

Human
Nature

WHARTON

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BY EDITH
WHARTON



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HUMAN NATURE

By EDITH WHARTON

SUMMER

THE REEF

THE MARNE

THE CHILDREN

HUMAN NATURE

CERTAIN PEOPLE

TWILIGHT SLEEP

THE GODS ARRIVE

HERE AND BEYOND

THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

HUDSON RIVER BRACKETED

THE MOTHER'S RECOMPENSE

THE GLIMPSES OF THE MOON

FRENCH WAYS AND THEIR MEANING

OLD NEW YORK

THE SPARK

FALSE DAWN

THE OLD MAID

NEW YEAR'S DAY

HUMAN NATURE

BY
EDITH WHARTON

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To

BERNARD BERENSON

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HER SON

I did not recognise Mrs. Stephen Glenn when I first saw her on the deck of the *Scythian*.

The voyage was more than half over, and we were counting on Cherbourg within forty-eight hours, when she appeared on deck and sat down beside me. She was as handsome as ever, and not a day older looking than when we had last met—toward the end of the war, in 1917 it must have been, not long before her only son, the aviator, was killed. Yet now, five years later, I was looking at her as if she were a stranger. Why? Not, certainly, because of her white hair. She had had the American woman's frequent luck of acquiring it while the face beneath was still fresh, and a dozen years earlier, when we used to meet at dinners, at the Opera, that silver diadem already crowned her. Now, looking more closely, I saw that the face beneath was still untouched; what then had so altered her? Perhaps it was the faint line of anxiety between her dark strongly-drawn eyebrows; or the setting of the eyes themselves, those sombre starlit eyes which seemed to have sunk deeper into their lids, and showed like glimpses of night through the arch of a cavern. But what a gloomy image to apply to eyes as tender as Catherine Glenn's! Yet it was immediately suggested by the look of the lady in deep mourning who had settled herself beside me, and now turned to say: "So you don't know me, Mr. Norcutt—Catherine Glenn?"

The fact was flagrant. I acknowledged it, and added: "But why didn't I? I can't imagine. Do you mind my saying that I believe it's because you're even more beautiful now than when I last saw you?"

She replied with perfect simplicity: "No; I don't mind—because I ought to be; that is, if there's any meaning in anything."

"Any meaning—?"

She seemed to hesitate; she had never been a woman who found words easily. "Any meaning in life. You see, since we've met I've lost everything: my son, my husband." She bent her head slightly, as though the words she pronounced were holy. Then she added, with the air of striving for more scrupulous accuracy: "Or, at least, almost everything."

The "almost" puzzled me. Mrs. Glenn, as far as I knew, had had no child but the son she had lost in the war; and the old uncle who had brought her up had died years earlier. I wondered if, in thus qualifying her loneliness, she alluded to the consolations of religion.

I murmured that I knew of her double mourning; and she surprised me still

farther by saying: “Yes; I saw you at my husband’s funeral. I’ve always wanted to thank you for being there.”

“But of course I was there.”

She continued: “I noticed all of Stephen’s friends who came. I was very grateful to them, and especially to the younger ones.” (This was meant for me.) “You see,” she added, “a funeral is—is a very great comfort.”

Again I looked my surprise.

“My son—my son Philip—” (why should she think it necessary to mention his name, since he was her only child?)—“my son Philip’s funeral took place just where his aeroplane fell. A little village in the Somme; his father and I went there immediately after the Armistice. One of our army chaplains read the service. The people from the village were there—they were so kind to us. But there was no one else—no personal friends; at that time only the nearest relations could get passes. Our boy would have wished it . . . he would have wanted to stay where he fell. But it’s not the same as feeling one’s friends about one, as I did at my husband’s funeral.”

While she spoke she kept her eyes intently, almost embarrassingly, on mine. It had never occurred to me that Mrs. Stephen Glenn was the kind of woman who would attach any particular importance to the list of names at her husband’s funeral. She had always seemed aloof and abstracted, shut off from the world behind the high walls of a happy domesticity. But on adding this new indication of character to the fragments of information I had gathered concerning her first appearance in New York, and to the vague impression she used to produce on me when we met, I began to see that lists of names were probably just what she would care about. And then I asked myself what I really knew of her. Very little, I perceived; but no doubt just as much as she wished me to. For, as I sat there, listening to her voice, and catching unguarded glimpses of her crape-shadowed profile, I began to suspect that what had seemed in her a rather dull simplicity might be the vigilance of a secretive person; or perhaps of a person who had a secret. There is a world of difference between them, for the secretive person is seldom interesting and seldom has a secret; but I felt inclined—though nothing I knew of her justified it—to put her in the other class.

I began to think over the years of our intermittent acquaintance—it had never been more, for I had never known the Glenns well. She had appeared in New York when I was a very young man, in the ’nineties, as a beautiful girl—from Kentucky or Alabama—a niece of old Colonel Reamer’s. Left an orphan, and penniless, when she was still almost a child, she had been passed about from one reluctant relation to another, and had finally (the legend ran) gone on the stage, and followed a strolling

company across the continent. The manager had deserted his troupe in some far-off state, and Colonel Reamer, fatuous, impecunious, and no doubt perplexed as to how to deal with the situation, had yet faced it manfully, and shaking off his bachelor selfishness had taken the girl into his house. Such a past, though it looks dove-coloured now, seemed hectic in the 'nineties, and gave a touch of romance and mystery to the beautiful Catherine Reamer, who appeared so aloof and distinguished, yet had been snatched out of such promiscuities and perils.

Colonel Reamer was a ridiculous old man: everything about him was ridiculous—his “toupee” (probably the last in existence), his vague military title, his anecdotes about southern chivalry, and duels between other gentlemen with military titles and civilian pursuits, and all the obsolete swagger of a character dropped out of Martin Chuzzlewit. He was the notorious bore of New York; tolerated only because he was old Mrs. So-and-so’s second cousin, because he was poor, because he was kindly—and because, out of his poverty, he had managed, with a smile and a gay gesture, to shelter and clothe his starving niece. Old Reamer, I recalled, had always had a passion for lists of names; for seeing his own appear in the “society column” of the morning papers, for giving you those of the people he had dined with, or been unable to dine with because already bespoken by others even more important. The young people called him “Old Previous-Engagement,” because he was so anxious to have you know that, if you hadn’t met him at some particular party, it was because he had been previously engaged at another.

Perhaps, I thought, it was from her uncle that Mrs. Glenn had learned to attach such importance to names, to lists of names, to the presence of certain people on certain occasions, to a social suitability which could give a consecration even to death. The profile at my side, so marble-pure, so marble-sad, did not suggest such preoccupations; neither did the deep entreating gaze she bent on me; yet many details fitted into the theory.

Her very marriage to Stephen Glenn seemed to confirm it. I thought back, and began to reconstruct Stephen Glenn. He was considerably older than myself, and had been a familiar figure in my earliest New York; a man who was a permanent ornament to society, who looked precisely as he ought, spoke, behaved, received his friends, filled his space on the social stage, exactly as his world expected him to. While he was still a young man, old ladies in perplexity over some social problem (there were many in those draconian days) would consult Stephen Glenn as if he had been one of the Ancients of the community. Yet there was nothing precociously old or dry about him. He was one of the handsomest men of his day, a good shot, a leader of cotillions. He practised at the bar, and became a member of a reputed legal

firm chiefly occupied with the management of old ponderous New York estates. In process of time the old ladies who had consulted him about social questions began to ask his advice about investments; and on this point he was considered equally reliable. Only one cloud shadowed his early life. He had married a distant cousin, an effaced sort of woman who bore him no children, and presently (on that account, it was said) fell into suicidal melancholia; so that for a good many years Stephen Glenn's handsome and once hospitable house must have been a grim place to go home to. But at last she died, and after a decent interval the widower married Miss Reamer. No one was greatly surprised. It had been observed that the handsome Stephen Glenn and the beautiful Catherine Reamer were drawn to each other; and though the old ladies thought he might have done better, some of the more caustic remarked that he could hardly have done differently, after having made Colonel Reamer's niece so "conspicuous." The attentions of a married man, especially of one unhappily married, and virtually separated from his wife, were regarded in those days as likely to endanger a young lady's future. Catherine Reamer, however, rose above these hints as she had above the perils of her theatrical venture. One had only to look at her to see that, in that smooth marble surface, there was no crack in which detraction could take root.

Stephen Glenn's house was opened again, and the couple began to entertain in a quiet way. It was thought natural that Glenn should want to put a little life into the house which had so long been a sort of tomb; but though the Glenn dinners were as good as the most carefully chosen food and wine could make them, neither of the pair had the gifts which make hospitality a success, and by the time I knew them, the younger set had come to regard dining with them as somewhat of a bore. Stephen Glenn was still handsome, his wife still beautiful, perhaps more beautiful than ever; but the apathy of prosperity seemed to have settled down on them, and they wore their beauty and affability like expensive clothes put on for the occasion. There was something static, unchanging in their appearance, as there was in their affability, their conversation, the *menus* of their carefully-planned dinners, the studied arrangement of the drawing-room furniture. They had a little boy, born after a year of marriage, and they were devoted parents, given to lengthy anecdotes about their son's doings and sayings; but one could not imagine their tumbling about with him on the nursery floor. Some one said they must go to bed with their crowns on, like the kings and queens on packs of cards; and gradually, from being thought distinguished and impressive, they came to be regarded as wooden, pompous and slightly absurd. But the old ladies still spoke of Stephen Glenn as a man who had done his family credit, and his wife began to acquire his figure-head attributes, and to be consulted, as he

was, about the minuter social problems. And all the while—I thought as I looked back—there seemed to have been no one in their lives with whom they were really intimate. . . .

Then, of a sudden, they again became interesting. It was when their only son was killed, attacked alone in mid-sky by a German air squadron. Young Phil Glenn was the first American aviator to fall; and when the news came people saw that the Mr. and Mrs. Glenn they had known was a mere *façade*, and that behind it were a passionate father and mother, crushed, rebellious, agonizing, but determined to face their loss dauntlessly, though they should die of it.

Stephen Glenn did die of it, barely two years later. The doctors ascribed his death to a specific disease; but everybody who knew him knew better. “It was the loss of the boy,” they said; and added: “It’s terrible to have only one child.”

Since her husband’s funeral I had not seen Mrs. Glenn; I had completely ceased to think of her. And now, on my way to take up a post at the American Consulate in Paris, I found myself sitting beside her and remembering these things. “Poor creatures—it’s as if two marble busts had been knocked off their pedestals and smashed,” I thought, recalling the faces of husband and wife after the boy’s death; “and she’s been smashed twice, poor woman. . . . Yet she says it has made her more beautiful. . . .” Again I lost myself in conjecture.

II

I was told that a lady in deep mourning wanted to see me on urgent business, and I looked out of my private den at the Paris Consulate into the room hung with maps and Presidents, where visitors were sifted out before being passed on to the Vice-Consul or the Chief.

The lady was Mrs. Stephen Glenn.

Six or seven months had passed since our meeting on the *Scythian*, and I had again forgotten her very existence. She was not a person who stuck in one's mind; and once more I wondered why, for in her statuesque weeds she looked nobler, more striking than ever. She glanced at the people awaiting their turn under the maps and the Presidents, and asked in a low tone if she could see me privately.

I was free at the moment, and I led her into my office and banished the typist.

Mrs. Glenn seemed disturbed by the signs of activity about me. "I'm afraid we shall be interrupted. I wanted to speak to you alone," she said.

I assured her we were not likely to be disturbed if she could put what she had to say in a few words—

"Ah, but that's just what I can't do. What I have to say can't be put in a few words." She fixed her splendid nocturnal eyes on me, and I read in them a distress so deep that I dared not suggest postponement.

I said I would do all I could to prevent our being interrupted, and in reply she just sat silent, and looked at me, as if after all she had nothing farther to communicate. The telephone clicked, and I rang for my secretary to take the message; then one of the clerks came in with papers for my signature. I said: "I'd better sign and get it over," and she sat motionless, her head slightly bent, as if secretly relieved by the delay. The clerk went off, I shut the door again, and when we were alone she lifted her head and spoke. "Mr. Norcutt," she asked, "have you ever had a child?"

I replied with a smile that I was not married. She murmured: "I'm sorry—excuse me," and looked down again at her black-gloved hands, which were clasped about a black bag richly embroidered with dull jet. Everything about her was as finished, as costly, as studied, as if she were a young beauty going forth in her joy; yet she looked like a heart-broken woman.

She began again: "My reason for coming is that I've promised to help a friend, a poor woman who's lost all trace of her son—her only surviving son—and is hunting for him." She paused, though my expectant silence seemed to encourage her to continue. "It's a very sad case: I must try to explain. Long ago, as a girl, my friend

fell in love with a married man—a man unhappily married.” She moistened her lips, which had become parched and colourless. “You mustn’t judge them too severely. . . . He had great nobility of character—the highest standards—but the situation was too cruel. His wife was insane; at that time there was no legal release in such cases. If you were married to a lunatic only death could free you. It was a most unhappy affair—the poor girl pitied her friend profoundly. Their little boy . . .” Suddenly she stood up with a proud and noble movement and leaned to me across the desk. “I am that woman,” she said.

She straightened herself and stood there, trembling, erect, like a swathed figure of woe on an illustrious grave. I thought: “What this inexpressive woman was meant to express is grief—” and marvelled at the wastefulness of Nature. But suddenly she dropped back into her chair, bowed her face against the desk, and burst into sobs. Her sobs were not violent; they were soft, low, almost rhythmical, with lengthening intervals between, like the last drops of rain after a long down-pour; and I said to myself: “She’s cried so much that this must be the very end.”

She opened the jet bag, took out a delicate handkerchief, and dried her eyes. Then she turned to me again. “It’s the first time I’ve ever spoken of this . . . to any human being except one.”

I laid my hand on hers. “It was no use—my pretending,” she went on, as if appealing to me for justification.

“Is it ever? And why should you, with an old friend?” I rejoined, attempting to comfort her.

“Ah, but I’ve had to—for so many years; to be silent has become my second nature.” She paused, and then continued in a softer tone: “My baby was so beautiful . . . do you know, Mr. Norcutt, I’m sure I should know him anywhere. . . . Just two years and one month older than my second boy, Philip . . . the one you knew.” Again she hesitated, and then, in a warmer burst of confidence, and scarcely above a whisper: “We christened the eldest Stephen. We knew it was dangerous: it might give a clue—but I felt I must give him his father’s name, the name I loved best. . . . It was all I could keep of my baby. And Stephen understood; he consented. . . .”

I sat and stared at her. What! This child of hers that she was telling me of was the child of Stephen Glenn? The two had had a child two years before the birth of their lawful son Philip? And consequently nearly a year before their marriage? I listened in a stupor, trying to reconstruct in my mind the image of a new, of another, Stephen Glenn, of the suffering reckless man behind the varnished image familiar to me. Now and then I murmured: “Yes . . . yes . . .” just to help her to go on.

“Of course it was impossible to keep the baby with me. Think—at my uncle’s!

My poor uncle . . . he would have died of it. . . .”

“And so you died instead?”

I had found the right word; her eyes filled again, and she stretched her hands to mine. “Ah, you’ve understood! Thank you. Yes; I died.” She added: “Even when Philip was born I didn’t come to life again—not wholly. Because there was always Stevie . . . part of me belonged to Stevie forever.”

“But when you and Glenn were able to marry, why—?”

She hung her head, and the blood rose to her worn temples. “Ah, why? . . . Listen; you mustn’t blame my husband. Try to remember what life was thirty years ago in New York. He had his professional standing to consider. A woman with a shadow on her was damned. . . . I couldn’t discredit Stephen. . . . We knew *positively* that our baby was in the best of hands. . . .”

“You never saw him again?”

She shook her head. “It was part of the agreement—with the persons who took him. They wanted to imagine he was their own. We knew we were fortunate . . . to find such a safe home, so entirely beyond suspicion . . . we had to accept the conditions.” She looked up with a faint flicker of reassurance in her eyes. “In a way it no longer makes any difference to me—the interval. It seems like yesterday. I know he’s been well cared for, and I should recognise him anywhere. No child ever had such eyes. . . .” She fumbled in her bag, drew out a small morocco case, opened it, and showed me the miniature of a baby a few months old. “I managed, with the greatest difficulty, to get a photograph of him—and this was done from it. Beautiful? Yes. I shall be able to identify him anywhere. . . . It’s only twenty-seven years. . . .”

III

Our talk was prolonged, the next day, at the quiet hotel where Mrs. Glenn was staying; but it led—it could lead—to nothing definite.

The unhappy woman could only repeat and amplify the strange confession stammered out at the Consulate. As soon as her child was born it had been entrusted with the utmost secrecy to a rich childless couple, who at once adopted it, and disappeared forever. Disappeared, that is, in the sense that (as I guessed) Stephen Glenn was as determined as they were that the child's parents should never hear of them again. Poor Catherine had been very ill at her baby's birth. Tortured by the need of concealment, of taking up her usual life at her uncle's as quickly as possible, of explaining her brief absence in such a way as to avert suspicion, she had lived in a blur of fear and suffering, and by the time she was herself again the child was gone, and the adoption irrevocable. Thereafter, I gathered, Glenn made it clear that he wished to avoid the subject, and she learned very little about the couple who had taken her child except that they were of good standing, and came from somewhere in Pennsylvania. They had gone to Europe almost immediately, it appeared, and no more was heard of them. Mrs. Glenn understood that Mr. Brown (their name was Brown) was a painter, and that they went first to Italy, then to Spain—unless it was the other way round. Stephen Glenn, it seemed, had heard of them through an old governess of his sister's, a family confidante, who was the sole recipient of poor Catherine's secret. Soon afterward the governess died, and with her disappeared the last trace of the mysterious couple; for it was not going to be easy to wander about Europe looking for a Mr. and Mrs. Brown who had gone to Italy or Spain with a baby twenty-seven years ago. But that was what Mrs. Glenn meant to do. She had a fair amount of money, she was desperately lonely, she had no aim or interest or occupation or duty—except to find the child she had lost.

What she wanted was some sort of official recommendation to our consuls in Italy and Spain, accompanied by a private letter hinting at the nature of her errand. I took these papers to her and when I did so I tried to point out the difficulties and risks of her quest, and suggested that she ought to be accompanied by some one who could advise her—hadn't she a man of business, or a relation, a cousin, a nephew? No, she said; there was no one; but for that matter she needed no one. If necessary she could apply to the police, or employ private detectives; and any American consul to whom she appealed would know how to advise her. "In any case," she added, "I couldn't be mistaken—I should always recognise him. He was the very image of his father. And if there were any possibility of my being in doubt, I

have the miniature, and photographs of his father as a young man.”

She drew out the little morocco case and offered it again for my contemplation. The vague presentment of a child a few months old—and by its help she expected to identify a man of nearly thirty!

Apparently she had no clue beyond the fact that, all those years ago, the adoptive parents were rumoured to have sojourned in Europe. She was starting for Italy because she thought she remembered that they were said to have gone there first—in itself a curious argument. Wherever there was an American consul she meant to apply to him. First at Genoa; then Milan; then Florence, Rome and Naples. In one or the other of these cities she would surely discover some one who could remember the passage there of an American couple named Brown with the most beautiful baby boy in the world. Even the long arm of coincidence could not have scattered so widely over southern Europe American couples of the name of Brown, with a matchlessly beautiful baby called Stephen.

Mrs. Glenn set forth in a mood of almost mystical exaltation. She promised that I should hear from her as soon as she had anything definite to communicate: “which means that you *will* hear—and soon!” she concluded with a happy laugh. But six months passed without my receiving any direct news, though I was kept on her track by a succession of letters addressed to my chief by various consuls who wrote to say that a Mrs. Stephen Glenn had called with a letter of recommendation, but that unluckily it had been impossible to give her any assistance “as she had absolutely no data to go upon.” Alas poor lady—

And then, one day, about eight months after her departure, there was a telegram. “Found my boy. Unspeakably happy. Long to see you.” It was signed Catherine Glenn, and dated from a mountain-cure in Switzerland.

IV

That summer, when the time came for my vacation, it was raining in Paris even harder than it had rained all the preceding winter, and I decided to make a dash for the sun.

I had read in the papers that the French Riviera was suffering from a six months' drought; and though I didn't half believe it, I took the next train for the south. I got out at Les Calanques, a small bathing-place between Marseilles and Toulon, where there was a fairish hotel, and pine-woods to walk in, and there, that very day, I saw seated on the beach the majestic figure of Mrs. Stephen Glenn. The first thing that struck me was that she had at last discarded her weeds. She wore a thin white dress, and a wide-brimmed hat of russet straw shaded the fine oval of her face. She saw me at once, and springing up advanced across the beach with a light step. The sun, striking on her hat brim, cast a warm shadow on her face; and in that semi-shade it glowed with recovered youth. "Dear Mr. Norcutt! How wonderful! Is it really you? I've been meaning to write for weeks; but I think happiness has made me lazy—and my days are so full," she declared with a joyous smile.

I looked at her with increased admiration. At the Consulate, I remembered, I had said to myself that grief was what Nature had meant her features to express; but that was only because I had never seen her happy. No; even when her husband and her son Philip were alive, and the circle of her well-being seemed unbroken, I had never seen her look as she looked now. And I understood that, during all those years, the unsatisfied longing for her eldest child, the shame at her own cowardice in disowning and deserting him, and perhaps her secret contempt for her husband for having abetted (or more probably exacted) that desertion, must have been eating into her soul, deeper, far deeper, than satisfied affections could reach. Now everything in her was satisfied; I could see it. . . . "How happy you look!" I exclaimed.

"But of course." She took it as simply as she had my former remark on her heightened beauty; and I perceived that what had illumined her face when we met on the steamer was not sorrow but the dawn of hope. Even then she had felt certain that she was going to find her boy; now she had found him and was transfigured. I sat down beside her on the sands. "And now tell me how the incredible thing happened."

She shook her head. "Not incredible—inevitable. When one has lived for more than half a life with one object in view it's bound to become a reality. I *had* to find Stevie; and I found him." She smiled with the inward brooding smile of a Madonna

—an image of the eternal mother who, when she speaks of her children in old age, still feels them at the breast.

Of details, as I made out, there were few; or perhaps she was too confused with happiness to give them. She had hunted up and down Italy for her Mr. and Mrs. Brown, and then suddenly, at Alassio, just as she was beginning to give up hope, and had decided (in a less sanguine mood) to start for Spain, the miracle had happened. Falling into talk, on her last evening, with a lady in the hotel lounge, she had alluded vaguely—she couldn't say why—to the object of her quest; and the lady, snatching the miniature from her, and bursting into tears, had identified the portrait as her adopted child's, and herself as the long-sought Mrs. Brown. Papers had been produced, dates compared, all to Mrs. Glenn's complete satisfaction. There could be no doubt that she had found her Stevie (thank heaven, they had kept the name!); and the only shadow on her joy was the discovery that he was lying ill, menaced with tuberculosis, at some Swiss mountain-cure. Or rather, that was part of another sadness; of the unfortunate fact that his adopted parents had lost nearly all their money just as he was leaving school, and hadn't been able to do much for him in the way of medical attention or mountain air—the very things he needed as he was growing up. Instead, since he had a passion for painting, they had allowed him to live in Paris, rather miserably, in the Latin Quarter, and work all day in one of those big schools—Julian's, wasn't it? The very worst thing for a boy whose lungs were slightly affected; and this last year he had had to give up, and spend several months in a cheap hole in Switzerland. Mrs. Glenn joined him there at once—ah, that meeting!—and as soon as she had seen him, and talked with the doctors, she became convinced that all that was needed to ensure his recovery was comfort, care and freedom from anxiety. His lungs, the doctors assured her, were all right again; and he had such a passion for the sea that after a few weeks in a good hotel at Montana he had persuaded Mrs. Glenn to come with him to the Mediterranean. But she was firmly resolved on carrying him back to Switzerland for another winter, no matter how much he objected; and Mr. and Mrs. Brown agreed that she was absolutely right—

“Ah; there's still a Mr. Brown?”

“Oh, yes.” She smiled at me absently, her whole mind on Stevie. “You'll see them both—they're here with us. I invited them for a few weeks, poor souls. I can't altogether separate them from Stevie—not yet.” (It was clear that eventually she hoped to.)

No, I assented; I supposed she couldn't; and just then she exclaimed: “Ah, there's my boy!” and I saw a tall stooping young man approaching us with the listless

step of convalescence. As he came nearer I felt that I was going to like him a good deal better than I had expected—though I don't know why I had doubted his likeableness before knowing him. At any rate, I was taken at once by the look of his dark-lashed eyes, deep-set in a long thin face which I suspected of being too pale under the carefully-acquired sunburn. The eyes were friendly, humorous, ironical; I liked a little less the rather hard lines of the mouth, until his smile relaxed them into boyishness. His body, lank and loose-jointed, was too thin for his suit of light striped flannel, and the untidy dark hair tumbling over his forehead adhered to his temples as if they were perpetually damp. Yes, he looked ill, this young Glenn.

I remembered wondering, when Mrs. Glenn told me her story, why it had not occurred to her that her oldest son had probably joined the American forces and might have remained on the field with his junior. Apparently this tragic possibility had never troubled her. She seemed to have forgotten that there had ever been a war, and that a son of her own, with thousands of young Americans of his generation, had lost his life in it. And now it looked as though she had been gifted with a kind of prescience. The war did not last long enough for America to be called on to give her weaklings, as Europe had, and it was clear that Stephen Glenn, with his narrow shoulders and hectic cheek-bones, could never have been wanted for active service. I suspected him of having been ill for longer than his mother knew.

Mrs. Glenn shone on him as he dropped down beside us. "This is an old friend, Stephen; a very dear friend of your father's." She added, extravagantly, that but for me she and her son might never have found each other. I protested: "How absurd," and young Glenn, stretching out his long limbs against the sand-back, and crossing his arms behind his head, turned on me a glance of rather weary good-humour. "Better give me a longer trial, my dear, before you thank him."

Mrs. Glenn laughed contentedly, and continued, her eyes on her son: "I was telling him that Mr. and Mrs. Brown are with us."

"Ah, yes—" said Stephen indifferently. I was inclined to like him a little less for his undisguised indifference. Ought he to have allowed his poor and unlucky foster-parents to be so soon superseded by this beautiful and opulent new mother? But, after all, I mused, I had not yet seen the Browns; and though I had begun to suspect, from Catherine's tone as well as from Stephen's, that they both felt the presence of that couple to be vaguely oppressive, I decided that I must wait before drawing any conclusions. And then suddenly Mrs. Glenn said, in a tone of what I can only describe as icy cordiality: "Ah, here they come now. They must have hurried back on purpose—"

Mr. and Mrs. Brown advanced across the beach. Mrs. Brown led the way; she walked with a light springing step, and if I had been struck by Mrs. Glenn's recovered youthfulness, her co-mother, at a little distance, seemed to me positively girlish. She was smaller and much slighter than Mrs. Glenn, and looked so much younger that I had a moment's doubt as to the possibility of her having, twenty-seven years earlier, been of legal age to adopt a baby. Certainly she and Mr. Brown must have had exceptional reasons for concluding so early that Heaven was not likely to bless their union. I had to admit, when Mrs. Brown came up, that I had overrated her juvenility. Slim, active and girlish she remained; but the freshness of her face was largely due to artifice, and the golden glints in her chestnut hair were a thought too golden. Still, she was a very pretty woman, with the alert cosmopolitan air of one who had acquired her elegance in places where the very best counterfeits are found. It will be seen that my first impression was none too favourable; but for all I knew of Mrs. Brown it might turn out that she had made the best of meagre opportunities. She met my name with a conquering smile, said: "Ah, yes—dear Mr. Norcutt. Mrs. Glenn has told us all we owe you"—and at the "we" I detected a faint shadow on Mrs. Glenn's brow. Was it only maternal jealousy that provoked it? I suspected an even deeper antagonism. The women were so different, so diametrically opposed to each other in appearance, dress, manner, and all the inherited standards, that if they had met as strangers it would have been hard for them to find a common ground of understanding; and the fact of that ground being furnished by Stephen hardly seemed to ease the situation.

