

Howells William Dean

The Quality of Mercy



William Howells
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The Quality of Mercy

PART FIRST

I

Northwick's man met him at the station with the cutter. The train was a little late, and Elbridge was a little early; after a few moments of formal waiting, he began to walk the clipped horses up and down the street. As they walked they sent those quivers and thrills over their thin coats which horses can give at will; they moved their heads up and down, slowly and easily, and made their bells jangle noisily together; the bursts of sound evoked by their firm and nervous pace died back in showers and falling drops of music. All the time Elbridge swore at them affectionately, with the unconscious profanity of the rustic Yankee whose lot has been much cast with horses. In the halts he made at each return to the station, he let his blasphemies bubble sociably from him in response to the friendly imprecations of the three or four other drivers who were waiting for the train; they had apparently no other parlance. The drivers of the hotel 'bus and of the local express wagon were particular friends; they gave each other to perdition at every other word; a growing boy, who had come to meet Mr. Gerrish, the merchant, with the family sleigh, made himself a fountain of meaningless maledictions; the public hackman, who admired Elbridge almost as much as he respected Elbridge's horses (they were really Northwick's, but the professional convention was that they were Elbridge's), clothed them with fond curses as with a garment. He was himself, more literally speaking, clothed in an old ulster, much frayed about the wrists and skirts, and polished across the middle of the back by rubbing against counters and window-sills. He was bearded like a patriarch, and he wore a rusty fur cap pulled down over his ears, though it was not very cold; its peak rested on the point of his nose, so that he had to throw his head far back to get Elbridge in the field of his vision. Elbridge had on a high hat, and was smoothly buttoned to his throat in a plain coachman's coat of black; Northwick had never cared to have him make a closer approach to a livery; and it is doubtful if Elbridge would have done it if he had asked or ordered it of him. He deferred to Northwick in a measure as the owner of his horses, but he did not defer to him in any other quality.

"Say, Elbridge, when you goin' to give me that old hat o' your'n?" asked the hackman in a shout that would have reached Elbridge if he had been half a mile off instead of half a rod.

"What do you want of another second-hand hat, you – old fool, you?" asked Elbridge in his turn.

The hackman doubled himself down for joy, and slapped his leg; at the sound of a whistle to the eastward, he pulled himself erect again, and said, as if the fact were one point gained, "Well, there she blows, any way." Then he went round the corner of the station to be in full readiness for any chance passenger the train might improbably bring him.

No one alighted but Mr. Gerrish and Northwick. Mr. Gerrish found it most remarkable that he should have come all the way from Boston on the same train with Northwick and not known it; but Northwick was less disposed to wonder at it. He passed rapidly beyond the following of Mr. Gerrish, and mounted to the place Elbridge made for him in the cutter. While Elbridge was still tucking the robes about their legs, Northwick drove away from the station, and through the village up to the rim of the highland that lies between Hatboro' and South Hatboro'. The bare line cut along the horizon where the sunset lingered in a light of liquid crimson, paling and passing into weaker violet tints with every moment, but still tenderly flushing the walls of the sky, and holding longer the accent of its color where a keen star had here and there already pierced it and shone quivering through. The

shortest days were past, but in the first week of February they had not lengthened sensibly, though to a finer perception there was the promise of release from the winter dark, if not from the winter cold. It was not far from six o'clock when Northwick mounted the southward rise of the street; it was still almost light enough to read; and the little slender black figure of a man that started up in the middle of the road, as if it had risen out of the ground, had an even vivid distinctness. He must have been lying in the snow; the horses crouched back with a sudden recoil, as if he had struck them back with his arm, and plunged the runners of the cutter into the deeper snow beside the beaten track. He made a slight pause, long enough to give Northwick a contemptuous glance, and then continued along the road at a leisurely pace to the deep cut through the snow from the next house. Here he stood regarding such difficulty as Northwick had in quieting his horses, and getting underway again. He said nothing, and Northwick did not speak; Elbridge growled, "He's on one of his tears again," and the horses dashed forward with a shriek of all their bells. Northwick did not open his lips till he entered the avenue of firs that led from the highway to his house; they were still clogged with the snowfall, and their lowermost branches were buried in the drifts.

"What's the matter with the colt?" he asked.

"I don't know as that fellow understands the colt's feet very well. I guess one of the shoes is set wrong," said Elbridge.

"Better look after it."

Northwick left Elbridge the reins, and got out of the cutter at the flight of granite steps which rose to the ground-floor of his wooden palace. Broad levels of piazza stretched away from the entrance under a portico of that carpentry which so often passes with us for architecture. In spite of the effect of organic flimsiness in every wooden structure but a log cabin, or a fisherman's cottage shingled to the ground, the house suggested a perfect functional comfort. There were double windows on all round the piazzas; a mellow glow from the incandescent electrics penetrated to the outer dusk from them; when the door was opened to Northwick, a pleasant heat gushed out, together with the perfume of flowers, and the odors of dinner.

"Dinner is just served, sir," said the inside man, disposing of Northwick's overcoat and hat on the hall table with respectful scruple.

Northwick hesitated. He stood over the register, and vaguely held his hands in the pleasant warmth indirectly radiated from the steam-pipes below.

"The young ladies were just thinking you wouldn't be home till the next train," the man suggested, at the sound of voices from the dining-room.

"They have some one with them?" Northwick asked.

"Yes, sir. The rector, sir; Mr. Wade, sir."

"I'll come down by and by," Northwick said, turning to the stairs. "Say I had a late lunch before I left town."

"Yes, sir," said the man.

Northwick went on up stairs, with footfalls hushed by the thickly-padded thick carpet, and turned into the sort of study that opened out of his bedroom. It had been his wife's parlor during the few years of her life in the house which he had built for her, and which they had planned to spend their old age in together. It faced southward, and looked out over the greenhouses and the gardens, that stretched behind the house to the bulk of woods, shutting out the stage-picturesqueness of the summer settlement of South Hatboro'. She had herself put the rocking-chair in the sunny bay-window, and Northwick had not allowed it to be disturbed there since her death. In an alcove at one side he had made a place for the safe where he kept his papers; his wife had intended to keep their silver in it, but she had been scared by the notion of having burglars so close to them in the night, and had always left the silver in the safe in the dining-room.

She was all her life a timorous creature, and after her marriage had seldom felt safe out of Northwick's presence. Her portrait, by Hunt, hanging over the mantelpiece, suggested something of

this, though the painter had made the most of her thin, middle-aged blond good looks, and had given her a substance of general character which was more expressive of his own free and bold style than of the facts in the case. She was really one of those hen-minded women, who are so common in all walks of life, and are made up of only one aim at a time, and of manifold anxieties at all times. Her instinct for saving long survived the days of struggle in which she had joined it to Northwick's instinct for getting; she lived and died in the hope, if not the belief, that she had contributed to his prosperity by looking strictly after all manner of valueless odds and ends. But he had been passively happy with her; since her death, he had allowed her to return much into his thoughts, from which her troublesome solitudes and her entire uselessness in important matters had obliged him to push her while she lived. He often had times when it seemed to him that he was thinking of nothing, and then he found he had been thinking of her. At such times, with a pang, he realized that he missed her; but perhaps the wound was to habit rather than affection. He now sat down in his swivel-chair and turned it from the writing-desk which stood on the rug before the fireplace, and looked up into the eyes of her effigy with a sense of her intangible presence in it, and with a dumb longing to rest his soul against hers. She was the only one who could have seen him in his wish to have not been what he was; she would have denied it to his face, if he had told her he was a thief; and as he meant to make himself more and more a thief, her love would have eased the way by full acceptance of the theories that ran along with his intentions and covered them with pretences of necessity. He thought how even his own mother could not have been so much comfort to him; she would have had the mercy, but she would not have had the folly. At the bottom of his heart, and under all his pretences, Northwick knew that it was not mercy which would help him; but he wanted it, as we all want what is comfortable and bad for us at times. With the performance and purpose of a thief in his heart, he turned to the pictured face of his dead wife as his refuge from the face of all living. It could not look at him as if he were a thief.

The word so filled his mind that it seemed always about to slip from his tongue. It was what the president of the board had called him when the fact of his fraudulent manipulation of the company's books was laid so distinctly before him that even the insane refusal, which the criminal instinctively makes of his crime in its presence, was impossible. The other directors sat blankly round, and said nothing; not because they hated a scene, but because the ordinary course of life among us had not supplied them with the emotional materials for making one. The president, however, had jumped from his seat and advanced upon Northwick. "What does all this mean, sir? I'll tell you what it means. It means that you're a thief, sir; the same as if you had picked my pocket, or stolen my horse, or taken my overcoat out of my hall."

He shook his clenched fist in Northwick's face, and seemed about to take him by the throat. Afterwards he inclined more to mercy than the others; it was he who carried the vote which allowed Northwick three days' grace, to look into his affairs, and lay before the directors the proof that he had ample means, as he maintained, to meet the shortage in the accounts. "I wish you well out of it, for your family's sake," he said at parting; "but all the same, sir, you are a thief."

He put his hands ostentatiously in his pockets, when some others meaninglessly shook hands with Northwick, at parting, as Northwick himself might have shaken hands with another in his place; and he brushed by him out of the door without looking at him. He came suddenly back to say, "If it were a question of you alone, I would cheerfully lose something more than you've robbed me of for the pleasure of seeing you handcuffed in this room and led to jail through the street by a constable. No honest man, no man who was not always a rogue at heart, could have done what you've done; juggled with the books for years, and bewitched the record so by your infernal craft, that it was never suspected till now. You've given *mind* to your scoundrelly work, sir; all the mind you had; for if you hadn't been so anxious to steal successfully, you'd have given more mind to the use of your stealings. You *may* have some of them left, but it looks as if you'd made ducks and drakes of them, like any petty rascal in the hands of the Employees' Insurance Company. Yes, sir, I believe you're of about the intellectual calibre of that sort of thief. I can't respect you even on your own ground. But I'm willing

to give you the chance you ask, for your daughter's sake. She's been in and out of my house with my girl like one of my own children, and I won't send her father to jail if I can help it. Understand! I haven't any sentiment for *you*, Northwick. You're the kind of rogue I'd like to see in a convict's jacket, learning to make shoe-brushes. But you shall have your chance to go home and see if you can pay up somehow, and you sha'n't be shadowed while you're at it. You shall keep your outside to the world three days longer, you whited sepulchre; but if you want to know, I think the best thing that could happen to you on your way home would be a good railroad accident."

The man's words and looks were burnt into Northwick's memory, which now seemed to have the faculty of simultaneously reproducing them all. Northwick remembered his purple face, with its prominent eyes, and the swing of his large stomach, and just how it struck against the jamb as he whirled a second time out of the door. The other directors, some of them, stood round buttoned up in their overcoats, with their hats on, and a sort of stunned aspect; some held their hats in their hands, and looked down into them with a decorous absence of expression, as people do at a funeral. Then they left him alone in the treasurer's private room, with its official luxury of thick Turkey rugs, leathern arm-chairs, and nickel-plated cuspidors standing one on each side of the hearth where a fire of soft coal in a low-down grate burned with a subdued and respectful flicker.

II

If it had not been for the boisterous indignation of the president, Northwick might have come away from the meeting, after the exposure of his defalcations, with an unimpaired personal dignity. But as it was, he felt curiously shrunken and shattered, till the prevailing habit of his mind enabled him to piece himself together again and resume his former size and shape. This happened very quickly; he had conceived of himself so long as a man employing funds in his charge in speculations sometimes successful and sometimes not, but at all times secured by his personal probity and reliability. He had in fact more than once restored all that he had taken, and he had come to trust himself in the course of these transactions as fully as he was trusted by the men who were ignorant of his irregularities. He was somehow flattered by the complete confidence they reposed in him, though he really felt it to be no more than his due; he had always merited and received the confidence of men associated with him in business, and he had come to regard the funds of the corporation as practically his own. In the early days of his connection with the company, it largely owed its prosperity to his wise and careful management; one might say that it was not until the last, when he got so badly caught by that drop in railroads, that he had felt anything wrong in his convertible use of its money. It was an informality; he would not have denied that, but it was merely an informality. Then his losses suddenly leaped beyond his ability to make them good; then, for the first time, he began to practice that system in keeping the books which the furious president called juggling with them. Even this measure he considered a justifiable means of self-defence pending the difficulties which beset him, and until he could make his losses good by other operations. From time to time he was more fortunate; and whenever he dramatized himself in an explanation to the directors, as he often did, especially of late, he easily satisfied them as to the nature of his motives and the propriety of his behavior, by calling their attention to these successful deals, and to the probability, the entire probability, that he could be at any moment in a position to repay all he had borrowed of the company. He called it borrowing, and in his long habit of making himself these loans and returning them, he had come to have a sort of vague feeling that the company was privy to them; that it was almost an understood thing. The president's violence was the first intimation to reach him in the heart of his artificial consciousness that his action was at all in the line of those foolish speculators whose discovery and flight to Canada was the commonplace of every morning's paper; such a commonplace that he had been sensible of an effort in the papers to vary the tiresome repetition of the same old fact by some novel grace of wit, or some fresh picturesqueness in putting it. In the presence of the directors, he had refused to admit it to himself; but after they adjourned, and he was left alone, he realized the truth. He was like those fools, exactly like them, in what they had done, and in the way of doing it; he was like them in motive and principle. All of them had used others' money in speculation, expecting to replace it, and then had not been able to replace it, and then had skipped, as the newspapers said.

Whether he should complete the parallel, and skip, too, was a point which he had not yet acknowledged to himself that he had decided. He never had believed that it need come to that; but, for an instant, when the president said he could wish him nothing better on his way home than a good railroad accident, it flashed upon him that one of the three alternatives before him was to skip. He had the choice to kill himself, which was supposed to be the gentlemanly way out of his difficulties, and would leave his family unstained by his crime; that matter had sometimes been discussed in his presence, and every one had agreed that it was the only thing for a gentleman to do after he had pilfered people of money he could not pay back. There was something else that a man of other instincts and weaker fibre might do, and that was to stand his trial for embezzlement, and take his punishment. Or a man, if he was that kind of a man, could skip. The question with Northwick was whether he was that kind of man, or whether, if he skipped, he would be that kind of man; whether the skipping would make him that kind of man.

