of that. "I shall probably be able to go to Mrs. Beale's without your mother's knowing it."

Maisie stared with a certain thrill at the dramatic element in this. "And she couldn't come here without mamma's—" She was unable to articulate the word for what mamma would do.

"My dear child, Mrs. Wix would tell of it."

"But I thought," Maisie objected, "that Mrs. Wix and you—"

"Are such brothers-in-arms?"—Sir Claude caught her up. "Oh yes, about everything but Mrs. Beale. And if you should suggest," he went on, "that we might somehow or other hide her peeping in from Mrs. Wix—"

"Oh, I don't suggest *that*!" Maisie in turn cut him short.

Sir Claude looked as if he could indeed quite see why. "No; it would really be impossible." There came to her from this glance at what they might hide the first small glimpse of something in him that she wouldn't have expected. There had been times when she had had to make the best of the impression that she was herself deceitful; yet she had never concealed anything bigger than a thought. Of course she now concealed this thought of how strange it would be to see *him* hide; and while she was so actively engaged he continued: "Besides, you know, I'm not afraid of your father."

"And you are of my mother?"

"Rather, old man!" Sir Claude returned.

XI

It must not be supposed that her ladyship's intermissions were not qualified by demonstrations of another order—triumphal entries and breathless pauses during which she seemed to take of everything in the room, from the state of the ceiling to that of her daughter's boot-toes, a survey that was rich in intentions. Sometimes she sat down and sometimes she surged about, but her attitude wore equally in either case the grand air of the practical. She found so much to deplore that she left a great deal to expect, and bristled so with calculation that she seemed to scatter remedies and pledges. Her visits were as good as an outfit; her manner, as Mrs. Wix once said, as good as a pair of curtains; but she was a person addicted to extremes—sometimes barely speaking to her child and sometimes pressing this tender shoot to a bosom cut, as Mrs. Wix had also observed, remarkably low. She was always in a fearful hurry, and the lower the bosom was cut the more it was to be gathered she was wanted elsewhere. She usually broke in alone, but sometimes Sir Claude was with her, and during all the earlier period there was nothing on which these appearances had had so delightful a bearing as on the way her ladyship was, as Mrs. Wix expressed it, under the spell. "But *isn't* she under it!" Maisie used in thoughtful but familiar reference to exclaim after Sir Claude had swept mamma away in peals of natural laughter. Not even in the old days of the convulsed ladies had she heard mamma laugh so freely as in these moments of conjugal surrender, to the gaiety of which even a little girl could see she had at last a right—a little girl whose thoughtfulness was now all happy selfish meditation on good omens and future fun.

Unaccompanied, in subsequent hours, and with an effect of changing to meet a change, Ida took a tone superficially disconcerting and abrupt—the tone of having, at an immense cost, made over everything to Sir Claude and wishing others to know that if everything wasn't right it was because Sir Claude was so dreadfully vague. "He has made from the first such a row about you," she said on one occasion to Maisie, "that I've told him to do for you himself and try how he likes it—see? I've washed my hands of you; I've made you over to him; and if you're discontented it's on him, please, you'll come down. So don't haul poor *me* up—I assure you I've worries enough." One of these, visibly, was that the spell rejoiced in by the schoolroom fire was already in danger of breaking; another was that she was finally forced to make no secret of her husband's unfitness for real responsibilities. The day came indeed when her breathless auditors learnt from her in bewilderment that what ailed him was that he was, alas, simply not serious. Maisie wept on Mrs. Wix's bosom after hearing that Sir Claude was a butterfly; considering moreover that her governess but half-patched it up in coming out at various moments the next few days with the opinion that it was proper to his "station" to be careless and free. That had been proper to every one's station that she had yet encountered save poor Mrs. Wix's own, and the particular merit of Sir Claude had seemed precisely that he was different from every one. She talked with him, however, as time went on, very freely about her mother; being with him, in this relation, wholly without the fear that had kept her silent before her father—the fear of bearing tales and making bad things worse. He appeared to accept the idea that he had taken her over and made her, as he said, his particular lark; he quite agreed also that he was an awful fraud and an idle beast and a sorry dunce. And he never said a word to her against her mother—he only remained dumb and discouraged in the face of her ladyship's own overtopping earnestness. There were occasions when he even spoke as if he had wrenched his little charge from the arms of a parent who had fought for her tooth and nail.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.