"Well, what's the matter with taking some notice of little me?" piped a small dry man dressed in too-smart flannels, and wearing a too-white Panama which he removed with an elaborate flourish.

"Oh, of course! My husband—Mr. Norcutt." Mrs. Brown laid a jewelled hand on Stephen's recumbent shoulder. "Steve, you rude boy, you ought to have introduced your dad." As she pressed his shoulder I noticed that her long oval nails were freshly lacquered with the last new shade of coral, and that the forefinger was darkly yellowed with nicotine. This familiar colour-scheme struck me at the moment as peculiarly distasteful.

Stephen vouchsafed no answer, and Mr. Brown remarked to me sardonically. "You know you won't lose your money or your morals in this secluded spot."

Mrs. Brown flashed a quick glance at him. "Don't be so silly! It's much better for Steve to be in a quiet place where he can just sleep and eat and bask. His

mother and I are going to be firm with him about that—aren't we, dearest?" She transferred her lacquered talons to Mrs. Glenn's shoulder, and the latter, with a just perceptible shrinking, replied gaily: "As long as we can hold out against him!"

"Oh, this is the very place I was pining for," said Stephen placidly. ("Gosh—*pinning!*" Mr. Brown interpolated.) Stephen tilted his hat forward over his sunburnt nose with the drawn nostrils, crossed his arms under his thin neck, and closed his eyes. Mrs. Brown bent over Mrs. Glenn with one of her quick gestures. "Darling—before we go in to lunch do let me fluff you out a little: so." With a flashing hand she loosened the soft white waves under Mrs. Glenn's spreading hat brim. "There—that's better; isn't it, Mr. Norcutt?"

Mrs. Glenn's face was a curious sight. The smile she had forced gave place to a marble rigidity; the old statuesqueness which had melted to flesh and blood stiffened her features again. "Thank you . . . I'm afraid I never think . . ."

"No, you never do; that's the trouble!" Mrs. Brown shot an arch glance at me. "With her looks, oughtn't she to think? But perhaps it's lucky for the rest of us poor women she don't—eh, Stevie?"

The colour rushed to Mrs. Glenn's face; she was going to retort; to snub the dreadful woman. But the new softness had returned, and she merely lifted a warning finger. "Oh, don't, please . . . speak to him. Can't you see that he's fallen asleep?"

O great King Solomon, I thought—and bowed my soul before the mystery.

I spent a fortnight at Les Calanques, and every day my perplexity deepened. The most conversible member of the little group was undoubtedly Stephen. Mrs. Glenn was as she had always been: beautiful, benevolent and inarticulate. When she sat on the beach beside the dozing Stephen, in her flowing white dress, her large white umbrella tilted to shelter him, she reminded me of a carven angel spreading broad wings above a tomb (I could never look at her without being reminded of statuary); and to converse with a marble angel so engaged can never have been easy. But I was perhaps not wrong in suspecting that her smiling silence concealed a reluctance to talk about the Browns. Like many perfectly unegotistical women Catherine Glenn had no subject of conversation except her own affairs; and these at present so visibly hinged on the Browns that it was easy to see why silence was simpler.

Mrs. Brown, I may as well confess, bored me acutely. She was a perfect specimen of the middle-aged flapper, with layers and layers of hard-headed feminine craft under her romping ways. All this I suffered from chiefly because I knew it was making Mrs. Glenn suffer. But after all it was thanks to Mrs. Brown that she had

found her son; Mrs. Brown had brought up Stephen, had made him (one was obliged to suppose) the whimsical dreamy charming creature he was; and again and again, when Mrs. Brown outdid herself in girlish archness or middle-aged craft, Mrs. Glenn's wounded eyes said to mine: "Look at Stephen; isn't that enough?"

Certainly it was enough; enough even to excuse Mr. Brown's jocular allusions and arid anecdotes, his boredom at Les Calanques, and the too-liberal potations in which he drowned it. Mr. Brown, I may add, was not half as trying as his wife. For the first two or three days I was mildly diverted by his contempt for the quiet watering-place in which his women had confined him, and his lordly conception of the life of pleasure, as exemplified by intimacy with the head-waiters of gilt-edged restaurants and the lavishing of large sums on horse-racing and cards. "Damn it, Norcutt, I'm not used to being mewed up in this kind of place. Perhaps it's different with you—all depends on a man's standards, don't it? Now before I lost my money—" and so on. The odd thing was that, though this loss of fortune played a large part in the conversation of both husband and wife, I never somehow believed in it—I mean in the existence of the fortune. I hinted as much one day to Mrs. Glenn, but she only opened her noble eyes reproachfully, as if I had implied that it discredited the Browns to dream of a fortune they had never had. "They tell me Stephen was brought up with every luxury. And besides—their own tastes seem rather expensive, don't they?" she argued gently.

"That's the very reason."

"The reason—?"

"The only people I know who are totally without expensive tastes are the overwhelmingly wealthy. You see it when you visit palaces. They sleep on camp-beds and live on boiled potatoes."

Mrs. Glenn smiled. "Stevie wouldn't have liked that."

Stephen smiled also when I alluded to these past splendours. "It must have been before I cut my first teeth. I know Boy's always talking about it; but I've got to take it on faith, just as you have."

"Boy—?"

"Didn't you know? He's always called 'Boy.' Boydon Brown—abbreviated by friends and family to 'Boy.' The Boy Browns. Suits them, doesn't it?"

It did; but I was not sure that it suited him to say so.

"And you've always addressed your adopted father in that informal style?"

"Lord, yes; nobody's formal with Boy except head-waiters. They bow down to him; I don't know why. He's got the manner. I haven't. When I go to a restaurant they always give me the worst table and the stupidest waiter." He leaned back

against the sand-bank and blinked contentedly seaward. "Got a cigarette?"

"You know you oughtn't to smoke," I protested.

"I know; but I do." He held out a lean hand with prominent knuckles. "As long as Kit's not about." He called the marble angel, his mother, "Kit"! And yet I was not offended—I let him do it, just as I let him have one of my cigarettes. If "Boy" had a way with head-waiters his adopted son undoubtedly had one with lesser beings; his smile, his faint hoarse laugh would have made me do his will even if his talk had not conquered me. We sat for hours on the sands, discussing and dreaming; not always undisturbed, for Mrs. Brown had a tiresome way of hovering and "listening in," as she archly called it—"I don't want Stevie to depreciate his poor ex-mamma to you," she explained one day); and whenever Mrs. Brown (who, even at Les Calanques, had contrived to create a social round for herself) was bathing, dancing, playing bridge, or being waved, massaged or manicured, the other mother, assuring herself from an upper window that the coast was clear, would descend in her gentle majesty and turn our sand-bank into a throne by sitting on it. But now and then Stephen and I had a half-hour to ourselves; and then I tried to lead his talk to the past.

He seemed willing enough that I should, but uninterested, and unable to recover many details. "I never can remember things that don't matter—and so far nothing about me has mattered," he said with a humorous melancholy. "I mean, not till I struck mother Kit."

He had vague recollections of continental travels as a little boy; had afterward been at a private school in Switzerland; had tried to pass himself off as a Canadian volunteer in 1915, and in 1917 to enlist in the American army, but had failed in each case—one had only to look at him to see why. The war over, he had worked for a time at Julian's, and then broken down; and after that it had been a hard row to hoe till mother Kit came along. By George, but he'd never forget what she'd done for him—never!

"Well, it's a way mothers have with their sons," I remarked.

He flushed under his bronze tanning, and said simply: "Yes—only you see I didn't know."

His view of the Browns, while not unkindly, was so detached that I suspected him of regarding his own mother with the same objectivity; but when we spoke of her there was a different note in his voice. "I didn't know"—it was a new experience to him to be really mothered. As a type, however, she clearly puzzled him. He was too sensitive to class her (as the Browns obviously did) as a simple-minded woman to whom nothing had ever happened; but he could not conceive what sort of things

could happen to a woman of her kind. I gathered that she had explained the strange episode of his adoption by telling him that at the time of his birth she had been “secretly married”—poor Catherine!—to his father, but that “family circumstances” had made it needful to conceal his existence till the marriage could be announced; by which time he had vanished with his adopted parents. I guessed how it must have puzzled Stephen to adapt his interpretation of this ingenuous tale to what, in the light of Mrs. Glenn’s character, he could make out of her past. Of obvious explanations there were plenty; but evidently none fitted into his vision of her. For a moment (I could see) he had suspected a sentimental tie, a tender past, between Mrs. Glenn and myself; but this his quick perceptions soon discarded, and he apparently resigned himself to regarding her as inscrutably proud and incorrigibly perfect. “I’d like to paint her some day—if ever I’m fit to,” he said; and I wondered whether his scruples applied to his moral or artistic inadequacy.

At the doctor’s orders he had dropped his painting altogether since his last breakdown; but it was manifestly the one thing he cared for, and perhaps the only reason he had for wanting to get well. “When you’ve dropped to a certain level, it’s so damnably easy to keep on till you’re altogether down and out. So much easier than dragging up hill again. But I do want to get well enough to paint mother Kit. She’s a subject.”

One day it rained, and he was confined to the house. I went up to sit with him, and he got out some of his sketches and studies. Instantly he was transformed from an amiably mocking dilettante into an absorbed and passionate professional. “This is the only life I’ve ever had. All the rest—!” He made a grimace that turned his thin face into a death’s-head. “Cinders!”

The studies were brilliant—there was no doubt of that. The question was—the eternal question—what would they turn into when he was well enough to finish them? For the moment the problem did not present itself, and I could praise and encourage him in all sincerity. My words brought a glow into his face, but also, as it turned out, sent up his temperature. Mrs. Glenn reproached me mildly; she begged me not to let him get excited about his pictures. I promised not to, and reassured on that point she asked if I didn’t think he had talent—real talent? “Very great talent, yes,” I assured her; and she burst into tears—not of grief or agitation, but of a deep upwelling joy. “Oh, what have I done to deserve it all—to deserve such happiness? Yet I always knew if I could find him he’d make me happy!” She caught both my hands, and pressed her wet cheek on mine. That was one of her unclouded hours.

There were others not so radiant. I could see that the Browns were straining at the leash. With the seductions of Juan-les-Pins and Antibes in the offing, why, their

frequent allusions implied, must they remain marooned at Les Calanques? Of course, for one thing, Mrs. Brown admitted, she hadn't the clothes to show herself on a smart *plage*. Though so few were worn they had to come from the big dressmakers; and the latter's charges, everybody knew, were in inverse ratio to the amount of material used. "So that to be really naked is ruinous," she concluded, laughing; and I saw the narrowing of Catherine's lips. As for Mr. Brown, he added morosely that if a man couldn't take a hand at baccarat, or offer his friends something decent to eat and drink, it was better to vegetate at Les Calanques, and be done with it. Only, when a fellow'd been used to having plenty of money . . .

I saw at once what had happened. Mrs. Glenn, whose material wants did not extend beyond the best plumbing and expensive clothes (and the latter were made to do for three seasons), did not fully understand the Browns' aspirations. Her fortune, though adequate, was not large, and she had settled on Stephen's adoptive parents an allowance which, converted into francs, made a generous showing. It was obvious, however, that what they hoped was to get more money. There had been debts in the background, perhaps; who knew but the handsome Stephen had had his share in them? One day I suggested discreetly to Mrs. Glenn that if she wished to be alone with her son she might offer the Browns a trip to Juan-les-Pins, or some such centre of gaiety. But I pointed out that the precedent might be dangerous, and advised her first to consult Stephen. "I suspect he's as anxious to have them go as you are," I said recklessly; and her flush of pleasure rewarded me. "Oh, you mustn't say that," she reproved me, laughing; and added that she would think over my advice. I am not sure if she did consult Stephen; but she offered the Browns a holiday, and they accepted it without false pride.

VI

After my departure from Les Calanques I had no news of Mrs. Glenn till she returned to Paris in October. Then she begged me to call at the hotel where I had previously seen her, and where she was now staying with Stephen—and the Browns.

She suggested, rather mysteriously, my dining with her on a particular evening, when, as she put it, “everybody” would be out; and when I arrived she explained that Stephen had gone to the country for the week-end, with some old comrades from Julian’s, and that the Browns were dining at a smart nightclub in Montmartre. “So we’ll have a quiet time all by ourselves.” She added that Steve was so much better that he was trying his best to persuade her to spend the winter in Paris, and let him get back to his painting; but in spite of the good news I thought she looked worn and dissatisfied.

I was surprised to find the Browns still with her, and told her so.

“Well, you see, it’s difficult,” she returned with a troubled frown. “They love Stephen so much that they won’t give him up; and how can I blame them? What are my rights, compared with theirs?”

Finding this hard to answer, I put another question. “Did you enjoy your quiet time with Stephen while they were at Juan-les-Pins?”

“Oh, they didn’t go; at least Mrs. Brown didn’t—Chrissy she likes me to call her,” Mrs. Glenn corrected herself hurriedly. “She couldn’t bear to leave Stephen.”

“So she sacrificed Juan-les-Pins, and that handsome cheque?”

“Not the cheque; she kept that. Boy went,” Mrs. Glenn added apologetically. Boy and Chrissy—it had come to that! I looked away from my old friend’s troubled face before putting my next question. “And Stephen—?”

“Well, I can’t exactly tell how he feels. But I sometimes think he’d like to be alone with me.” A passing radiance smoothed away her frown. “He’s hinted that, if we decide to stay here, they might be tempted by winter sports, and go to the Engadine later.”

“So that they would have the benefit of the high air instead of Stephen?” She coloured a little, looked down, and then smiled at me. “What can I do?”

I resolved to sound Stephen on his adopted parents. The present situation would have to be put an end to somehow; but it had puzzling elements. Why had Mrs. Brown refused to go to Juan-les-Pins? Was it, as I had suspected, because there were debts, and more pressing uses for the money? Or was it that she was so much attached to her adopted son as to be jealous of his mother’s influence? This was far

more to be feared; but it did not seem to fit in with what I knew of Mrs. Brown. The trouble was that what I knew was so little. Mrs. Brown, though in one way so intelligible, was in another as cryptic to me as Catherine Glenn was to Stephen. The surface was transparent enough; but what did the blur beneath conceal? Troubled waters, or just a mud-flat? My only hope was to try to get Stephen to tell me.

Stephen had hired a studio—against his doctor’s advice, I gathered—and spent most of his hours there, in the company of his old group of painting friends. Mrs. Glenn had been there once or twice, but in spite of his being so sweet and dear to her she had felt herself in the way—as she undoubtedly was. “I can’t keep up with their talk, you know,” she explained. With whose talk could she, poor angel?

I suggested that, for the few weeks of their Paris sojourn, it would be kinder to let Stephen have his fling; and she agreed. Afterward, in the mountains, he could recuperate; youth had such powers of self-healing. But I urged her to insist on his spending another winter in the Engadine; not at one of the big fashionable places—

She interrupted me. “I’m afraid Boy and Chrissy wouldn’t like—”

“Oh, for God’s sake; can’t you give Boy and Chrissy another cheque, and send them off to Egypt, or to Monte Carlo?”

She hesitated. “I could try; but I don’t believe she’d go. Not without Stevie.”

“And what does Stevie say?”

“What can he say? She brought him up. She was there—all the years when I’d failed him.”

It was unanswerable, and I felt the uselessness of any advice I could give. The situation could be changed only by some internal readjustment. Still, out of pity for the poor mother, I determined to try a word with Stephen. She gave me the address of his studio, and the next day I went there.

It was in a smart-looking modern building in the Montparnasse quarter; lofty, well-lit and well-warmed. What a contrast to his earlier environment! I climbed to his door, rang the bell and waited. There were sounds of moving about within, but as no one came I rang again; and finally Stephen opened the door. His face lit up pleasantly when he saw me. “Oh, it’s you, my dear fellow!” But I caught a hint of constraint in his voice.

“I’m not in the way? Don’t mind throwing me out if I am.”

“I’ve got a sitter—” he began, visibly hesitating.

“Oh, in that case—”

“No, no; it’s only—the fact is, it’s Chrissy. I was trying to do a study of her—”

He led me across the passage and into the studio. It was large and flooded with light. Divans against the walls; big oak tables; shaded lamps, a couple of tall screens.

From behind one of them emerged Mrs. Brown, hatless and slim, in a pale summer-like frock, her chestnut hair becomingly tossed about her eyes. "Dear Mr. Norcutt. So glad you turned up! I was getting such a stiff neck—Stephen's merciless."

"May I see the result?" I asked; and "Oh, no," she protested in mock terror, "it's too frightful—it really is. I think he thought he was doing a *nature morte*—lemons and a bottle of beer, or something!"

"It's not fit for inspection," Stephen agreed.

The room was spacious, and not over-crowded. Glancing about, I could see only one easel with a painting on it. Stephen went up and turned the canvas face inward, with the familiar gesture of the artist who does not wish to challenge attention. But before he did so I had remarked that the painting was neither a portrait of Mrs. Brown nor a still-life. It was a rather brilliant three-quarter sketch of a woman's naked back and hips. A model, no doubt—but why did he wish to conceal it?

"I'm so glad you came," Mrs. Brown repeated, smiling intensely. I stood still, hoping she was about to go; but she dropped down on one of the divans, tossing back her tumbled curls. "He works too hard, you know; I wish you'd tell him so. Steve, come here and stretch out," she commanded, indicating the other end of the divan. "You ought to take a good nap."

The hint was so obvious that I said: "In that case I'd better come another time."

"No, no; wait till I give you a cock-tail. We all need cock-tails. Where's the shaker, darling?" Mrs. Brown was on her feet again, alert and gay. She dived behind the screen which had previously concealed her, and reappeared with the necessary appliances. "Bring up that little table, Mr. Norcutt, please. Oh, I know—dear Kit doesn't approve of cock-tails; and she's right. But look at him—dead beat! If he will slave at his painting, what's he to do? I was scolding him about it when you came in."

The shaker danced in her flashing hands, and in a trice she was holding a glass out to me, and another to Stephen, who had obediently flung himself down on the divan. As he took the glass she bent and laid her lips on his damp hair. "You bad boy, you!"

I looked at Stephen. "You ought to get out of this, and start straight off for Switzerland," I admonished him.

"Oh, hell," he groaned. "Can't you get Kit to drop all that?"

Mrs. Brown made an impatient gesture. "Isn't he too foolish? Of course he ought to go away. He looks like nothing on earth. But his only idea of Switzerland is one of those awful places we used to have to go to because they were cheap, where

there's nothing to do in the evening but to sit with clergymen's wives looking at stereopticon views of glaciers. I tell him he'll love St. Moritz. There's a thrill there every minute."

Stephen closed his eyes and sank his head back in the cushions without speaking. His face was drawn and weary; I was startled at the change in him since we had parted at Les Calanques.

Mrs. Brown, following my glance, met it with warning brows and a finger on her painted lips. It was like a parody of Mrs. Glenn's maternal gesture, and I perceived that it meant: "Can't you see that he's falling asleep? Do be tactful and slip out without disturbing him."

What could I do but obey? A moment later the studio door had closed on me, and I was going down the long flights of stairs. The worst of it was that I was not at all sure that Stephen was really asleep.

VII

The next morning I received a telephone call from Stephen asking me to lunch. We met at a quiet restaurant near his studio, and when, after an admirably chosen meal, we settled down to coffee and cigars, he said carelessly: "Sorry you got thrown out that way yesterday."

"Oh, well—I saw you were tired, and I didn't want to interfere with your nap."

He looked down moodily at his plate. "Tired—yes, I'm tired. But I didn't want a nap. I merely simulated slumber to try and make Chrissy shut up."

"Ah—" I said.

He shot a quick glance at me, almost resentfully, I thought. Then he went on: "There are times when aimless talk nearly kills me. I wonder," he broke out suddenly, "if you can realize what it feels like for a man who's never—I mean for an orphan—suddenly to find himself with two mothers?"

I said I could see it might be arduous.

"Arduous! It's literally asphyxiating." He frowned, and then smiled whimsically. "When I need all the fresh air I can get!"

"My dear fellow—what you need first of all is to get away from cities and studios."

His frown deepened. "I know; I know all that. Only, you see—well, to begin with, before I turn up my toes I want to do something for mother K.it."

"Do something?"

"Something to show her that I was—was worth all this fuss." He paused, and turned his coffee-spoon absently between his long twitching fingers.

I shrugged. "Whatever you do, she'll always think that. Mothers do."

He murmured after me slowly: "Mothers—"

"What she wants you to do now is to get well," I insisted.

"Yes; I know; I'm pledged to get well. But somehow that bargain doesn't satisfy me. If I don't get well I want to leave something behind me that'll make her think: 'If he'd lived a little longer he'd have pulled it off'."

"If you left a gallery of masterpieces it wouldn't help her much."

His face clouded, and he looked at me wistfully. "What the devil else can I do?"

"Go to Switzerland, and let yourself be bored there for a whole winter. Then you can come back and paint, and enjoy your success instead of having the enjoyment done for you by your heirs."

"Oh, what a large order—" he sighed, and drew out his cigarettes.

For a moment we were both silent; then he raised his eyes and looked straight at

me. "Supposing I don't get well, there's another thing . . ." He hesitated a moment. "Do you happen to know if my mother has made her will?"

I imagine my look must have surprised him, for he hurried on: "It's only this: if I should drop out—you can never tell—there are Chrissy and Boy, poor helpless devils. I can't forget what they've been to me . . . done for me . . . though sometimes I daresay I seem ungrateful. . . ."

I listened to his embarrassed phrases with an embarrassment at least as great. "You may be sure your mother won't forget either," I said.

"No; I suppose not. Of course not. Only sometimes—you can see for yourself that things are a little breezy . . . They feel that perhaps she doesn't always remember for how many years . . ." He brought the words out as though he were reciting a lesson. "I can't forget it . . . of course," he added, painfully.

I glanced at my watch and stood up. I wanted to spare him the evident effort of going on. "Mr. and Mrs. Brown's tastes don't always agree with your mother's. That's evident. If you could persuade them to go off somewhere—or to lead more independent lives when they're with her—mightn't that help?"

He cast a despairing glance at me. "Lord—I wish you'd try! But you see they're anxious—*anxious* about their future. . . ."

"I'm sure they needn't be," I answered shortly, more and more impatient to make an end.

His face lit up with a suddenness that hurt me. "Oh, well . . . it's sure to be all right if you say so. Of course you know."

"I know your mother," I said, holding out my hand for goodbye.

VIII

Shortly after my lunch with Stephen Glenn I was unexpectedly detached from my job in Paris and sent on a special mission to the other side of the world. I was sorry to bid goodbye to Mrs. Glenn, but relieved to be rid of the thankless task of acting as her counsellor. Not that she herself was not thankful, poor soul; but the situation abounded in problems, to not one of which could I find a solution; and I was embarrassed by her simple faith in my ability to do so. "Get rid of the Browns; pension them off," I could only repeat; but since my talk with Stephen I had little hope of his mother's acting on this suggestion. "You'll probably all end up together at St. Moritz," I prophesied; and a few months later a belated Paris *Herald*, overtaking me in my remote corner of the globe, informed me that among the guests of the new Ice Palace Hotel at St. Moritz were Mrs. Glenn of New York, Mr. Stephen Glenn, and Mr. and Mrs. Boydon Brown. From succeeding numbers of the same sheet I learned that Mr. and Mrs. Boydon Brown were among those entertaining on the opening night of the new *Restaurant des Glaciers*, that the Boydon Brown cup for the most original costume at the Annual Fancy Ball of the Skiers' Club had been won by Miss Thora Dacy (costume designed by the well-known artist, Stephen Glenn), and that Mr. Boydon Brown had been one of the stewards of the dinner given to the participants in the ice-hockey match between the St. Moritz and Suvretta teams. And on such items I was obliged to nourish my memory of my friends, for no direct news came to me from any of them.

When I bade Mrs. Glenn goodbye I had told her that I had hopes of a post in the State Department at the close of my temporary mission, and she said, a little wistfully: "How wonderful if we could meet next year in America! As soon as Stephen is strong enough I want him to come back and live with me in his father's house." This seemed a natural wish; and it struck me that it might also be the means of effecting a break with the Browns. But Mrs. Glenn shook her head. "Chrissy says a winter in New York would amuse them both tremendously."

I was not so sure that it would amuse Stephen, and therefore did not base much hope on the plan. The one thing Stephen wanted was to get back to Paris and paint; it would presumably be his mother's lot to settle down there when his health permitted.

I heard nothing more until I got back to Washington the following spring; then I had a line from Stephen. The winter in the Engadine had been a deadly bore, but had really done him good, and his mother was just leaving for Paris to look for an apartment. She meant to take one on a long lease, and have the furniture of the New

York house sent out—it would be jolly getting it arranged. As for him, the doctors said he was well enough to go on with his painting, and, as I knew, it was the one thing he cared for; so I might cast off all anxiety about the family. That was all—and perhaps I should have obeyed if Mrs. Glenn had also written. But no word, no message even, came from her; and as she always wrote when there was good news to give, her silence troubled me.

It was in the course of the same summer, during a visit to Bar Harbour, that one evening, dining with a friend, I found myself next to a slight pale girl with large gray eyes, who suddenly turned them on me reproachfully. “Then you don’t know me? I’m Thora.”

I looked my perplexity, and she added: “Aren’t you Steve Glenn’s great friend? He’s always talking of you.” My memory struggled with a tangle of oddments, from which I finally extricated the phrase in the *Herald* about Miss Thora Dacy and the fancy-dress ball at St. Moritz. “You’re the young lady who won the Boydon Brown prize in a costume designed by the well-known artist, Mr. Stephen Glenn!”

Her charming face fell. “If you know me only through that newspaper rubbish . . . I had an idea the well-known artist might have told you about me.”

“He’s not much of a correspondent.”

“No; but I thought—”

“Why won’t you tell me yourself instead?”

Dinner was over, and the company had moved out to a wide, starlit verandah looking seaward. I found a corner for two, and installed myself there with my new friend, who was also Stephen’s. “I like him awfully—don’t you?” she began at once. I liked her way of saying it; I liked her direct gaze; I found myself thinking: “But this may turn out to be the solution!” For I felt sure that, if circumstances ever gave her the right to take part in the coming struggle over Stephen, Thora Dacy would be on the side of the angels.

As if she had guessed my thought she continued: “And I do love Mrs. Glenn too—don’t you?”

I assured her that I did, and she added: “And Steve loves her—I’m sure he does!”

“Well, if he didn’t—!” I exclaimed indignantly.

“That’s the way I feel; he ought to. Only, you see, Mrs. Brown—the Browns adopted him when he was a baby, didn’t they, and brought him up as if he’d been their own child? I suppose they must know him better than any of us do; and Mrs. Brown says he can’t help feeling bitter about—I don’t know all the circumstances, but his mother did desert him soon after he was born, didn’t she? And if it hadn’t

been for the Browns—”

“The Browns—the Browns! It’s a pity they don’t leave it to other people to proclaim their merits! And I don’t believe Stephen does feel as they’d like you to think. If he does, he ought to be kicked. If—if complicated family reasons obliged Mrs. Glenn to separate herself from him when he was a baby, the way she mourned for him all those years, and her devotion since they’ve come together again, have atoned a thousandfold for that old unhappiness; and no one knows it better than Stephen.”

The girl received this without protesting. “I’m so glad—so glad.” There was a new vibration in her voice; she looked up gravely. “I’ve always *wanted* to love Mrs. Glenn the best.”

“Well, you’d better; especially if you love Stephen.”

“Oh, I do love him,” she said simply. “But of course I understand his feeling as he does about the Browns.”

I hesitated, not knowing how I ought to answer the question I detected under this; but at length I said: “Stephen, at any rate, must feel that Mrs. Brown has no business to insinuate anything against his mother. He ought to put a stop to that.” She met the suggestion with a sigh, and stood up to join another group. “Thora Dacy may yet save us!” I thought, as my gaze followed her light figure across the room.