The question was a cruel one for the self-respect which he had so curiously kept intact. He had been respectable ever since he was born; if he was born with any instinct it was the instinct of respectability, the wish to be honored for what he seemed. It was all the stronger in him, because his father had never had it; perhaps an hereditary trait found expression in him after passing over one generation; perhaps an antenatal influence formed him to that type. His mother was always striving to keep the man she had married worthy of her choice in the eyes of her neighbors; but he had never seconded her efforts. He had been educated a doctor, but never practised medicine; in carrying on the drug and book business of the village, he cared much more for the literary than the pharmaceutical side of it; he liked to have a circle of cronies about the wood-stove in his store till midnight, and discuss morals and religion with them; and one night, when denying the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, he went to the wrong jar for an ingredient of the prescription he was making up; the patient died of his mistake. The disgrace and the disaster broke his wife's heart; but he lived on to a vague and colorless old age, supported by his son in a total disoccupation. The elder Northwick used sometimes to speak of his son and his success in the world; not boastfully, but with a certain sarcasm for the source of his bounty, as a boy who had always disappointed him by a narrowness of ambition. He called him Milt, and he said he supposed now Milt was the most self-satisfied man in Massachusetts; he implied that there were better things than material success. He did not say what they were, and he could have found very few people in that village to agree with him; or to admit that the treasurer of the Ponkwasset Mills had come in anywise short of the destiny of a man whose father had started him in life with the name of John Milton. They called him Milt, too, among themselves, and perhaps here and there a bolder spirit might have called him so to his face if he had ever come back to the village. But he had not. He had, as they had all heard, that splendid summer place at Hatboro', where he spent his time when he was not at his house in Boston; and when they verified the fact of his immense prosperity by inquiry of some of the summer-folks who knew him or knew about him, they were obscurely flattered by the fact; just as many of us are proud of belonging to a nation in which we are enriched by the fellow-citizenship of many manifold millionnaires. They did not blame Northwick for never coming to see his father, or for never having him home on a visit; they daily saw what old Northwick was, and how little he was fitted for the society of a man whose respectability, even as it was reflected upon them, was so dazzling. Old Northwick had never done anything for Milt; he had never even got along with him; the fellow had left him, and made his own way; and the old man had no right to talk; if Milt was ever of a mind to cut off his rations, the old man would soon see.

III

The local opinion scarcely did justice to old Northwick's imperfect discharge of a father's duties; his critics could not have realized how much some capacities, if not tastes, which Northwick had inherited, contributed to that very effect of respectability which they revered. The early range of books, the familiarity with the mere exterior of literature, restricted as it was, helped Northwick later to pass for a man of education, if not of reading, with men who were themselves less read than educated. The people whom his ability threw him with in Boston were all Harvard men, and they could not well conceive of an acquaintance, so gentlemanly and quiet as Northwick, who was not college bred, too. By unmistakable signs, which we carry through life, they knew he was from the country, and they attributed him to a freshwater college. They said, "You're a Dartmouth man, Northwick, I believe," or, "I think you're from Williams," and when Northwick said no, they forgot it, and thought that he was a Bowdoin man; the impression gradually fixed itself that he was from one or other of those colleges. It was believed in like manner, partly on account of his name, that he was from one of those old ministerial families that you find up in the hills, where the whole brood study Greek while they are sugaring off in the spring; and that his own mother had fitted him for college. There was, in fact, something clerical in Northwick's bearing; and it was felt by some that he had studied for the ministry, but had gone into business to help his family. The literary phase of the superstition concerning him was humored by the library which formed such a striking feature of his house in Boston, as well as his house in Hatboro'; at Hatboro' it was really vast, and was so charming and so luxurious that it gave the idea of a cultivated family; they preferred to live in it, and rarely used the drawing-room, which was much smaller, and was a gold and white sanctuary on the north side of the house, only opened when there was a large party of guests, for dancing. Most people came and went without seeing it, and it remained shut up, as much a conjecture as the memory of Northwick's wife. She was supposed to have been taken from him early, to save him and his children from the mortifying consequences of one of those romantic love-affairs in which a conscientious man had sacrificed himself to a girl he was certain to outgrow. None of his world knew that his fortunes had been founded upon the dowry she brought him, and upon the stay her belief in him had always been. She was a church-member, as such women usually are, but Northwick was really her religion; and as there is nothing that does so much to sanctify a deity as the blind devotion of its worshippers, Northwick was rendered at times worthy of her faith by the intensity of it. In his sort he returned her love; he was not the kind of man whose affections are apt to wander, perhaps because they were few and easily kept together; perhaps because he was really principled against letting them go astray. He was not merely true in a passive way, but he was constant in the more positive fashion. When they began to get on in the world, and his business talent brought him into relations with people much above them socially, he yielded to her shrinking from the opportunities of social advancement that opened to them, and held aloof with her. This kept him a country person in his experiences much longer than he need have remained; and tended to that sort of defensive secretiveness which grew more and more upon him, and qualified his conduct in matters where there was no question of his knowledge of the polite world. It was not until after his wife's death, and until his daughters began to grow up into the circles where his money and his business associations authorized them to move, that he began to see a little of that world. Even then he left it chiefly to his children; for himself he continued quite simply loyal to his wife's memory, and apparently never imagined such a thing as marrying again.

He rose from the chair where he had sat looking up into her pictured face, and went to open the safe near the window. But he stopped in stooping over to work the combination, and glanced out across his shoulder into the night. The familiar beauty of the scene tempted him to the window for what, all at once, he felt might be his last look, though the next instant he was able to argue the feeling

down, and make his meditated act work into his schemes of early retrieval and honorable return. He must have been thinking there before the fire a long time, for now the moon had risen, and shone upon the black bulk of firs to the southward, and on the group of outbuildings. These were in a sort the mechanism that transacted the life of his house, ministering to all its necessities and pleasures. Under the conservatories, with their long stretches of glass, catching the moon's rays like levels of water, was the steam furnace that imparted their summer climate, through heavy mains carried below the basement, to every chamber of the mansion; a ragged plume of vapor escaped from the tall chimney above them, and dishevelled itself in diaphanous silver on the night-breeze. Beyond the hot-houses lay the cold graperies; and off to the left rose the stables; in a cosy nook of this low mass Northwick saw the lights of the coachman's family-rooms; beyond the stables were the cow-barn and the dairy, with the farmer's cottage; it was a sort of joke with Northwick's business friends that you could buy butter of him sometimes at less than half it cost him, and the joke flattered Northwick's sense of baronial consequence with regard to his place. It was really a farm in extent, and it was mostly a grazing farm; his cattle were in the herd-books, and he raised horses, which he would sell now and then to a friend; they were so distinctly varied from the original stock as to form almost a breed of themselves; they numbered scores in his stalls and pastures. The whole group of the buildings was so great that it was like a sort of communal village. In the silent moonlight Northwick looked at it as if it were an expansion or extension of himself, so personally did it seem to represent his tastes, and so historical was it of the ambitions of his whole life; he realized that it would be like literally tearing himself from it, when he should leave it. That would be the real pang; his children could come to him, but not his home. But he reminded himself that he was going only for a time, until he could rehabilitate himself, and come back upon the terms he could easily make when once he was on his feet again. He thought how fortunate it was that in the meanwhile this property could not be alienated; how fortunate it was that he had originally deeded it to his wife in the days when he had the full right to do so, and she had willed it to their children by a perfect entail. The horses and the cattle might go, and probably must go; and he winced to think of it, but the land, and the house, – all but the furniture and pictures, – were the children's and could not be touched. The pictures were his, and would have to go with the horses and cattle; but ten or twelve thousand dollars would replace them, and he must add that sum to his other losses, and bear it as well as he could.

After all, when everything was said and done, he was the chief loser. If he was a thief, as that man said, he could show that he had robbed himself of two dollars for every dollar that he had robbed anybody else of; if now he was going to add to his theft by carrying off the forty-three thousand dollars of the company's which he found himself possessed of, it was certainly not solely in his own interest. It was to be the means of recovering all that had gone before it, and that the very men whom it would enable him to repay finally in full, supposed it to have gone with.

Northwick felt almost a glow of pride in clarifying this point to his reason. The additional theft presented itself almost in the light of a duty; it really was his duty to make reparation to those he had injured, if he had injured any one, and it was his first duty to secure the means of doing it. If that money, which it might almost be said was left providentially in his hands, were simply restored now to the company, it would do comparatively no good at all, and would strip him of every hope of restoring the whole sum he had borrowed. He arrived at that word again, and reinforced by it, he stooped again to work the combination of his safe, and make sure of the money, which he now felt an insane necessity of laying his hands on; but he turned suddenly sick, with a sickness at the heart or at the stomach, and he lifted himself, and took a turn about the room.

He perceived that in spite of the outward calm which it had surprised him to find in himself, he was laboring under some strong inward stress, and he must have relief from it if he was to carry this business through. He threw up the window and stood with his hand on the sash, quivering in the strong in-rush of the freezing air. But it strengthened him, and when he put down the window after a few moments, his faintness passed altogether. Still, he thought he would not go through that business

at once; there was time enough; he would see his girls and tell them that he was obliged to leave by an early train in the morning.

He took off his shoes, and put on his slippers and his house-coat, and went to the stair-landing outside, and listened to the voices in the library below. He could hear only women's voices, and he inferred that the young man who had been dining with his daughters was gone. He went back into his bedroom, and looked at the face of an unmasked thief in his glass. It was not to get that aspect of himself, though, that he looked; it was to see if he was pale or would seem ill to his children.

IV

Northwick was fond of both his daughters; if he was more demonstrative in meeting the younger, it was because she had the more modern and more urban habit of caressing her father; the elder, who was very much the elder, followed an earlier country fashion of self-possession, and remained silent and seated when he came into the room, though she watched with a pleased interest the exchange of endearments between him and her sister. Her name was Adeline, which was her mother's name, too; and she had the effect of being the aunt of the young girl. She was thin and tall, and she had a New England indigestion which kept her looking frailer than she really was. She conformed to the change of circumstances which she had grown into almost as consciously as her parents, and dressed richly in sufficiently fashionable gowns, which she preferred to have of silk, cinnamon or brown in color; on her slight, bony fingers she wore a good many rings.

Suzette was the name of the other daughter; her mother had fancied that name; but the single monosyllable it had been shortened into somehow suited the proud-looking girl better than the whole name, with its suggestion of coquettishness.

She asked, "Why didn't you come down, papa? Mr. Wade was calling, and he stayed to dinner." She smiled, and it gave him a pang to see that she seemed unusually happy; he could have borne better, he perceived, to leave her miserable; at least, then, he would not have wholly made her so.

"I had some matters to look after," he said. "I thought I might get down before he went." A deep leathern arm-chair stood before the hearth where the young rector had been sitting, with the ladies at either corner of the mantel; Northwick let himself sink into it, and with a glance at the face of the faintly ticking clock on the black marble shelf before him, he added casually, "I must get an early train for Ponkwasset in the morning, and I still have some things to put in shape."

"Is there any trouble there?" the girl asked from the place she had resumed. She held by one hand from the corner of the mantel, and let her head droop over on her arm. Her father had a sense of her extraordinary beauty, as a stranger might have had.

"Trouble?" he echoed.

"With the hands."

"Oh, no; nothing of that sort. What made you think so?" asked Northwick, rapidly exploring the perspective opened up in his mind by her question, to see if it contained any suggestion of advantage to him. He found an instant's relief in figuring himself called to the mills by a labor trouble.

"That tiresome little wretch of a Putney is going about circulating all sorts of reports."

"There is no reason as yet, to suppose the strike will affect us," said Northwick. "But I think I had better be on the ground."

"I should think you could leave it to the Superintendent," said the girl, "without wearing your own life out about it."

"I suppose I might," said Northwick, with an effect of refusing to acquire merit by his behavior, "but the older hands all know me so well, that –"

He stopped as if it were unnecessary to go on, and the elder daughter said: "He is on one of his sprees again. I should think something ought to be done about him, for his family's sake, if nothing else. Elbridge told James that you almost drove over him, coming up."

"Yes," said Northwick. "I didn't see him until he started up under the horses' feet."

"He will get killed, some of these days," said Adeline, with the sort of awful satisfaction in realizing a catastrophe, which delicate women often feel.

"It would be the best thing for him," said her sister, "and for his family, too. When a man is nothing but a burden and a disgrace to himself and everybody belonging to him, he had better die as soon as possible."

Northwick sat looking into his daughter's beautiful face, but he saw the inflamed and heated visage of the president of the board, and he heard him saying, "The best thing that could happen to you on your way home would be a good railroad accident."

He sighed faintly, and said, "We can't always tell. I presume it isn't for us to say." He went on, with that leniency for the shortcomings of others which we feel when we long for mercy to our own: "Putney is a very able man; one of the ablest lawyers in the State, and very honest. He could be almost anything if he would let liquor alone. I don't wish to judge him. He may have" – Northwick sighed again, and ended vaguely – "his reasons."

Suzette laughed. "How moderate you always are, papa! And how tolerant!"

"I guess Mr. Putney knows pretty well whom he's got to deal with, and that he's safe in abusing you all he likes," said Adeline. "But I don't see how such respectable people as Dr. Morrell and Mrs. Morrell can tolerate him. I've no patience with Dr. Morrell, or his wife, either. To be sure, they tolerate Mrs. Wilmington, too."

Suzette went over to her father to kiss him. "Well, I'm going to bed, papa. If you'd wanted more of my society you ought to have come down sooner. I suppose I sha'n't see you in the morning; so it's good-bye as well as good-night. When will you be home?"

"Not for some days, perhaps," said the unhappy man.

"How doleful! Are you always so homesick when you go away?"

"Not always; no."

"Well, try to cheer up, this time, then. And if you have to be gone a great while, send for me, won't you?"

"Yes, yes; I will," said Northwick. The girl gave his head a hug, and then glided out of the room. She stopped to throw him a kiss from the door.

"There!" said Adeline. "I didn't mean to let Mrs. Wilmington slip out; she can't bear the name, and I *know* it drove her away. But you mustn't let it worry you, father. I guess it's all going well, now."

"What's going well?" Northwick asked, vaguely.

"The Jack Wilmington business. I know she's really given him up at last; and we can't be too thankful for that much, if it's no more. I don't believe he's bad, for all the talk about him, but he's been weak, and that's a thing she couldn't forgive in a man; she's so strong herself."

Northwick did not think of Wilmington; he thought of himself, and in the depths of his guilty soul, in those secret places underneath all his pretences, where he really knew himself a thief, he wondered if his child's strength would be against her forgiving his weakness. What we greatly dread we most unquestioningly believe; and it did not occur to him to ask whether impatience with weakness was a necessary inference from strength. He only knew himself to be miserably weak.

He rose and stood a moment by the mantel, with his impassive, handsome face turned toward his daughter as if he were going to speak to her. He was a tall man, rather thin; he was clean shaven, except for the grayish whiskers just forward of his ears and on a line with them; he had a regular profile, which was more attractive than the expression of his direct regard. He took up a crystal ball that lay on the marble, and looked into it as if he were reading his future in its lucid depths, and then put it down again, with an effect of helplessness. When he spoke, it was not in connection with what his daughter had been talking about. He said almost dryly, "I think I will go up and look over some papers I have to take with me, and then try to get a little sleep before I start."

"And when shall we expect you back?" asked his daughter, submissively accepting his silence concerning her sister's love affairs. She knew that it meant acquiescence in anything that Sue and she thought best.

"I don't know, exactly; I can't say, now. Good-night."

To her surprise he came up and kissed her; his caresses were for Sue, and she expected them no more than she invited them. "Why, father!" she said in a pleased voice.

"Let James pack the small bag for me, and send Elbridge to me in about an hour," he said, as he went out into the hall.