I had half a mind to write of that meeting to Stephen or to his mother; but the weeks passed while I procrastinated, and one day I received a note from Stephen. He wrote (with many messages from Mrs. Glenn) to give me their new address, and to tell me that he was hard at work at his painting, and doing a “promising portrait of mother Kit.” He signed himself my affectionate Steve, and added underneath: “So glad you’ve come across little Thora. She took a most tremendous shine to you. Do please be nice to her; she’s a dear child. But don’t encourage any illusions about me, please; marrying’s not in my programme.” “So that’s that,” I thought, and tore the letter up rather impatiently. I wondered if Thora Dacy already knew that her illusions were not to be encouraged.

IX

The months went by, and I heard no more from my friends. Summer came round again, and with it the date of my six weeks' holiday, which I purposed to take that year in Europe. Two years had passed since I had last seen Mrs. Glenn, and during that time I had received only two or three brief notes from her, thanking me for Christmas wishes, or telling me that Stephen was certainly better, though he would take no care of himself. But several months had passed since the date of her last report.

I had meant to spend my vacation in a trip in south-western France, and on the way over I decided to invite Stephen Glenn to join me. I therefore made direct for Paris, and the next morning rang him up at Mrs. Glenn's. Mrs. Brown's voice met me in reply, informing me that Stephen was no longer living with his mother. "Read the riot act to us all a few months ago—said he wanted to be independent. You know his fads. Dear Catherine was foolishly upset. As I said to her . . . yes, I'll give you his address; but poor Steve's not well just now . . . Oh, go on a trip with you? No; I'm afraid there's no chance of that. The truth is, he told us he didn't want to be bothered—rather warned us off the premises; even poor old Boy; and you know he adores Boy. I haven't seen him myself for several days. But you can try . . . oh, of course, you can try . . . No; I'm afraid you can't see Catherine either—not just at present. She's been ill too—feverish; worrying about her naughty Steve, I suspect. I'm mounting guard for a few days, and not letting her see anybody till her temperature goes down. And would you do me a favour? Don't write—don't let her know you're here. Not for a day or two, I mean . . . She'd be so distressed at not being able to see you. . . ."

She rang off, and left me to draw my own conclusions.

They were not of the pleasantest. I was perplexed by the apparent sequestration of both my friends, still more so by the disquieting mystery of Mrs. Glenn's remaining with the Browns while Stephen had left them. Why had she not followed her son? Was it because she had not been allowed to? I conjectured that Mrs. Brown, knowing I was likely to put these questions to the persons concerned, was manoeuvring to prevent my seeing them. If she could manoeuvre, so could I; but for the moment I had to consider what line to take. The fact of her giving me Stephen's address made me suspect that she had taken measures to prevent my seeing him; and if that were so there was not much use in making the attempt. And Mrs. Glenn was in bed, and "feverish," and not to be told of my arrival. . . .

After a day's pondering I reflected that telegrams sometimes penetrate where

letters fail to, and decided to telegraph to Stephen. No reply came, but the following afternoon, as I was leaving my hotel a taxi drove up and Mrs. Glenn descended from it. She was dressed in black, with many hanging scarves and veils, as if she either feared the air or the searching eye of some one who might be interested in her movements. But for her white hair and heavy stooping lines she might have suggested the furtive figure of a young woman stealing to her lover. But when I looked at her the analogy seemed a profanation.

To women of Catherine Glenn's ripe beauty thinness gives a sudden look of age; and the face she raised among her thrown-back veils was emaciated. Illness and anxiety had scarred her as years and weather scar some beautiful still image on a churchfront. She took my hand, and I led her into the empty reading-room. "You've been ill!" I said.

"Not very; just a bad cold." It was characteristic that while she looked at me with grave beseeching eyes her words were trivial, ordinary. "Chrissy's so devoted—takes such care of me. She was afraid to have me go out. The weather's so unsettled, isn't it? But really I'm all right; and as it cleared this morning I just ran off for a minute to see you." The entreaty in her eyes became a prayer. "Only don't tell her, will you? Dear Steve's been ill too—did you know? And so I just slipped out while Chrissy went to see him. She sees him nearly every day, and brings me the news." She gave a sigh and added, hardly above a whisper: "He sent me your address. She doesn't know."

I listened with a sense of vague oppression. Why this mystery, this watching, these evasions? Was it because Steve was not allowed to write to me that he had smuggled my address to his mother? Mystery clung about us in damp fog-like coils, like the scarves and veils about Mrs. Glenn's thin body. But I knew that I must let my visitor tell her tale in her own way; and, of course, when it was told, most of the mystery subsisted, for she was in it, enveloped in it, blinded by it. I gathered, however, that Stephen had been very unhappy. He had met at St. Moritz a girl whom he wanted to marry: Thora Dacy—ah, I'd heard of her, I'd met her? Mrs. Glenn's face lit up. She had thought the child lovely; she had known the family in Washington—excellent people; she had been so happy in the prospect of Stephen's happiness. And then something had happened . . . she didn't know, she had an idea that Chrissy hadn't liked the girl. The reason Stephen gave was that in his state of health he oughtn't to marry; but at the time he'd been perfectly well—the doctors had assured his mother that his lungs were sound, and that there was no likelihood of a relapse. She couldn't imagine why he should have had such scruples; still less why Chrissy should have encouraged them. For Chrissy had also put it on the ground of

health; she had approved his decision. And since then he had been unsettled, irritable, difficult—oh, very difficult. Two or three months ago the state of tension in which they had all been living had reached a climax; Mrs. Glenn couldn't say how or why—it was still obscure to her. But she suspected that Stephen had quarrelled with the Browns. They had patched it up now, they saw each other; but for a time there had certainly been something wrong. And suddenly Stephen had left the apartment, and moved into a wretched studio in a shabby quarter. The only reason he gave for leaving was that he had too many mothers—that was a joke, of course, Mrs. Glenn explained . . . but her eyes filled as she said it.

Poor mother—and, alas, poor Stephen! All the sympathy I could spare from the mother went to the son. He had behaved harshly, cruelly, no doubt; the young do; but under what provocation! I understood his saying that he had too many mothers; and I suspected that what he had tried for—and failed to achieve—was a break with the Browns. Trust Chrissy to baffle that attempt, I thought bitterly; she had obviously deflected the dispute, and made the consequences fall upon his mother. And at bottom everything was unchanged.

Unchanged—except for that thickening of the fog. At the moment it was almost as impenetrable to me as to Mrs. Glenn. Certain things I could understand that she could not; for instance, why Stephen had left home. I could guess that the atmosphere had become unbreathable. But if so, it was certainly Mrs. Brown's doing, and what interest had she in sowing discord between Stephen and his mother? With a shock of apprehension my mind reverted to Stephen's enquiry about his mother's will. It had offended me at the time; now it frightened me. If I was right in suspecting that he had tried to break with his adopted parents—over the question of the will, no doubt, or at any rate over their general selfishness and rapacity—then his attempt had failed, since he and the Browns were still on good terms, and the only result of the dispute had been to separate him from his mother. At the thought my indignation burned afresh. "I mean to see Stephen," I declared, looking resolutely at Mrs. Glenn.

"But he's not well enough, I'm afraid; he told me to send you his love, and to say that perhaps when you come back—"

"Ah, you've seen him, then?"

She shook her head. "No; he telegraphed me this morning. He doesn't even write any longer." Her eyes filled, and she looked away from me.

He too used the telegraph! It gave me more to think about than poor Mrs. Glenn could know. I continued to look at her. "Don't you want to send him a telegram in return? You could write it here, and give it to me," I suggested. She hesitated,

seemed half to assent, and then stood up abruptly.

“No; I’d better not. Chrissy takes my messages. If I telegraphed she might wonder—she might be hurt—”

“Yes; I see.”

“But I must be off, I’ve stayed too long.” She cast a nervous glance at her watch. “When you come back . . .” she repeated.

When we reached the door of the hotel rain was falling, and I drew her back into the vestibule while the porter went to call a taxi. “Why haven’t you your own motor?” I asked.

“Oh, Chrissy wanted the motor. She had to go to see Stevie—and of course she didn’t know I should be going out. You won’t tell her, will you?” Mrs. Glenn cried back to me as the door of the taxi closed on her.

The taxi drove off, and I was standing on the pavement looking after it when a handsomely appointed private motor glided up to the hotel. The chauffeur sprang down, and I recognized him as the man who had driven Mrs. Glenn when we had been together at Les Calanques. I was therefore not surprised to see Mrs. Brown, golden-haired and slim, descending under his unfurled umbrella. She held a note in her hand, and looked at me with a start of surprise. “What luck! I was going to try to find out when you were likely to be in—and here you are! Concierges are always so secretive that I’d written as well.” She held the envelope up with her brilliant smile. “Am I butting in? Or may I come and have a talk?”

I led her to the reading-room which Mrs. Glenn had so lately left, and suggested the cup of tea which I had forgotten to offer to her predecessor.

She made a gay grimace. “Tea? Oh, no—thanks. Perhaps we might go round presently to the Nouveau Luxe grill for a cock-tail. But it’s rather early yet; there’s nobody there at this hour. And I want to talk to you about Stevie.”

She settled herself in Mrs. Glenn’s corner, and as she sat there, slender and alert in her perfectly-cut dark coat and skirt, with her silver fox slung at the exact fashion-plate angle, I felt the irony of these two women succeeding each other in the same seat to talk to me on the same subject. Mrs. Brown groped in her bag for a jade cigarette-case, and lifted her smiling eyes to mine. “Catherine’s just been here, hasn’t she? I passed her in a taxi at the corner,” she remarked lightly.

“She’s been here; yes. I scolded her for not being in her own motor,” I rejoined, with an attempt at the same tone.

Mrs. Brown laughed. “I knew you would! But I’d taken the motor on purpose to prevent her going out. She has a very bad cold, as I told you; and the doctor has absolutely forbidden—”

"Then why didn't you let me go to see her?"

"Because the doctor forbids her to see visitors. I told you that too. Didn't you notice how hoarse she is?"

I felt my anger rising. "I noticed how unhappy she is," I said bluntly.

"Oh, unhappy—why is she unhappy? If I were in her place I should just lie back and enjoy life," said Mrs. Brown, with a sort of cold impatience.

"She's unhappy about Stephen."

Mrs. Brown looked at me quickly. "She came here to tell you so, I suppose? Well—he *has* behaved badly."

"Why did you let him?"

She laughed again, this time ironically. "Let him? Ah, you believe in that legend? The legend that I do what I like with Stephen." She bent her head to light another cigarette. "He's behaved just as badly to me, my good man—and to Boy. And *we* don't go about complaining!"

"Why should you, when you see him every day?"

At this she bridled, with a flitting smile. "Can I help it—if it's me he wants?"

"Yes, I believe you can," I said resolutely.

"Oh, thanks! I suppose I ought to take that as a compliment."

"Take it as you like. Why don't you make Stephen see his mother?"

"Dear Mr. Norcutt if I had any influence over Stephen, do you suppose I'd let him quarrel with his bread-and-butter? To put it on utilitarian grounds, why should I?" She lifted her clear shallow eyes and looked straight into mine—and I found no answer. There was something impenetrable to me beneath that shallowness.

"But why did Stephen leave his mother?" I persisted.

She shrugged, and looked down at her rings, among which I fancied I saw a new one, a dark luminous stone in claws of platinum. She caught my glance. "You're admiring my brown diamond? A beauty, isn't it? Dear Catherine gave it to me for Christmas. The angel! Do you suppose I wouldn't do anything to spare her all this misery? I wish I could tell you why Stephen left her. Perhaps . . . perhaps because she *is* such an angel . . . Young men—you understand? She was always wrapping him up, lying awake to listen for his latch-key . . . Steve's rather a Bohemian; suddenly he struck—that's all I know."

I saw at once that this contained a shred of truth wrapped round an impenetrable lie; and I saw also that to tell that lie had not been Mrs. Brown's main object. She had come for a still deeper reason, and I could only wait for her to reveal it.

She glanced up reproachfully. "How hard you are on me—always! From the very first day—don't I know? And never more than now. Don't you suppose I can

guess what you're thinking? You're accusing me of trying to prevent your seeing Catherine; and in reality I came here to ask you to see her—to beg you to—as soon as she's well enough. If you'd only trusted me, instead of persuading her to slip off on the sly and come here in this awful weather . . .”

It was on the tip of my tongue to declare that I was guiltless of such perfidy; but it occurred to me that my visitor might be trying to find out how Mrs. Glenn had known I was in Paris, and I decided to say nothing.

“At any rate, if she's no worse I'm sure she could see you tomorrow. Why not come and dine? I'll carry Boy off to a restaurant, and you and she can have a cosy evening together, like old times. You'd like that, wouldn't you?” Mrs. Brown's face was veiled with a retrospective emotion; I saw that, less acute than Stephen, she still believed in a sentimental past between myself and Catherine Glenn. “She must have been one of the loveliest creatures that ever lived—wasn't she? Even now no one can come up to her. You don't know how I wish she liked me better; that she had more confidence in me. If she had, she'd know that I love Stephen as much as she does—perhaps more. For so many years he was mine, all mine! But it's all so difficult—at this moment, for instance . . .” She paused, jerked her silver fox back into place, and gave me a prolonged view of meditative lashes. At last she said: “Perhaps you don't know that Steve's final folly has been to refuse his allowance. He returned the last cheque to Catherine with a dreadful letter.”

“Dreadful? How?”

“Telling her he was old enough to shift for himself—that he refused to sell his independence any longer; perfect madness.”

“Atrocious cruelty—”

“Yes; that too. I told him so. But do you realise the result?” The lashes, suddenly lifted, gave me the full appeal of wide, transparent eyes. “Steve's starving—voluntarily starving himself. Or would be, if Boy and I hadn't scraped together our last pennies . . .”

“If independence is what he wants, why should he take your pennies when he won't take his mother's?”

“Ah—there's the point. He will.” She looked down again, fretting her rings. “Ill as he is, how could he live if he didn't take somebody's pennies? If I could sell my brown diamond without Catherine's missing it I'd have done it long ago, and you need never have known of all this. But she's so sensitive—and she notices everything. She literally spies on me. I'm at my wits' end. If you'd only help me!”

“How in the world can I?”

“You're the only person who can. If you'd persuade her, as long as this queer

mood of Stephen's lasts, to draw his monthly cheque in my name, I'd see that he gets it—and that he uses it. He would, you know, if he thought it came from Boy and me."

I looked at her quickly. "That's why you want me to see her. To get her to give you her son's allowance?"

Her lips parted as if she were about to return an irritated answer; but she twisted them into a smile. "If you like to describe it in that way—I can't help your putting an unkind interpretation on whatever I do. I was prepared for that when I came here." She turned her bright inclement face on me. "If you think I enjoy humiliating myself! After all, it's not so much for Stephen that I ask it as for his mother. Have you thought of that? If she knew that in his crazy pride he was depriving himself of the most necessary things, wouldn't she do anything on earth to prevent it? She's his *real* mother . . . I'm nothing . . ."

"You're everything, if he sees you and listens to you."

She received this with the air of secret triumph that met every allusion to her power over Stephen. Was she right, I wondered, in saying that she loved him even more than his mother did? "Everything?" she murmured deprecatingly. "It's you who are everything, who can help us all. What can I do?"

I pondered a moment, and then said: "You can let me see Stephen."

The colour rushed up under her powder. "Much good that would do—if I could! But I'm afraid you'll find his door barricaded."

"That's a pity," I said coldly.

"It's very foolish of him," she assented.

Our conversation had reached a deadlock, and I saw that she was distinctly disappointed—perhaps even more than I was. I suspected that while I could afford to wait for a solution she could not.

"Of course, if Catherine is willing to sit by and see the boy starve"—she began.

"What else can she do? Shall we go over to the Nouveau Luxe bar and study the problem from the cock-tail angle?" I suggested.

Mrs. Brown's delicately pencilled brows gathered over her transparent eyes. "You're laughing at me—and at Steve. It's rather heartless of you, you know," she said, making a movement to rise from the deep armchair in which I had installed her. Her movements, as always, were quick and smooth; she got up and sat down with the ease of youth. But her face startled me—it had suddenly shrunk and withered, so that the glitter of cosmetics hung before it like a veil. A pang of compunction shot through me. I felt that it *was* heartless to make her look like that. I could no longer endure the part I was playing. "I'll—I'll see what I can do to arrange things," I

stammered. “If only she’s not too servile,” I thought, feeling that my next move hung on the way in which she received my reassurance.

She stood up with a quick smile. “Ogre!” she just breathed, her lashes dancing. She was laughing at me under her breath—the one thing she could have done just then without offending me. “Come; we *do* need refreshment, don’t we?” She slipped her arm through mine as we crossed the lounge and emerged on the wet pavement.

The cosy evening with which Mrs. Brown had tempted me was not productive of much enlightenment. I found Catherine Glenn tired and pale, but happy at my coming, with a sort of furtive schoolgirl happiness which suggested the same secret apprehension as I had seen in Mrs. Brown's face when she found I would not help her to capture Stephen's allowance. I had already perceived my mistake in letting Mrs. Brown see this, and during our cock-tail epilogue at the Nouveau Luxe had tried to restore her confidence; but her distrust had been aroused, and in spite of her recovered good-humour I felt that I should not be allowed to see Stephen.

In this respect poor Mrs. Glenn could not help me. She could only repeat the lesson which had evidently been drilled into her. "Why should I deny what's so evident—and so natural? When Stevie's ill and unhappy it's not to me he turns. During so many years he knew nothing of me, never even suspected my existence; and all the while *they* were there, watching over him, loving him, slaving for him. If he concealed his real feelings now it might be only on account of the—the financial inducements; and I like to think my boy's too proud for that. If you see him, you'll tell him so, won't you? You'll tell him that, unhappy as he's making me, mistaken as he is, I enter into his feelings as—as only his mother can." She broke down, and hid her face from me.

When she regained her composure she rose and went over to the writing-table. From the blotting-book she drew an envelope. "I've drawn this cheque in your name—it may be easier for you to get Stevie to accept a few bank-notes than a cheque. You must try to persuade him—tell him his behaviour is making the Browns just as unhappy as it is me, and that he has no right to be cruel to them, at any rate." She lifted her head and looked into my eyes heroically.

I went home perplexed, and pondering on my next move; but (not wholly to my surprise) the question was settled for me the following morning by a telephone call from Mrs. Brown. Her voice rang out cheerfully.

"Good news! I've had a talk with Steve's doctor—on the sly, of course. Steve would kill me if he knew! The doctor says he's really better; you can see him today if you'll promise to stay only a few minutes. Of course I must first persuade Steve himself, the silly boy. You can't think what a savage mood he's in. But I'm sure I can bring him round—he's so fond of you. Only before that I want to see you myself—" ("Of course," I commented inwardly, feeling that here at last was the gist of the communication.) "Can I come presently—before you go out? All right; I'll turn up in

an hour.”

Within the hour she was at my hotel; but before her arrival I had decided on my course, and she on her side had probably guessed what it would be. Our first phrases, however, were non-committal. As we exchanged them I saw that Mrs. Brown’s self-confidence was weakening, and this incited me to prolong the exchange. Stephen’s doctor, she assured me, was most encouraging; one lung only was affected, and that slightly; his recovery now depended on careful nursing, good food, cheerful company—all the things of which, in his foolish obstinacy, he had chosen to deprive himself. She paused, expectant—

“And if Mrs. Glenn handed over his allowance to you, you could ensure his accepting what he’s too obstinate to take from his mother?”

Under her carefully prepared complexion the blood rushed to her temples. “I always knew you were Steve’s best friend!” She looked away quickly, as if to hide the triumph in her eyes.

“Well, if I am, he’s first got to recognise it by seeing me.”

“Of course—of course!” She corrected her impetuosity. “I’ll do all I can . . .”

“That’s a great deal, as we know.” Under their lowered lashes her eyes followed my movements as I turned my coat back to reach an inner pocket. She pressed her lips tight to control their twitching. “There, then!” I said.

“Oh, you angel, you! I should never have dared to ask Catherine,” she stammered with a faint laugh as the bank-notes passed from my hand to her bag.

“Mrs. Glenn understood—she always understands.”

“She understands when *you* ask,” Mrs. Brown insinuated, flashing her lifted gaze on mine. The sense of what was in the bag had already given her a draught of courage, and she added quickly: “Of course I needn’t warn you not to speak of all this to Steve. If he knew of our talk it would wreck everything.”

“I can see that,” I remarked, and she dropped her lids again, as though I had caught her in a blunder.

“Well, I must go; I’ll tell him his best friend’s coming . . . I’ll reason with him . . .” she murmured, trying to disguise her embarrassment in emotion. I saw her to the door, and into Mrs. Glenn’s motor, from the interior of which she called back: “You know you’re going to make Catherine as happy as I am.”

Stephen Glenn’s new habitation was in a narrow and unsavoury street, and the building itself contrasted mournfully with the quarters in which he had last received me. As I climbed the greasy stairs I felt as much perplexed as ever. I could not yet see why Stephen’s quarrel with Mrs. Glenn should, even partially, have included the

Browns, nor, if it had, why he should be willing to accept from their depleted purse the funds he was too proud to receive from his mother. It gave me a feeling, of uneasy excitement to know that behind the door at which I stood the answer to these problems awaited me.

No one answered my knock, so I opened the door and went in. The studio was empty, but from the room beyond Stephen's voice called out irritably: "Who is it?" and then, in answer to my name: "Oh, Norcutt—come in."

Stephen Glenn lay in bed, in a small room with a window opening on a dimly-lit inner courtyard. The room was bare and untidy, the bed-clothes were tumbled, and he looked at me with the sick man's instinctive resentfulness at any intrusion on his lonely pain. "Above all," the look seemed to say, "don't try to be kind."

Seeing that moral pillow-smoothing would be resented I sat down beside him without any comment on the dismalness of the scene, or on his own aspect, much as it disquieted me.

"Well, old man—" I began, wondering how to go on; but he cut short my hesitation. "I've been wanting to see you for ever so long," he said.

In my surprise I had nearly replied: "That's not what I'd been told"—but, resolved to go warily, I rejoined with a sham gaiety: "Well, here I am!"

Stephen gave me the remote look which the sick turn on those arch-aliens, the healthy. "Only," he pursued, "I was afraid if you did come you'd begin and lecture me; and I couldn't stand that—I can't stand anything. I'm *raw*!" he burst out.

"You might have known me better than to think I'd lecture you."

"Oh, I don't know. Naturally the one person you care about in all this is—mother Kit."

"Your mother," I interposed.

He raised his eyebrows with the familiar ironic movement; then they drew together again over his sunken eyes. "I wanted to wait till I was up to discussing things. I wanted to get this fever out of me.

"You don't look feverish now."

"No; they've brought it down. But I'm down with it. I'm very low," he said, with a sort of chill impartiality, as though speaking of some one whose disabilities did not greatly move him. I replied that the best way for him to pull himself up again was to get out of his present quarters, and let himself be nursed and looked after.

"Oh, don't argue!" he interrupted.

"Argue—?"

"You're going to tell me to go back to—to my mother. To let her fatten me up. Well, it's no use. I won't take another dollar from her—not one."

I met this in silence, and after a moment perceived that my silence irritated him more than any attempt at argument. I did not want to irritate him, and I began: "Then why don't you go off again with the Browns? There's nothing you can do that your mother won't understand—"

"And suffer from!" he interjected.

"Oh, as to suffering—she's seasoned."

He bent his slow feverish stare on me. "So am I."

"Well, at any rate, you can spare her by going off at once into good air, and trying your level best to get well. You know as well as I do that nothing else matters to her. She'll be glad to have you go away with the Browns—I'll answer for that."

He gave a short laugh, so harsh and disenchanting that I suddenly felt he was right: to laugh like that he must be suffering as much as his mother. I laid my hand on his thin wrist. "Old man—"

He jerked away. "No, no. Go away with the Browns? I'd rather be dead. I'd rather hang on here till I *am* dead."

The outburst was so unexpected that I sat in silent perplexity. Mrs. Brown had told the truth, then, when she said he hated them too? Yet he saw them, he accepted their money . . . The darkness deepened as I peered into it.

Stephen lay with half-closed lids, and I saw that whatever enlightenment he had to give would have to be forced from him. The perception made me take a sudden resolve.

"When one is physically down and out one *is* raw, as you say: one hates everybody. I know you don't really feel like that about the Browns; but if they've got on your nerves, and you want to go off by yourself, you might at least accept the money they're ready to give you—"

He raised himself on his elbow with an ironical stare. "Money? They borrow money; they don't give it."

"Ah—" I thought; but aloud I continued: "They're prepared to give it now. Mrs. Brown tells me—"

He lifted his hand with a gesture that cut me short; then he leaned back, and drew a painful breath or two. Beads of moisture came out on his forehead. "If she told you that, it means she's got more out of Kit. Or out of Kit through *you*—is that it?" he brought out roughly.

His clairvoyance frightened me almost as much as his physical distress—and the one seemed, somehow, a function of the other, as though the wearing down of his flesh had made other people's diaphanous to him, and he could see through it to their hearts. "Stephen—" I began imploringly.

Again his lifted hand checked me. “No, wait.” He breathed hard again and shut his eyes. Then he opened them and looked into mine. “There’s only one way out of this.”

“For you to be reasonable.”

“Call it that if you like. I’ve got to see mother Kit—and without their knowing it.”

My perplexity grew, and my agitation with it. Could it be that the end of the Browns was in sight? I tried to remember that my first business was to avoid communicating my agitation to Stephen. In a tone that I did my best to keep steady I said: “Nothing could make your mother happier. You’re all she lives for.”

“She’ll have to find something else soon.”

“No, no. Only let her come, and she’ll make you well. Mothers work miracles —”

His inscrutable gaze rested on mine. “So they say. Only, you see, she’s not my mother.”

He spoke so quietly, in such a low detached tone, that at first the words carried no meaning to me. If he had been excited I should have suspected fever, delirium; but voice and eyes were clear. “Now you understand,” he added.

I sat beside him stupidly, speechless, unable to think. “I don’t understand anything,” I stammered. Such a possibility as his words suggested had never once occurred to me. Yet he wasn’t delirious, he wasn’t raving—it was I whose brain was reeling as if in fever.

“Well, I’m not the long-lost child. The Browns are not *her* Browns. It’s all a lie and an imposture. We faked it up between us, Chrissy and I did—her simplicity made it so cursedly easy for us. Boy didn’t have much to do with it; poor old Boy! He just sat back and took his share . . . *Now* you do see,” he repeated, in the cool explanatory tone in which he might have set forth some one else’s shortcomings.

My mind was still a blur while he poured out, in broken sentences, the details of the conspiracy—the sordid tale of a trio of society adventurers come to the end of their resources, and suddenly clutching at this unheard-of chance of rescue, affluence, peace. But gradually, as I listened, the glare of horror with which he was blinding me turned into a strangely clear and penetrating light, forcing its way into obscure crannies, elucidating the incomprehensible, picking out one by one the links that bound together his fragments of fact. I saw—but what I saw my gaze shrank from.

“Well,” I heard him say, between his difficult breaths, “now do you begin to believe me?”

"I don't know. I can't tell. Why on earth," I broke out, suddenly relieved at the idea, "should you want to see your mother if this isn't all a ghastly invention?"

"To tell her what I've just told you—make a clean breast of it. Can't you see?"

"If that's the reason, I see you want to kill her—that's all."

He grew paler under his paleness. "Norcutt, I can't go on like this; I've got to tell her. I want to do it at once. I thought I could keep up the lie a little longer—let things go on drifting—but I can't. I held out because I wanted to get well first, and paint her picture—leave her that to be proud of, anyhow! Now that's all over, and there's nothing left but the naked shame . . ." He opened his eyes and fixed them again on mine. "I want you to bring her here today—without *their* knowing it. You've got to manage it somehow. It'll be the first decent thing I've done in years."

"It will be the most unpardonable," I interrupted angrily. "The time's past for trying to square your own conscience. What you've got to do now is to go on lying to her—you've got to get well, if only to go on lying to her!"

A thin smile flickered over his face. "I can't get well."

"That's as it may be. You can spare her, anyhow."

"By letting things go on like this?" He lay for a long time silent; then his lips drew up in a queer grimace. "It'll be horrible enough to be a sort of expiation—"

"It's the only one."

"It's the worst."

He sank back wearily. I saw that fatigue had silenced him, and wondered if I ought to steal away. My presence could not but be agitating; yet in his present state it seemed almost as dangerous to leave him as to stay. I saw a flask of brandy on the table, a glass beside it. I poured out some brandy and held it to his lips. He emptied the glass slowly, and as his head fell back I heard him say: "Before I knew her I thought I could pull it off. . . . But, you see, her sweetness . . ."

"If she heard you say that it would make up for everything."

"Even for what I've just told you?"

"Even for that. For God's sake hold your tongue, and just let her come here and nurse you."

He made no answer, but under his lids I saw a tear or two.

"Let her come—let her come," I pleaded, taking his dying hand in mine.

XI

Nature does not seem to care for dramatic climaxes. Instead of allowing Stephen to die at once, his secret on his lips, she laid on him the harsher task of living on through weary weeks, and keeping back the truth till the end.

As the result of my visit, he consented, the next day, to be carried back in an ambulance to Mrs. Glenn's; and when I saw their meeting it seemed to me that ties of blood were frail compared to what drew those two together. After she had fallen on her knees at his bedside, and drawn his head to her breast, I was almost sure he would not speak; and he did not.

I was able to stay with Mrs. Glenn till Stephen died; then I had to hurry back to my post in Washington. When I took leave of her she told me that she was following on the next steamer with Stephen's body. She wished her son to have a New York funeral, a funeral like his father's, at which all their old friends could be present. "Not like poor Phil's, you know—" and I recalled the importance she had attached to the presence of her husband's friends at his funeral. "It's something to remember afterwards," she said, with dry eyes. "And it will be their only way of knowing my Stephen . . ." It was of course impossible to exclude Mr. and Mrs. Brown from these melancholy rites; and accordingly they sailed with her.

If Stephen had recovered she had meant, as I knew, to re-open her New York house; but now that was not to be thought of. She sold the house, and all it contained, and a few weeks later sailed once more for Paris—again with the Browns.

I had resolved, after Stephen's death—when the first shock was over—to do what I could toward relieving her of the Browns' presence. Though I could not tell her the truth about them, I might perhaps help her to effect some transaction which would relieve her of their company. But I soon saw that this was out of the question; and the reason deepened my perplexity. It was simply that the Browns—or at least Mrs. Brown—had become Mrs. Glenn's chief consolation in her sorrow. The two women, so incessantly at odds while Stephen lived, were now joined in a common desolation. It seemed like profaning Catherine Glenn's grief to compare Mrs. Brown's to it; yet, in the first weeks after Stephen's death, I had to admit that Mrs. Brown mourned him as genuinely, as inconsolably, as his supposed mother. Indeed, it would be nearer the truth to say that Mrs. Brown's grief was more hopeless and rebellious than the other's. After all, as Mrs. Glenn said, it was much worse for Chrissy. "She had so little compared to me; and she gave as much, I suppose. Think what I had that she's never known; those precious months of waiting for him, when

he was part of me, when we were one body and one soul. And then, years afterward, when I was searching for him, and knowing all the while I should find him; and after that, our perfect life together—our perfect understanding. All that—there’s all that left to me! And what did she have? Why, when she shows me his little socks and shoes (she’s kept them all so carefully) they’re *my* baby’s socks and shoes, not hers—and I know she’s thinking of it when we cry over them. I see now that I’ve been unjust to her . . . and cruel . . . For he *did* love me best; and that ought to have made me kinder—”

Yes; I had to recognise that Mrs. Brown’s grief was as genuine as her rival’s, that she suffered more bleakly and bitterly. Every turn of the strange story had been improbable and incalculable, and this new freak of fate was the most unexpected. But since it brought a softening to my poor friend’s affliction, and offered a new pretext for her self-devotion, I could only hold my tongue and be thankful that the Browns were at last serving some humaner purpose.

The next time I returned to Paris the strange trio were still together, and still living in Mrs. Glenn’s apartment. Its walls were now hung with Stephen’s paintings and sketches—among them many unfinished attempts at a portrait of Mrs. Glenn—and the one mother seemed as eager as the other to tell me that a well-known collector of modern art had been so struck by their quality that there was already some talk of a posthumous exhibition. Mrs. Brown triumphed peculiarly in the affair. It was she who had brought the collector to see the pictures, she who had always known that Stephen had genius; it was with the Browns’ meagre pennies that he had been able to carry on his studies at Julian’s, long before Mrs. Glenn had appeared. “Catherine doesn’t pretend to know much about art. Do you, my dear? But, as I tell her, when you’re a picture yourself you don’t have to bother about other people’s pictures. There—your hat’s crooked again! Just let me straighten it, darling—” I saw Mrs. Glenn wince a little, as she had winced the day at Les Calanques when Mrs. Brown, with an arch side-glance at me, had given a more artful twist to her friend’s white hair.

It was evident that time, in drying up the source which had nourished the two women’s sympathy, had revived their fundamental antagonism. It was equally clear, however, that Mrs. Brown was making every effort to keep on good terms with Mrs. Glenn. That substantial benefits thereby accrued to her I had no doubt; but at least she kept up in Catherine’s mind the illusion of the tie between them.

Mrs. Brown had certainly sorrowed for Stephen as profoundly as a woman of her kind could sorrow; more profoundly, indeed, than I had thought possible. Even now, when she spoke of him, her metallic voice broke, her metallic mask softened.

On the rare occasions when I found myself alone with her (and I had an idea she saw to it that they were rare), she spoke so tenderly of Stephen, so affectionately of Mrs. Glenn, that I could only suppose she knew nothing of my last talk with the poor fellow. If she had, she would almost certainly have tried to ensure my silence; unless, as I sometimes imagined, a supreme art led her to feign unawareness. But, as always when I speculated on Mrs. Brown, I ended up against a blank wall.

The exhibition of Stephen's pictures took place, and caused (I learned from Mrs. Glenn) a little flutter in the inner circle of connoisseurs. Mrs. Glenn deluged me with newspaper rhapsodies which she doubtless never imagined had been bought. But presently, as a result of the show, a new difference arose between the two women. The pictures had been sufficiently remarked for several purchasers to present themselves, and their offers were so handsome that Mrs. Brown thought they should be accepted. After all, Stephen would have regarded the sale of the pictures as the best proof of his success; if they remained hidden away at Mrs. Glenn's, she, who had the custody of his name, was obviously dooming it to obscurity. Nevertheless she persisted in refusing. If selling her darling's pictures was the price of glory, then she must cherish his genius in secret. Could any one imagine that she would ever part with a single stroke of his brush? She was his mother; no one else had a voice in the matter. I divined that the struggle between herself and Mrs. Brown had been not only sharp but prolonged, and marked by a painful interchange of taunts. "If it hadn't been for me," Mrs. Brown argued, "the pictures would never have existed"; and "If it hadn't been for me," the other retorted, "my Stephen would never have existed." It ended—as I had foreseen—in the adoptive parents accepting from Mrs. Glenn a sum equivalent to the value at which they estimated the pictures. The quarrel quieted down, and a few months later Mrs. Glenn was remorsefully accusing herself of having been too hard on Chrissy.

So the months passed. With their passage news came to me more rarely; but I gathered from Mrs. Glenn's infrequent letters that she had been ill, and from her almost illegible writing that her poor hands were stiffening with rheumatism. Finally, a year later, a letter announced that the doctors had warned her against spending her winters in the damp climate of Paris, and that the apartment had been disposed of, and its contents (including, of course, Stephen's pictures) transported to a villa at Nice. The Browns had found the villa and managed the translation—with their usual kindness. After that there was a long silence.

It was not until over two years later that I returned to Europe; and as my short holiday was taken in winter, and I meant to spend it in Italy, I took steamer directly to Villefranche. I had not announced my visit to Mrs. Glenn. I was not sure till the

last moment of being able to get off; but that was not the chief cause of my silence. Though relations between the incongruous trio seemed to have become harmonious, it was not without apprehension that I had seen Mrs. Glenn leave New York with the Browns. She was old, she was tired and stricken; how long would it be before she became a burden to her beneficiaries? This was what I wanted to find out without giving them time to prepare themselves or their companion for my visit. Mrs. Glenn had written that she wished very particularly to see me, and had begged me to let her know if there were a chance of my coming abroad; but though this increased my anxiety it strengthened my resolve to arrive unannounced, and I merely replied that she could count on seeing me as soon as I was able to get away.

Though some months had since gone by I was fairly sure of finding her still at Nice, for in the newspapers I had bought on landing I had lit on several allusions to Mr. and Mrs. Boydon Brown. Apparently the couple had an active press-agent, for an attentive world was daily supplied with a minute description of Mrs. "Boy" Brown's casino toilets, the value of the golf or pigeon-shooting cups offered by Mr. "Boy" Brown to various fashionable sporting clubs, and the names of the titled guests whom they entertained at the local "Lidos" and "Jardins Fleuris." I wondered how much the chronicling of these events was costing Mrs. Glenn, but reminded myself that it was part of the price she had to pay for the hours of communion over Stephen's little socks. At any rate it proved that my old friend was still in the neighbourhood; and the next day I set out to find her.

I waited till the afternoon, on the chance of her being alone at the hour when mundane affairs were most likely to engage the Browns; but when my taxi-driver had brought me to the address I had given him I found a locked garden-gate and a shuttered house. The sudden fear of some new calamity seized me. My first thought was that Mrs. Glenn must have died; yet if her death had occurred before my sailing I could hardly have failed to hear of it, and if it was more recent I must have seen it announced in the papers I had read since landing. Besides, if the Browns had so lately lost their benefactress they would hardly have played such a part in the social chronicles I had been studying. There was no particular reason why a change of address should portend tragedy; and when at length a reluctant portress appeared in answer to my ringing she said, yes, if it was the Americans I was after, I was right: they had moved away a week ago. Moved—and where to? She shrugged and declared she didn't know; but probably not far, she thought, with the old white-haired lady so ill and helpless.

"Ill and helpless—then why did they move?"

She shrugged again. "When people don't pay their rent, they have to move,

don't they? When they don't even settle with the butcher and baker before they go, or with the laundress who was fool enough to do their washing—and it's I who speak to you, Monsieur!"

This was worse than I had imagined. I produced a bank-note, and in return the victimized concierge admitted that she had secured the fugitives' new address—though they were naturally not anxious to have it known. As I had surmised, they had taken refuge within the kindly bounds of the principality of Monaco; and the taxi carried me to a small shabby hotel in one of the steep streets above the Casino. I could imagine nothing less in harmony with Catherine Glenn or her condition than to be ill and unhappy in such a place. My only consolation was that now perhaps there might be an end to the disastrous adventure. "After all," I thought, as I looked up at the cheerless front of the hotel, "if the catastrophe has come the Browns can't have any reason for hanging on to her."

A red-faced lady with a false front and false teeth emerged from the back-office to receive me.

Madame Glenn—Madame Brown? Oh, yes; they were staying at the hotel—they were both upstairs now, she believed. Perhaps Monsieur was the gentleman that Madame Brown was expecting? She had left word that if he came he was to go up without being announced.

I was inspired to say that I was that gentleman; at which the landlady rejoined that she was sorry the lift was out of order, but that I would find the ladies at number 5 on the third floor. Before she had finished I was half way up.

A few steps down an unventilated corridor brought me to number 5; but I did not have to knock, for the door was ajar—perhaps in expectation of the other gentleman. I pushed it open, and entered a small plushy sitting-room, with faded mimosa in ornate vases, newspapers and cigarette-ends scattered on the dirty carpet, and a bronzed-over plaster Bayadère posturing before the mantelpiece mirror. If my first glance took such sharp note of these details it is because they seemed almost as much out of keeping with Catherine Glenn as the table laden with gin and bitters, empty cock-tail glasses and disks of sodden lemon.

It was not the first time it had occurred to me that I was partly responsible for Mrs. Glenn's unhappy situation. The growing sense of that responsibility had been one of my reasons for trying to keep an eye on her, for wanting her to feel that in case of need she could count on me. But on the whole my conscience had not been oppressed. The impulse which had made me exact from Stephen the promise never to undeceive her had necessarily governed my own conduct. I had only to recall Catherine Glenn as I had first known her to feel sure that, after all, her life had been

richer and deeper than if she had spent it, childless and purposeless, in the solemn upholstery of her New York house. I had had nothing to do with her starting on her strange quest; but I was certain that in what had followed she had so far found more happiness than sorrow.

But now? As I stood in that wretched tawdry room I wondered if I had not laid too heavy a burden on my conscience in keeping the truth from her. Suddenly I said to myself: "The time has come—whatever happens I must get her away from these people." But then I remembered how Stephen's death had drawn the two ill-assorted women together, and wondered if to destroy that tie would not now be the crowning cruelty.

I was still uneasily deliberating when I heard a voice behind the door opposite the one by which I had entered. The room beyond must have been darkened, for I had not noticed before that this door was also partly open. "Well, have you had your nap?" a woman's voice said irritably. "Is there anything you want before I go out? I told you that the man who's going to arrange for the loan is coming for me. He'll be here in a minute." The voice was Mrs. Brown's, but so sharpened and altered that at first I had not known it. "This is how she speaks when she thinks there's no one listening," I thought.

I caught an indistinct murmur in reply; then the rattle of drawn-back curtain-rings; then Mrs. Brown continuing: "Well, you may as well sign the letter now. Here it is—you've only got to write your name . . . Your glasses? I don't know where your glasses are—you're always dropping your things about. I'm sorry I can't keep a maid to wait on you—but there's nothing in this letter you need be afraid of. I've told you before that it's only a formality. Boy's told you so too, hasn't he? I don't suppose you mean to suggest that we're trying to do you out of your money, do you? We've got to have enough to keep going. Here, let me hold your hand while you sign. My hand's shaky too . . . it's all this beastly worry . . . Don't you imagine you're the only person who's had a bad time of it . . . Why, what's the matter? Why are you pushing me away—?"

Till now I had stood motionless, unabashed by the fact that I was eaves-dropping. I was ready enough to stoop to that if there was no other way of getting at the truth. But at the question: "Why are you pushing me away?" I knocked hurriedly at the door of the inner room.

There was a silence after my knock. "There he is! You'll have to sign now," I heard Mrs. Brown exclaim; and I opened the door and went in. The room was a bedroom; like the other, it was untidy and shabby. I noticed a stack of canvases, framed and unframed, piled up against the wall. In an armchair near the window

Mrs. Glenn was seated. She was wrapped in some sort of dark dressing-gown, and a lace cap covered her white hair. The face that looked out from it had still the same carven beauty; but its texture had dwindled from marble to worn ivory. Her body too had shrunk, so that, low in her chair, under her loose garments, she seemed to have turned into a little broken doll. Mrs. Brown, on the contrary, perhaps by contrast, appeared large and almost towering. At first glance I was more startled by the change in her appearance than in Mrs. Glenn's. The latter had merely followed, more quickly than I had hoped she would, the natural decline of the years; whereas Mrs. Brown seemed like another woman. It was not only that she had grown stout and heavy, or that her complexion had coarsened so noticeably under the skilful make-up. In spite of her good clothes and studied coiffure there was something haphazard and untidy in her appearance. Her hat, I noticed, had slipped a little sideways on her smartly waved head, her bright shallow eyes looked blurred and red, and she held herself with a sort of vacillating erectness. Gradually the incredible fact was borne in on me; Mrs. Brown had been drinking.

"Why, where on earth—?" she broke out, bewildered, as my identity dawned on her. She put up a hand to straighten her hat, and in doing so dragged it over too far on the other side.

"I beg your pardon. I was told to come to number 5, and as there was no one in the sitting-room I knocked on this door."

"Oh, you knocked? I didn't hear you knock," said Mrs. Brown suspiciously; but I had no ears for her, for my old friend had also recognised me, and was holding out her trembling hands. "I knew you'd come—I said you'd come!" she cried out to me.

Mrs. Brown laughed. "Well, you've said he would often enough. But it's taken some time for it to come true."

"I knew you'd come," Mrs. Glenn repeated, and I felt her hand pass tremblingly over my hair as I stooped to kiss her.

"Lovers' meeting!" Mrs. Brown tossed at us with an unsteady gaiety; then she leaned against the door, and stood looking on ironically. "You didn't expect to find us in this palatial abode, did you?"

"No. I went to the villa first."

Mrs. Glenn's eyes dwelt on me softly. I sat down beside her, and she put her hand in mine. Her withered fingers trembled incessantly.

"Perhaps," Mrs. Brown went on, "if you'd come sooner you might have arranged things so that we could have stayed there. I'm powerless—I can't do anything with her. The fact that for years I looked after the child she deserted weighs nothing with her. She doesn't seem to think she owes us anything."

Mrs. Glenn listened in silence, without looking at her accuser. She kept her large sunken eyes fixed on mine. "There's no money left," she said when the other ended.

"No money! No money! That's always the tune nowadays. There was always plenty of money for her precious—money for all his whims and fancies, for journeys, for motors, for doctors, for—well, what's the use of going on? But now that there's nobody left but Boy and me, who slaved for her darling for years, who spent our last penny on him when his mother'd forgotten his existence—now there's nothing left! Now she can't afford anything; now she won't even pay her own bills; now she'd sooner starve herself to death than let us have what she owes us . . ."

"My dear—my dear," Mrs. Glenn murmured, her eyes still on mine.

"Oh, don't 'my dear' me," Mrs. Brown retorted passionately. "What you mean is: 'How can you talk like that before him?' I suppose you think I wish he hadn't come. Well, you never were more mistaken. I'm glad he's here; I'm glad he's found out where you're living, and how you're living. Only this time I mean him to hear our side of the story instead of only yours."

Mrs. Glenn pressed my hand in her twitching fingers. "She wants me to sign a paper. I don't understand."

"You don't understand? Didn't Boy explain it to you? You said you understood then." Mrs. Brown turned to me with a shrug. "These whims and capers . . . all I want is money enough to pay the bills . . . so that we're not turned out of this hole too . . ."

"There is no money," Mrs. Glenn softly reiterated.

My heart stood still. The scene must at all costs be ended, yet I could think of no way of silencing the angry woman. At length I said: "If you'll leave me for a little while with Mrs. Glenn perhaps she'll be able to tell me—"

"How's she to tell you what she says she doesn't understand herself? If I leave her with you all she'll tell you is lies about us—I found that out long ago." Mrs. Brown took a few steps in my direction, and then, catching at the window-curtain, looked at me with a foolish laugh. "Not that I'm pining for her society. I have a good deal of it in the long run. But you'll excuse me for saying that, as far as this matter is concerned, it's entirely between Mrs. Glenn and me."

I tightened my hold on Mrs. Glenn's hand, and sat looking at Mrs. Brown in the hope that a silent exchange of glances might lead farther than the vain bandying of arguments. For a moment she seemed dominated; I began to think she had read in my eyes the warning I had tried to put there. If there was any money left I might be able to get it from Catherine after her own attempts had failed; that was what I was trying to remind her of, and what she understood my looks were saying. Once

before I had done the trick; supposing she were to trust me to try again? I saw that she wavered; but her brain was not alert, as it had been on that other occasion. She continued to stare at me through a blur of drink and anger; I could see her thoughts clutching uneasily at my suggestion and then losing their hold on it. "Oh, we all know you think you're God Almighty!" she broke out with a contemptuous toss.

"I think I could help you if I could have a quiet talk with Mrs. Glenn."

"Well, you can have your quiet talk." She looked about her, and pulling up a chair plumped down into it heavily. "I'd love to hear what you've got to say to each other," she declared.

Mrs. Glenn's hand began to shake again. She turned her head toward Mrs. Brown. "My dear, I should like to see my friend alone."

"I should like! I should like! I daresay you would. It's always been what *you'd* like—but now it's going to be what I choose. And I choose to assist at the conversation between Mrs. Glenn and Mr. Norcutt, instead of letting them quietly say horrors about me behind my back."

"Oh, Chrissy—" my old friend murmured; then she turned to me and said: "You'd better come back another day."

Mrs. Brown looked at me with a sort of feeble cunning. "Oh, you needn't send him away. I've told you my friend's coming—he'll be here in a minute. If you'll sign that letter I'll take it to the bank with him, and Mr. Norcutt can stay here and tell you all the news. Now wouldn't that be nice and cosy?" she concluded coaxingly.

Looking into Mrs. Glenn's pale frightened face I was on the point of saying: "Well, sign it then, whatever it is—anything to get her to go." But Mrs. Glenn straightened her drooping shoulders and repeated softly: "I can't sign it."

A flush rose to Mrs. Brown's forehead. "You can't? That's final, is it?" She turned to me. "It's all money she owed us, mind you—money we've advanced to her—in one way or another. Every penny of it. And now she sits there and says she won't pay us!"

Mrs. Glenn, twisting her fingers into mine, gave a barely audible laugh. "Now he's here I'm safe," she said.

The crimson of Mrs. Brown's face darkened to purple. Her lower lip trembled and I saw she was struggling for words that her dimmed brain could not supply. "God Almighty—you think he's God Almighty!" She evidently felt the inadequacy of this, for she stood up suddenly, and coming close to Mrs. Glenn's armchair, stood looking down on her in impotent anger. "Well, I'll show you—" She turned to me, moved by another impulse. "You know well enough you could make her sign if you chose to."

My eyes and Mrs. Brown's met again. Hers were saying: "It's your last chance—it's *her* last chance. I warn you—" and mine replying: "Nonsense, you can't frighten us; you can't even frighten *her* while I'm here. And if she doesn't want to sign you shan't force her to. I have something up my sleeve that would shut you up in five seconds if you knew."

She kept her thick stare on mine till I felt as if my silent signal must have penetrated it. But she said nothing, and at last I exclaimed: "You know well enough the risk you're running—"

Perhaps I had better not have spoken. But that dumb dialogue was getting on my nerves. If she wouldn't see, it was time to make her—

Ah, she saw now—she saw fast enough! My words seemed to have cleared the last fumes from her brain. She gave me back my look with one almost as steady; then she laughed.

"The risk I'm running? Oh, that's it, is it? That's the pull you thought you had over me? Well, I'm glad to know—and I'm glad to tell you that I've known all along that you knew. I'm sick and tired of all the humbug—if she won't sign I'm going to tell her everything myself. So now the cards are on the table, and you can take your choice. It's up to you. The risk's on your side now!"

The unaccountable woman—drunkenly incoherent a moment ago, and now hitting the nail on the head with such fiendish precision! I sat silent, meditating her hideous challenge without knowing how to meet it. And then I became aware that a quiver had passed over Mrs. Glenn's face, which had become smaller and more ivory-yellow than before. She leaned toward me as if Mrs. Brown, who stood close above us, could not hear what we were saying.

"What is it she means to tell me? I don't care unless it's something bad about Stevie. And it couldn't be that, could it? How does she know? No one can come between a son and his mother."

Mrs. Brown gave one of her sudden laughs. "A son and his mother? I daresay not! Only I'm just about fed up with having you think you're his mother."

It was the one thing I had not foreseen—that she would possess herself of my threat and turn it against me. The risk was too deadly; and so no doubt she would have felt if she had been in a state to measure it. She was not; and there lay the peril.

Mrs. Glenn sat quite still after the other's outcry, and I hoped it had blown past her like some mere rag of rhetoric. Then I saw that the meaning of the words had reached her, but without carrying conviction. She glanced at me with the flicker of a smile. "Now she says I'm not his mother—!" It's her last round of ammunition; but don't be afraid—it won't make me sign, the smile seemed to whisper to me.

Mrs. Brown caught the unspoken whisper, and her exasperation rushed to meet it. “You don’t believe me? I knew you wouldn’t! Well, ask your friend here; ask Mr. Norcutt; you always believe everything he says. He’s known the truth for ever so long—long before Stephen died he knew he wasn’t your son.”

I jumped up, as if to put myself between my friend and some bodily harm: but she held fast to my hand with her clinging twitching fingers. “As if she knew what it is to have a son! All those long months when he’s one with you . . . *Mothers* know,” she said.

“Mothers, yes! I don’t say you didn’t have a son and desert him. I say that son wasn’t Stephen. Don’t you suppose I know? Sometimes I’ve wanted to laugh in your face at the way you went on about him . . . Sometimes I used to have to rush out of the room, just to have my laugh out by myself . . .”

Mrs. Brown stopped with a gasp, as if the fury of the outburst had shaken her back to soberness, and she saw for the first time what she had done. Mrs. Glenn sat with her head bowed; her hand had grown cold in mine. I looked at Mrs. Brown and said: “Now won’t you leave us? I suppose there’s nothing left to say.”

She blinked at me through her heavy lids; I saw she was wavering. But at the same moment Mrs. Glenn’s clutch tightened; she drew me down to her, and looked at me out of her deep eyes. “What does she mean when she says you knew about Stevie?”

I pressed her hand without answering. All my mind was concentrated on the effort of silencing my antagonist and getting her out of the room. Mrs. Brown leaned in the window-frame and looked down on us. I could see that she was dismayed at what she had said, and yet exultant; and my business was to work on the dismay before the exultation mastered it. But Mrs. Glenn still held me down: her eyes seemed to be forcing their gaze into me. “Is it true?” she asked almost inaudibly.

“True?” Mrs. Brown burst out. “Ask him to swear to you it’s not true—see what he looks like then! He was in the conspiracy, you old simpleton.”

Mrs. Glenn’s head straightened itself again on her weak neck: her face wore a singular majesty. “You were my friend—” she appealed to me.

“I’ve always been your friend.”

“Then I don’t have to believe her.”

Mrs. Brown seemed to have been gathering herself up for a last onslaught. She saw that I was afraid to try to force her from the room, and the discovery gave her a sense of hazy triumph, as if all that was left to her was to defy me. “Tell her I’m lying—why don’t you tell her I’m lying?” she taunted me.

I knelt down by my old friend and put my arm about her. “Will you come away

with me now—at once? I'll take you wherever you want to go . . . I'll look after you . . . I'll always look after you.”

Mrs. Glenn's eyes grew wider. She seemed to weigh my words till their sense penetrated her; then she said, in the same low voice: “It is true, then?”

“Come away with me; come away with me,” I repeated.

I felt her trying to rise; but her feet failed under her and she sank back. “Yes, take me away from her,” she said.

Mrs. Brown laughed. “Oh, that's it, is it? ‘Come away from that bad woman, and I'll explain everything, and make it all right’ . . . Why don't you adopt *him* instead of Steve? I daresay that's what he's been after all the time. That's the reason he was so determined we shouldn't have your money . . .” She drew back, and pointed to the door. “You can go with him—who's to prevent you? I couldn't if I wanted to. I see now it's for him we've been nursing your precious millions . . . Well, go with him, and he'll tell you the whole story . . .” A strange secretive smile stole over her face. “All except one bit . . . there's one bit he doesn't know; but *you're* going to know it now.”

She stepped nearer, and I held up my hand; but she hurried on, her eyes on Mrs. Glenn. “What he doesn't know is why we fixed the thing up. Steve wasn't my adopted son any more than he was your real one. Adopted son, indeed! How old do you suppose I am? He was my lover. There—do you understand? My Lover! That's why we faked up that ridiculous adoption story, and all the rest of it—because he was desperately ill, and down and out, and we hadn't a penny, the three of us, and I had to have money for him, and didn't care how I got it, didn't care for anything on earth but seeing him well again, and happy.” She stopped and drew a panting breath. “There—I'd rather have told you that than have your money. I'd rather you should know what Steve was to me than think any longer that you owned him . . .”

I was still kneeling by Mrs. Glenn, my arm about her. Once I felt her heart give a great shake; then it seemed to stop altogether. Her eyes were no longer turned to me, but fixed in a wide stare on Mrs. Brown. A tremor convulsed her face; then, to my amazement, it was smoothed into an expression of childish serenity, and a faint smile, half playful, half ironic, stole over it.

She raised her hand and pointed tremulously to the other's disordered headgear. “My dear—your hat's crooked,” she said.