V

Northwick was now fifty-nine years old, but long before he reached this age he had seen many things to make him doubt the moral government of the universe. His earliest instruction had been such as we all receive. He had been taught to believe that there was an overruling power which would punish him if he did wrong, and reward him if he did right; or would, at least, be displeased in one case, and pleased in the other. The precept took primarily the monitory form, and first enforced the fact of the punishment or the displeasure; there were times when the reward or the pleasure might not sensibly follow upon good behavior, but evil behavior never escaped the just consequences. This was the doctrine which framed the man's intention if not his conduct of life, and continued to shape it years after experience of the world, and especially of the business world, had gainsaid it. He had seen a great many cases in which not only good behavior had apparently failed of its reward but bad behavior had failed of its punishment. In the case of bad behavior, his observation had been that no unhappiness, not even any discomfort, came from it unless it was found out; for the most part, it was not found out. This did not shake Northwick's principles; he still intended to do right, so as to be on the safe side, even in a remote and improbable contingency; but it enabled him to compromise with his principles and to do wrong provisionally and then repair the wrong before he was found out, or before the overruling power noticed him.

But now there were things that made him think, in the surprising misery of being found out, that this power might have had its eye upon him all the time, and was not sleeping, or gone upon a journey, as he had tacitly flattered himself. It seemed to him that there was even a dramatic contrivance in the circumstances to render his anguish exquisite. He had not read many books; but sometimes his daughters made him go to the theatre, and once he had seen the play of Macbeth. The people round him were talking about the actor who played the part of Macbeth, but Northwick kept his mind critically upon the play, and it seemed to him false to what he had seen of life in having all those things happen just so, to fret the conscience and torment the soul of the guilty man; he thought that in reality they would not have been quite so pat; it gave him rather a low opinion of Shakespeare, lower than he would have dared to have if he had been a more cultivated man. Now that play came back into his mind, and he owned with a pang that it was all true. He was being quite as aptly visited for his transgression; his heart was being wrung, too, by the very things that could hurt it most. He had not been very well of late, and was not feeling physically strong; his anxieties had preyed upon him, and he had never felt the need of the comfort and quiet of his home so much as now when he was forced to leave it. Never had it all been so precious; never had the beauty and luxury of it seemed so great. All that was nothing, though, to the thought of his children, especially of that youngest child, whom his heart was so wrapt up in, and whom he was going to leave to shame and ruin. The words she had spoken from her pride in him, her ignorant censure of that drunkard, as a man who had better die since he had become nothing but a burden and disgrace to his family, stung on as if by incessant repetition. He had crazy thoughts, impulses, fantasies, in which he swiftly dreamed renunciation of escape. Then he knew that it would not avail anything to remain; it would not avail anything even to die; nothing could avail anything at once, but in the end, his going would avail most. He must go; it would break the child's heart to face his shame, and she must face it. He did not think of his eldest daughter, except to think that the impending disaster could not affect her so ruinously.

"My God, my God!" he groaned, as he went up stairs. Adeline called from the room he had left, "Did you speak, father?"

He had a conscience, that mechanical conscience which becomes so active in times of great moral obliquity, against telling a little lie, and saying he had not spoken. He went on up stairs without answering anything. He indulged the self pity, a little longer, of feeling himself an old man forced from his home, and he had a blind reasonless resentment of the behavior of the men who were driving

him away, and whose interests, even at that moment, he was mindful of. But he threw off this mood when he entered his room, and settled himself to business. There was a good deal to be done in the arrangement of papers for his indefinite absence, and he used the same care in providing for some minor contingencies in the company's affairs as in leaving instructions to his children for their action until they should hear from him again. Afterwards this curious scrupulosity became a matter of comment among those privy to it; some held it another proof of the ingrained rascality of the man, a trick to suggest lenient construction of his general conduct in the management of the company's finances, others saw in it an interesting example of the involuntary operation of business instincts which persisted at a juncture when the man might be supposed to have been actuated only by the most intensely selfish motives.

The question was not settled even in the final retrospect, when it appeared that at the very moment that Northwick showed himself mindful of the company's interests on those minor points, he was defrauding it further in the line of his defalcations, and keeping back a large sum of money that belonged to it. But at that moment Northwick did not consider that this money necessarily belonged to the company, any more than his daughters' house and farm belonged to it. To be sure it was the fruit of money he had borrowed or taken from the company and had used in an enormously successful deal; but the company had not earned it, and in driving him into a corner, in forcing him to make instant restitution of all its involuntary loans, it was justifying him in withholding this part of them. Northwick was a man of too much sense to reason explicitly to this effect, but there was a sophistry, tacitly at work in him to this effect, which made it possible for him to go on and steal more where he had already stolen so much. In fact it presented the further theft as a sort of duty. This sum, large as it was, really amounted to nothing in comparison with the sum he owed the company; but it formed his only means of restitution, and if he did not take it and use it to that end, he might be held recreant to his moral obligations. He contended, from that vestibule of his soul where he was not a thief, with that self of his inmost where he was a thief, that it was all most fortunate, if not providential, as it had fallen out. Not only had his broker sent him that large check for his winnings in stocks the day before, but Northwick had, contrary to his custom, cashed the check, and put the money in his safe instead of banking it. Now he could perceive a leading in the whole matter, though at the time it seemed a flagrant defiance of chance, and a sort of invitation to burglars. He seemed to himself like a burglar, when he had locked the doors and pulled down the curtains, and stood before the safe working the combination. He trembled, and when at last the mechanism announced its effect, with a slight click of the withdrawing bolt, he gave a violent start. At the same time there came a rough knock at the door, and Northwick called out in the choking, incoherent voice of one suddenly roused from sleep: "Hello! Who's there? What is it?"

"It's me," said Elbridge.

"Oh, yes! Well! All right! Hold on, a minute! Ah – you can come back in ten or fifteen minutes. I'm not quite ready for you, yet." Northwick spoke the first broken sentences from the safe, where he stood in a frenzy of dismay; the more collected words were uttered from his desk, where he ran to get his pistol. He did not know why he thought Elbridge might try to force his way in; perhaps it was because any presence on the outside of the door would have terrified him. He had time to recognize that he was not afraid for the money, but that he was afraid for himself in the act of taking it.

Elbridge gave a cough on the other side of the door, and said with a little hesitation, "All right," and Northwick heard him tramp away, and go down stairs.

He went back to the safe and pulled open the heavy door, whose resistance helped him shake off his nervousness. Then he took the money from the drawer where he had laid it, counted it, slipped it into the inner pocket of his waistcoat, and buttoned it in there. He shut the safe and locked it. The succession of these habitual acts calmed him more and more, and after he had struck a match and kindled the fire on his hearth, which he had hitherto forgotten, he was able to settle again to his preparations in writing.

VI

When Elbridge came back, Northwick called out, "Come in!" and then went and unlocked the door for him. "I forgot it was locked," he said, carelessly. "Do you think the colt's going to be lame?"

"Well, I don't like the way she behaves, very well. Them shoes have got to come off." Elbridge stood at the corner of the desk, and diffused a strong smell of stable through the hot room.

"You'll see to it, of course," said Northwick. "I'm going away in the morning, and I don't know just how long I shall be gone." Northwick satisfied his mechanical scruple against telling a lie by this formula; and in its shelter he went on to give Elbridge instructions about the management of the place in his absence. He took some money from his pocket-book and handed it to him for certain expenses, and then he said, "I want to take the five o'clock train, that reaches Ponkwasset at nine. You can drive me up with the black mare."

"All right," said Elbridge; but his tone expressed a shadow of reluctance that did not escape Northwick.

"Anything the matter?" he asked.

"I dunno. Our little boy don't seem to be very well."

"What ails him?" asked Northwick, with the sympathy it was a relief for him to feel.

"Well, Dr. Morrell's just been there, and he's afraid it's the membranous crou – " The last letter stuck in Elbridge's throat; he gulped it down.

"Oh, I *hope* not," said Northwick.

"He's comin' back again – he had to go off to another place – but I could see 'twa'n't no use," said Elbridge with patient despair; he had got himself in hand again, and spoke clearly.

Northwick shrank back from the shadow sweeping so near him; a shadow thrown from the skies, no doubt, but terrible in its blackness on the earth. "Why, of course, you mustn't think of leaving your wife. You must telephone Simpson to come for me."

"All right." Elbridge took himself away.

Northwick watched him across the icy stable-yard, going to the coachman's quarters in that cosy corner of the spreading barn; the windows were still as cheerily bright with lamplight as when they struck a pang of dumb envy to Northwick's heart. The child's sickness must have been very sudden for his daughters not to have known of it. He thought he ought to call Adeline, and send her in there to those poor people; but he reflected that she could do no good, and he spared her the useless pain; she would soon need all her strength for herself. His thought returned to his own cares, from which the trouble of another had lured it for a moment. But when he heard the doctor's sleigh-bells clash into the stable-yard, he decided to go himself and show the interest his family ought to feel in the matter.

No one answered his knock at Elbridge's door, and he opened it and found his way into the room, where Elbridge and his wife were with the doctor. The little boy had started up in his crib, and was struggling, with his arms thrown wildly about.

"There! There, he's got another of them chokin' spells!" screamed the mother. "Elbridge Newton, ain't you goin' to do anything? Oh help him, save him, Dr. Morrell! Oh, I should think you'd be ashamed to let him suffer so!" She sprang upon the child, and caught him from the doctor's hands, and turned him this way and that trying to ease him; he was suddenly quiet, and she said, "There, I just knew I could do it! What are you big, strong men good for, any – " She looked down at the child's face in her arms, and then up at the doctor's, and she gave a wild screech, like the cry of one in piercing torment.

It turned Northwick heart-sick. He felt himself worse than helpless there; but he went to the farmer's house, and told the farmer's wife to go over to the Newtons'; their little boy had just died. He heard her coming before he reached his own door, and when he reached his room, he heard the bells of the doctor's sleigh clashing out of the avenue.

The voice and the look of that childless mother haunted him. She had been one of the hat-shop hands, a flighty, nervous thing, madly in love with Elbridge, whom she ruled with a sort of frantic devotion since their marriage, compensating his cool quiet with a perpetual flutter of exaggerated sensibilities in every direction. But somehow she had put Northwick in mind of his own mother, and he thought of the chance or the will that had bereaved one and spared the other, and he envied the little boy who had just died.

He considered the case of the parents who would want to make full outward show of their grief, and he wrote Elbridge a note, to be given him in the morning, and enclosed one of the bills he was taking from the company; he hoped Elbridge would accept it from him towards the expenses he must meet at such a time.

Then he wheeled his chair about to the fire and stretched his legs out to get what rest he could before the hour of starting. He would have liked to go to bed, but he was afraid of oversleeping himself in case Elbridge had neglected to telephone Simpson. But he did not believe this possible, and he had smoothly confided himself to his experience of Elbridge's infallibility, when he started awake at the sound of bells before the front door, and then the titter of the electric bell over his bed in the next room. He thought it was an officer come to arrest him, but he remembered that only his household was acquainted with the use of that bell, and then he wondered that Simpson should have found it out. He put on his overcoat and arctics and caught up his bag, and hurried down stairs and out of doors. It was Elbridge who was waiting for him on the threshold, and took his bag from him.

"Why! Where's Simpson?" he asked. "Couldn't you get him?"

"It's all right," said Elbridge, opening the door of the booby, and gently bundling Northwick into it. "I could come just's easy as not. I thought you'd ride better in the booby; it's a little mite chilly for the cutter." The stars seemed points of ice in the freezing sky; the broken snow clinked like charcoal around Elbridge's feet. He shut the booby door and then came back and opened it slightly. "I wa'n't agoin' to let no Simpson carry you to no train, noway."

The tears came into Northwick's eyes, and he tried to say, "Why, thank you, Elbridge," but the door shut upon his failure, and Elbridge mounted to his place and drove away. Northwick had been able to get out of his house only upon condition that he should behave as if he were going to be gone on an ordinary journey. He had to keep the same terms with himself on the way to the station. When he got out there he said to Elbridge, "I've left a note for you on my desk. I'm sorry to be leaving home – at such a time – when you've –"

"You'll telegraph when to meet you?" Elbridge suggested.

"Yes," said Northwick. He went inside the station, which was deliciously warm from the large register in the centre of the room, and brilliantly lighted in readiness for the train now almost due. The closing of the door behind Northwick roused a little black figure drooping forward on the benching in one corner. It was the drunken lawyer. There had been some displeasures, general and personal, between the two men, and they did not speak; but now, at sight of Northwick, Putney came forward, and fixed him severely with his eye.

"Northwick! Do you know who you tried to drive over, last evening?"

Northwick returned his regard with the half-ironical, half-patronizing look a dull man puts on with a person of less fortune but more brain. "I didn't see you, Mr. Putney, until I was quite upon you. The horses –"

"It was the Law you tried to drive over!" thundered the little man with a voice out of keeping with his slender body. "Don't try it too often! You can't drive over the Law, *yet*– you haven't quite millions enough for that. Heigh? That so?" he queried, sensible of the anti-climax of asking such a question in that way, but tipsily helpless in it.

Northwick did not answer; he walked to the other end of the station set off for ladies, and Putney did not follow him. The train came in, and Northwick went out and got aboard.

VII

The president of the Board, who had called Northwick a thief, and yet had got him a chance to make himself an honest man, was awake at the hour the defaulter absconded, after passing quite as sleepless a night. He had kept a dinner engagement, hoping to forget Northwick, but he seemed to be eating and drinking him at every course. When he came home toward eleven o'clock, he went to his library and sat down before the fire. His wife had gone to bed, and his son and daughter were at a ball; and he sat there alone, smoking impatiently.

He told the man who looked in to see if he wanted anything that he might go to bed; he need not sit up for the young people. Hilary had that kind of consideration for servants, and he liked to practise it; he liked to realize that he was practising it now, in a moment when every habit of his life might very well yield to the great and varying anxieties which beset him.

He had an ideal of conduct, of what was due from him to himself, as a gentleman and a citizen, and he could not conceal from himself that he had been mainly instrumental in the escape of a rogue from justice, when he got the Board to give Northwick a chance. His ideals had not hitherto stood in the way of his comfort, his entire repose of mind, any more than they had impaired his prosperity, though they were of a kind far above those which commercial honor permits a man to be content with. He held himself bound, as a man of a certain origin and social tradition, to have public spirit, and he had a great deal of it. He believed that he owed it to the community to do nothing to lower its standards of personal integrity and responsibility; and he distinguished himself by a gratified consciousness from those people of chromo-morality, who held all sorts of loose notions on such points. His name stood not merely for so much money; many names stood for far more; but it meant reliability, it meant honesty, it meant good faith. He really loved these things, though, no doubt, he loved them less for their own sake than because they were spiritual properties of Eben Hilary. He did not expect everybody else to have them, but his theory of life exacted that they should be held the chief virtues. He was so conscious of their value that he ignored all those minor qualities in himself which rendered him not only bearable but even lovable; he was not aware of having any sort of foibles, so that any error of conduct in himself surprised him even more than it pained him. It was not easy to recognize it; but when he once saw it, he was not only willing but eager to repair it.