For a moment I was bewildered; then I saw that, very gently, she was at last returning the taunt that Mrs. Brown had so often addressed to her. The shot fired, she leaned back against me with the satisfied sigh of a child; and immediately I

understood that Mrs. Brown's blow had gone wide. A pitying fate had darkened Catherine Glenn's intelligence at the exact moment when to see clearly would have been the final anguish.

Mrs. Brown understood too. She stood looking at us doubtfully; then she said in a tone of feeble defiance: "Well, I had to tell her."

She turned and went out of the room, and I continued to kneel by Mrs. Glenn. Her eyes had gradually clouded, and I doubted if she still knew me; but her lips nursed their soft smile, and I saw that she must have been waiting for years to launch that little shaft at her enemy.

THE DAY OF THE FUNERAL

His wife had said: "If you don't give her up I'll throw myself from the roof." He had not given her up, and his wife had thrown herself from the roof.

Nothing of this had of course come out at the inquest. Luckily Mrs. Trenham had left no letters or diary—no papers of any sort, in fact; not even a little mound of ashes on the clean hearth. She was the kind of woman who never seemed to have many material appurtenances or encumbrances. And Dr. Lanscomb, who had attended her ever since her husband had been called to his professorship at Kingsborough, testified that she had always been excessively emotional and high-strung, and never "quite right" since her only child had died. The doctor's evidence closed the inquiry; the whole business had not lasted more than ten minutes.

Then, after another endless interval of forty-eight hours, came the funeral. Ambrose Trenham could never afterward recall what he did during those forty-eight hours. His wife's relations lived at the other end of the continent, in California; he himself had no immediate family; and the house—suddenly become strange and unfamiliar, a house that seemed never to have been his—had been given over to benevolent neighbours, soft-stepping motherly women, and to glib, subservient men who looked like a cross between book-agents and revivalists. These men took measures, discussed technical questions in undertones with the motherly women, and presently came back with a coffin with plated handles. Some one asked Trenham what was to be engraved on the plate on the lid, and he said: "Nothing." He understood afterward that the answer had not been what was expected; but at the time every one evidently ascribed it to his being incapacitated by grief.

Before the funeral one horrible moment stood out from the others, though all were horrible. It was when Mrs. Cossett, the wife of the professor of English Literature, came to him and said: "Do you want to see her?"

"See her—?" Trenham gasped, not understanding.

Mrs. Cossett looked surprised, and a little shocked. "The time has come—they must close the coffin . . ."

"Oh, let them close it," was on the tip of the widower's tongue; but he saw from Mrs. Cossett's expression that something very different was expected of him. He got up and followed her out of the room and up the stairs. . . . He looked at his wife. Her face had been spared. . . .

That too was over now, and the funeral as well. Somehow, after all, the time had worn on. At the funeral, Trenham had discovered in himself—he, the absent-minded, the unobservant—an uncanny faculty for singling out every one whom he knew in the

crowded church. It was incredible; sitting in the front pew, his head bowed forward on his hands, he seemed suddenly gifted with the power of knowing who was behind him and on either side. And when the service was over, and to the sound of O Paradise he turned to walk down the nave behind the coffin, though his head was still bowed, and he was not conscious of looking to the right or the left, face after face thrust itself forward into his field of vision—and among them, yes: of a sudden, Barbara Wake's!

The shock was terrible; Trenham had been so sure she would not come. Afterward he understood that she had had to—for the sake of appearances. "Appearances" still ruled at Kingsborough—where didn't they, in the University world, and more especially in New England? But at the moment, and for a long time, Trenham had felt horrified, and outraged in what now seemed his holiest feelings. What right had she? How dared she? It was indecent. . . . In the reaction produced by the shock of seeing her, his remorse for what had happened hardened into icy hate of the woman who had been the cause of the tragedy. The sole cause—for in a flash Trenham had thrown off his own share in the disaster. "The woman tempted me—" Yes, she had! It was what his poor wronged Milly had always said: "You're so weak; and she's always tempting you—"

He used to laugh at the idea of Barbara Wake as a temptress; one of poor Milly's delusions! It seemed to him, then, that he was always pursuing, the girl evading; but now he saw her as his wife had seen her, and despised her accordingly. The indecency of her coming to the funeral! To have another look at him, he supposed. . . . She was insatiable . . . it was as if she could never fill her eyes with him. But, if he could help it, they should never be laid on him again. . . .

II

His indignation grew; it filled the remaining hours of the endless day, the empty hours after the funeral was over; it occupied and sustained him. The President of the University, an old friend, had driven him back to his lonely house, had wanted to get out and come in with him. But Trenham had refused, had shaken hands at the gate, and walked alone up the path to his front door. A cold lunch was waiting on the dining-room table. He left it untouched, poured out some whisky and water, carried the glass into his study, lit his pipe and sat down in his armchair to think, not of his wife, with whom the inquest seemed somehow to have settled his account, but of Barbara Wake. With her he must settle his account himself. And he had known at once how he would do it; simply by tying up all her letters, and the little photograph he always carried in his note-case (the only likeness he had of her), and sending them back without a word.

A word! What word indeed could equal the emphasis of that silence? Barbara Wake had all the feminine passion for going over and over things; talking them inside out; in that respect she was as bad as poor Milly had been, and nothing would humiliate and exasperate her as much as an uncommented gesture of dismissal. It was so fortifying to visualize that scene—the scene of her opening the packet alone in her room—that Trenham's sense of weariness disappeared, his pulses began to drum excitedly, and he was torn by a pang of hunger, the first he had felt in days. Was the cold meat still on the table, he wondered? Shamefacedly he stole back to the dining-room. But the table had been cleared, of course—just today! On ordinary days the maid would leave the empty dishes for hours unremoved; it was one of poor Milly's household grievances. How often he had said to her, impatiently: "Good Lord, what does it matter?" and she had answered: "But, Ambrose, the flies!" . . . And now, of all days, the fool of a maid had cleared away everything. He went back to his study, sat down again, and suddenly felt too hungry to think of anything but his hunger. Even his vengeance no longer nourished him; he felt as if nothing would replace that slice of pressed beef, with potato salad and pickles, of which his eyes had rejected the disgusted glimpse an hour or two earlier.

He fought his hunger for a while longer; then he got up and rang. Promptly, attentively, Jane, the middle-aged disapproving maid, appeared—usually one had to rip out the bell before she disturbed herself. Trenham felt sheepish at having to confess his hunger to her, as if it made him appear unfeeling, unheroic; but he could not help himself. He stammered out that he supposed he ought to eat something . . . and Jane, at once, was all tearful sympathy. "That's right, sir; you must *try* . . . you

must force yourself. . . .” Yes, he said; he realized that. He would force himself. “We were saying in the kitchen, Katy and me, that you couldn’t go on any longer this way. . . .” He could hardly wait till she had used up her phrases and got back to the pantry. . . . Through the half-open dining-room door he listened avidly to her steps coming and going, to the clatter of china, the rattle of the knife-basket. He met her at the door when she returned to tell him that his lunch was ready . . . and that Katy had scrambled some eggs for him the way he liked them.

At the dining-room table, when the door had closed on her, he squared his elbows, bent his head over his plate, and emptied every dish. Had he ever before known the complex exquisiteness of a slice of pressed beef? He filled his glass again, leaned luxuriously, waited without hurry for the cheese and biscuits, the black coffee, and a slice of apple-pie apologetically added from the maids’ dinner—and then—oh, resurrection!—felt for his cigar-case, and calmly, carelessly almost, under Jane’s moist and thankful eyes, cut his Corona and lit it.

“Now he’s saved,” her devout look seemed to say.

III

The letters must be returned at once. But to whom could he entrust them? Certainly not to either one of the maid-servants. And there was no one else but the slow-witted man who looked after the garden and the furnace, and who would have been too much dazed by such a commission to execute it without first receiving the most elaborate and reiterated explanations, and then would probably have delivered the packet to Professor Wake, or posted it—the latter a possibility to be at all costs avoided, since Trenham's writing might have been recognised by someone at the post-office, one of the chief centres of gossip at Kingsborough. How it complicated everything to live in a small, prying community! He had no reason to suppose that any one divined the cause of his wife's death, yet he was aware that people had seen him more than once in out-of-the-way places, and at queer hours, with Barbara Wake; and if his wife knew, why should not others suspect? For a while, at any rate, it behoved him to avoid all appearance of wishing to communicate with the girl. Returning a packet to her on the very day of the funeral would seem particularly suspicious. . . .

Thus, after coffee and cigar, and a nip of old Cognac, argued the normal sensible man that Trenham had become again. But if his nerves had been steadied by food his will had been strengthened by it, and instead of a weak, vacillating wish to let Barbara Wake feel the weight of his scorn he was now animated by the furious resolution to crush her with it, and at once. That packet should be returned to her before night.

He shut the study door, drew out his keys, and unlocked the cabinet in which he kept the letters. He had no need now to listen for his wife's step, or to place himself between the cabinet and the door of the study, as he used to when he thought he heard her coming. Now, had he chosen, he could have spread the letters out all over the table. Jane and Katy were busy in the kitchen, and the rest of the house was his to do what he liked in. He could have sat down and read the serried pages one by one, lingeringly, gloatingly, as he had so often longed to do when the risk was too great—and now they were but so much noisome rubbish to him, to be crammed into a big envelope, and sealed up out of sight. He began to hunt for an envelope. . . .

God! What dozens and dozens of letters there were! And all written within eighteen months. No wonder poor Milly . . . but what a blind reckless fool he had been! The reason of their abundance was, of course, the difficulty of meeting. . . . So often he and Barbara had had to write because they couldn't contrive to see each other . . . but still, this bombardment of letters was monstrous, inexcusable. . . . He

hunted for a long time for an envelope big enough to contain them; finally found one, a huge linen-lined envelope meant for college documents, and jammed the letters into it with averted head. But what, he thought suddenly, if she mistook his silence, imagined he had sent her the letters simply as a measure of prudence? No—that was hardly likely, now that all need of prudence was over; but she might affect to think so, use the idea as a pretext to write and ask what he meant, what she was to understand by his returning her letters without a word. It might give her an opening, which was probably what she was hoping for, and certainly what he was most determined she should not have.

He found a sheet of note-paper, shook his fountain-pen, wrote a few words (hardly looking at the page as he did so), and thrust the note in among the letters. His hands turned clammy as he touched them; he felt cold and sick. . . . And the cursed flap of the envelope wouldn't stick—those linen envelopes were always so stiff. And where the devil was the sealing-wax? He rummaged frantically among the odds and ends on his desk. A provision of sealing-wax used always to be kept in the lower left-hand drawer. He groped about in it and found only some yellowing newspaper cuttings. Milly used to be so careful about seeing that his writing-table was properly supplied; but lately—ah, his poor poor Milly! If she could only know how he was suffering and atoning already. . . . Some string, then. . . . He fished some string out of another drawer. He would have to make it do instead of sealing-wax; he would have to try to tie a double knot. But his fingers, always clumsy, were twitching like a drug-fiend's; the letters seemed to burn them through the envelope. With a shaking hand he addressed the packet, and sat there, his eyes turned from it, while he tried again to think out some safe means of having it delivered. . . .

IV

He dined hungrily, as he had lunched; and after dinner he took his hat from its peg in the hall, and said to Jane: "I think I'll smoke my cigar in the campus."

That was a good idea; he saw at once that she thought it a hopeful sign, his wanting to take the air after being mewed up in the house for so long. The night was cold and moonless, and the college grounds, at that hour, would be a desert. . . . After all, delivering the letters himself was the safest way: openly, at the girl's own door, without any mystery. . . . If Malvina, the Wakes' old maid, should chance to open the door, he'd pull the packet out and say at once: "Oh, Malvina, I've found some books that Miss Barbara lent me last year, and as I'm going away—" He had gradually learned that there was nothing as safe as simplicity.

He was reassured by the fact that the night was so dark. It felt queer, unnatural somehow, to be walking abroad again like the Ambrose Trenham he used to be; he was glad there were so few people about, and that the Kingsborough suburbs were so scantily lit. He walked on, his elbow hitting now and then against the bundle, which bulged out of his pocket. Every time he felt it a sort of nausea rose in him. Professor Wake's house stood half way down one of the quietest of Kingsborough's outlying streets. It was withdrawn from the road under the hanging boughs of old elms; he could just catch a glint of light from one or two windows. And suddenly, as he was almost abreast of the gate, Barbara Wake came out of it.

For a moment she stood glancing about her; then she turned in the direction of the narrow lane bounding the farther side of the property. What took her there, Trenham wondered? His first impulse had been to draw back, and let her go her way; then he saw how providential the encounter was. The lane was dark, deserted—a mere passage between widely scattered houses, all asleep in their gardens. The chilly night had sent people home early; there was not a soul in sight. In another moment the packet would be in her hands, and he would have left her, just silently raising his hat.

He remembered now where she was going. The garage, built in the far corner of the garden, opened into the lane. The Wakes had no chauffeur, and Barbara, who drove the car, was sole mistress of the garage and of its keys. Trenham and she had met there sometimes; a desolate trysting-place! But what could they do, in a town like Kingsborough? At one time she had talked of setting up a studio—she dabbled in painting; but the suggestion had alarmed him (he knew the talk it would create), and he had discouraged her. Most often they took the train and went to Ditson, a manufacturing town an hour away, where no one knew them. . . . But what could she

be going to the garage for at this hour?

The thought of his wife rushed into Trenham's mind. The discovery that she had lived there beside him, knowing all, and that suddenly, when she found she could not regain his affection, life had seemed worthless, and without a moment's hesitation she had left it . . . why, if he had known the quiet woman at his side had such springs of passion in her, how differently he would have regarded her, how little this girl's insipid endearments would have mattered to him! He was a man who could not live without tenderness, without demonstrative tenderness; his own shyness and reticence had to be perpetually broken down, laughingly scattered to the winds. His wife, he now saw, had been too much like him, had secretly suffered from the same inhibitions. She had always seemed ashamed, and frightened by her feeling for him, and half-repelled, half-fascinated by his response. At times he imagined that she found him physically distasteful, and wondered how, that being the case, she could be so fiercely jealous of him. Now he understood that her cold reluctant surrender concealed a passion so violent that it humiliated her, and so incomprehensible that she had never mastered its language. She reminded him of a clumsy little girl he had once known at a dancing class he had been sent to as a boy—a little girl who had a feverish passion for dancing, but could never learn the steps. And because he too had felt the irresistible need to join in the immemorial love-dance he had ended by choosing a partner more skilled in its intricacies. . . .

These thoughts wandered through his mind as he stood watching Barbara Wake. Slowly he took a few steps down the lane; then he halted again. He had not yet made up his mind what to do. If she were going to the garage to get something she had forgotten (as was most probable, at that hour) she would no doubt be coming back in a few moments, and he could meet her and hand her the letters. Above all, he wanted to avoid going into the garage. To do so at that moment would have been a profanation of Milly's memory. He would have liked to efface from his own all recollection of the furtive hours spent there; but the vision returned with intolerable acuity as the girl's slim figure, receding from him, reached the door. How often he had stood at that corner, under those heavy trees, watching for her to appear and slip in ahead of him—so that they should not be seen entering together. The elaborate precautions with which their meetings had been surrounded—how pitifully futile they now seemed! They had not even achieved their purpose, but had only belittled his love and robbed it of its spontaneity. Real passion ought to be free, reckless, audacious, unhampered by the fear of a wife's feelings, of the University's regulations, the President's friendship, the deadly risk of losing one's job and wrecking one's career. It seemed to him now that the love he had given to Barbara

Wake was almost as niggardly as that which he had doled out to his wife. . . .

He walked down the lane and saw that Barbara was going into the garage. It was so dark that he could hardly make out her movements; but as he reached the door she drew out her electric lamp (that recalled memories too), and by its flash he saw her slim gloveless hand put the key into the lock. The key turned, the door creaked, and all was darkness. . . .

The glimpse of her hand reminded him of the first time he had dared to hold it in his and press a kiss on the palm. They had met accidentally in the train, both of them on their way home from Boston, and he had proposed that they should get off at the last station before Kingsborough, and walk back by a short cut he knew, through the woods and along the King river. It was a shining summer day, and the girl had been amused at the idea and had accepted. . . . He could see now every line, every curve of her hand, a quick strong young hand, with long fingers, slightly blunt at the tips, and a sensuous elastic palm. It would be queer to have to carry on life without ever again knowing the feel of that hand. . . .

Of course he would go away; he would have to. If possible he would leave the following week. Perhaps the Faculty would let him advance his Sabbatical year. If not, they would probably let him off for the winter term, and perhaps after that he might make up his mind to resign, and look for a professorship elsewhere—in the south, or in California—as far away from that girl as possible. Meanwhile what he wanted was to get away to some hot climate, steamy, tropical, where one could lie out all night on a white beach and hear the palms chatter to the waves, and the trade-winds blow from God knew where . . . one of those fiery flowery islands where marriage and love were not regarded so solemnly, and a man could follow his instinct without calling down a catastrophe, or feeling himself morally degraded. . . . Above all, he never wanted to see again a woman who argued and worried and reproached, and dramatized things that ought to be as simple as eating and drinking. . . .

Barbara, he had to admit, had never been frightened or worried, had never reproached him. The girl had the true sporting instinct; he never remembered her being afraid of risks, or nervous about “appearances.” Once or twice, at moments when detection seemed imminent, she had half frightened him by her cool resourcefulness. He sneered at the remembrance. “An old hand, no doubt!” But the sneer did not help him. Whose fault was it if the girl had had to master the arts of dissimulation? Whose but his? He alone (he saw in sudden terror) was responsible for what he supposed would be called her downfall. Poor child—poor Barbara! Was it possible that he, the seducer, the corrupter, had presumed to judge her? The

thought was monstrous. . . . His resentment had already vanished like a puff of mist. The feeling of his responsibility, which had seemed so abhorrent, was now almost sweet to him. He was responsible—he owed her something! Thank heaven for that! For now he could raise his passion into a duty, and thus disguised and moralized, could once more—oh, could he, dared he?—admit it openly into his life. The mere possibility made him suddenly feel less cold and desolate. That the something-not-himself that made for Righteousness should take on the tender lineaments, the human warmth of love, should come to sit by his hearth in the shape of Barbara—how warm, how happy and reassured it made him! He had a swift vision of her, actually sitting there in the shabby old leather chair (he would have it recovered), her slim feet on the faded Turkey rug (he would have it replaced). It was almost a pity—he thought madly—that they would probably not be able to stay on at Kingsborough, there, in that very house where for so long he had not even dared to look at her letters. . . . Of course, if they did decide to, he would have it all done over for her.

The garage door creaked and again he saw the flash of the electric lamp on her bare hand as she turned the key; then she moved toward him in the darkness.

“Barbara!”

She stopped short at his whisper. They drew closer to each other. “You wanted to see me?” she whispered back. Her voice flowed over him like summer air.

“Can we go in there—?” he gestured.

“Into the garage? Yes—I suppose so.”

They turned and walked in silence through the obscurity. The comfort of her nearness was indescribable.

She unlocked the door again, and he followed her in. “Take care; I left the wheel-jack somewhere,” she warned him. Automatically he produced a match, and she lit the candle in an old broken-paned lantern that hung on a nail against the wall. How familiar it all was—how often he had brought out his matchbox and she had lit that candle! In the little pool of yellowish light they stood and looked at each other.

“You didn’t expect me?” he stammered.

“I’m not sure I didn’t,” she returned softly, and he just caught her smile in the half-light. The divineness of it!

“I didn’t suppose I should see you. I just wandered out. . . .” He suddenly felt the difficulty of accounting for himself.

“My poor Ambrose!” She laid her hand on his arm. “How I’ve ached for you —”

Yes; that was right; the tender sympathizing friend . . . anything else, at that moment, would have been unthinkable. He drew a breath of relief and self-satisfaction. Her pity made him feel almost heroic—had he not lost sight of his own sufferings in the thought of hers? “It’s been awful—” he muttered.

“Yes; I know.”

She sat down on the step of the old Packard, and he found a wooden stool and dragged it into the candle-ray.

“I’m glad you came,” she began, still in the same soft healing voice, “because I’m going away tomorrow early, and—”

He started to his feet, upsetting the stool with a crash. “Going away? Early tomorrow?” Why hadn’t he known of this? He felt weak and injured. Where could she be going in this sudden way? If they hadn’t happened to meet, would he have known nothing of it till she was gone? His heart grew small and cold.

She was saying quietly: “You must see—it’s better. I’m going out to the Jim

Southwicks, in California. They're always asking me. Mother and father think it's on account of my colds . . . the winter climate here . . . they think I'm right." She paused, but he could find nothing to say. The future had become a featureless desert. "I wanted to see you before going," she continued, "and I didn't exactly know . . . I hoped you'd come—"

"When are you coming back?" he interrupted desperately.

"Oh, I don't know; they want me for the winter, of course. There's a crazy plan about Hawaii and Samoa . . . sounds lovely, doesn't it? And from there on . . . But I don't know. . . ."

He felt a suffocation in his throat. If he didn't cry out, do something at once to stop her, he would choke. "You can't go—you can't leave me like this!" It seemed to him that his voice had risen to a shout.

"Ambrose—" she murmured, subdued, half-warning.

"You can't. How can you? It's madness. You don't understand. You say you ought to go—it's better you should go. What do you mean—why better? Are you afraid of what people might say? Is that it? How can they say anything when they know we're going to be married? Don't you know we're going to be married?" he burst out weakly, his words stumbling over each other in the effort to make her understand.

She hesitated a moment, and he stood waiting in an agony of suspense. How women loved to make men suffer! At last she said in a constrained voice: "I don't think we ought to talk of all this yet—"

Rebuking him—she was actually rebuking him for his magnanimity! But couldn't she see—couldn't she understand? Or was it that she really enjoyed torturing him? "How can I help talking of it, when you tell me you're going away tomorrow morning? Did you really mean to go without even telling me?"

"If I hadn't seen you I should have written," she faltered.

"Well, now I'm here you needn't write. All you've got to do is to answer me," he retorted almost angrily. The calm way in which she dealt with the situation was enough to madden a man—actually as if she hadn't made up her mind, good God! "What are you afraid of?" he burst out harshly.

"I'm not afraid—only I didn't expect . . . I thought we'd talk of all this later . . . if you feel the same when I come back—if we both do."

"If we both do!" Ah, there was the sting—the devil's claw! What was it? Was she being super-humanly magnanimous—or proud, over-sensitive, afraid that he might be making the proposal out of pity? Poor girl—poor child! That must be it. He loved her all the more for it, bless her! Or was it (ah, now again the claw tightened),

was it that she really didn't want to commit herself, wanted to reserve her freedom for this crazy expedition, to see whether she couldn't do better by looking about out there—she, so young, so fresh and radiant—than by binding herself in advance to an elderly professor at Kingsborough? Hawaii—Samoa—swarming with rich idle yachtsmen and young naval officers (he had an excruciating vision of a throng of “Madame Butterfly” tenors in immaculate white duck and gold braid)—cock-tails, fox-trot, moonlight in the tropics . . . he felt suddenly middle-aged, round-shouldered, shabby, with thinning graying hair. . . . Of course what she wanted was to look round and see what her chances were! He retrieved the fallen stool, set it up again, and sat down on it.

“I suppose you're not sure you'll feel the same when you get back? Is that it?” he suggested bitterly.

Again she hesitated. “I don't think we ought to decide now—tonight. . . .”

His anger blazed. “Why oughtn't we? Tell me that! I've decided. Why shouldn't you?”

“You haven't really decided either,” she returned gently.

“I haven't—haven't I? Now what do you mean by that?” He forced a laugh that was meant to be playful but sounded defiant. He was aware that his voice and words were getting out of hand—but what business had she to keep him on the stretch like this?

“I mean, after what you've been through . . .

“After what I've been through? But don't you see that's the very reason? I'm at the breaking-point—I can't bear any more.”

“I know; I know.” She got up and came close, laying a quiet hand on his shoulder. “I've suffered for you too. The shock it must have been. That's the reason why I don't want to say anything now that you might—”

He shook off her hand, and sprang up. “What hypocrisy!” He heard himself beginning to shout again. “I suppose what you mean is that you want to be free to marry out there if you see anybody you like better. Then why not admit it at once?”

“Because it's not what I mean. I don't want to marry any one else, Ambrose.”

Oh, the melting music of it! He lifted his hands and hid his burning eyes in them. The sound of her voice wove magic passes above his forehead. Was it possible that such bliss could come out of such anguish? He forgot the place—forgot the day—and abruptly, blindly, caught her by the arm, and flung his own about her.

“Oh, Ambrose—” he heard her, reproachful, panting. He struggled with her, feverish for her lips.

In the semi-obscurity there was the sound of something crashing to the floor

between them. They drew apart, and she looked at him, bewildered. "What was that?"

What was it? He knew well enough; a shiver of cold ran over him. The letters, of course—her letters! The bulging clumsily-tied envelope had dropped out of his pocket onto the floor of the garage; in the fall the string had come undone, and the mass of papers had tumbled out, scattering themselves like a pack of cards at Barbara's feet. She picked up her electric lamp, and bending over shot its sharp ray on them.

"Why, they're letters! Ambrose—are they my letters?" She waited; but silence lay on him like lead. "Was that what you came for?" she exclaimed.

If there was an answer to that he couldn't find it, and stupidly, without knowing what he was doing, he bent down and began to gather up the letters.

For a while he was aware of her standing there motionless, watching him; then she too bent over, and took up the gaping linen envelope. "Miss Barbara Wake," she read out; and suddenly she began to laugh. "Why," she said, "there's something left in it! A letter for *me*? Is that it?"

He put his hand out. "Barbara—don't! Barbara—I implore you!"

She turned the electric ray on the sheet of paper, which detached itself from the shadows with the solidity of a graven tablet. Slowly she read out, in a cool measured voice, almost as though she were parodying his poor phrases: "November tenth. . . . You will probably feel as I do' (no—don't snatch! Ambrose, I forbid you!) 'You will probably feel, as I do, that after what has happened you and I can never'—" She broke off and raised her eyes to Trenham's. "'After what has happened'? I don't understand. What do you mean? What *has* happened, Ambrose—between you and me?"

He had retreated a few steps, and stood leaning against the side of the motor. "I didn't say 'between you and me.'"

"What did you say?" She turned the light once more on the fatal page. "'You and I can never wish to meet again.'" Her hand sank, and she stood facing him in silence.

Feeling her gaze fixed on him, he muttered miserably: "I asked you not to read the thing."

"But if it was meant for me why do you want me not to read it?"

"Can't you see? It doesn't mean anything. I was raving mad when I wrote it. . . ."

"But you wrote it only a few hours ago. It's dated today. How can you have changed so in a few hours? And you say: 'After what has happened.' That must

mean something. What does it mean? What *has* happened?"

He thought he would go mad indeed if she repeated the word again. "Oh, don't—!" he exclaimed.

"Don't what?"

"Say it over and over—'what has happened?' Can't you understand that just at first—"

He broke off, and she prompted him: "Just at first—?"

"I couldn't bear the horror alone. Like a miserable coward I let myself think you were partly responsible—I wanted to think so, you understand. . . ."

Her face seemed to grow white and wavering in the shadows. "What do you mean? Responsible for what?"

He straightened his shoulders and said slowly: "Responsible for her death. I was too weak to carry it alone."

"Her death?" There was a silence that seemed to make the shadowy place darker. He could hardly see her face now, she was so far off. "How could I be responsible?" she broke off, and then began again: "Are you—trying to tell me—that it wasn't an accident?"

"No—it wasn't an accident."

"She—"

"Well, can't you guess?" he stammered, panting.

"You mean—she killed herself?"

"Yes."

"Because of us?"

He could not speak, and after a moment she hurried on: "But what makes you think so? What proof have you? Did she tell any one? Did she leave a message—a letter?"

He summoned his voice to his dry throat. "No; nothing."

"Well, then—?"

"She'd told me beforehand; she'd warned me—"

"Warned you?"

"That if I went on seeing you . . . and I did go on seeing you . . . She warned me again and again. Do you understand now?" he exclaimed, twisting round on her fiercely, like an animal turning on its torturer.

There was an interval of silence—endless it seemed to him. She did not speak or move; but suddenly he heard a low sobbing sound. She was weeping, weeping like a frightened child. . . . Well, of all the unexpected turns of fate! A moment ago he had seemed to feel her strength flowing into his cold veins, had thought to himself: "I shall

never again be alone with my horror—” and now the horror had spread from him to her, and he felt her inwardly recoiling as though she shuddered away from the contagion.

“Oh, how dreadful, how dreadful—” She began to cry again, like a child swept by a fresh gust of misery as the last subsides.

“Why dreadful?” he burst out, unnerved by the continuance of her soft unremitting sobs. “You must have known she didn’t like it—didn’t you?”

Through her lament a whisper issued: “I never dreamed she knew. . . .”

“You mean to say you thought we’d deceived her? All those months? In a one-horse place where everybody is on the watch to see what everybody else is doing? Likely, isn’t it? My God—”

“I never dreamed . . . I never dreamed . . .” she reiterated.

His exasperation broke out again. “Well, now you begin to see what I’ve suffered—”

“Suffered? *You* suffered?” She uttered a low sound of derision. “I see what she must have suffered—what we both of us must have made her suffer.”

“Ah, at least you say ‘both of us!’”

She made no answer, and through her silence he felt again that she was inwardly shrinking, averting herself from him. What! His accomplice deserting him? She acknowledged that she was his accomplice—she said “both of us”—and yet she was drawing back from him, flying from him, leaving him alone! Ah, no—she shouldn’t escape as easily as that, she shouldn’t leave him; he couldn’t face that sense of being alone again. “Barbara!” he cried out, as if the actual distance between them had already doubled.

She still remained silent, and he hurried on, almost cringingly: “Don’t think I blame you, child—don’t think . . .”

“Oh, what does it matter, when I blame myself?” she wailed out, her face in her hands.

“Blame yourself? What folly! When you say you didn’t know—”

“Of course I didn’t know! How can you imagine—? But this dreadful thing has happened; and *you* knew it might happen . . . you knew it all along . . . all the while it was in the back of your mind . . . the days when we used to meet here . . . and the days when we went to Ditson . . . oh, that horrible room at Ditson! All that time she was sitting at home alone, knowing everything, and hating me as if I’d been her murderess. . . .”

“Good God, Barbara! Don’t you suppose I blame myself?”

“But if you blamed yourself how could you go on, how could you let me think

she didn't care?"

"I didn't suppose she did," he muttered sullenly.

"But you say she told you—she warned you! Over and over again she warned you."

"Well, I didn't want to believe her—and so I didn't. When a man's infatuated . . . Don't you see it's hard enough to bear without all this? Haven't you any pity for me, Barbara?"

"Pity?" she repeated slowly. "The only pity I feel is for *her*—for what she must have gone through, day after day, week after week, sitting there all alone and knowing . . . imagining exactly what you were saying to me . . . the way you kissed me . . . and watching the clock, and counting the hours . . . and then having you come back, and explain, and pretend—I suppose you *did* pretend? . . . and all the while secretly knowing you were lying, and yet longing to believe you . . . and having warned you, and seeing that her warnings made no difference . . . that you didn't care if she died or not . . . that you were doing all you could to kill her . . . that you were probably counting the days till she was dead!" Her passionate apostrophe broke down in a sob, and again she stood weeping like an inconsolable child.

Trenham was struck silent. It was true. He had never been really able to enter into poor Milly's imaginings, the matter of her lonely musings; and here was this girl to whom, in a flash, that solitary mind lay bare. Yes; that must have been the way Milly felt—he knew it now—and the way poor Barbara herself would feel if he ever betrayed her. Ah, but he was never going to betray her—the thought was monstrous! Never for a moment would he cease to love her. This catastrophe had bound them together as a happy wooing could never have done. It was her love for him, her fear for their future, that was shaking her to the soul, giving her this unnatural power to enter into Milly's mind. If only he could find words to reassure her, now, at once. But he could not think of any.

"Barbara—Barbara," he kept on repeating, as if her name were a sort of incantation.

"Oh, think of it—those lonely endless hours! I wonder if you ever did think of them before? When you used to go home after one of our meetings, did you remember each time what she'd told you, and begin to wonder, as you got near the house, if she'd done it *that day*?"

"Barbara—"

"Perhaps you did—perhaps you were even vexed with her for being so slow about it. Were you?"

"Oh, Barbara—Barbara . . ."

“And when the day came at last, were you surprised? Had you got so impatient waiting that you’d begun to believe she’d never do it? Were there days when you went almost mad at having to wait so long for your freedom? It was the way I used to feel when I was rushing for the train to Ditson, and father would call me at the last minute to write letters for him, or mother to replace her on some charity committee; there were days when I could have *killed* them, almost, for interfering with me, making me miss one of our precious hours together. *Killed them*, I say! Don’t you suppose I know how murderers feel? How *you* feel—for you’re a murderer, you know! And now you come here, when the earth’s hardly covered her, and try to kiss me, and ask me to marry you—and think, I suppose, that by doing so you’re covering up her memory more securely, you’re pounding down the earth on her a little harder. . . .”

She broke off, as if her own words terrified her, and hid her eyes from the vision they called up.

Trenham stood without moving. He had gathered up the letters, and they lay in a neat pile on the floor between himself and her, because there seemed no other place to put them. He said to himself (reflecting how many million men must have said the same thing at such moments): “After this she’ll calm down, and by tomorrow she’ll be telling me how sorry she is. . . .” But the reflection did not seem to help him. She might forget—but he would not. He had forgotten too easily before; he had an idea that his future would be burdened with long arrears of remembrance. Just as the girl described Milly, so he would see her in the years to come. He would have to pay the interest on his oblivion; and it would not help much to have Barbara pay it with him. The job was probably one that would have to be accomplished alone. At last words shaped themselves without his knowing it. “I’d better go,” he said.

Unconsciously he had expected an answer; an appeal; a protest, perhaps. But none came. He moved away a few steps in the direction of the door. As he did so he heard Barbara break into a laugh, and the sound, so unnatural in that place, and at that moment, brought him abruptly to a halt.

“Yes—?” he said, half turning, as though she had called him.

“And I sent a wreath—I sent her a wreath! It’s on her grave now—it hasn’t even had time to fade!”

“Oh—” he gasped, as if she had struck him across the face. They stood forlornly confronting each other. Her last words seemed to have created an icy void between them. Within himself a voice whispered: “She can’t find anything worse than that.” But he saw by the faint twitch of her lips that she was groping, groping—

“And the worst of it is,” she broke out, “that if I didn’t go away, and we were to

drag on here together, after a time I might even drift into forgiving you.”

Yes; she was right; that was certainly the worst of it. Human imagination could not go beyond that, he thought. He moved away again stiffly.

“Well, you *are* going away, aren’t you?” he said.

“Yes; I’m going.”

He walked back slowly through the dark deserted streets. His brain, reeling with the shock of the encounter, gradually cleared, and looked about on the new world within itself. At first the inside of his head was like a deserted house out of which all the furniture has been moved, down to the last familiar encumbrances. It was empty, absolutely empty. But gradually a small speck of consciousness appeared in the dreary void, like a mouse scurrying across bare floors. He stopped on a street corner to say to himself: “But after all nothing is changed—absolutely nothing. I went there to tell her that we should probably never want to see each other again; and she agreed with me. She agreed with me—that’s all.”

It was a relief, almost, to have even that little thought stirring about in the resonant void of his brain. He walked on more quickly, reflecting, as he reached his own corner: “In a minute it’s going to rain.” He smiled a little at his unconscious precaution in hurrying home to escape the rain. “Jane will begin to fret—she’ll be sure to notice that I didn’t take my umbrella.” And his cold heart felt a faint warmth at the thought that some one in the huge hostile world would really care whether he had taken his umbrella or not. “But probably she’s in bed and asleep,” he mused, despondently.

On his door-step he paused and began to grope for his latch-key. He felt impatiently in one pocket after another—but the key was not to be found. He had an idea that he had left it lying on his study table when he came in after—after what? Why, that very morning, after the funeral! He had flung the key down among his papers—and Jane would never notice that it was there. She would never think of looking; she had been bidden often enough on no account to meddle with the things on his desk. And besides she would take for granted that he had the key in his pocket. And here he stood, in the middle of the night, locked out of his own house

A sudden exasperation possessed him. He was aware that he must have lost all sense of proportion, all perspective, for he felt as baffled and as angry as when Barbara’s furious words had beaten down on him. Yes; it made him just as unhappy to find himself locked out of his house—he could have sat down on the door-step and cried. And here was the rain beginning. . . .

He put his hand to the bell; but did the front door bell ring in the far-off attic where the maids were lodged? And was there the least chance of the faint tinkle from the pantry mounting two flights, and penetrating to their sleep-muffled ears? Utterly improbable, he knew. And if he couldn't make them hear he would have to spend the night at a hotel—the night of his wife's funeral! And the next morning all Kingsborough would know of it, from the President of the University to the boy who delivered the milk. . . .

But his hand had hardly touched the bell when he felt a vibration of life in the house. First there was a faint flash of light through the transom above the front door; then, scarcely distinguishable from the noises of the night, a step sounded far off: it grew louder on the hall floor, and after an interval that seemed endless the door was flung open by a Jane still irreproachably capped and aproned.

“Why, Jane—I didn't think you'd be awake! I forgot my key. . . .”

“I know, sir. I found it. I was waiting.” She took his wet coat from him. “Dear, dear! And you hadn't your umbrella.”

He stepped into his own hall, and heard her close and bar the door behind him. He liked to listen to that familiar slipping of the bolts and clink of the chain. He liked to think that she minded about his not having his umbrella. It was his own house, after all—and this friendly hand was shutting him safely into it. The dreadful sense of loneliness melted a little at the old reassuring touch of habit.

“Thank you, Jane; sorry I kept you up,” he muttered, nodding to her as he went upstairs.

A GLIMPSE

As John Kilvert got out of the motor at the Fusina landing-stage, and followed his neat suit-cases on board the evening boat for Venice, he growled to himself inconsequently: "Always on wheels! When what I really want is to walk—"

To walk? How absurd! Would he even have known how to, any longer? In youth he had excelled in the manly exercises then fashionable: lawn tennis, racquets, golf and the rest. He had even managed, till well over forty, to combine the more violent of these with his busy life of affairs in New York, and since then, with devout regularity and some success, had conformed to the national ritual of golf. But the muscles used for a mere walk were probably long since atrophied; and, indeed, so little did this modest form of exercise enter into the possibilities of his life that in his sudden outburst he had used the word metaphorically, meaning that all at once his existence seemed to him too cushioned, smooth and painless—he didn't know why.

Perhaps it was the lucky accident of finding himself on board the wrong boat—the unfashionable boat; an accident caused by the chauffeur's having mistaken a turn soon after they left Padua, missed the newly opened "*auto-strada*," and slipped through reed-grown byways to the Fusina water-side. It was a hot Sunday afternoon in September, and a throng of dull and dingy-looking holiday-makers were streaming across the gang-plank onto the dirty deck, and settling down with fretful babies, withered flowers, and baskets stuffed with provisions from the mainland on the narrow uncomfortable bench along the rail. Perhaps it was that—at any rate the discomfort did not annoy John Kilvert; on the contrary, it gave him a vague glow of satisfaction. Camping for an hour on this populous garlicky boat would be almost the equivalent of walking from Padua to Fusina instead of gliding there in the commodious Fiat he had hired at Milan. And to begin with, why had he hired it? Why hadn't the train been good enough for him? What was the matter with him, anyhow? . . . He hadn't meant to include Venice in his holiday that summer. He had settled down in Paris to do some systematic sight-seeing in the Ile-de-France: French church architecture was his hobby, he had collected a library on the subject, and liked going on archæological trips (also in a commodious motor, with a pause for lunch at the most reputed restaurants) in company with a shy shabby French archæologist who could guide and explain, and save him the labour of reading all the books he bought. But he concealed his archæological interests from most of his American friends because they belonged to a cosmopolitan group who thought that motors were made for speeding, not sight-seeing, and that Paris existed merely to launch new fashions, new plays and new restaurants, for rich and easily bored

Americans. John Kilvert, at fifty-five, had accepted this point of view with the weary tolerance which had long since replaced indignation in his moral make-up.

And now, after all, his plans had been upset by a telegram from Sara Roseneath, insisting that he should come to Venice at once to help her about her fancy-dress for the great historical ball which was to be given at the Ducal Palace (an unheard-of event, looming in cosmopolitan society far higher than declarations of war, or peace treaties). And he had started.

But why, again—why? Sara Roseneath was an old friend, of course; an old love. He had been half disposed to marry her once, when she was Sara Court; but she had chosen a richer man, and now that she was widowed, though he had no idea of succeeding to the late Roseneath, he and she had drifted into a semi-sentimental friendship, occasionally went on little tours together, and were expected by their group to foregather whenever they were both in New York, or when they met in Paris or London. A safe, prudent arrangement, gradually fading into an intimacy scarcely calmer than the romance that went before. It was all she wanted of the emotional life (practical life being so packed with entertainments, dressmakers, breathless travel and all sorts of fashionable rivalries); and it was all he had to give in return for what she was able to offer. What held him, then? Partly habit, a common stock of relations and allusions, the knowledge that her exactions would never be more serious than this urgent call to help her to design a fancy-dress—and partly, of course, what survived in her, carefully preserved by beauty-doctors and gymnastic trainers, of the physical graces which had first captured him.

Nevertheless he was faintly irritated with both himself and her for having suffered this journey to be imposed on him. Of course it was his own fault; if he had refused to come she would have found half a dozen whippersnappers to devise a fancy-dress for her. And she would not have been really angry; only gently surprised and disappointed. She would have said; “I thought I could *always* count on you in an emergency!” An emergency—this still handsome but middle-aged woman, to whom a fancy ball represented an event! There is no frivolity, he thought, like that of the elderly. . . . Venice in September was a place wholly detestable to him, and that he should be summoned there to assist a spoilt woman in the choice of a fancy-dress shed an ironic light on the contrast between his old ambitions and his present uses. The whole affair was silly and distasteful, and he wished he could shake off his social habits and break once for all with the trivial propinquities which had created them. . . .

The slatternly woman who sat crammed close against him moved a little to readjust the arm supporting her sleep-drunken baby, and her elbow pressed

uncomfortably against Kilvert's ribs. He got up and wandered forward. As the passengers came on board he had noticed two people—a man and a woman—whose appearance singled them out from the workaday crowd. Not that they fitted in with his standard of personal seemliness; the woman was bare-headed, with blown hair, untidy and turning gray, and the man, in worn shapeless homespun, with a short beard turning gray also, was as careless in dress and bearing as his companion. Still, blowsy and shabby as they were, they were evidently persons of education and refinement, and Kilvert, having found a corner for himself in the forward part of the boat, began to watch them with a certain curiosity.

First he speculated about their nationality; but that was hard to determine. The woman was dusky, almost swarthy, under her sunburn; her untidy hair was still streaked with jet, and the eyes under her dense black eyebrows were of a rich burning brown. The man's eyes were gray, his nose was straight, his complexion and hair vaguely pepper-and-salt, like his clothes. He had taken off his stalking-cap, disclosing thick hair brushed back carelessly from a high wide forehead. His brow and his high cheekbones were burnt to a deeper bronze than his companion's, but his long nervous hands showed whiter at the wrists than hers. For the rest, they seemed of about the same age, and though there was no trace of youth about either of them their vigorous maturity seemed to give out a strong emotional glow. Such had been Kilvert's impression as they came on board, hurriedly, almost precipitately, after all the other passengers were seated. The woman had come first, and the man, after a perceptible interval, had scrambled over the side as the boat was actually beginning to put off. Where had they come from, Kilvert wondered, why such haste and such agitation? They had no luggage, no wraps, the woman, gloveless and cloakless, apparently had not even a hat.

For a while Kilvert had lost them in the crowd; but now, going forward, he found them wedged between the prow of the boat and the low sky-light of the forward cabin. They had not found seats, but they seemed hardly aware of it; the woman was perched on the edge of the closed sky-light, the man, facing her, leaned against the side of the boat, his hands braced against the rail. Both turned their backs to the low misty line along the horizon that was rapidly defining itself as a distant view of Venice. Kilvert's first thought was: "I don't believe they even know where they are."

A fat passenger perched on a coil of rope had spied the seat which Kilvert had left, and the latter was able to possess himself of the vacated rope. From where he sat he was only a few yards from the man and woman he had begun to watch; just too far to catch their words, or even to make quite sure of the language they were speaking (he wavered between Hungarian, and Austrian German smattered with

English), but near enough to observe the play of their facial muscles and the corresponding gestures of their dramatic bodies.

Husband and wife? No—he dismissed the idea as it shaped itself. They were too acutely aware of each other, what each said (whatever its import might be) came to the other with too sharp an impact of surprise for habit to have dulled their intercourse. Lovers, then—as he and Sara had once been, for a discreet interval? Kilvert winced at the comparison. He tried, but in vain, to picture Sara Roseneath and himself, in the hour of their rapture, dashing headlong and hatless on board a dirty boat crowded with perspiring work-people, and fighting out the last phase of their amorous conflict between coils of tarry rope and bulging baskets of farm produce. In fact there had been no conflict; he and Sara had ceased their sentimental relations without shedding of blood. But then they had only strolled around the edge of the crater, picking flowers, while these two seemed writhing in its depths.

As Kilvert settled himself on his coil of rope their conversation came to an end. The man walked abruptly away, striding the length of the crowded deck (in his absorption he seemed unaware of the obstacles in his advance), while the woman, propped against her precarious ledge, remained motionless, her eyes fixed, her rough gray head, with the streaks of wavy jet, bowed as under a crushing thought. “They’ve quarrelled,” Kilvert said to himself with a half-envious pang.

The woman sat there for several minutes. Her only motion was to clasp and unclasp her long sunburnt fingers. Kilvert noticed that her hands, which were large for her height, had the same nervous suppleness as the man’s; high-strung intellectual hands, as eloquent as her burning brown eyes. As she continued to sit alone their look deepened from feverish fire to a kind of cloudy resignation, as though to say that now the worst was over. “Ah, quarrelled irremediably—” Kilvert thought, disappointed.

Then the man came back. He forced his way impatiently through the heaped-up bags and babies, regained his place at his companion’s side, and stood looking down at her, sadly but not resignedly. An unappeased entreaty was in his gaze. Kilvert became aware that the struggle was far from being over, and his own muscles unconsciously braced themselves for the renewal of the conflict. “He won’t give up—he *won’t* give up!” he exulted inwardly.

The man lowered his head above his companion, and spoke to her in pressing inaudible tones. She listened quietly, without stirring, but Kilvert noticed that her lower lip trembled a little. Was her mouth beautiful? He was not yet sure. It had something of the sinuous strength of her long hands, and the complexity of its curves made it a matchless vehicle for the expression of irony, bitterness and grief. An

actress's mouth, perhaps; over-elastic, subtly drawn, capable of being beautiful or ugly as her own emotions were. It struck Kilvert that her whole face, indeed her whole body, was like that: a vehicle, an instrument, a language rather than a plastic fact. Kilvert's interest deepened to excitement as he watched her.

She began to speak, at first very low and gravely; then more eagerly, passionately, passing (as he imagined) from pleading, from tenderness and regret, to the despair of an accepted renouncement. "Ah, don't tempt me—don't begin it all over again!" her eyes and lips seemed to be saying in tortured remonstrance, as his gray head bent above her and their urgent whispers were interwoven. . . .

Kilvert felt that he was beginning to understand the situation. "She's married—unhappily married. That must be it. And everything draws her to this man, who is her predestined mate. . . . But some terrible obstacle lies between them. Her husband, her children, perhaps some obligation of his that he wants to forget, but that she feels compelled, for his own sake, to remind him of, though she does so at the cost of her very life—ah, yes, she's bleeding to death for him! And they've been off, spending a last day together in some quiet place, to talk it all over for the last time; and he won't take her refusal for an answer—and by God, I wouldn't either!" Kilvert inwardly shrieked, kindled to a sudden forgotten vehemence of passion by the mute display of it before him. "When people need each other as desperately as those two do—not mere instinct-driven infants, but a mature experienced man and woman—the gods ought to let them come together, no matter how much it costs, or for how short a time it is! And that's what he's saying to her; by heaven, he's saying: 'I thought I could stand it, but I can't.' . . ."

To Kilvert's surprise his own eyes filled with tears; they came so thick that he had to pull out his handkerchief and wipe them away. What was he mourning—the inevitable break between these two anguished people, or some anguish that he himself had once caught a glimpse of, and missed? There had been that gray-eyed Russian girl, the governess of his sister's children; with her he had very nearly sounded the depths. He remembered one long walk with her in the summer woods, the children scampering ahead. . . . At a turn when they were out of sight, he and she had suddenly kissed and clung to each other. . . . But his sister's children's governess—? Did he mean to marry her? He asked himself that through a long agitated night—recalled the chapter in "Resurrection" where Prince Nekludov paces his room, listening to the drip of the spring thaw in the darkness outside—and was off by the earliest train the next morning, and away to Angkor and Bali the following week. A man can't be too careful—or *can* he? Who knows? He still remembered the shuddering ebb of that night's emotions. . . .

“But what a power emotion is!” he reflected. “I could lift mountains still if I could feel as those two do about anything. I suppose all the people worth remembering—lovers or poets or inventors—have lived at white-heat level, while we crawl along in the temperate zone.” Once more he concentrated his attention on the couple facing him. The woman had risen in her turn. She walked away a few steps, and stood leaning against the rail, her gaze fixed on the faint horizon-line that was shaping itself into wavering domes and towers. What did that distant view say to her? Perhaps it symbolized the life she must go back to, the duties, sacrifices, daily wearinesses from which this man was offering her an escape. She knew all that; she saw her fate growing clearer and clearer before her as the boat advanced through the summer twilight; in half an hour more the crossing would be over, and the gang-plank run out to the quay.

The man had not changed his position; he stood where she had left him, as though respecting the secrecy of her distress, or else perhaps too worn out, too impoverished in argument, to resume the conflict. His eyes were fixed on the ground; he looked suddenly years older—a baffled and beaten man. . . .

The woman turned her head first. Kilvert saw her steal a furtive glance at her companion. She detached her hands from the rail, and half moved toward him; then she stiffened herself, resumed her former attitude, and addressed her mournful sunken profile to the contemplation of Venice. . . . But not for long; she looked again; her hands twitched, her face quivered, and suddenly she swept about, rejuvenated, and crossed the space between herself and her companion. He started at her touch on his arm, and looked at her, bewildered, reproachful, while she began to speak low and rapidly, as though all that was left to be said must be crowded into the diminishing minutes before the boat drew alongside the quay. “Ah, how like a woman!” Kilvert groaned, all his compassion transferred to the man. “Now she’s going to begin it all over again—just as he’d begun to resign himself to the inevitable!”

Yet he envied the man on whom this intolerable strain was imposed. “How she must love him to torture him so!” he ejaculated. “She looks ten years younger since she’s come back to him. Anything better than to spend these last minutes apart from him. . . . Nothing that he may be suffering counts a single instant in comparison with that. . . .” He saw the man’s brow darken, his eyebrows jut out almost savagely over his suffering bewildered eyes, and his lips open to utter a word, a single word, that Kilvert could not hear, but of which he traced the passage on the woman’s face as if it had been the sting of a whip. She paled under her deep sunburn, her head drooped, she clung to her companion desolately, almost helplessly, and for a minute

they neither spoke nor looked at each other. Then Kilvert saw the man's hand steal toward hers and clasp it as it still lay on his arm. He spoke again, more softly, and her head sank lower, but she made no answer. They both looked exhausted with the struggle.

Two men who had been sitting near by got up and began to collect their bags and baskets. One of the couple whom Kilvert was watching pointed out to the other the seats thus vacated, and the two moved over and sat down on the narrow board. Dusk was falling, and Kilvert could no longer see their faces distinctly; but he noticed that the man had slipped his arm about his companion, not so much to embrace as to support her. She smiled a little at his touch, and leaned back, and they sat silent, their worn faces half averted from one another, as though they had reached a point beyond entreaties and arguments. Kilvert watched them in an agony of participation. . . .

Now the boat was crossing the Grand Canal; the dusky palaces glimmered with lights, lamplit prows flashed out from the side canals, the air was full of cries and guttural hootings. On board the boat the passengers were all afoot, assembling children and possessions, rummaging for tickets, chattering and pushing. Kilvert sat quiet. He knew the boat would first touch near the railway station, where most of the passengers would probably disembark, before it carried him to his own landing-place at the Piazzetta. The man and woman sat motionless also; he concluded with satisfaction that they would probably land at the Piazzetta, and that there he might very likely find some one waiting for him—some friend of Mrs. Roseneath's, or a servant sent to meet him—and might just conceivably discover who his passionate pilgrims were.

But suddenly the man began to speak again, quickly, vehemently, in less guarded tones. He was speaking Italian now, easily and fluently, though it was obvious from his intonation that it was not his native tongue. "You promised—you promised!" Kilvert heard him reiterate, no doubt made reckless by the falling darkness and the hurried movements of the passengers. The woman's lips seemed to shape a "no" in reply; but Kilvert could not be sure. He knew only that she shook her head once or twice, softly, resignedly. Then the two lapsed once more into silence, and the man leaned back and stared ahead of him.

The boat had drawn close to her first landing-stage, and the gang-plank was being run out. The couple sat listlessly watching it, still avoiding each other's eyes. The people who were getting off streamed by them, chattering and jostling each other, lifting children and baskets of fowls over their heads. The couple watched. . . .

And then, suddenly, as the last passengers set foot on the quay, and the whistle

for departure sounded, the woman sprang up, forced her way between the sailors who had their hands on the gang-plank, and rushed ashore without a backward glance or gesture. The man, evidently taken by surprise, started to his feet and tried to follow; but a bewildered mother clutching a baby blocked his way, the bell rang, and the gang-plank was already being hauled onto the boat. . . . The man drew back baffled, and stood straining his eyes after the fugitive; but she had already vanished in the dispersing throng.

As Kilvert's gaze followed her he felt as if he too were straining his eyes in the pursuit of some rapture just glimpsed and missed. It might have been his own lost destiny mocking him in the flight of this haggard woman stumbling away distraught from her last hope of youth and freedom. Kilvert saw the man she had forsaken raise his hand to his eyes with a vague hopeless gesture, then give his shoulders a shake and stand leaning against the rail, unseeing, unhearing. "It's the end," Kilvert muttered to himself.

The boat was now more than half empty, and as they swung back into the Grand Canal he was tempted to go up to the solitary traveller and say a word to him—perhaps only ask him for a light, or where the boat touched next. But the man's face was too closed, too stricken; Kilvert did not dare intrude on such a secrecy of suffering. At the Piazzetta the man, who had taken up his place near the gang-plank, was among the first to hurry ashore, and in the confusion and the cross-play of lights Kilvert for a moment lost sight of him. But his tall gray head reappeared again above the crowd just as Kilvert himself was greeted by young Harry Breck, Mrs. Roseneath's accomplished private secretary. Kilvert seized the secretary's arm. "Look here! Who's that man over there? The tall fellow with gray hair and reddish beard . . . stalking-cap . . . there, ahead of you," Kilvert gasped incoherently, clutching the astonished Breck, who was directing one of Mrs. Roseneath's gondoliers toward his luggage.

"Tall man—where?" Young Breck, swinging round, lifted himself on his tiptoes to follow the other's gesture.

"There—over there! Don't you see? The man with a stalking-cap—"

"That? I can't be certain at this distance; but it looks like Brand, the 'cellist, don't it? Want to speak to him? No? All right. Anyhow, I'm not so sure . . ."

They went down the steps to the gondola.