The error that he had committed in Northwick's case, if it was an error, was one that presented peculiar difficulties, as every error in life does; the errors love an infinite complexity of disguise, and masquerade as all sorts of things. There were moments when Hilary saw his mistake so clearly that it seemed to him nothing less than the repayment of Northwick's thefts from his own pocket would satisfy the claims of justice to his fellow-losers if Northwick ran away; and then again, it looked like the act of wise mercy which it had appeared to him when he was urging the Board to give the man a chance as the only thing which they could hopefully do in the circumstances, as common sense, as business. But it was now so obvious that a man like Northwick could and would do nothing but run away if he were given the chance, that he seemed to have been his accomplice when he used the force of his personal character with them in Northwick's behalf. He was in a ridiculous position, there was no doubt of that, and he was not going to get out of it without much painful wear and tear of pride, of self-respect.

After a long time he looked at the clock, and found it still early for the return of his young people. He was impatient to see his son, and to get the situation in the light of his mind, and see how it looked there. He had already told him of the defalcation, and of what the Board had decided to do with Northwick; but this was while he was still in the glow of action, and he had spoken very hurriedly with Matt who came in just as he was going out to dinner; it was before his cold fit came on.

He had reached that time of life when a man likes to lay his troubles before his son; and in the view his son usually took of his troubles, Hilary seemed to find another mood of his own. It was a

fresher, different self dealing with them; for the fellow was not only younger and more vigorous; he was another temperament with the same interests, and often the same principles. He had disappointed Hilary in some ways, but he had gratified his pride in the very ways he had disappointed him. The father had expected the son to go into business, and Matt did go into the mills at Ponkwasset, where he was to be superintendent in the natural course. But one day he came home and told his father that he had begun to have his doubts of the existing relations of labor and capital; and until he could see his way clearer he would rather give up his chance with the company. It was a keen disappointment to Hilary; he made no concealment of that; but he did not quarrel with his son about it. He robustly tolerated Matt's queer notions, not only because he was a father who blindly doted on his children and behaved as if everything they did was right, no matter if it put him in the wrong, but because he chose to respect the fellow's principles, if those were his principles. He had his own principles, and Matt should have his if he liked. He bore entirely well the purpose of going abroad that Matt expressed, and he wished to give him much more money than the fellow would take, to carry on those researches which he made in his travels. When he came back and published his monograph on work and wages in Europe, Hilary paid the expense, and took as unselfish an interest in the slow and meagre sale of the little book as if it had cost him nothing.

Eben Hilary had been a crank, too, in his day, so far as to have gone counter to the most respectable feeling of business in Boston, when he came out an abolitionist. His individual impulse to radicalism had exhausted itself in that direction; we are each of us good for only a certain degree of advance in opinion; few men are indefinitely progressive; and Hilary had not caught on to the movement that was carrying his son with it. But he understood how his son should be what he was, and he loved him so much that he almost honored him for what he called his balderdash about industrial slavery. His heart lifted when at last he heard the scratching of the night-latch at the door below, and he made lumbering haste down stairs to open and let the young people in. He reached the door as they opened it, and in the momentary lightness of his soul at sight of his children, he gave them a gay welcome, and took his daughter, all a fluff of soft silken and furry wraps, into his arms.

"Oh, don't kiss my nose!" she called out. "It'll freeze you to death, papa! What in the world are you up, for? Anything the matter with mamma?"

"No. She was in bed when I came home; I thought I would sit up and ask what sort of a time you'd had."

"Did you ever know me to have a bad one? I had the best time in the world. I danced every dance, and I enjoyed it just as much as if I had 'shut and been a Bud again.' But don't you know it's very bad for old gentlemen to be up so late?"

They were mounting the stairs, and when they reached the library, she went in and poked her long-gloved hands well in over the fire on the hearth while she lifted her eyes to the clock. "Oh, it isn't so very late. Only five."

"No, it's early," said her father with the security in a feeble joke which none but fathers can feel with none but their grown-up daughters. "It's full an hour yet before Matt would be getting up to feed his cattle, if he were in Vardley." Hilary had given Matt the old family place there; and he always liked to make a joke of his getting an honest living by farming it.

"Don't speak of that agricultural angel!" said the girl, putting her draperies back with one hand and confining them with her elbow, so as to give her other hand greater comfort of the fire. To do better yet she dropped on both knees before it.

"Was he nice?" asked the father, with confidence.

"Nice! Ask all the plain girls he danced with, all the dull girls he talked with! When I think what a good time I should have with him as a plain girl, if I were not his sister, I lose all patience." She glanced up in her father's face, with all the strange charm of features that had no regular beauty; and then, as she had to do whenever she remembered them, she asserted the grace which governed every movement and gesture in her, and got as lightly to her feet as if she were a wind-bowed flower tilting

back to its perpendicular. Her father looked at her with as fond a delight as a lover could have felt in her fascination. She was, in fact, a youthful, feminine version of himself in her plainness; though the grace was all her own. Her complexion was not the leathery red of her father's, but a smooth and even white from cheek to throat. She let her loose cloak fall to the chair behind her, and showed herself tall and slim, with that odd visage of hers drooping from a perfect neck. "Why," she said, "if we had all been horned cattle, he couldn't have treated us better."

"Do you hear that, Matt?" asked the father, as his son came in, after a methodical and deliberate bestowal of his outer garments below; his method and his deliberation were part of the joke of him in the family.

"Complaining of me for making her walk home?" he asked in turn, with the quiet which was another part of the joke. "I didn't suppose you'd give me away, Louise."

"I didn't; I knew I only had to wait and you would give yourself away," said the girl.

"Did he make you walk home?" said the father. "That's the reason your hands are so cold."

"They're not very cold – now; and if they were, I shouldn't mind it in such a cause."

"What cause?"

"Oh the general shamefulness of disusing the feet God had given me. But it was only three blocks, and I had my arctics." She moved a little away toward the fire again and showed the arctics on the floor where she must have been scuffling them off under her skirts. "Ugh! But it's cold!" She now stretched a satin slipper in toward the fire.

"Yes, it's a cold night; but you seem to have got home alive, and I don't think you'll be the worse for it now, if you go to bed at once," said her father.

"Is that a hint?" she asked, with a dreamy appreciation of the warmth through the toe of her slipper.

"Not at all; we should be glad to have you sit up the whole night with us."

"Ah, now I know you're hinting. Is it business?"

"Yes, it's business."

"Well, I'm just in the humor for business; I've had enough pleasure."

"I don't see why Louise shouldn't stay and talk business with us, if she likes. I think it's a pity to keep women out of it, as if it didn't concern them," said the son. "Nine-tenths of the time it concerns them more than it does men." He had a bright, friendly, philosophical smile in saying this, and he stood waiting for his sister to be gone, with a patience which their father did not share. He stood something over six feet in his low shoes, and his powerful frame seemed starting out of the dress-suit, which it appeared so little related to. His whole face was handsome and regular, and his full beard did not wholly hide a mouth of singular sweetness.

"Yes; I think so too, in the abstract," said the father. "If the business were mine, or were business in the ordinary sense of the term –"

"Why, why did you say it was business at all, then?" The girl put her arms round her father's neck and let her head-scarf fall on the rug a little way from her cloak and her arctics. "If you hadn't said it was business, I should have been in bed long ago." Then, as if feeling her father's eagerness to have her gone, she said, "Good night," and gave him a kiss, and a hug or two more, and said "Good night, Matt," and got herself away, letting a long glove trail somewhere out of her dress, and stretch its weak length upon the floor after her, as if it were trying to follow her.

VIII

Louise's father, in turning to look from her toward his son, felt himself slightly pricked in the cheek by the pin that had transferred itself from her neck-gear to his coat collar, and Matt went about picking up the cloak, the arctics, the scarf and the glove. He laid the cloak smoothly on the leathern lounge, and arranged the scarf and glove on it, and set the arctics on the floor in a sort of normal relation to it, and then came forward in time to relieve his father of the pin that was pricking him, and that he was rolling his eyes out of his head to get sight of.

"What in the devil is that?" he roared.

"Louise's pin," said Matt, as placidly as if that were quite the place for it, and its function were to prick her father in the cheek. He went and pinned it into her scarf, and then he said, "It's about Northwick, I suppose."

"Yes," said his father, still furious from the pinprick. "I'm afraid the miserable scoundrel is going to run away."

"Did you expect there was a chance of that?" asked Matt, quietly.

"Expect!" his father blustered. "I don't know what I expected. I might have expected anything of him but common honesty. The position I took at the meeting was that our only hope was to give him a chance. He made all sorts of professions of ability to meet the loss. I didn't believe him, but I thought that he might partially meet it, and that nothing was to be gained by proceeding against him. You can't get blood out of a turnip, even by crushing the turnip."

"That seems sound," said the son, with his reasonable smile.

"I didn't spare him, but I got the others to spare him. I told him he was a thief."

"Oh!" said Matt.

"Why, wasn't he?" returned his father, angrily.

"Yes, yes. I suppose he might be called so." Matt admitted it with an air of having his reservations, which vexed his father still more.

"Very well, sir!" he roared. "Then I called him so; and I think that it will do him good to know it." Hilary did not repeat all of the violent things he had said to Northwick, though he had meant to do so, being rather proud of them; the tone of his son's voice somehow stopped him for the moment. "I brought them round to my position, and we gave him the chance he asked for."

"It was really the only thing you could do."

"Of course it was! It was the only business-like thing, though it won't seem so when it comes out that he's gone to Canada. I told him I thought the best thing for him would be a good, thorough, railroad accident on his way home; and that if it were not for his family, for his daughter who's been in and out here so much with Louise, I would like to see him handcuffed, and going down the street with a couple of constables."

Matt made no comment upon this, perhaps because he saw no use in criticising his father, and perhaps because his mind was more upon the point he mentioned. "It will be hard for that pretty creature."

"It will be hard for a number of creatures, pretty and plain," said his father. "It won't break any of us; but it will shake some of us up abominably. I don't know but it may send one or two people to the wall, for the time being."

"Ah, but that isn't the same thing at all. That's suffering; it isn't shame. It isn't the misery that the sin of your father has brought on you."

"Well, of course not!" said Hilary, impatiently granting it. "But Miss Northwick always seemed to me a tolerably tough kind of young person. I never quite saw what Louise found to like in her."

"They were at school together," said the son. "She's a sufficiently offensive person, I fancy; or might be. But she sometimes struck me as a person that one might be easily unjust to, for that very reason; I suppose she has the fascination that a proud girl has for a girl like Louise."

Hilary asked, with a divergence more apparent than real, "How is that affair of hers with Jack Wilmington?"

"I don't know. It seems to have that quality of mystery that belongs to all affairs of the kind when they hang fire. We expect people to get married, and be done with it, though that may not really be the way to be done with it."

"Wasn't there some scandal about him, of some kind?"

"Yes; but I never believed in it."

"He always struck me as something of a cub, but somehow he doesn't seem the sort of a fellow to give the girl up because – "

"Because her father is a fraud?" Matt suggested. "No, I don't think he is, quite. But there are always a great many things that enter into the matter besides a man's feelings, or his principles, even. I can't say what I think Wilmington would do. What steps do you propose to take next in the matter?"

"I promised him he shouldn't be followed up, while he was trying to right himself. If we find he's gone, we must give the case into the hands of the detectives, I suppose." The disgust showed itself in Hilary's face, which was an index to all his emotions, and his son said, with a smile of sympathy:

"The apparatus of justice isn't exactly attractive, even when one isn't a criminal. But I don't know that it's any more repulsive than the apparatus of commerce, or business, as we call it. Some dirt seems to get on everybody's bread by the time he's earned it, or on his money even when he's made it in large sums as our class do."

The last words gave the father a chance to vent his vexation with himself upon his son. "I wish you wouldn't talk that walking-delegate's rant with me, Matt. If I let you alone in your nonsense, I think you may fitly take it as a sign that I wish to be let alone myself."

"I beg your pardon," said the young man. "I didn't wish to annoy you."

"Don't do it, then." After a moment, Hilary added with a return to his own sense of deficiency, "The whole thing's as thoroughly distasteful to me as it can be. But I can't see how I could have acted otherwise than I've done. I know I've made myself responsible, in a way, for Northwick's getting off; but there was really nothing to do but to give him the chance he asked for. His having abused it won't change that fact at all; but I can't conceal from myself that I half-expected him to abuse it."

He put this tentatively, and his son responded, "I suppose that naturally inclines you to suppose he'll run away."

"Yes."

"But your supposition doesn't establish the fact."

"No. But the question is whether it doesn't oblige me to act as if it had; whether I oughtn't, if I've got this suspicion, to take some steps at once to find out whether Northwick's really gone or not, and to mix myself actively up in the catchpole business of his pursuit, after I promised him he shouldn't be shadowed in any way till his three days were over."

"It's a nice question," said Matt, "or rather, it's a nasty one. Still, you've only got your fears for evidence, and you must all have had your fears before. I don't think that even a bad conscience ought to hurry one into the catchpole business." Matt laughed again with that fondness he had for his father. "Though as for any peculiar disgrace in catchpoles as catchpoles, I don't see it. They're a necessary part of the administration of justice, as we understand it, and have it; and I don't see how a detective who arrests, say, a murderer, is not as respectably employed as the judge who sentences him, or the hangman who puts the rope round his neck. The distinction we make between them is one of those tricks for shirking responsibility which are practised in every part of the system. Not that I want you to turn catchpole. It's all so sorrowful and sickening that I wish you hadn't any duty at all in the matter. I suppose you feel at least that you ought to let the Board know that you have your misgivings?"

"Yes," said Hilary, ruefully, with his double chin on his breast, "I felt like doing it at once; but there was my word to *him*! And I wanted to talk with you."

"It was just as well to let them have their night's rest. There isn't really anything to be done." Matt rose from the low chair where he had been sprawling, and stretched his stalwart arms abroad. "If the man was going he's gone past recall by this time; and if he isn't gone, there's no immediate cause for anxiety."

"Then you wouldn't do anything at present?"

"I certainly shouldn't. What could you do?"

"Yes, it might as well all go till morning, I suppose."

"Good night," the son said, suggestively, "I suppose there isn't really anything more?"

"No, what could there be? You had better go to bed."

"And you, too, I hope, father."

"Oh, I shall go to bed – as a matter of form."

The son laughed. "I wish you could carry your formality so far as to go to sleep, too. I shall."

"I sha'n't sleep," said the father, bitterly. "When things like this happen, someone has to lie awake and think about them."

"Well, I dare say Northwick's doing that."

"I doubt it," said Hilary. "I suspect Northwick is enjoying a refreshing slumber on the Montreal express somewhere near St. Albans about this time."

"I doubt if his dreams are pleasant. After all, he's only going to a larger prison if he's going into exile. He may be on the Montreal express, but I guess he isn't sleeping," said Matt.

"Yes," his father admitted. "Poor devil! He'd much better be dead."

IX

The groom who drove Miss Sue Northwick down to the station at noon that day, came back without her an hour later. He brought word to her sister that she had not found the friend she expected to meet at the station, but had got a telegram from her there, and had gone into town to lunch with her. The man was to return and fetch her from the six o'clock train.

She briefly explained at dinner that her friend had been up at four balls during the week, and wished to beg off from the visit she had promised until after the fifth, which was to be that night.

"I don't see how she lives through it," said Adeline. "And at her age, it seems very odd to be just as fond of dancing as if she were a bud."