II

“That would account for their hands,” Kilvert suddenly thought, rousing himself to wave away a second offering of *langoustines à la Vénitienne*. He looked down Mrs. Roseneath’s shining dinner-table, trying to force himself to a realisation of the scene; but the women’s vivid painted heads, the men’s polished shirt-fronts, the gliding gondoliers in white duck and gold-fringed sashes, handing silver dishes down the table, all seemed as remote and unrelated to reality as the great Tiepolesque fresco which formed the background of the scene. Before him Kilvert could see only a middle-aged life-worn man and woman torn with the fulness of human passion. “If he’s a musician, so is she, probably,” he thought; and this evocation of their supple dramatic hands presented itself as a new clue to their identity.

He did not know why he was so anxious to find out who they were. Indeed, some secret apprehension half held him back from pressing his inquiries. “Brand the ’cellist—” from young Breck’s tone it would seem that the name was well-known among musicians. Kilvert racked his memories; but music and musicians were not prominent in them, and he could not discover any association with the name of Brand—or any nationality either, since it might have been at home anywhere from Edinburgh to Oslo.

Well, all this brooding was really morbid. Was it possible that he would stoop to gather up gossip about this couple, even if he succeeded in finding out who they were? No! All he wanted was to identify them, to be able to call them by name, and then enshrine them in some secret niche of memory in all their tragic isolation. “Musicians’ hands—that’s it,” he murmured.

But the problem would not let him rest, and after dinner, forsaking the groups who were scattering and forming again down the length of the great frescoed saloon, he found a pretext for joining Breck on the balcony.

“That man I pointed out as I left the boat—you said he was a musician?”

“When? Oh, as you were leaving the boat? Well, he looked uncommonly like Julian Brand. You’ve never heard him? Not much in that line, are you? Thought not. They gave you a cigar, I hope?” he added, suddenly remembering his duties.

Kilvert waved that away too. “I’m not particularly musical. But his head struck me. They were sitting near me on the boat.”

“They? Who?” queried Breck absently, craning his head back toward the saloon to make sure that the *liqueurs* were being handed.

“This man. He was with a woman, very dark, black hair turning gray, splendid eyes—dreadfully badly dressed, and not young, but tingling. Something gypsy-like

about her. Who was she, do you suppose? They seemed very intimate.”

“Love-making, eh?”

“No. Much more—more *intimate* than that. Hating and loving and despairing all at once,” stammered Kilvert, reluctant to betray himself to such ears, yet driven by the irresistible need to find out what he could from this young fool. “They weren’t husband and wife, either, you understand.”

Breck laughed. “Obviously! You said they were intimate.”

“Well, who was she then—the woman? Can you tell me?”

Breck wrinkled his brows retrospectively. He saw so many people in the course of a day, his uncertain frown seemed to plead. “Splendid eyes, eh?” he repeated, as if to gain time.

“Well, burning—”

“Ah, burning,” Breck echoed, his eyes on the room. “But I must really . . . Here, Count Dossi’s the very man to tell you,” he added, hurrying away in obedience to a signal from Mrs. Roseneath.

The small, dry waxen-featured man who replaced him was well-known to Kilvert, and to all cosmopolitan idlers. He was an Anglo-Italian by birth, with a small foothold in Rome, where he spent the winter months, drifting for the rest of the year from one centre of fashion to another, and gathering with impartial eye and indefatigable memory the items of a diary which, he boasted, could not safely be published till fifty years after his death. Count Dossi bent on Kilvert his coldly affable glance. “Who has burning eyes?” he asked. “I came out here in search of a light, but hadn’t hoped to find one of that kind.” He produced a cigarette, and continued, as he held it to Kilvert’s lighter: “There are not so many incandescent orbs left in the world that one shouldn’t be able to identify them.”

Kilvert shrank from exposing the passionate scene on the boat to Count Dossi’s disintegrating scrutiny; yet he could not bear to miss the chance of tracing the two who had given him so strange a cross-section of their souls. He tried to appear indifferent, and slightly ironical. “There are still some. . . .”

“Oh, no doubt. A woman, I suppose?”

Kilvert nodded. “But neither young nor beautiful—by rule, at least.”

“Who is beautiful, by rule? A plaster cast at best. But your lady interests me. Who is she? I know a good many people. . . .”

Kilvert, tempted, began to repeat his description of the couple, and Count Dossi, meditatively twisting his cigarette, listened with a face wrinkled with irony. “Ah, that’s interesting,” he murmured, as the other ended. “Musicians’ hands, you say?”

“Well, I thought—”

“You probably thought rightly. I should say Breck’s guess was correct. From your description the man was almost certainly Brand, the ’cellist. He was to arrive about this time for a series of concerts with Margaret Aslar. You’ve heard the glorious Margaret? Yes, it must have been Brand and Aslar . . .” He pinched his lips in a dry smile. “Very likely she crossed over to Fusina to meet him. . . .”

“To meet him? But I should have thought they’d been together for hours. They were in the thick of a violent discussion when they came on board. . . . They looked haggard, worn out . . . and so absorbed in each other that they hardly knew where they were.”

Dossi nodded appreciatively. “No, they wouldn’t—they wouldn’t! The foolish things. . . .”

“Ah—they care so desperately for each other?” Kilvert murmured.

Dossi lifted his thin eyebrows. “Care—? They care frantically for each other’s music; they can’t get on without each other—in that respect.”

“But when I saw them they were not thinking about anybody’s music; they were thinking about each other. They were desperate . . . they . . . they . . .”

“Ah, just so! Fighting like tigers, weren’t they?”

“Well, one minute, yes—and the next, back in each other’s arms, almost.”

“Of course! Can’t I see them? They were probably quarrelling about which of their names should come first on the programme, and have the biggest letters. And Brand’s weak; I back Margaret to come out ahead. . . . You’ll see when the bills are posted up.” He chuckled at the picture, and was turning to re-enter the room when he paused to say: “But, by the way, they’re playing here tomorrow night, aren’t they? Yes; I’m sure our hostess told me this afternoon that she’d finally captured them. They don’t often play in private houses—Margaret hates it, I believe. But when Mrs. Roseneath sets her heart on anything she’s irresistible.” With a nod and smile he strolled back into the long saloon where the guests were dividing into groups about the bridge-tables.

Kilvert continued to lean on the stone balustrade and look down into the dark secret glitter of the canal. He was fairly sure that Dossi’s identification of the mysterious couple was correct; but of course his explanation of their quarrel was absurd. A child’s quarrel over toys and spangles! That was how people of the world interpreted the passions of great artists. Kilvert’s heart began to beat excitedly at the thought of seeing and hearing his mysterious couple. And yet—supposing they turned out to be mere tawdry *cabotins*? Would it not be better to absent himself from the concert and nurse his dream? It was odd how Dossi’s tone dragged down

those vivid figures to the level of the dolls about Mrs. Roseneath's bridge-tables.

III

Kilvert had not often known his hostess to be in the field as early as ten in the morning. But this was a field-day, almost as important as the day of the fancy ball, since two or three passing royalties (and not in exile either) had suddenly signified their desire to be present at her musical party that evening; and Mrs. Roseneath, on such occasions, had the soldier's gift of being in the saddle at dawn. But when Kilvert—his own *café-au-lait* on the balcony barely despatched—was summoned to her room by an agitated maid, he found the mistress even more agitated.

"They've chucked—they've chucked for tonight! The devils—they won't come!" Mrs. Roseneath cried out, waving a pale hand toward a letter lying on her brocaded bedspread.

"But do take a mouthful of tea, madam," the maid intervened, proffering a tray.

"Tea? How can I take tea? Take it away! It's a catastrophe, John—a catastrophe . . . and Breck's such a helpless fool when it comes to anything beyond getting people together for bridge," Mrs. Roseneath lamented, sinking back discouraged among her pillows.

"But who's chucked? The Prince and Princess?"

"Lord, no! They're all coming; the King is too, I mean. And *he's* musical, and has stayed over on purpose. . . . It's Aslar, of course, and Brand. . . . Her note is perfectly insane. She says Brand's disappeared, and she's half crazy, and can't play without him."

"Disappeared—the 'cellist?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, read the note, and don't just stand there and repeat what I say! Where on earth am I to get other performers for this evening, if you don't help me?"

Kilvert stared back blankly. "I don't know."

"You don't know? But you must know! Oh, John, you must go instantly to see her. You're the only person with brains—the only one who'll know how to talk to such people. If I offered to double the fee, do you suppose—?"

"Oh, no, no!" Kilvert protested indignantly, without knowing why.

"Well, what I'd already agreed to give is colossal," Mrs. Roseneath sighed, "so perhaps it's not that, after all. John, darling, you must go and see her at once! You'll know what to say. She must keep her engagement, she must telegraph, she must send a motor after him; if she can't find *him*, she must get hold of another 'cellist. None of these people will know if it's Brand or not. I'll lie about it if I have to. Oh, John, ring for the gondola! Don't lose an instant . . . say anything you like, use any

argument . . . only make her see it's her duty!" Before the end of the sentence he was out of her door, borne on the rush of Mrs. Roseneath's entreaties down the long marble flights to the gondola. . . .

Kilvert was in the mood to like the shabbiness, the dinginess almost, of the little hotel on an obscure canal to which the gondola carried him. He liked even the slit of untidy garden, in which towels were drying on a sagging rope, the umbrella-stand in imitation of rustic woodwork, the slatternly girl with a shawl over her head delivering sea-urchins to the black-wigged landlady. This was the way real people lived, he thought, glancing at a crumby dining-room glimpsed through glass doors. He thought he would find a pretext for moving there the next day from the Palazzo, and very nearly paused to ask the landlady if she could take him in. But his errand was urgent, and he went on.

The room into which he was shown was small, and rather bare. A worn cashmere shawl had been thrown over the low bed in a hasty attempt to convert it into a divan. The centre front was filled by a grand piano built on a concert-stage scale, and looking larger than any that Kilvert had ever seen. Between it and the window stood a woman in a frayed purple silk dressing-gown, her tumbled grayish hair streaked with jet tossed back from her drawn dusky face. She had evidently not noticed Kilvert the previous evening on the boat, for the glance she turned on him was unrecognising. Obviously she resented his intrusion. "You come from Mrs. Roseneath, don't you? About tonight's concert? I said you could come up in order to get it over sooner. But it's no use whatever—none! Please go back and tell her so."

She was speaking English now, with a slightly harsh yet rich intonation, and an accent he could not quite place, but guessed to be partly Slavonic. He stood looking at her in an embarrassed silence. He was not without social adroitness, or experience in exercising it; but he felt as strongly as she evidently did that his presence was an intrusion. "I don't believe I know how to talk to real people," he reproached himself inwardly.

"Before you send me away," he said at length, "you must at least let me deliver Mrs. Roseneath's message of sympathy."

Margaret Aslar gave a derisive shrug. "Oh, sympathy—!"

He paused a moment, and then ventured: "Don't you need it? On the boat yesterday evening I rather thought you did."

She turned toward him with a quick swing of her whole body. "The boat yesterday evening? You were there?"

"I was sitting close to you. I very nearly had the impertinence to go up to you and tell you I was—sorry."

She received this in a wondering silence. Then she dropped down on the piano-stool, and rested her thin elbows on the closed lid of the instrument, and her drooping head on her hands. After a moment she looked up and signed to him to take the only chair. "Put the music on the floor," she directed. Kilvert obeyed.

"You were right—I need pity, I need sympathy," she broke out, her burning eyes on his.

"I wish I could give you something more—give you real help, I mean."

She continued to gaze at him intently. "Oh, if you could bring him back to me!" she exclaimed, lifting her prayerful hands with the despair of the mourning women in some agonizing Deposition.

"I would if I could—if you'd tell me how," Kilvert murmured.

She shook her head, and sank back into her weary attitude at the piano. "What nonsense I'm talking! He's gone for good, and I'm a desolate woman."

Kilvert had by this time entirely forgotten the object of his visit. All he felt was a burning desire to help this stricken Ariadne.

"Are you sure I couldn't find him and bring him back—if you gave me a clue?"

She sat silent, her face plunged in her long tortured hands. Finally she looked up again to murmur: "No. I said things he can never forgive—"

"But if you tell him that, perhaps he will," suggested Kilvert.

She looked at him questioningly, and then gave a slight laugh. "Ah, you don't know—you don't know either of us!"

"Perhaps I could get to, if you'd help me; if you could tell me, for instance, without breach of confidence, the subject of that painful discussion you were having yesterday—a lovers' quarrel, shall we call it?"

She seemed to catch only the last words, and flung them back at him with a careless sneer. "Lovers' quarrel? Between *us*? Do you take us for children?" She swept her long arms across the piano-lid, as if it were an open keyboard. "Lovers' quarrels are pastry *éclair*s. Brand and I are artists, Mr. —— Mr. ——"

"Kilvert."

"I've never denied his greatness as an artist—never! And he knows it. No living 'cellist can touch him. I've heard them all, and I know. But, good heavens, if you think that's enough for him!"

"Such praise from you—"

She laughed again. "One would think so! Praise from Margaret Aslar! But no—! You say you saw us yesterday on the boat. I'd gone to Fusina to meet him—really in

the friendliest spirit. He'd been off on tour in Poland and Hungary; I hadn't seen him for weeks. And I was so happy, looking forward to our meeting so eagerly. I thought it was such a perfect opportunity for talking over our Venetian programmes; tonight's, and our two big concerts next week. Wouldn't you have thought so too? He arrived half an hour before the boat started, and his first word was: 'Have you settled the programmes?' After that—well, you say you saw us. . . ."

"But he was awfully glad to see you; I saw that, at any rate."

"Oh, yes; awfully glad! He thought that after such a separation I'd be like dough in his hands—accept anything, agree to anything! I had settled the programmes; but when he'd looked them over, he just handed them back to me with that sort of *sotto voce* smile he has, and said: 'Beautiful—perfect. But I thought it was understood that we were to appear together?'"

"Well—wasn't it?" Kilvert interjected, beginning to flounder.

She glanced at him with a shrug. "When Brand smiles like that it means: 'I see you've made out the whole programme to your own advantage. It's really a piano solo from one end to the other'. That's what he means. Of course it isn't, you understand; but the truth is that nowadays he has come to consider me simply as an accompanist, and would like to have our tour regarded as a series of 'cello concerts, so that he's furious when I don't subordinate myself entirely."

Kilvert listened in growing bewilderment. He knew very little about artists, except that they were odd and unaccountable. He would have given all his possessions to be one himself; but he wasn't, and he had never felt his limitations more keenly than at this moment. Still, he argued with himself, fundamentally we're all made of the same stuff, and this splendid fury is simply a woman in love, who's afraid of having lost her lover. He tried to pursue the argument on those lines.

"After all—suppose you were to subordinate yourself, or at least affect to? Offer to let him make out your next few programmes, I mean . . . if you know where he's to be found, I could carry your message. . . ."

"Let him give a 'cello tour with 'Mrs. J. Margaret Aslar at the piano'—in small type, at the bottom of the page? Ah," she cried, swept to her feet by a great rush of Sybilline passion, "*that's* what you think of my playing, is it? I always knew fashionable people could barely distinguish a barrel-organ from a Steinway—but I didn't know they confused the players as well as the instruments."

Kilvert felt suddenly reassured by her unreasonableness. "I wasn't thinking of you as a player—but only as a woman."

"A woman? Any woman, I suppose?"

"A woman in love *is* 'any woman.' A man in love is 'any man.' If you tell your

friend that all that matters is your finding him again, he'll put your name back on the programme wherever you want it to be."

Margaret Aslar, leaning back against the piano, stood looking down at him sternly. "Have you *no* respect for art?" she exclaimed.

"Respect for art? But I venerate it—in all its forms!" Kilvert stammered, overwhelmed.

"Well, then—you ought to try to understand its interpreters. We're instruments, you see, Mr. —— Mr. ——"

"Kilvert."

"We're the pipes the god plays on—not mere servile eyes or ears, like all the rest of you! And whatever branch of art we're privileged to represent, that we must uphold, we must defend—even against the promptings of our own hearts. Brand has left me because he won't recognise that *my* branch is higher, is more important, than his. In his infatuated obstinacy he won't admit what all the music of all the greatest composers goes to show; that the piano ranks above the 'cello. And yet it's so obvious, isn't it? I could have made my career as a great pianist without him—but where would he as a 'cellist be without me? Ah, let him try—let him try! That's what I've always told him. If he thinks any girl of twenty, because she has long eyelashes, and pretends to swoon whenever he plays his famous Beethoven adagio, can replace an artist who is his equal; but his equal in a higher form of art—" She broke off, and sank down again on the piano-stool. "Our association has made him; but he won't admit it. He won't admit that the 'cello has no life of its own without the piano. Well, let him see how he feels as number four in a string quartet! Because that's what he'll have to come to now."

Kilvert felt himself out of his depth in this tossing sea of technical resentments. He might have smiled at it in advance, as a display of artistic fatuity; but now he divined, under the surface commotion, something nobler, something genuine and integral. "I've never before met a mouthpiece of the gods," he thought, "and I don't believe I know how to talk to them."

And then, with a start, he recalled the humble purpose of his mission, and that he was there, not as the answering mouthpiece of divinity, but only as Mrs. Roseneath's. After all, it was hard on her to have her party wrecked for a whim. He looked at Margaret Aslar with a smile.

"You have a wonderful opportunity of proving your argument to your friend this very evening. Everybody in Venice is coming to hear you at Mrs. Roseneath's. You have simply to give a piano recital to show that you need no one to help you."

She gazed at him in a sort of incredulous wonder, and slowly an answering smile

stole over her grave lips. “Ah, he’d see *then*—he’d see!” She seemed to be looking beyond Kilvert’s shoulder, at a figure unseen by him, to whom she flung out her ironic challenge. “Let him go off, and do as much himself! Let him try to cram a house to bursting, and get ten recalls, with a stammering baby at the piano!” She put up her hands to her tossed hair. “I’ve grown gray at this work—and so has he! Twenty years ago we began. And every gray hair is a string in the perfect instruments that time has made of us. That’s what a man never sees—never remembers! Ah, just let him try; let him have his lesson now, if he wants to!”

Kilvert sprang up, as if swept to his feet on the waves of her agitation. “You will come then, won’t you? And the programme—? Can I go back and say you’ll have it ready in an hour or two? I hate to bother you; but, you see, Mrs. Roseneath’s in suspense—I must hurry back now with your promise.”

“My promise?” Margaret Aslar confronted him with a brow of tragic wonderment. Her face reminded him of a wind-swept plain with cloud-shadows rushing over it. “My promise—to play tonight without Brand? But my poor Mr. — Mr. —”

“Kilvert.”

“Are you serious? Really serious? Do you really suppose that a tree torn up by the roots and flung to the ground can give out the same music as when it stands in the forest by its mate, and the wind rushes through their branches? I couldn’t play a note tonight. I must bury my old self first—the self made out of Brand and Margaret Aslar. Tell Mrs. Roseneath I’m sorry—tell her anything you like. Tell her I’m burying a friend; tell her that Brand’s dead—and he *is* dead, now that he’s lost me. Tell her I must watch by him tonight. . . .”

She stood before Kilvert with lifted arms, in an attitude of sculptural desolation; then she turned away and went and leaned in the window, as unconscious of his presence as if he had already left the room.

Kilvert wanted to speak, to argue, urge, entreat; but a kind of awe, a sense of her inaccessibility, restrained him. What plea of expediency would weigh anything in the scales of such anger and such sorrow? He stood waiting for a while, trying to think of something to say; but no words came, and he slipped out and closed the door on the greatest emotional spectacle he had ever witnessed.

The whirr of wings was still in his ears when he reached the door of the hotel and began to walk along the narrow street leading to the nearest *traghetti*. A few yards from the door he almost stumbled against a man who, turning a corner, stopped abruptly in his path. They looked at each other in surprise, and Kilvert stammered: “You’re Mr. Brand?”

The other smiled and nodded. He had the delicately shaded smile of a man who seldom laughs, and its kindly disenchanting curve betrayed a hint of recognition. "Yes. I saw you yesterday on the Fusina boat, didn't I?"

Kilvert glanced up and down the narrow deserted *calle*. He seemed, for the first time in his life, to have his hand on the wheels of destiny, and the contact scorched his palm. He had forgotten all about Mrs. Roseneath and the concert. He was still in the presence of the woman upstairs in the shabby hotel, and his only thought was: "He's come back to her!" Brand's eyes were resting on him with a glance of amiable curiosity, and he was conscious that, in that narrow lane, they were actually obstructing each other's passage, and that his business was to draw aside, bow and pass on. But something suddenly impelled him to speak. "My name's Kilvert. I've just come from Madame Aslar's."

Brand nodded again; he seemed neither surprised nor put off by the half-confidential tone of the remark.

"Ah? I supposed so," he agreed affably.

"Now, why did he suppose so?" Kilvert wondered; and, feeling that the onus of explaining was on his side, he added, collecting himself. "I'm staying with Mrs. Roseneath, and she sent me as—as an ambassador, to reason with Madame Aslar, to do what I could to persuade her . . ."

Brand looked genuinely surprised. "Reason with her?" he echoed, as though faintly amused at any one's attempting so impossible a task.

"About the concert tonight at Mrs. Roseneath's."

"Oh, the devil! At Mrs. Roseneath's? I'd forgotten all about it! Is Margaret going to play?"

The two men looked at each other a moment, as if attempting to measure the situation; then Kilvert took a plunge. "Of course not. She refused absolutely."

The other gave a low whistle. "Refused? What's up now? Why 'of course'—?"

It was Kilvert's turn to sound his surprise. "But without you—she says she'll never play a note without you!"

The musician answered with a wondering glance. His lips were grave, but the disenchanting smile in the depths of his eyes turned into a faint glimmer of satisfaction. "Play without me? Of course she won't—she *can't*! I'm glad she's admitted it for once." He scrutinised Kilvert with quiet irony. "I suppose our lives have no secrets for you, if you've been talking with Margaret. I came back, of course, because we must get through our Venetian engagements somehow. After that—"

"Oh," Kilvert interrupted passionately, "don't say: 'After that!'"

Brand gave a careless shrug. "After that, I shall come back again; I shall keep on

coming back; always for the same reason, I suppose.”

“If you could see her as she is now, you’d need no other reason than herself!”

The musician repeated his shrug, this time with a gesture of retrospective weariness. “If only she’d leave me alone about that Polish girl! As if a man couldn’t have a chance accompanist without . . . Her fatal mistake is always mixing the eternal with the transient. But every woman does that, I suppose. Oh, well, we’re chained to each other by something we love better than ourselves; and she knows it. She knows I’ll always come back—I’ll always have to.” He stood looking at Kilvert as if this odd burst of confidence had suddenly turned them into old friends. “Do you know what programme she’s settled on for tonight?” he added wearily, as he turned toward the door of the hotel.

JOY IN THE HOUSE

The moment the big liner began to move out of harbour Christine Ansley went down to her small inside stateroom and addressed herself, attentively and systematically, to unpacking and arranging her things. Only a week between Havre and New York; but that was no reason why she should not be comfortably settled, have everything within easy reach, "ship-shape," in fact—she saw now the fitness of the term.

She sat down on the narrow berth with a sigh of mingled weariness and satisfaction. The wrench had been dreadful—the last hours really desperate; she was shaken with them still—but the very moment the steamer began to glide out into the open the obsession fell from her, the tumult and the agony seemed to grow unreal, remote, as if they had been part of a sensational film she had sat and gazed at from the stalls. The real woman, her only real self, was here in this cabin, homeward bound, was Mrs. Devons Ansley—ah, thank God, still Mrs. Devons Ansley!—and not the bewildered shattered Christine who, a few hours earlier, had stumbled out of the room in the hotel at Havre, repeating to the man who sat, his face buried in his arms, and neither moved nor spoke any longer: "I can't . . . I mean I must. . . . I promised Devons I'd go back. . . . You *know* I promised!"

That was barely three hours ago. But by this time no doubt Jeff Lithgow was in the train again, on his way back to Paris; and she was here, on this blessed boat, in this dear little cabin of her own, sitting on the narrow berth in which she would sleep undisturbed through the long safe quiet night and on into the next day, for as many hours on end as she chose. A whole week by herself, in which to sleep, and to think things over, and gradually to become Christine Ansley again—oh, yes, forever! The time seemed too short; she wished the steamer were bound across the Pacific at its widest. . . .

She began to unpack, shaking out the garments she had flung into her steamer-trunk that morning, she didn't know how! What a welter of untidiness and confusion she had come out of: things always being pitched into trunks or tumbled out, in the perpetual rush and confusion of their unsettled lives. Poor Jeff! He would never be anything but a roamer . . . With whom would he roam next, she wondered? But that speculation did not detain her long. She wanted to turn her thoughts away from Jeff, not to follow him through his subsequent divagations. . . . She supposed all artists were like that; he said they were. Painters especially. . . . Not that she had ever thought him a great painter—not *really*. . . . His portrait of her, for instance! Why, she must have sat for it sixty times—no, sixty-two; she'd counted. . . . Hours and

hours of stiff neck and petrified joints. . . . He had a theory that a painter should always catch his subjects unawares, but there wasn't much unawareness about his practice! She was thankful Devons had never seen that portrait. . . . Of course Devons didn't know much about painting; at least that particular kind of painting. In his own line—as a militant moralist, and an amateur lecturer on the New Psychology—he prided himself on being in the advance guard, an “ultra,” as he smilingly boasted; but though he had a smattering of Academic culture, and had once discoursed on Renaissance Painters to the Stokesburg Wednesday Evening Club, his business as an active real-estate agent had prevented his having time to deal with the moderns, and Christine recalled his genial guffaw when he had first encountered a picture of Jeff's at Mabel Breck's: “My Lithgow,” Mabel simperingly called it.

“That a Lithgow, is it? Glad to know! I saw at once it wasn't a picture,” Dev had guffawed—how it had mortified Christine at the time! Mabel had been obviously annoyed; Mabel liked to be in the “last boat,” but not alone there; but Mabel's husband and the others had enjoyed the joke, and been put at their ease by it, for Devons passed for a wit in their set, and Stokesburg, in spite of its thirst for modern culture, was not yet collecting Lithgows. . . .

Jeff had a brilliant talent; Christine had been among the first to recognise it. At least among the first at Stokesburg; for when she went to New York that spring she found that everybody (the “everybody” she wanted to be one of) was talking of him, and wondering whether one oughtn't to get in ahead and buy his pictures. Yes, of course Jeff had talent—but there was something unstable, unreliable in his talent, just as there was in his character . . . whereas Devons . . .

She put up her hands and hid her face in them for a moment. . . . Why this perpetual pendulum swing: Jeff—Devons, Devons—Jeff, backward and forward in her brain? The Jeff affair was over, wound up, wiped out of existence; she was Mrs. Devons Ansley, going back to her husband after a six months' absence. No; no six months, even. Five months and sixteen days. That had been the understanding when she and Devons had parted at the station (so like him to drive her to the station, and see that she was properly settled in the New York train, and had the newspapers, and a box of chocolates!). He had said then, slipping a letter into her hand with her ticket: “Here, my dear; I've put it in writing so that there can be no mistake. Any time within six months, if you want to come back, there'll be joy in the house. Joy in the house!” He had said it emphatically, deliberately, with a drawn smile, and ended on a sort of nervous parody of his large hospitable laugh. “*Within* six months! After that, of course, I shall assume . . . I shall feel obliged to assume . . .” The train was already moving, but his strained grin, his laborious laugh, had followed her. It had

been “poor Dev” then—till she saw Jeff’s dark eager head working a way toward her through the crowd at the Grand Central station. . . .

Well—she had made a horrible mistake, and she had recognised it in time. Many women make just such mistakes, but to few, even in communities more advanced than Stokesburg, is given the opportunity of wiping out the past and beginning over again. She owed that to Devons; to his really superhuman generosity. It was something she would never forget; she would devote the rest of her life to making up to him for it—to that, and to bringing up their boy to appreciate and revere his father. . . . When she thought of the boy—her baby Christopher—the sense of her iniquity, of her inhumanity, overcame her afresh. She had walked out of the house and left husband and child to fend for themselves, consoling herself with the idea that the same thing happened to lots of children whose parents were “unsuited” to each other, and that they never seemed much the worse for it. And then Christopher’s Susan was a perfect nurse, and Mrs. Robbit, Devons’s mother (who had remarried, but was again a widow) lived only five minutes away, and was devoted to her son and to the boy, and would manage everything ever so much better than Christine ever had. That had stilled her conscience as she pushed her way through the crowd to join Jeff at the Grand Central . . . but now?