"Louise is only twenty-three," said Suzette. "If she were married, she would be just in the heart of her gayeties at that age, or even older."

"But she isn't married, and that makes all the difference."

"Her brother is spending the month at home, and she makes the most of his being with them."

"Has he given up his farming? It's about time."

"No; not at all, I believe. She says he's in Boston merely as a matter of duty, to chaperon her at parties, and save her mother from having to go with her."

"Well," said Adeline, "I should think he would want to be of *some* use in the world; and if he won't help his father in business, he had better help his mother in society."

Suzette sat fallen back in her chair for the moment, and she said as if she had not heeded, "I think I will give a little dance here, next week. Louise can come up for a couple of days, and we can have it Thursday. We made out the list – just a few people. She went out with me after lunch, and we saw most of the girls, and I ordered the supper. Mrs. Lambert will matronize them; it'll be an old dance, rather, as far as the girls are concerned, but I've asked two or three buds; and some of the young married people. It will be very pleasant, don't you think?"

"Very. Do you think Mr. Wade would like to come?"

Suzette smiled. "I dare say he would. I wasn't thinking of him in making it, but I don't see why he shouldn't look in."

"He might come to the supper," Adeline mused aloud, "if it isn't one of his church days. I never can keep the run of them."

"We were talking about that and we decided that Thursday would be perfectly safe. Louise and I looked it up together; but we knew we could make everything sure by asking Mrs. Lambert first of all; she would have been certain to object if we had made any mistake."

"I'm very glad," said Adeline. "I know father will be glad to have Mr. Wade here. He's taken a great fancy to him."

"Mr. Wade's very nice," said Suzette, coolly. "I shouldn't have liked to have it without him."

They left the table and went into the library, to talk the dance over at larger leisure. Suzette was somewhat sleepy from the fatigues of her escapade to Boston, and an afternoon spent mostly in the cold air, and from time to time she yawned, and said she must really go to bed, and then went on talking.

"Shall you have any of the South Hatboro' people?" her sister asked.

"Mrs. Munger and her tribe?" said Suzette, with a contemptuous little smile. "I don't think she would contribute much. Why not the Morrells; or the Putneys, at once?" She added abruptly, "I think I shall ask Jack Wilmington." Adeline gave a start, and looked keenly at her; but she went on quite imperviously. "The Hilarys know him. Matt Hilary and he were quite friends at one time. Besides," she said, as if choosing now to recognize the quality of Adeline's gaze, "I don't care to have Louise suppose there's the shadow of anything between us any more, not even a quarrel."

Adeline gave a little sigh of relief. "I'm glad that's it. I'm always afraid you'll get – "

"To thinking about him again? You needn't be. All that's as thoroughly dead and gone as anything can be in this world. No," she continued, in the tone that is more than half for one's self in such dealings, "whatever there was of that, or might have been, Mr. Wilmington has put an end to, long ago. It never was anything but a fancy, and I don't believe it could have been anything else if it had ever come to the point."

"I'm glad it seems so to you now, Sue," said her sister, "but you needn't tell me that you weren't very much taken with him at one time; and if it's going to begin again, I'd much rather you wouldn't have him here."

Suzette laughed at the old-maidish anxiety. "Do you think you shall see me at his feet before the evening is over? But I should like to see him at mine for a moment, and to have the chance of hearing his explanations."

"I don't believe he's ever been bad!" cried Adeline. "He's just weak."

"Very well. I should like to hear what a man has to say for his weakness, and then tell him that I had a little weakness of my own, and didn't think I had strength to endure a husband that had to be explained."

"Ah, you're in love with him, yet! You shall never have him here in the world, after the way he's treated you!"

"Don't be silly, Adeline! Don't be romantic! If you had ever been in love yourself, you would know that people outlive that as well as other things. Let's see how the drawing-room will do for the dance?"

She jumped from her chair and touched the electric button at the chimney. "You think that nothing but death can kill a fancy, and yet nobody marries their first love, and lots of women have second husbands." The man showed himself at the door, and she said to him in a rapid aside: "Turn up the lights in the drawing-room, James," and returned to her sister. "No, Adeline! The only really enduring and undying thing is a slight. That lasts – with *me*!"

Adeline was moved to say, in the perverse honesty of her soul, and from the inborn New England love of justice, "I don't believe he ever meant it, Sue. I don't believe but what he was influenced –"

Suzette laughed, not at all bitterly. "Oh, *you're* in love with him! Well, you may have him if ever he offers himself to me. Let's look at the drawing-room." She caught Adeline round her bony waist, where each rib defined itself to her hand, and danced her out of the library, across the hall into the white and gold saloon beyond. "Yes," she said, with a critical look at the room, "it will do splendidly. We shall have to put down linen, of course; but then the dancing will be superb – as good as a bare floor. Yes, it will be a grand success. Ugh! Come out, come out, come out! How deathly cold it is!"

She ran back into the warm library, and her sister followed more slowly. "You shouldn't think," she said, as if something in Sue's words had reminded her of it, "that coming so soon after Mrs. Newton's little boy –"

"Well, that's *like* you, Adeline! To bring *that* up! *No*, indeed! It'll be a whole week, nearly; and besides he *isn't* quite one of the family. What an idea!"

"Of course," her sister assented, abashed by Sue's scornful surprise.

"It's too bad it should have happened just at this time," said the girl, with some relenting. "When is it to be?"

"To-morrow, at eleven," said Adeline. She perceived that Sue's selfishness was more a selfishness of words, perhaps, than of thoughts or feelings. "You needn't have anything to do with it. I can tell them you were not very well, and didn't feel exactly like coming. They will understand." She was used to making excuses for Suzette, and a motherly fib like this seemed no harm to her.

X

In the morning before her sister was astir, Adeline went out to the coachman's quarters in the stabling, and met the mother of the dead child at the door. "Come right in!" she said, fiercely, as she set it wide. "I presume you want to know if there's anything you can do for me; that's what they all ask. Well, there ain't, unless you can bring him back to life. I've been up and doin', as usual, this mornin'," she said, and a sound of frying came from the kitchen where she had left her work to let her visitor in. "We got to eat; we got to live."

The farmer's wife came in from the next chamber, where the little one lay; she had her bonnet and shawl on as if going home after a night's watching. She said, "I tell her he's better off where he's gone; but she can't seem to sense the comfort of it."

"How do you know he's better off?" demanded the mother, turning upon her. "It makes me tired to hear such stuff. Who's goin' to take more care of the child where he's gone, than what his mother could? Don't you talk nonsense, Mrs. Saunders! You don't know anything about it, and nobody does. I can bear it; yes, I've got the stren'th to stand up against death, but I don't want any *comfort*. You want to see Elbridge, Miss Northwick? He's in the harness room, I guess. He's got to keep about, too, if he don't want to go clear crazy. One thing, he don't have to stand any comfortin'. I guess men don't say such things to each other as women do, big fools as they be!"

Mrs. Saunders gave Miss Northwick a wink of pity for Mrs. Newton and expressed that she was hardly accountable for what she was saying.

"He used to complain of me for lettin' Arty get out into the stable among the horses; but I guess he won't be troubled that way *much* more," said the mother; and then something in Miss Northwick's face seemed to stay her in her wild talk; and she asked, "Want I should call him for you?"

"No, no," said Adeline, "I'll go right through to him, myself." She knew the way from the coachman's dwelling into the stable, and she found Elbridge oiling one of the harnesses, with a sort of dogged attention to the work, which he hardly turned from to look at her. "Elbridge," she asked, "did you drive father to the depot yesterday morning?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did."

"When did he say he would be back?"

"Well, he said he couldn't say, exactly. But I understood in a day or two."

"Did he expect to be anywhere but Ponkwasset?"

"No, ma'am, I didn't hear him say as he did."

"Then it's a mistake; and of course I knew it was a mistake. There's more than one Northwick in the world, I presume." She laughed a little hysterically; she had a newspaper in her hand, and it shook with the nervous tremor that passed over her.

"Why, what is it, Miss Northwick?" said Elbridge with a perception of the trouble in her voice through the trouble in his own heart. He stopped pulling the greasy sponge over the trace in his hand, and turned towards her.

"Oh, nothing. There's been an accident on the Union and Dominion Railroad; and of course it's a mistake."

She handed him the paper, folded to the column which she wished to show, and he took it between two finger-tips, so as to soil it as little as possible, and stood reading it. She went on saying, "He wouldn't be on the train if he was at Ponkwasset; I got the paper when I first came down stairs, but I didn't happen to read the account till just now; and then I thought I'd run out and see what father said to you about where he was going. He told us he was going to the Mills, too, and – " Her voice growing more and more wistful, died away in the fascination of watching the fascination of Elbridge as he first took in the half-column of scare-heads, and then followed down to the meagre details of the dispatch eked out with double-leading to cover space.

It appeared that the Northern express had reached Wellwater Junction, on the Union and Dominion line, several hours behind time, and after the usual stop there for supper, had joined the Boston train, on the United States and Canada, for Montreal, and had, just after leaving the Junction, run off the track. "The deadly car stove got in its work" on the wreck, and many lives had been lost by the fire, especially in the parlor car. It was impossible to give a complete list of the killed and wounded, but several bodies were identified, and among the names of passengers in the Pullman that of T. W. Northwick was reported, from a telegram received by the conductor at Wellwater asking to have a seat reserved from that point to Montreal.

"It ain't him, I know it ain't, Miss Northwick," said Elbridge. He offered to give her the paper, but took another look at it before he finally yielded it. "There's lots of folks of the same name, I don't care what it is, and the initials ain't the ones."

"No," she said, doubtfully, "but I didn't like the last name being the same."

"Well, you can't help that; and as long as it ain't the initials, and you know your father is safe and sound at the Mills, you don't want to worry."

"No," said Adeline. "You're sure he told you he was going to the Mills?"

"Why, didn't he tell *you* he was? I don't recollect just what he said. But he told me about that note he left for me, and that had the money in it for the fun'al – " Elbridge stopped for a moment before he added, "He said he'd telegraph just which train he wanted me to meet him when he was comin' back... Why, dumn it! I guess I *must* be crazy. We can settle it in half an hour's time – or an hour or two at the outside – and no need to worry about it. Telegraph to the Mills and find out whether he's there or not."

He dropped his harness, and went to the telephone and called up the Western Union operator at the station. He had the usual telephonic contention with her as to who he was, and what he wanted, but he got her at last to take his dispatch to Ponkwasset Falls, asking whether Northwick was at the Mills.

"There!" he said, "I don't believe but what that'll fix it all right. And I'll bring you in the answer myself, when it comes, Miss Northwick."

"I do hate to trouble you with my foolishness, when – "

"I guess you needn't mind about that," said Elbridge. "I guess it wouldn't make much difference to me, if the whole world was burnt up. Be a kind of a relief." He did not mean just the sense the words conveyed, and she, in her preoccupation with her own anxiety, and her pity for him, interpreted them aright.

She stayed to add, "I don't know what he could have been on that train for, any way, do you?"

"No, and he wa'n't on it; you'll find that out."

"It'll be very provoking," she said, forecasting the minor trouble of the greater trouble's failure. "Everybody will wonder if it isn't father, and we shall have to tell them it isn't."

"Well, that won't be so bad as havin' to tell 'em it is," said Elbridge, getting back for the moment to his native dryness.

"That's true," Adeline admitted. "Don't speak to anybody about it till you hear." She knew from his making no answer that he would obey her, and she hid the paper in her pocket, as if she would hide the intelligence it bore from all the rest of the world.

She let Suzette sleep late, after the fatigues of her day in Boston and the excitement of their talk at night, which she suspected had prevented the girl from sleeping early. Elbridge's sympathetic incredulity had comforted her, if it had not convinced her, and she possessed herself in such patience as she could till the answer should come from the mills. If her father were there, then it would be all right; and in the meantime she found some excuses for not believing the worst she feared. There was no reason in the world why he should be on that train; there was no reason why she should identify him with that T. W. Northwick in the burnt-up car; that was not his name, and that was not the place where he would have been.

XI

There was trouble with the telegraph and telephone connections between Hatboro' and Ponkwasset, and Adeline had to go to the funeral without an answer to Elbridge's message. Below her surface interest in the ceremony and the behavior of the mourners and the friends, which nothing could have alienated but the actual presence of calamity, she had a nether misery of alternating hope and fear, of anxieties continually reasoned down, and of security lost the instant it was found. The double strain told so upon her nerves, that when the rites at the grave were ended, she sent word to the clergyman and piteously begged him to drive home with her.

"Why, aren't you well, Miss Northwick?" he asked, with a glance at her troubled face, as he got into the covered sleigh with her.

"Oh, yes," she said, and she flung herself back against the cushioning and began to cry.

"Poor Mrs. Newton's grief has been very trying," he said, gently, and with a certain serenity of smile he had, and he added, as if he thought it well to lure Miss Northwick from the minor affliction that we feel for others' sorrows to the sorrow itself, "It has been a terrible blow to her – so sudden, and her only child."

"Oh, it isn't that," said Adeline, frankly. "Have – have you seen the – paper this morning?"

"It came," said the clergyman. "But in view of the duty before me, I thought I wouldn't read it. Is there anything particular in it?"

"No, nothing. Only – only –" Adeline had not been able to separate herself from the dreadful thing, and she took it out of the carriage pocket. "There has been an accident on the railroad," she began firmly, but she broke down in the effort to go on. "And I wanted to have you see – see –" She stopped, and handed him the paper.

He took it and ran over the account of the accident, and came at her trouble with an instant intelligence that was in itself a sort of reassurance. "But had you any reason to suppose your father was on the train?"

"No," she said from the strength he gave her. "That is the strange part about it. He went up to the Mills, yesterday morning, and he couldn't have been on the train at all. Only the name –"

"It isn't quite the name," said Wade, with a gentle moderation, as if he would not willingly make too much of the difference, and felt truth to be too sacred to be tampered with even while it had merely the form of possibility.

"No," said Adeline, eager to be comforted, "and I'm sure he's at the Mills. Elbridge has sent a dispatch to find out if he's there, but there must be something the matter with the telegraph. We hadn't heard before the funeral; or, at least, he didn't bring the word; and I hated to keep round after him when –"

"He probably hadn't heard," said the clergyman, soothingly, "and no news is good news, you know. But hadn't we better drive round by the station, and find out whether any answer has been –"

"O, no! I couldn't do that!" said Adeline, nervously. "They will telephone the answer up to Elbridge. But come home with me, if you haven't something to do, and stay with us till we –"

"Oh, very willingly." On the way the young clergyman talked of the accident, guessing that her hysterical conjectures had heightened the horror, and that he should make it less dreadful by exploring its facts with her. He did not declare it impossible her father should have been on the train, but he urged the extreme improbability.

Elbridge and his wife passed them, driving rapidly in Simpson's booby, which Adeline had ordered for their use at the funeral; and when she got into the house Elbridge was waiting there for her. He began at once; "Miss Northwick, I don't believe but what your father's staid over at Springfield for something. He was talkin' to me last week about some hosses there –"

"Isn't he at the Mills?" she demanded sharply.

Elbridge gave his hat a turn on his hand, before he looked up. "Well, no, he hain't been, yet – " Adeline made no sound, but she sank down as a column of water sinks.

At the confusion of movements and voices that followed, Suzette came to the door of the library, and looked wonderingly into the hall, where this had happened, with a book clasped over her finger. "What in the world is the matter?" she asked with a sort of sarcastic amaze, at sight of Elbridge lifting something from the floor.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Suzette," said Mr. Wade, "Your sister seems a little faint, and – "

"It's this sickening heat!" cried the girl, running to the door, and setting it wide. "It suffocates me when I come in from the outside. I'll get some water." She vanished and was back again instantly, stooping over Adeline to wet her forehead and temples. The rush of the cold air began to revive her. She opened her eyes, and Suzette said, severely, "What has come over you, Adeline? Aren't you well?" and as Adeline answered nothing, she went on: "I don't believe she knows where she is. Let us get her into the library on the lounge."

She put her strength with that of the young clergyman, and they carried Adeline to the lounge; Suzette dispatched Elbridge, hanging helplessly about, for some of the women. He sent the parlor-maid, and did not come back.

Adeline kept looking at her sister as if she were afraid of her. When she was recovered sufficiently to speak, she turned her eyes on the clergyman, and said huskily, "Tell her."

"Your sister has had a little fright," he began; and with his gentle eyes on the girl's he went on to deal the pain that priests and physicians must give. "There's the report of a railroad accident in the morning paper, and among the passengers – the missing – was one of the name of Northwick – "

"But father is at the Mills!"

"Your sister had telegraphed before the funeral, to make sure – and word has come that he – isn't there."

"Where is the paper?" demanded Suzette, with a kind of haughty incredulity.

Wade found it in his pocket, where he must have put it instead of giving it back to Adeline in the sleigh. Suzette took it and went with it to one of the windows. She stood reading the account of the accident, while her sister watched her with tremulous eagerness for the help that came from her contemptuous rejection of the calamity.

"How absurd! It isn't father's name, and he couldn't have been on the train. What in the world would he have been going to Montreal for, at this time of year? It's ridiculous!" Suzette flung the paper down, and came back to the other two.

"I felt," said Wade, "that it was extremely improbable – "

"But where," Adeline put in faintly, "could he have been if he wasn't at the Mills?"

"Anywhere in the world except Wellwater Junction," returned Suzette, scornfully. "He may have stopped over at Springfield, or – "

"Yes," Adeline admitted, "that's what Elbridge thought."

"Or he may have gone on to Willoughby Junction. He often goes there."

"That is true," said the other, suffering herself to take heart a little. "And he's been talking of selling his interest in the quarries there; and – "

"He's there, of course," said Suzette with finality. "If he'd been going farther, he'd have telegraphed us. He's always very careful. I'm not in the least alarmed, and I advise you not to be, Adeline. When did you see the paper first?"

"When I came down to breakfast," said Adeline, quietly.

"And I suppose you didn't eat any breakfast?"

Adeline's silence made confession.

"What I think is, we'd better all have *lunch*," said Suzette, and she went and touched the bell at the chimney. "You'll stay with us, won't you, Mr. Wade? We want lunch at once, James," she said to the man who answered her ring. "Of course, you must stay, Mr. Wade, and help see Adeline back to

her right mind." She touched the bell again, and when the man appeared, "My sleigh at once, James," she commanded. "I will drive you home, Mr. Wade, on my way to the station. Of course I shall not leave anything in doubt about this silly scare. I fancy it will be no great difficulty to find out where father is. Where is that railroad guide? Probably my father took it up to his room." She ran upstairs and came down with the book in her hand. "Now we will see. I don't believe he could get any train at Springfield, where he would have to change for the Mills, that would take him beyond the Junction at that hour last night. The express has to come up from Boston – " She stopped and ran over the time-table of the route. "Well, he *could* get a connecting train at the Junction; but that doesn't prove at all that he did."

She talked on, mocking the mere suggestion of such a notion, and then suddenly rang the bell once more, to ask sharply, "Isn't lunch ready yet? Then bring us tea, here. I shall telegraph to the Mills again, and I shall telegraph to Mr. Hilary in Boston; he will know whether father was going anywhere else. They had a meeting of the Board day before yesterday, and father went to the Mills unexpectedly. I shall telegraph to Ponkwasset Junction, too; and you may be sure I shall not come home, Adeline, till I know something definite."

The tea came, and Suzette served the cups herself, with nerves that betrayed no tremor in the clash of silver or china. But she made haste, and at the sound of sleigh-bells without, she put down her own cup, untasted.

"Oh, must you take Mr. Wade away?" Adeline feebly pleaded. "Stay till she comes back!" she entreated.

Suzette faltered a moment, and then with a look at Mr. Wade, she gave a harsh laugh. "Very well!" she said.

She ran into the hall and up the stairs, and in another moment they heard her coming down again; the outer door shut after her, and then came the flutter of the sleigh-bells as she drove away.

Over the lunch the elder sister recovered herself a little, and ate as one can in the suspense of a strong emotion.

"Your sister is a person of great courage," said the clergyman, as if he were a little abashed by it.

"She would never show that she's troubled. But I know well enough that she's troubled, by the way she kept talking and doing something every minute; and now, if she hadn't gone to telegraph, she'd – I mustn't keep you here, any longer, Mr. Wade," she broke off in the sense of physical strength the food had given her. "Indeed, I mustn't. You needn't be anxious. I shall do very well, now. Yes! I shall!"

She begged him to leave her, but he perceived that she did not really wish him to go, and it was nearly an hour after Suzette drove away, before he got out of the house. He would not let her send him home; and he walked toward the village in the still, sunny cold of the early winter afternoon, thinking of the sort of contempt with which that girl had spurned the notion of calamity, as if it were something to be resented, and even snubbed, in its approach to her. It was as if she had now gone to trace it to its source, and defy it there; to stamp upon the presumptuous rumor and destroy it.

Just before he reached the crest of the upland that shut out the village from him, he heard the clash of sleigh-bells; a pair of horses leaped into sight, and came bearing down upon him with that fine throw of their feet, which you get only in such a direct encounter. He stepped into the side track, and then he heard Miss Sue Northwick call to her horses and saw her pulling them up. She had her father's fondness for horses, and the pair of little grays were a gift from him with the picturesque sledge they drew. The dasher swelled forward like a swan's breast, and then curved deeply backward; from either corner of the band of iron filagree at the top, dangled a red horsetail. The man who had driven her to the station sat in a rumble behind; on the seat with Suzette was another young lady, who put out her hand to Wade with a look of uncommon liking, across the shining bearskin robe, and laughed at his astonishment in seeing her. While they talked, the clipped grays nervously lifted and set down their forefeet in the snow, as if fingering it; they inhaled the cold air with squared nostrils, and

blew it out in blasts of white steam. Suzette said, in explanation of her friend's presence: "Louise had seen the account, and she made her brother bring her up. They think just as I do, that there's nothing of it; one of the papers had the name Nordeck; but we've left Mr. Hilary at the station, fighting the telegraph and telephone in all directions, and he isn't to stop till he gets something positive. He's trying Wellwater now." She said all this very haughtily, but she added, "The only thing is, I can't understand why my father hasn't been heard of at the Mills. Some one was asking for him there yesterday."

"Probably he went on to Willoughby Junction, as you suggested."

"Of course he did," said Louise. "We haven't heard from there yet."

"Oh, I'm not in the least troubled," said Sue, "but it's certainly very provoking." She lifted her reins. "I'm hurrying home to let Adeline know."

"She'll be very glad," Wade returned, as if it were the certainty of good news she was carrying. "I think I'll join Matt at the station," he suggested to Louise.

"Do!" she answered. "You can certainly manage something between you. Matt will be almost as glad of your coming as my going. I thought we were coming up here to reassure Sue, but I seem strangely superfluous."

"You can reassure Adeline," said Sue. She added to Wade, "I keep thinking what an annoyance it will be to my father, to have all this fuss made over him. I sometimes feel vexed with Adeline. Good-bye!" she called back to him as she drove away, and she stopped again to add, "Won't you come up with Mr. Hilary when you've heard something definite?"

Wade promised, and they repeated their good-byes all round with a resolute cheerfulness.

XII

The affair had been mixed up with tea and lunch, and there was now the suggestion of a gay return to the Northwick place and an hour or two more in that pleasant company of pretty and lively women, which Wade loved almost as well as he loved righteousness. He knew that there was such a thing as death in the world; he had often already seen its strange, peaceful face; he had just stood by an open grave; but at the moment, his youth denied it all, and he swung along over the hard-packed roadway thinking of the superb beauty of Suzette Northwick, and the witchery of Louise Hilary's face. It was like her, to come at once to her friend in this anxiety; and he believed a strength in her to help bear the worst, the worst that now seemed so remote and impossible.

He did not find Matt Hilary in the station; but he pushed through to the platform outside and saw him at a little distance standing between two of the tracks, and watching a group of men there who were replacing some wornout rails with new ones.

"Matt!" he called to him, and Matt turned about and said, "Hello, Caryl!" and yielded him a sort of absent-minded hand, while he kept his face turned smilingly upon the men. Some were holding the rails in position, and another was driving in the spike that was to rivet the plate to the sleeper. He struck it with exquisite accuracy from a wide, free-handed rhythmical swing of his hammer.

"Beautiful! Isn't it?" said Matt. "I never see any sort of manual labor, even the kinds that are brutified and demoralized by their association with machinery, without thinking how far the arts still come short of the trades. If any sculptor could feel it, what a magnificent bas-relief just that thing would make!" He turned round to look at the men again: in their different poses of self-forgetfulness and interest in their work, they had a beauty and grace, in spite of their clumsy dress, which ennobled the scene.

When Matt once more faced round, he smiled serenely on his friend. Wade, who knew his temperament and his philosophy, was deceived for the moment. "Then you don't share Miss Northwick's anxiety about her father," he began, as if Matt had been dealing directly with that matter, and had been giving his reasons for not being troubled about it. "Have you heard any thing yet? But of course you haven't, or – "

Matt halted him, and looked down into his face from his greater height with a sort of sobered cheerfulness. "How much do you know about Miss Northwick's father?"

"Very little – nothing in fact but what she and her sister showed me in the morning paper. I know they're in great distress about him; I just met Miss Suzette and your sister, and they told me I should find you at the station."

Matt began to walk on again. "I didn't know but you had heard some talk from the outside. I came off to escape the pressure of inquiry at the station; people had found out somehow that I had been put in charge of the telegraphing when the young ladies left. I imagined they wouldn't follow me if I went for a walk." He put his hand through Wade's arm, and directed their course across the tracks toward the street away from the station, where Elbridge had walked his horses up and down the evening he met Northwick. "I told them to look out for me, if they got anything; I should keep in sight somewhere. Isn't it a curious commentary on our state of things," he went on, "that when any man in a position of trust can't be accounted for twenty-four hours after he leaves home, the business-like supposition is that he has run away with money that doesn't belong to him?"

"What do you mean, Matt?"

"I mean that the popular belief in Hatboro' seems to be that Northwick was on his way to Canada on the train that was wrecked."

"Shocking, shocking!" said Wade. "What makes you think they believe that?"

"The conjecture and speculation began in the station the moment Miss Northwick left it, and before it could be generally understood that I was there to represent her. I suppose there wasn't a

man among them that wouldn't have trusted Northwick with all he had, or wouldn't have felt that his fortune was made if Northwick had taken charge of his money. In fact I heard some of them saying so before their deference for me shut their mouths. Yet I haven't a doubt they all think he's an absconding defaulter."

"It's shocking," said Wade, sadly, "but I'm afraid you're right. These things are so common that people are subjected to suspicion on no kind of – " But just at this juncture Matt lifted his head from the moment's reverie in which he seemed to have been far absent.

"Have you seen much of the family this winter?"

"Yes, a good deal," said Wade. "They're not communicants, but they've been regular attendants at the services, and I've been a good deal at their house. They seem rather lonely; they have very little to do with the South Hatboro' people, and nothing at all with the villagers. I don't know why they've spent the winter here. Of course one hears all kinds of gossip. The gossips at South Hatboro' say that Miss Suzette was willing to be on with young Wilmington again, and that *she* kept the family here. But I place no faith in such a conjecture."

"It has a rustic crudity," said Matt. "But if Jack Wilmington ever cared anything for the girl, now's his chance to be a man and stand by her."

Something in Matt's tone made Wade stop and ask, "What do you mean, Matt? Is there anything besides – "

"Yes." Matt took a fresh grip of his friend's arm, and walked him steadily forward, and kept him walking in spite of his involuntary tendency to come to a halt every few steps, and try to urge something that he never quite got from his tongue, against the probability of what Matt was saying. "I mean that these people are right in their suspicions."

"Right?"

"My dear Caryl, there is no doubt whatever that Northwick is a defaulter to the company in a very large amount. It came out at a meeting of the directors on Monday. He confessed it, for he could not deny it in the face of the proof against him, and he was given a number of days to make up his shortage. He was released on parole: it was really the best thing, the wisest as well as the mercifullest, and of course he broke his word, and seized the first chance to run away. I knew all about the defalcation from my father just after the meeting. There is simply no question about it."

"Gracious powers!" said Wade, finally helpless to dispute the facts which he still did not realize. "And you think it possible – do you suppose – imagine – that it was really he who was in that burning car? What an awful fate!"

"An awful fate?" asked Matt. "Do you think so? Yes, yours is the safe ground in regard to a thing of that kind – the only ground."

"The only ground?"

"I was thinking of my poor father," said Matt.

"He said some sharp things to that wretched creature at the meeting of the Board – called him a thief, and I dare say other hard names – and told him that the best thing that could happen to him was a railroad accident on his way home."

"Ah!"

"You see? When he read the account of that accident in the paper this morning, and found a name so much like Northwick's among the victims, he was fearfully broken up, of course. He felt somehow as if he had caused his death – I could see that, though of course he wouldn't admit anything of the kind."

"Of course," said Wade, compassionately.

"I suppose it isn't well to invoke death in any way. He is like the devil, and only too apt to come, if you ask for him. I don't mean anything superstitious, and I don't suppose my father really has any superstitious feeling about the matter. But he's been rather a friend – or a victim – of that damnable theory that the gentlemanly way out of a difficulty like Northwick's is suicide, and I suppose he spoke

from association with it, or by an impulse from it. He has been telegraphing right and left, to try to verify the reports, as it was his business and duty to do, anyway; and he caught at the notion of my coming up here with Louise to see if we could be of any use to those two poor women."

"Poor women!" Wade echoed. "The worst must fall upon them, as the worst always seems to do."

"Yes, wherever a cruel blow falls there seems to be a woman for it to fall on. And you see what a refinement of cruelty this is going to be when it reaches them? They have got to know that their father met that awful death, and that he met it because he was a defaulter and was running away. I suppose the papers will be full of it."

"That seems intolerable. Couldn't anything be done to stop them?"

"Why the thing has to come out. You can keep happiness a secret, but sorrow and shame have to come out – I don't know why, but they do. Then, when they come out, we feel as if the means of their publicity were the cause of them. It's very unphilosophical." They walked slowly along in silence for a few moments, and then Matt's reverie broke out again in words: "Well, it's to be seen now whether she has the strength that bears, or the strength that breaks. The way she held her head, as she took the reins and drove off, with poor Louise beside her palpitating with sympathy for her trouble and anxiety about her horses, was, yes, it was superb: there's no other word for it. Ah, poor girl!"

"Your sister's presence will be a great help to her," said Wade. "It was very good of her to come."

"Ah, there wasn't anything else for it," said Matt, flinging his head up. "Louise has my father's loyalty. I don't know much about her friendship with Miss Northwick – she's so much younger than I, and they came together when I was abroad – but I've fancied she wasn't much liked among the girls, and Louise was her champion, in a way. When Louise read that report, nothing would do but she must come."

"Of course."

"But our being here must have its embarrassments for my father. It was a sacrifice for him to let us come."

"I don't understand."

"It was he who carried through the respite the directors gave Northwick; and now he will have the appearance before some people of helping to cover up the miserable facts, of putting a good face on things while a rogue was getting away from justice. He might even be supposed to have some interest in getting him out of the way."

"Oh, I don't think any such suspicion can attach itself to such a man as Mr. Hilary," said Wade, with a certain resentment of the suggestion even from the man's son.

"In a commercial civilization like ours any sort of suspicion can attach to any sort of man in a case like this," said Matt.

Wade took off his hat and wiped his forehead. "I can't realize that the case is what you say. I can't realize it at all. It seems like some poor sort of play, of make-believe. I can't forgive myself for being so little moved by it. We are in the presence of a horror that ought to make us uncover our heads and fall to our knees and confess our own sins to God!"

"Ah, I'm with you *there!*" said Matt, and he pushed his hand farther through his friend's arm.

They were both still well under thirty, and they both had that zest for mere experience, any experience, that hunger for the knowledge of life, which youth feels. In their several ways they were already men who had thought for themselves, or conjectured, rather; and they were eager to verify their speculations through their emotions. They thought a good deal alike in many things, though they started from such opposite points in their thinking; and they both had finally the same ideal of life. Their intimacy was of as old a date as their school days; at Harvard they were in the same clubs as well as the same class. Wade's father was not a Boston man, but his mother was a Bellingham, and he

was nurtured in the traditions of Hilary's social life. Both had broken with them: Wade not so much when he became a ritualist as Hilary when he turned his back on manufacturing.

They were now not without a kind of pride in standing so close to the calamity they were fated witnesses of, and in the midst of their sympathy they had a curiosity which concerned itself with one of the victims because she was a young and beautiful girl. Their pity not so much forgot as ignored Northwick's elder daughter, who was a plain, sick old maid, and followed the younger with a kind of shrinking and dread of her doom which Matt tried to put into words.

"I assure you if I couldn't manage to pull away from it at moments, I don't see how I could stand it. I had a sense of personal disgrace, when I met that poor girl, with what I had in my mind. I felt as if I were taking some base advantage of her in knowing that about her father, and I was so glad when she went off with Louise and left me to struggle with my infamous information alone. I hurried Louise away with her in the most cowardly haste. We don't any of us realize it, as you say. Why, just imagine! It means sorrow, it means shame, it means poverty. They will have to leave their house, their home; she will have to give up everything to the company. It isn't merely friends and her place in the world; it's money, it's something to eat and wear, it's a roof over her head!"

Wade refused the extreme view portrayed by his friend's figures. "Of course she won't be allowed to come to want."

"Of course. But there's really no measuring the sinuous reach of a disaster like this. It strikes from a coil that seems to involve everything."

"What are you going to do if you get bad news?" asked Wade.

"Ah, I don't know! I must tell her, somehow; unless you think that you –" Wade gave a start which Matt interpreted aright; he laughed nervously. "No, no! It's for me to do it. I know that; unless I can get Louise. Ah! I wonder what that is."

They were walking back toward the station again, and Matt had seen a head and arm projected from the office window, and a hand waving a sheet of yellow paper. It seemed meant for them. They both began to run, and then they checked themselves; and walked as fast as they could.

"We must refer the matter to your sister," said Wade, "and if she thinks best, remember that I shall be quite ready to speak to Miss Northwick. Or, if you think best, I will speak to her without troubling your sister."

"Oh, you're all right, Wade. You needn't have any doubt of that. We'll see. I wonder what there is in that dispatch."

The old station master had come out of the station and was hurrying to meet them with the message, now duly enclosed in an envelope. He gave it to Matt and promptly turned his back on him.

Matt tore it open, and read: "Impossible to identify parlor-car passengers." The telegram was signed "Operator," and was dated at Wellwater. It fell blankly on their tense feeling.

"Well," said Wade, after a long breath. "It isn't the worst."

Matt read it frowningly over several times; then he smiled. "Oh, no. This isn't at all bad. It's nothing. But so far, it's rather comforting. And it's something, even if it is nothing. Well, I suppose I'd better go up to Miss Northwick with it. Wait a moment; I must tell them where to send if anything else comes."

"I'll walk with you as far as St. Michael's," said Wade, when they left the station. "I'm going to my study, there."

They set off together, up the middle of the street, which gave them more elbow-room than the sidewalk narrowly blocked out of the snow.

From a large store as they were passing, a small, dry-looking, pompous little man advanced to the middle of the street, and stopped them. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Wade! I beg your pardon, sir!" he said, nimbly transferring himself, after the quasi self-introduction, from Wade to Matt. "May I ask whether you have received any further information?"

"No," said Matt, amiably, "the only answer we have got is that it is impossible to identify the passengers in the parlor-car."

"Ah, thank you! Thank you very much, sir! I felt sure it couldn't be *our* Mr. Northwick. Er – good-morning, sir."

He bowed himself away, and went into his store again, and Matt asked Wade, "Who in the world is that?"

"He's a Mr. Gerrish – keeps the large store, there. Rather an unpleasant type."

Matt smiled. "He had the effect of refusing to believe that anything so low as an accident could happen to a man of Northwick's business standing."

"Something of that," Wade assented. "He worships Northwick on the altar of material success."

Matt lifted his head and looked about. "I suppose the whole place is simply seething with curiosity."

Just after they reached the side-street where Wade left him to go down to his church, he met Sue Northwick driving in her sleigh. She was alone, except for the groom impassive in the rumble.

"Have you heard anything?" she asked, sharply.

Matt repeated the dispatch from the operator at Wellwater.

"I knew it was a mistake," she said, with a kind of resolute scorn. "It's perfectly ridiculous! *Why* should he have been there? I think there ought to be some way of punishing the newspapers for circulating false reports. I've been talking with the man who drove my father to the train yesterday morning, and he says he spoke lately of buying some horses at Springfield. He got several from a farm near there once. I'm going down to telegraph the farmer; I found his name among father's bills. Of course he's there. I've got the dispatch all written out."

"Let me take it back to the station for you, Miss Northwick," said Matt.

"No; get in with me here, and we'll drive down, and then I'll carry you back home. Or! Here, Dennis!" she said to the man in the rumble; and she handed him the telegram. "Take this to the telegraph-office, and tell them to send it up by Simpson the instant the answer comes."

The Irishman said, "Yes, ma'am," and dropped from his perch with the paper in his hand.

"Get in, Mr. Hilary," she said, and after he had mounted she skilfully backed the sleigh and turned the horses homeward. "If I hear nothing from my dispatch, or if I hear wrong, I am going up to Wellwater Junction myself, by the first train. I can't wait any longer. If it's the worst, I want to know the worst."

Matt did not know what to say to her courage. So he said, "Alone?" to gain time.

"Of course! At such a time, I would *rather* be alone."

At the house Matt found Louise had gone to her room for a moment, and he said he would like to speak with her there.

She was lying on the lounge, when he announced himself, and she said, "Come in," and explained, "I just came off a moment, to give my sympathies a little rest. And then, being up late so many nights this week. What have you heard?"

"Nothing, practically. Louise, how long did you expect to stay?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought. As long as I'm needed, I suppose. Why? Must you go back?"

"No – not exactly."

"Not exactly? What are you driving at?"

"Why, there's nothing to be found out by telegraphing. Some one must go up to the place where the accident happened. She sees that, and she wants to go. She can't realize at all what it means to go there. Suppose she could manage the journey, going alone, and all that; what could she do after she got there? How could she go and look up the place of the accident, and satisfy herself whether her father was – "

"Matt!" shrieked his sister. "If you go on, you will drive me wild. She mustn't go; that's all there is of it. You mustn't think of letting her go." She sat up on the lounge in expression of her resolution on this point. "She must send somebody – some of their men. She mustn't go. It's too hideous!"

"No," said Matt, thoughtfully. "I shall go."

"You!"

"Why not? I can be at the place by four or five in the morning, and I can ascertain all the facts, and be able to relieve this terrible suspense for her."

"For both of them," suggested Louise. "It must be quite as bad for that poor, sick old maid."

"Why, of course," said Matt, and he felt so much ashamed of having left her out of the account that he added, "I dare say it's even worse for her. She's seen enough of life to realize it more."

"Sue was his favorite, though," Louise returned. "Of course you must go, Matt. *You* couldn't do *less*! It's magnificent of you. Have you told her, yet, that you would go?"

"Not yet. I thought I would talk it over with you, first."

"Oh, *I* approve of it. It's the only thing to do. And I had better stay here till you come back – "

"Why, no; I'm not sure." He came a little nearer and dropped his voice. "You'd better know the whole trouble, Louise. There's great trouble for them whether he's dead or alive. There's something wrong in his accounts with the company, and if he was on that train he was running away to Canada to escape arrest."

He could see that only partial intelligence of the case reached her.

"Then if he's killed, it will all be hushed up. I see! It makes you hope he's killed."

Matt gave a despairing groan. "If he's killed it makes it just so much the worse. The defalcation has to come out, any way."

"When must it come out?"

"A good many people know of it; and such things are hard to keep. It may come out – some rumor of it – in the morning papers. The question is whether you want to stay till they know it here; whether it would be wise, or useful."

"Certainly not! I should want to kill anybody that was by when such a thing as that came out, and I should despise Sue Northwick if she let me get away alive. I must go at once!"

She slid herself from the lounge, and ran to the glass, where she put up a coil of hair in the knot it had escaped from.

"I had my doubts," Matt said, "about letting you come here, without telling you just what the matter was; but mother thought you would insist upon coming, any way, and that you would be embarrassed."

"Oh, *that* was quite right," said Louise. "The great thing now is to get away."

"I hope you won't let her suspect – "

"Well, I *think* you can trust me for that, Matt," said Louise, turning round upon him, with a hairpin in her mouth, long enough to give him as sarcastic a glance as she could. If her present self-possession was a warrant of future performance, Matt thought he could trust her; but he was afraid Louise had not taken in the whole enormity of the fact; and he was right in this. As a crime, she did not then, or ever afterwards, fully imagine it. It may be doubted whether she conceived of it as other than a great trouble, and as something that ought always to be kept from her friend.

Matt went down stairs and found Sue Northwick in the library.

"I feel perfectly sure," she said, "that we shall hear of my father at Springfield. One of the horses he got there has gone lame, and it would be quite like him to stop and look up another in the place of it on the same farm."

The logic of this theory did not strike Matt, but the girl held her head in such a strong way, she drew her short breaths with such a smoothness, she so visibly concealed her anxiety in the resolution to believe herself what she said that he could not refuse it the tribute of an apparent credence. "Yes, that certainly makes it seem probable."

"At any rate," she said, "if I hear nothing from him there, or we get no news from Wellwater, I shall go there at once. I've made up my mind to that."

"I shouldn't wish you to go alone, Sue," Adeline quavered. Her eyes were red, and her lips swollen as if she had been crying; and now the tears came with her words. "You could never get there alone in the world. Don't you remember, it took us all day to get to Wellwater the last time we went to Quebec?"

Sue gave her sister a severe look, as if to quell her open fears at least, and Matt asked aimlessly, "Is it on the way to Quebec?"

Sue picked up the railroad guide from the desk where she had left it. "Yes; it is, and it isn't." She opened the book and showed him the map of the road. "The train divides at Wellwater, and part goes to Montreal and part to Quebec. There are all sorts of stops and starts on the Quebec branch, so that you don't arrive till next morning, but you get to Montreal in five or six hours. But the whole thing seems perfectly frantic. I don't see why we pay the slightest attention to it! Of *course*, papa has stayed over in Springfield for something; only he's usually so careful about telegraphing us if he changes his plans – "

She faltered, and let the book drop. Matt picked it up for her, and began to look at the timetable, at first to hide the pain he felt at the self-discouragement in which she ended, and then to see if he might not somehow be useful to her. "I see that a train from Boston meets the Springfield train at Wellwater."

"Does there?" She bent to look over the book with him, and he felt the ungovernable thrill at being near the beauty of a woman's face which a man never knows whether to be ashamed of or glad of, but which he cannot help feeling. "Then perhaps I had better go by way of Boston. What time does it start? Oh, I see! Seven, thirty. I could get that train – if I don't hear from him at Springfield. But I know I shall hear."

A stir of drapery made them aware of Louise at the library door. Suzette went toward her, "Are you going?" she asked, without apparently sharing the surprise Matt felt at seeing his sister with her hat and gloves on, and her jacket over her arm.

"Yes, I'm going, Sue. I just ran up to see you – I had to do that – but we both know I'm of no use here; and so we won't make any pretences." Louise spoke very steadily, almost coldly; her brother did not quite know what to make of her; she was pale, and she looked down, while she spoke. But when she finished buttoning the glove she was engaged with, she went up and put both her hands in Suzette's. "I don't need to tell you that I'm going just to get myself out of your way. It isn't a time for ornamental friend-shiping, and you've got all the good you could out of seeing me, and knowing that I'm anxious with you. That's about all there is of it, and I guess we'd better not spin it out. But remember, Sue, whenever you need me, when you really want me, you can send for me, and if I don't come again till you do, you'll know that I'm simply waiting. Will you remember that —*whatever* happens?"

Matt gave a long tacit sigh of relief.

"Yes, I will, Louise," said Suzette. They kissed each other as if in formal ratification of their compact, which meant so much more to one of them than it could to the other.

"Come, Matt!" said Louise.

She added hastily, to prevent insistence against her plan, that they would have time to walk to the station, and she wished to walk. Then Matt said, "I will see you aboard the train, and then I'll come back and wait till you hear from Springfield, Miss Suzette."

"That is a good idea," said Louise.

"But," Adeline urged tremulously, "sha'n't you be afraid to go to Boston alone? It'll be dark by the time you get there!"

"The journey can't be very dangerous," said Louise, "and when I arrive, I shall put myself in charge of a faithful Boston hackman, and tell him I'm very valuable, and am to be taken the best of care of. Then I shall be set down at our door in perfect safety."

They all had the relief of a little laugh; even Adeline joined reluctantly in it.

When they were once free of the house, Matt said, "I wonder whether she will remember, after the worst comes, what you said, and whether she will trust you enough to turn to us?"

"I don't know. Probably she will be too proud at first. But I shall come, whether she asks me or not. If they had relations or connections, as everybody else has, it would be different. But as it is – "

"Yes, of course," said Matt.

"I wish I could realize that Sue is fond of him, as we are of papa. But I can't. He always made me feel creepy; didn't he you?"

"He was a secret person. But as far as I had anything to do with him at the Mills, when I was there, I found him square enough. He was a country person."

"I suppose Sue's pride is countrified," said Louise.

Matt went on, "His secrecy may have been only a sort of shyness; Heaven knows I don't want to judge him. I suppose that that slow deliberation of his was an effort to maintain himself with dignity. Of course, we see him now in the light of his rascality, poor man, and most of his traits seem ugly."

They had a little time after they reached the station, and they walked up and down the platform, talking, and Matt explained how his father might be glad to have him go to Wellwater and settle the question whether Northwick was in the accident or not. It would be a great relief for him to know. He tried to make out that he was going from a divided motive.

"Oh, you needn't be at the trouble to say all that to me, Matt," said Louise. "I don't blame you for wanting to go, even out of kindness."

"No, I suppose there's no guilt attaching to a thing of that kind," Matt answered.

There were a good many loungers about the station, young men and girls, released from the shops for the day; in such towns they find the station an agreeable resort, and enjoy a never-failing excitement in the coming and going of the trains. They watched the Hilarys, as they walked, with envy of that something distinguished which both of them had. They were both tall and handsomely made, and they had the ease before their fellow-beings which perhaps comes as much from the life-long habit of good clothes as from anything else. Matt had a conscience against whatever would separate him from his kind, but he could not help carrying himself like a swell, for all that; and Louise did not try to help it, for her part. She was an avowed worldling, and in this quality she now wore a drab cloth costume, bordered with black fur down the front of the jacket and around it at the hips; the skirt, which fell plain to her feet, had a border of fur there, and it swirled and swayed with her long, dashing stride in a way that filled all those poor girls who saw it, with despair. It seemed to interest almost as painfully a young man with a thin, delicate face, whom she noticed looking at her; she took him at first for one of those educated or half-educated operatives, who are complicating the labor problem more and more. He was no better dressed than others in the crowd, and there was no reason why he should not be a hat-shop or a shoe-shop hand, and yet, at a second glance, she decided that he was not. He stood staring at her with a studious frown, and with the faint suggestion of a sneer on his clean-shaven, fine lips; but she knew that he was admiring her, however he might be hating her, and she spoke to Matt about him as they turned from him in their walk and promised to point him out. But when they came up again to where he had been standing, he was gone. The train came in, and Louise got aboard, and Matt made his way into the station, and went to ask the operator in the telegraph office if she had got anything for Miss Northwick.

She said, "Something just come. I was waiting for the hack to send it up."

"Oh, I will take it, if you please. I am going back to Mr. Northwick's," said Matt.

"All right."

Matt took the dispatch, and hurried out to find some means of getting quickly to Miss Northwick with it. There was no conveyance about the station, and he started up the street at a gait which was little short of a run, and which exposed him to the ridicule of such small boys as observed his haste, in their intervals of punning. One, who dropped from the runner of a sleigh which came up behind him, jeered him for the awkwardness with which he floundered out of its way in the deep snow of the roadside. The sleigh was abruptly halted, and Sue Northwick called from it, "Mr. Hilary! I couldn't wait at home; and I've just been at the depot by the lower road. You have a dispatch?"

"Yes, I have a telegram."

"Oh, give it to me!"

He withheld it a moment. "I don't know what it is, Miss Northwick. But if isn't what you expected, will you let – will you allow me – "

As if she did not know what she was doing, she caught the dispatch from his hand, and tore it open. "Well," she said, "I knew it. He hasn't been there; now I shall go to Wellwater." She crumpled the telegram nervously in her hand, and made a motion to lift the reins.

Matt put his hand on her wrist. "You couldn't. You – you must let me go."

"You?"

"Me. I can get into Boston in time for that half-past-seven train, and I can do all the things when I get to Wellwater that you couldn't do. Come; be reasonable! You must see that what I propose is best. I solemnly promise you that nothing shall be left undone, or omitted or forgotten, that could set your mind at rest. Whatever you would wish done, I will do. Go home; your sister needs you; you need yourself; if you have a trial to meet greater than this suspense, which you've borne with such courage, you want all your strength for it. I beg you to trust me to do this for you. I know that it seems recreant to let another go in your place on such an errand, but it really isn't so. You ought to know that I wouldn't offer to go if I were not sure that I could do all that you could do, and more. Come! Let me go for you!"

He poured out his reasons vehemently, and she sat like one without strength to answer. When he stopped, she still waited before she answered simply, almost dryly, "Well," and she gave no other sign of assent in words. But she turned over the hand, on which he was keeping his, and clutched his hand hard; the tears, the first she had shed that day, gushed into her eyes. She lifted the reins and drove away, and he stood in the road gazing after her, till her sleigh vanished over the rise of ground to the southward.

XIII

The pale light in which Matt Hilary watched the sleigh out of sight thickened into early winter dusk before his train came and he got off to Boston. In the meantime the electrics came out like sudden moons, and shed a lunar ray over the region round about the station, where a young man, who was in the habit of describing himself in print as "one of *The Boston Events'* young men," found his way into an eating-house not far from the track. It had a simple, domestic effect inside, and the young man gave a sigh of comfort in the pleasant warmth and light. There was a woman there who had a very conversable air, a sort of eventual sociability, as the young man realized when she looked up from twitching the white, clean cloths perfectly straight on the little tables set in rows on either side of the room.

She finally reached the table where the young man had taken a chair for his overcoat and hat, and was about taking another for himself.

"Well," he said, "let's see. No use asking if you've got coffee?" He inhaled the odor of it coming from the open door of another room, with a deep breath.

"Baked beans?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't think there's anything much better than baked beans. Do you?"

"Well, not when you git 'em *good*," the woman admitted. "*Ril good*."

"And what's the matter with a piece of mince pie?"

"I don't see's there's any great deal. Hot?"

"Every time."

"I *thought* so," said the woman. "We have it both ways, but I'd as soon eat a piece of I don't know what as a piece o' *cold* mince pie."

"We have mince pie right along at our house," said the young man. "But I guess if I was to eat a piece of it cold, my wife would have the doctor round inside of five minutes."

The woman laughed as if for joy in the hot mince-pie fellowship established between herself and the young man. "Well, I guess she need to. Nothin' else you want?" She brought the beans and coffee, with a hot plate, and a Japanese paper napkin, and she said, as she arranged them on the table before the young man, "Your pie's warmin' for you; I got you some rolls; they're just right out the oven; and here's some the best butter I ever put a knife to, if I *do* say so. It's just as good and sweet as butter can be, if it *didn't* come from the Northwick place at a dollar a pound."

"Well, now, I should have thought you'd have used the Northwick butter," said the young man with friendly irony.

"You know the Northwick butter?" said the woman, charmed at the discovery of another tie.

"Well, my wife likes it for cooking," said the young man. "We have a fancy brand for the table."

The woman laughed out her delight in his pleasantries. "Land! I'll bet you grumble at it, too!" she said, with a precipitate advance in intimacy which he did not disallow.

"Well, I'm pretty particular," said the young man. "But I *have* to be, to find anything to find fault with in the way *my* wife manages. I don't suppose I shall be able to get much more Northwick butter, now."

"Why not?"

"Why, if he was killed in that accident –"

"Oh, I guess there ain't anything to that," said the woman. "I guess it was some other Northwick. Their coachman – Elbridge Newton – was tellin' my husband that Mr. Northwick had stopped over at Springfield to look at some hosses there. He's always buyin' more hosses. I guess he must have as much as eighty or ninety hosses now. I don't place any dependence on that report."

"That so?" said the young man. "Why, what did that fellow mean, over at the drug store, just now, by his getting out for Canada?"

"What fellow?"

"Little slim chap, with a big black moustache, and blue eyes, blue and blazing, as you may say."

"Oh, – Mr. Putney! That's just one of his jokes. He's always down on Mr. Northwick."

"Then I suppose he's just gone up to Ponkwasset about the trouble there."

"Labor trouble?"

"I guess so."

The woman called toward an open door at the end of the room, "William!" and a man in his shirt sleeves showed himself. "You heard of any labor trouble to Mr. Northwick's mills?"

"No, I don't believe there is any," said the man. He came forward inquiringly to the table where his wife was standing by the *Events'* young man.

"Well, I'm sorry," said the young man, "but it shows that I haven't lost so much in missing Mr. Northwick, after all. I came up here from Boston to interview him for our paper about the labor troubles."

"I want to know!" said the hostess. "You an editor?"

"Well, I'm a reporter – same thing," the young man answered. "Perhaps you've got some troubles of your own here in your shops?"

"No," said the host, "I guess everybody's pretty well satisfied here in Hatboro'." He was tempted to talk by the air of confidence which the *Events'* young man somehow diffused about him, but his native Yankee caution prevailed, and he did not take the lead offered him.

"Well," said the young man, "I noticed one of your citizens over at the drug store that seemed to be pretty happy."

"Oh, yes; Mr. Putney. I heard you tellin' my wife."

"Who *is* Mr. Putney, any way?" asked the *Events'* man.

"Mr. Putney?" the host repeated, with a glance at his wife, as if for instruction or correction in case he should go wrong. "He's one of the old Hatboro' Putneys, here."

"All of 'em preserved in liquor, the same way?"

"Well, no, I can't say as they are." The host laughed, but not with much liking, apparently. His wife did not laugh at all, and the young man perceived that he had struck a false note.

"Pity," he said, "to see a man like that, goin' that way. He said more bright things in five minutes, drunk as he was, than I could say in a month on a strict prohibition basis."

The good understanding was restored by this ready self-abasement. "Well, I d' know as you can say that, exactly," said the hostess, "but he is bright, there ain't any two ways about it. And he ain't always that way you see him. It's just one of his times, now. He has 'em about once in every four or five months, and the rest part he's just as straight as anybody. It's like a disease, as I tell my husband."

"I guess if he was a mind to steady up, there ain't any lawyer could go ahead of him, well, not in *this* town," said the husband.

"Seems to be pretty popular as it is," said the young man. "What makes him so down on Mr. Northwick?"

"Well, I dunno," said the host, "*what* it is. He's always been so. I presume it's more the kind of a man Mr. Northwick is, than what it is anything else."

"Why, what kind of a man *is* Mr. Northwick, any way?" the young man asked, beginning to give his attention to the pie, which the woman had now brought. "He don't seem to be so popular. What's the reason?"

"Well, I don't know as I could say, exactly. I presume, one thing, he's only been here summers till this year, since his wife died, and he never did have much to do with the place, before."

"What's he living here for this winter? Economizing?"

"No; I guess he no need to do that," the host answered.

His wife looked knowing, and said with a laugh, "I guess Miss Sue Northwick could tell you if she was a mind to."

"Oh, I see," said the reporter, with an irreverence that seemed to be merely provisional and held subject to instant exchange for any more available attitude. "Young man in the case. Friendless minister whose slippers require constant attention?"

"I guess he ain't very friendless," said the hostess, "as far forth as that goes. He's about the most popular minister, especially with the workin' folks, since Mr. Peck."

"Who was Mr. Peck?"

"Well, he was the one that was run over by the cars at the depot here two or three years back. Why, this house was started on his idea. Sort of co-operation at first; we run it for the Social Union."

"And the co-operation petered out," said the reporter making a note. "Always does; and then you took it, and began to make money. Standard history of co-operation."

"I guess we ain't gettin' rich any too fast," said the hostess, dryly.

"Well, you will if you use the Northwick butter. What's the reason he isn't popular here when he is here? Must spend a good deal of money on that big place of his; and give work."

"Mr. Putney says it's corruptin' to have such a rich man in the neighborhood; and he does more harm than good with his money." The hostess threw out the notion as if it were something she had never been quite able to accept herself, and would like to see its effect upon a man of the reporter's wide observation. "*He* thinks Hatboro' was better off before there was a single hat-shop or shoe-shop in the place."

"And the law offices had it all to themselves," said the young man; and he laughed. "Well, it was a halcyon period. What sort of a man is Mr. Northwick, personally?"

The woman referred the question to her husband, who pondered it a moment. "Well, he's a kind of a close-mouthed man. He's never had anything to do with the Hatboro' folks much. But I never heard anything against him. I guess he's a pretty good man."

"Wouldn't be likely to mention it round a great deal if he *was* going to Canada. Heigh? Well, I'm sorry I can't see Mr. Northwick, after all. With these strikes in the mills everywhere, he must have some light to throw on the labor question generally. Poor boy, himself, I believe?"

"I don't believe his daughters could remember when," said the hostess, sarcastically.

"That's so? Well, we are apt to lose our memory for dates as we get on in the world, especially the ladies. Ponkwasset isn't on the direct line of this road, is it?" He asked this of the host, as if it followed.

"No, you got to change at Springfield, and take the Union and Dominion road there. Then it's on a branch."

"Well, I guess I shall have to run up and see Mr. Northwick, there. *What* did you say the young man's name was that's keeping the Northwick family here this winter?" He turned suddenly to the hostess, putting up his note-book, and throwing a silver dollar on the table to be changed. "Married man myself, you know."

"I guess I hain't mentioned any names," said the woman in high glee. Her husband went back to the kitchen, and she took the dollar away to a desk in the corner of the room, and brought back the change.

"Who'd be a good person to talk with about the labor situation here?" the young man asked, in pocketing his money.

"I d' know as I could hardly tell," said the hostess thoughtfully. "There's Colonel Marvin, he's got the largest shoe-shop; and some the hat-shop folks, most any of 'em would do. And then there's Mr. Wilmington that owns the stocking mills; him or Mr. Jack Wilmington, either one'd be good. Mr. Jack'd be the best, I guess. Or I don't suppose there's anybuddy in the place 'd know more, if they'd a mind to talk, than Mrs. Wilmington; unless it was Mis' Docter Morrell."

"Is Mr. Jack their son?" asked the reporter.

"Land! Why she ain't a day older, if she's that. He's their nephew."

"Oh, I see: second wife. Then *he's* the young man, heigh!"

The hostess looked at the reporter with admiration. "Well, you do beat the witch. If he hain't, I guess he might 'a' b'en."

The reporter said he guessed he would take another piece of that pie, and some more coffee if she had it, and before he had finished them he had been allowed to understand that if it was not for his being Mrs. Wilmington's nephew Mr. Jack would have been Miss Northwick's husband long ago; and that the love lost between the two ladies was not worth crying for.

The reporter, who had fallen into his present calling by a series of accidents not necessarily of final result in it, did not use arts so much as instincts in its exercise. He liked to talk of himself and his own surroundings, and he found that few men, and no women could resist the lure thrown out by his sincere expansiveness. He now commended himself to the hostess by the philosophical view he took of the popular belief that Mrs. Wilmington was keeping her nephew from marrying any one else so as to marry him herself when her husband died. He said that if you were an old man and you married a young woman he guessed that was what you had got to expect. This gave him occasion to enlarge upon the happiness to be found only in the married state if you were fitly mated, and on his own exceptional good fortune in it.

He was in the full flow of an animated confidence relating to the flat he had just taken and furnished in Boston, when the door opened, and the pale young man whom Louise Hilary had noticed at the station, came in.

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