Now she saw that, but for her husband’s magnanimity, his loyalty to his given word, she would have been alone and adrift, husbandless and childless—for whatever happened (even if Jeff had been able to persuade his wife to divorce him, which had never been very sure, Madge Lithgow’s views being less “advance guard” and more proprietary than Devons’s); whatever happened, Christine now knew, she could never have married Jeffrey Lithgow. . . . Anything, anything but that!

“A trial marriage,” Devons had called it, stiffening his lips into a benedictory smile on the day when she had wrung his consent from him. “Let’s call it that, shall we? A marriage, I’ll understand—not an elopement. For, of course, my child, unless your object is marriage—and unless you have a definite understanding—er . . . er . . . pledge—I couldn’t possibly let you expose yourself—” A man like Devons, of course, couldn’t dream that, to men like Jeff Lithgow, marriage means nothing; that they don’t care whether they’re married or not, because it makes no practical difference to them—no difference in their way of thinking or living. After all, what’s the meaning of “self-realisation,” if you’re to let your life be conditioned and contracted by somebody else’s? To the abstract argument, of course, Devons would have agreed; it was exactly what he was always preaching and proclaiming. “You wouldn’t think it a virtue to limp about in a tight shoe, would you? Then, if the domestic shoe pinches—” didn’t she know all the figures of speech and all the

deductions? Jeff, on the contrary, had never thought about such questions, or worried about his own conduct or anybody else's. Abstract reasoning sent him to sleep, and he was unaware of institutions unless they got in his way and tripped him up. Every faculty was concentrated on the pursuit of his two passions: painting and loving. He said perhaps some time he'd take a day off—from painting, that is—and find out about the rest of life. . . . With Devons it was just the other way. He was forever taking out his convictions and re-examining and re-formulating them. But he might lecture on "The New Morality" to the end of time, and talk as loudly as he pleased about individual liberty, and living one's life: *his* life was one of bedroom slippers and the evening paper by a clean gas-fire, with his wife stitching across the hearth, and telling him that the baby's first tooth was showing. Only, having proclaimed the doctrine of sentimental liberty so long and loudly, when he was asked to apply his doctrine to his wife's case he had either to admit it was a failure, or to accept the consequences; and he had accepted them.

She remembered the first day she had really listened to Jeff, consented to take his entreaties seriously, his look of genuine surprise when she had questioned: "Yes—but what about your wife?"

"Who—Madge?" (As if he had had several, and wasn't sure which!) "Oh, Madge's all right. She's A-1." That settled it, his easy smile seemed to say.

"But if you feel like that about her—why do you want to leave her?"

He took the end of one of his paint-brushes and ran it through the tawny-brown ripples of Christine's hair. "Because she smells of soap," he said gravely.

"Oh, Jeff—how monstrous!" But how could she help laughing with him when he laughed? "Madge understands—she *knows*," he continued, reassuring her. "Doesn't Ansley *know*?" he added, with sudden insight. And she murmured: "I suppose people can't help knowing when they're out of step. . . ." "Well, what's worrying you, then? Turn your head a fraction of a hair's breadth to the left, will you, darling? There—that's it. . . . For how many æons of time do you suppose the Creator has been storing the light in your hair for me? It may come from some star thirty million light-years away. Especially stored up for Jeff Lithgow!"

"But then, if it comes from as far off as that, the star's dead already; been dead for æons; the Christine star, you know."

At that he had drawn up his tormented eyebrows to meet the dusky-brown wrinkles of his forehead. "*You* dead? Why, you've hardly begun to be alive! You're a lovely buried lady that I've stumbled on in a desert tomb, shrouded in your golden hair; and being a sorcerer I'm breathing life into you. There! You're actually getting rosier with every word. . . ."

“Yes,” she laughed. “But those resuscitated ladies never stay alive long. What are you going to do when I crumble on you?”

He threw down his brushes. “Do? Kill myself. I’ve waited for you too long,” he said with a sudden sombreness, and a shiver swept through her that checked her laugh.

“Well—as long as you don’t kill *me!*” she bantered back with dry lips.

“*You?* I won’t have to. You’ll die of losing me,” he announced in his calm concentrated voice. “This isn’t any ordinary flurry, you understand; it’s one of those damned predestined things. . . . Child! You’ve moved again. Here—do try to look steadily at the left-hand upper corner of that picture-frame. So . . .” He sank back into his absorption with a murmur of deep content.

Yes; she saw it now. That was the kind of thing that had dazzled her—the light-years, and the buried lady, and that calm fatalistic vision: “You’ll die of losing me—*Und mein Stamm sind jene Asra . . .*” and all the rest of it.

And then—the reality? Well, it wasn’t that he seemed to love her less. Perhaps it was, in part, that the violence, the absoluteness of his love, was too much for her, was more than mortal stature—hers at any rate—could carry. There were days when she simply staggered under the load. And somehow he never seemed to try to share it with her—just left her to bear this prodigious burden of being loved by him as he left her, when they got out at a railway station, to stagger under the burden of their joint bags and wraps, to dive after the umbrellas, capture a porter and hunt for the hotel bus, while he solicitously nursed those sacred objects, his “painting things,” and forgot about everything else, herself included.

Not that he wasn’t kind; but how could he notice a poor woman carrying too heavy a load when he was miles above the earth, floating overhead in his native medium, in the stratosphere, as he called it? Why wouldn’t she come up there with him? he was always asking her. “Don’t say you couldn’t breathe up there, when your eyes are made of two pieces of it.” She had thought that enchanting, she remembered. . . .

But then, one day, when her eyes reminded him of something else, and he was bending over them, as he said, to fish for his lost soul—that day he had drawn back suddenly, and exclaimed, in a voice strident with jealousy: “Who’s that other man in your eyes?”

Genuinely bewildered, she lifted them from the letter she had been reading. “The other man?” They filled with tears. “Oh, such a darling man! My little boy. This is from his Nanny—”

“Your little boy?” He seemed really not to know of whom she was speaking.

“My son Christopher. You haven’t forgotten, I suppose, that I have a child at home, and must sometimes think of him?”

His own eyes darkened with momentary pity. “Oh, you poor lost mother-bird! But we’ll have another child,” he declared with sudden conviction, as if he were saying: “Poor child yourself—you’ve broken your toy, but I’ll buy you another. . . .”

And then there had been the other day, less painful but more humiliating, when he had to tell her that the London dealer had returned the picture sent on approval, and that there wasn’t money enough left to pay the hotel bill in that horrid place where the woman had been so insolent that they had already decided to leave—the day when they had had to bear her rudeness, and invent things to pacify her, and Jeff had offered to paint a head of her little girl in payment, and the monster had looked at one of his canvases, and said: “*Est-ce que Monsieur se moque de moi?*” Ah, how Christine hated the memory of it, she who had always held her head so high, and marked her passage by such liberalities! Devons, who wasn’t always generous, gave big tips in travelling, perhaps because it was an easy way of adding to his own consequence, and because he liked to be blessed by beggars, and have servants rush to open doors for him. “It takes so little to make them happy,” he always said, referring to the poor and the dependent; and Christine sometimes wondered how he knew. She wasn’t sure any longer that it took so little to make anybody happy. In her case it seemed to have taken the best of four or five people’s lives, and left her so little happy that, with her steamer-trunk half unpacked, and the luncheon gong booming, she could only throw herself down on her berth and weep.

II

“A wireless, ma’am,” the steward said, coming up to her on the last day out.

Christine took the message tremblingly; she had to wait a minute before breaking the band. Supposing it should be from Jeff, re-opening the whole question, arguing, pleading, reproaching her again? Or from Devons, to say that after all he had presumed too much on his moral courage in saying she might come back to him, with all Stokesburg maliciously agog for her return? Or the boy?—Ah, if it should be to say that Christopher was ill, was dead—her child whom she had abandoned so light-heartedly, and then, after a few weeks, begun to fret and yearn for with an incessant torment of self-reproach? How could she bear that, how could she bear it? The great tragic folds of her destiny were more than she could ever fill, were cut on a scale too vast for her. “Any answer, ma’am?” asked the hovering steward; and she stiffened herself and opened the telegram.

“In two days more there will be joy in the house. Devons and Christopher,” she read, and the happy tears rushed to her eyes.

“Yes—there’s an answer.” She found her pen, the steward produced a form, and she scribbled: “And in my heart, you darlings.” Yes; it was swelling, ripening in her heart, the joy of her return to these two people who were hers, who were waiting for her, to whom, in spite of everything, she was still, sacredly and inalienably, “my wife,” “my mother.” The steward hurried away, and she leaned back with closed eyes and a meditative heart.

What a relief to be drawn back into her own peaceful circle—to stop thinking about Jeff and the last tormented months, and glide, through the door of that tender welcome, into the safe haven of home! She kept her eyes shut, and tried to feel that home again, to see and hear it. . . .

A house in Crest Avenue—how proud she had been of it when Devons had first brought her there! Proud of the smooth circle of turf before the door, the two cut-leaved maples, the carefully clipped privet hedge, the honeysuckle over the porch. It was in the very best neighborhood, high up, dry, airy, healthy—and with the richest people living close by. Old Mrs. Briscott, and the Barkly Troys, and the young Palmers building their great new house on the ridge just above; Devons had the right to be proud of taking his young wife to such a home. But what she thought of now was not the Briscotts and the Troys and the Palmers—no, not even Mabel Breck and her “last boat,” or the other social and topographical amenities of Crest Avenue, but just the space enclosed in her own privet hedge: the garden she and Devons had fussed over, ordered seeds and tools for, the house with its wide friendly gables and

the inevitable Colonial porch, the shining order within doors, the sunny neatness of the nursery, the spring bulbs in Chinese bowls on the south window-seat in the drawing-room, her books in their low mahogany bookshelves, Devons's own study, that was as tidy and glossy as a model dairy, and Martha's broad smile and fluted cap on the threshold. Even to see Martha's smile again would be a separate and individual joy! And at last her clothes would be properly mended and pressed, and she would be able to splash about at leisure in the warm bathroom. . . .

She was not in the least ashamed of lingering over these small sensual joys. She had not made enough of them when they were hers, and dwelling on them now helped to shut out something dark and looming on the threshold of her thoughts—the confused sense that life is not a matter of water-tight compartments, that no effort of the will can keep experiences from interpenetrating and colouring each other, and that for all her memories and yearnings she was really a new strange Christine entering upon a new strange life. . . .

As the train reached Stokesburg, she leaned out, hungry for the sight of Christopher. She saw a round pink face, an arm agitating a new straw hat, a large pink hand gesticulating.

“No; the boy's waiting for you at home with his grandmother. I wanted to be alone to greet my wife. Let me take your bag, my darling. So; be careful how you jump.” He enveloped her with almost paternal vigilance, receiving her on his broad chest as she stepped down on the platform. He smelt of eau de Cologne and bath salts; something sanitary, crisp and blameless exhaled itself from his whole person. If anything could ever corrupt him, it would not be moth and rust. . . .

She wanted to speak, to answer what he was saying; but her lips were dry. “And Christopher?” Her throat contracted as she tried to ask.

“Bless the boy! He's growing out of all his clothes. Mother says—”

Oh, the relief in her heart! “I suppose Susan's had Mrs. Shetter in to help her with the sewing?” How sweet it was to be saying the old usual things in the old usual way!

“Well, Susan—the fact is, Susan's not here any more. She—”

Susan not here! Susan no longer with Christopher? Christine's heart contracted again, she felt herself suddenly plunged full into the unknown, the disquieting. What had happened, why had her boy been separated from his nurse? But she hardly heard her husband's answer—she was thinking in a tumult: “After all, he was separated from his mother . . .”

“The fact is, Susan was too hide-bound, too old-fashioned. She was afraid of

fresh air. She inflicted silly punishments. Mother and I felt that a change was necessary. You'll see what Miss Bilk has done already—"

"Miss Bilk!" Ah, how she was prepared to hate Miss Bilk! And her mother-in-law also, for interfering and introducing new ideas and people behind her back. Christine had always felt, under Mrs. Robbit's blandness and acquiescence, a secret itch to meddle and advise. And of course Devons had been wax in her hands. . . .

And here they were at the white gate, and across the newly clipped privet the house smiled at them from all its glittering windows. On the shiny door-step stood Mrs. Robbit, large and soft and beautifully dressed; and from her arms shot forth a flying figure, shouting: "Daddy—Daddy!" as the car drew up.

Daddy—only Daddy! Christine hung back, her dry eyes devouring the child, her lips twitching. "My son, here's your mother; here's darling mummy, back from her long journey. You know I always said she'd come," Devons admonished him.

Christopher stopped short, glanced at her, and twisted his hand nervously in his father's. She fell on her knees before him. "Chris—my Chris! You haven't forgotten me?"

"I thought you were dead," he said.

"Christopher, I told you every day that your mother had only gone away on a journey," his father rebuked him.

"Yes; but that's what they always say when they're dead," the child rejoined, kicking the gravel, and looking away from his mother. "You won't lock up my wireless, will you?" he asked suddenly. "Not because I thought you were dead?"

The tension was relieved by tears and laughter, and with the boy on his father's shoulder, husband and wife walked up the carefully raked gravel to where Mrs. Robbit smiled and rustled between newly painted tubs of blue hydrangeas. "I wanted you to have your first moments alone with Chris and Devons—my daughter!" Mrs. Robbit murmured, enfolding Christine in an embrace that breathed of hygiene and Christian charity.

Miss Bilk, discretion itself, hung in the background, hiding behind her spectacles. When Christine saw how neutral-tinted she was, and how large the spectacles were, her secret apprehension was relieved. Had she actually felt jealous of Miss Bilk? Was it possible that Jeff had so altered her whole angle of vision, taught her to regard all men and women as carnivora perpetually devouring each other in hate or love? She put an appeased hand in the nursery-governess's, and walked across the threshold with a quiet heart.

"Oh—how lovely!" she exclaimed in the doorway. On the varnished white stair-rail, facing her from a half-way landing, hung a panel on which skilful hands had

woven in tight violets and roses:

JOY IN THE HOUSE

She gazed at it with tear-filled eyes. "How lovely of you all," she murmured.

"It was his idea," said Mrs. Robbit, with a fluffy gesture at her son.

"Ah, but mother did all the other flowers herself," the son interposed dutifully; and between the two, the reassured Christopher capering ahead, Christine re-entered her own drawing-room, saw the sunshine on the south window-seat, the hyacinths in the Chinese bowls, and flowers, flowers everywhere, disposed to welcome her.

"Joy in the house," her husband repeated, laying his lips on hers in an almost ritual gesture, while Mrs. Robbit delicately averted her swimming eyes.

"Yes—joy in the house, my daughter!"

"The parenthesis closed—everything between wiped out, obliterated, forgotten," Devons continued with rising eloquence.

Christine looked about her, trying to recognise them all again, and herself among them. "Home—" she murmured, straining every nerve to make it feel so.

"Home, sweet Home!" echoed her mother-in-law archly.

III

In the nursery, she had to admit, Miss Bilk had introduced the reign of reason. The windows were wide open day and night, Chris had his daily sunbath, his baby gymnastics, his assorted vitamins. And he seemed not to dislike the calm spectacled guardian who had replaced his old impulsive Nanny. After dinner, and a goodnight kiss to her sleeping son, Christine said to her husband: "Yes, the boy looks splendidly. I'm sure Miss Bilk's all right. But it must have nearly killed Susan."

Devons's rosy beatitude was momentarily clouded. "That's just it. She made a dreadful scene—though she knew that scenes were the one thing strictly forbidden. She excited the child so that I had to send her off the same night."

"Oh, poor Susan! What she must have suffered—"

"My dear, she made the child suffer. I overheard her telling him that you'd gone away because you didn't love him. And I will not permit suffering in my house."

Christine startled herself by a sudden laugh. "I wonder how you're going to keep it out?"

"How?" He shone on her admonishingly over his gold-rimmed eyeglasses. "By ignoring it, denying it, saying: 'It won't happen—it can't happen! Not to simple kindly people like us.'" He paused and gave a shy cough. "I said that to myself, nearly six months ago, the day you told me you . . . you wished to travel. . . . Now you see . . ."

Compunction flushed her, and she stood up and went to him. "Oh, you've been splendid—don't think I don't feel it. . . ." She drew a deep breath. "It's lovely to be here—at peace again. . . ."

"Where you belong," he murmured, lifting her hand to his lips.

"Where I belong," she echoed. She was so grateful to him for attempting nothing more than that reverential salute that she had nearly bent to touch his forehead. But something in her resisted, and she went back to her armchair. The gas-fire sparkled between them. He said ceremoniously: "You permit?" as he lit his pipe, and sank back in his armchair with the sigh of happy digestion. You had only to forbid sorrow to look in at the door, or drive it out when it forced its way in disguised as Susan. In both cases the end had justified the means, and he sat placidly among the rebuilt ruins. No wonder he stirred his pipe with a tranquil hand. He smiled at her across the fire.

"You're tired, my dear, after your night in the train?"

"I suppose so . . . yes . . . and coming back. . . ."

He shook a pink finger admonishingly. "Too much emotion. I want you to have

only calm happy thoughts. Go up to bed now and have a long quiet sleep.”

Ah, how tactful, how thoughtful he was! He was not going to drag her back too soon into the old intimacy. . . . He knew, he must know, how she was entangled in those other memories. They kissed goodnight, stiffly, half fraternally, and he called after her, as she mounted the stairs under the triumphal flower-piece that was already fading: “In the morning Chris and I’ll come in to see how you’ve slept.”

What a good thing, she thought the next morning, that in the Stokesburg world every man had an office, and had to go to it. Life was incredibly simplified by not having one’s husband about the house all day. With Jeff there was always the anxious problem of the days when he didn’t want to paint, and just messed about and disturbed the settled order of things, irritating himself and her. Now she heard the front door open and close at the usual hour, and said to herself that Devons was already on his way down town. She leaned back luxuriously against her pillows, smiling at the bright spring sunlight on her coverlet, the pretty breakfast set which Martha had brought to the bedside (a “surprise” from Mrs. Robbit, the maid told her), and Chris’s jolly shouts overhead. Yes, home was sweet on those terms . . . “I’ve waked from a bad dream,” she thought.

When she came down a little later she was surprised to hear her husband’s voice in the hall. It had not been to let him out that the front door had opened and closed. She paused on the landing, and saw him standing in the hall, his hat on, his hand on the door-handle, apparently addressing himself to some one who was already on the threshold.

“No, no—no publicity, please! On no account whatever! The matter is *closed*, you can say. Nothing changed: not a cloud on the horizon. My wife’s a great traveller—that’s all there is to it. Just a private episode with a happy ending—a Happy Ending!” he added, joyously stressing the capitals. The door shut on the invisible visitor and she saw Devons walk humming toward the umbrella-stand, select another stick, tap the barometer on the wall, and go out in his turn. “A reporter,” Christine thought, wincing under the consciousness that it was to spy out her arrival that the man had come, and thankful that he had not waylaid her in the hall. “Devons always knew how to deal with them,” she concluded, with a wife’s comfortable dismissal of difficulties she need not cope with.

The house was exquisitely calm and orderly. She liked the idea of resuming her household duties, talking over the marketing with the cook, discussing a new furniture polish with Martha. It was soothing to move from one tidy room to the

other, noting that ash-trays and paper-baskets had been emptied, cushions shaken up, scattered newspapers banished. Did the rooms look a trifle too tidy, had their personality been tidied away with the rest? She recalled with a shudder that chaotic room at the Havre hotel, and her struggle to sort out her things from Jeff's, in the sordid overnight confusion, while he sat at the table with his face buried.

For a moment, the evening before, she had wanted to talk to Devons of what was in her mind, to establish some sort of understanding with him; but how could she, when he declared that nothing was changed, spoke of her six months' absence as caused by a commendable desire for sight-seeing, tidied away all her emotion, and all reality, as the maid swept away pipe-ashes and stale newspapers? And now she saw that it was better so; that any return to the past would only stir up evil sediments, that the "nothing has happened" attitude was the safest, the wisest—and the easiest. She must just put away her anxious introspections, and fall in with her husband's plan. After all, she owed him that. "But I wish I could forget about Susan. He wasn't kind to Susan," she thought as she sat down at her writing-table.

She caught the ring of the front door bell, and Martha crossing the hall. Her mother-in-law, she supposed. She heard a woman's voice, and rose to welcome Mrs. Robbit. But the maid met her on the threshold, signing to her mysteriously. "There's a lady; she won't come in."

"Won't come in?"

"No. She says she wants to speak to you outside."

Christine walked buoyantly across the room. Its brightness and order struck her again; the flowers filled the air with summer. She crossed the hall, and in the open doorway saw a small slight woman standing. Christine's heart stood still. "Mrs. Lithgow!" she faltered.

Mrs. Lithgow turned on her a sharp birdlike face, drawn and dusky under graying hair. She was said to be older than her husband, and she looked so now.

"I wouldn't send in my name, because I knew if I did you'd tell the maid to say you were out." She spoke quickly, in a staccato voice which had something of Jeff's stridency.

"Say I was out—but why?" Christine stood looking at her shyly, kindly. There had been a day when the meeting with Jeff's wife would have filled her with anguish and terror; but now that the Jeff episode was happily over—obliterated, wiped out, as Devons said—what could she be to Mrs. Lithgow but a messenger of peace? "Why shouldn't I see you?" she repeated with a smile.

Mrs. Lithgow stood in the middle of the hall. Suddenly she looked up and her eyes rested on the withered "Joy in the House" that confronted her. "Well—because

of *that!*” she said with a sharp laugh.

Christine coloured up. How indelicate—how like Jeff! she thought. The shock of the sneer made her feel how deeply she herself had already been re-absorbed into the pacifying atmosphere of Crest Avenue. “Do come in,” she said, ignoring the challenge.

Mrs. Lithgow followed her into the drawing-room and Christine closed the door. Her visitor stood still, looking about her as she had looked about the hall. “Flowers everywhere, joy everywhere,” she said, with the same low rasping laugh.

Christine flushed again, again felt herself more deeply committed to the Crest Avenue attitude. “Won’t you sit down?” she suggested courteously.

The other did not seem to hear. “And not one petal on his grave!” she burst out with a sudden hysterical cry.

Christine gave a start of alarm. Was the woman off her balance—or only unconsciously imitating Jeff’s crazy ravings? After a moment Christine’s apprehension gave way to pity—she felt that she must quiet and reassure the poor creature. Perhaps Mrs. Lithgow, who was presumably not kept informed of the course of her husband’s amatory adventures, actually thought that Christine meant to rejoin him. Perhaps she had come to warn her rival that she would never under any circumstances consent to a divorce.

“Mrs. Lithgow,” Christine began, “I know you must think badly of me. I don’t mean to defend myself. But perhaps you don’t know that I’ve fully realised the wrong I’ve done, and that I’ve parted definitely from Jeff. . . .”

Mrs. Lithgow, sitting rigid in the opposite chair, emitted one of her fierce little ejaculations. “Not know? Oh, yes: I know. Look at this.” She drew a telegram out of her bag, and handed it to Christine, who unfolded it and read: “I thought I could stand her leaving me but I can’t. Goodbye.”

“You see he kept me informed of your slightest movements,” said Mrs. Lithgow with a kind of saturnine satisfaction.

Christine sat staring in silence at the message. She felt faint and confused. Why was the poor woman showing her those pitiful words, so obviously meant for no other eyes? She was seized with an agony of pity and remorse. “But it’s all over, it’s all over,” she murmured penitently, propitiatingly.

“All over—yes! I was starting for Havre when I got that cable three days ago. But the other message caught me on my way to the train.”

“The other message?”

“Well, the one that said it was all over. He was buried yesterday. The Consul was there. It was the Consul who cabled me not to come—it was just as well; for

I'd have had to borrow the money, and there are the children to think of. He hardly ever sent me any money," added Mrs. Lithgow dispassionately. Her hysterical excitement had subsided with the communication of what she had come to say, and she spoke in a low monotonous voice like an absent-minded child haltingly reciting a lesson.

Christine stood before her, the telegram in her shaking hands. Mrs. Lithgow's words were still remote and unreal to her: they sounded like the ticking out of a message on a keyboard—a message that would have to be decoded. . . . "Jeff—Jeff? You mean—you don't mean he's dead?" she gasped.

Mrs. Lithgow looked at her in astonishment. "You didn't know—you really didn't know?"

"Know? How could you suppose . . . how could I imagine . . .?"

"How could you imagine you'd—killed him?"

"Ah, no! No! Not that—don't say that!"

"As if you'd held the revolver," said Mrs. Lithgow implacably.

"Ah, no—no, no!"

"He held out for two days . . . he tried to pull himself together. I thought you must have seen it in one of those papers they print on the steamer."

Christine shook her head. "I never looked at them."

"And you actually mean to say your husband didn't tell you?" Again Christine made a shuddering gesture of negation.

"Well," said Mrs. Lithgow, with her little acrid laugh, "now you know why he hung up that 'Joy In The House' for your arrival."

"Oh, don't say that—don't be so inhuman!"

"Well—don't he read the papers either?"

"He couldn't have . . . seen this . . ."

"He must have been blind, then. There's been nothing else in the papers. My husband was famous," said Mrs. Lithgow with a sudden bitter pride.

Christine had dropped down sobbing into a chair. "Oh, spare me—spare me!" she cried out, hiding her face.

"I don't know why I should," she heard Mrs. Lithgow say behind her. Christine struggled to her feet, and the two women stood looking at each other in silence.

"There's no joy in the house for *me*," said Mrs. Lithgow drily.

"Oh, don't—don't speak of that again! That silly thing . . ."

"My husband's epitaph."

"How can you speak to me in that way?" Christine struggled to control herself, to fight down the humiliation and the horror. "It wasn't my fault—I mean that he . . ."

I was not the only one. . . . He was always imagining . . .”

“He was always looking for the woman? Yes; artists are like that, I believe. But he was sure he’d found her when he found you. He never hid it from me. He told you so, didn’t he? He told you he couldn’t live without you? Only I suppose you didn’t believe him. . . .”

Christine sank down again with covered face. Only Mrs. Lithgow’s last words had reached her. “You didn’t believe him. . . .” But hadn’t she, in the inmost depths of herself, believed him? Hadn’t she felt, during those last agonizing hours in the hotel at Havre, that what he told her was the truth, hadn’t she known that his life was actually falling in ruins, hadn’t her only care been to escape before the ruins fell on her and destroyed her too? Her husband had said the night before that she had come back to the place where she belonged; but if human responsibility counted for anything, wasn’t her place rather in that sordid hotel room where a man sat with buried face because he could not bear to see the door close on her forever?

“Oh, what can I do—what can I do?” broke from her in her desolate misery.

Mrs. Lithgow took the outcry as addressed to herself. “Do? For me, do you mean? I forgot—it was what I came for. About his pictures . . . I have to think about that already. The lawyers say I must. . . . Do you know where they are, what he’d done with them? Had he given you any to bring home?” She hung her head, turning sallow under her duskiness. “They say his dying in this terrible way will . . . will help the sale. . . . I have to think of the children. I’m beyond minding anything for myself. . . .”

Christine looked at her vacantly. She was thinking: “I tried to escape from the ruins, and here they are crashing about me.” At first she could not recall anything about the pictures; then her memory cleared, and gave her back the address of a painter in Paris with whom Jeff had told her that he had left some of his things, in the hope that the painter might sell them. He had been worried, she remembered, because there was no money to send home for the children; he had hoped his friend would contrive to raise a few hundred francs on the pictures. She faltered out the address, and Mrs. Lithgow noted it down carefully on the back of her husband’s farewell cable. She was beyond minding even that, Christine supposed. Mrs. Lithgow pushed the cable back into her shabby bag.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose you and I haven’t got anything else to say to each other.”

It was on Christine’s lips to break out: “Only that I know now how I loved him —” but she dared not. She moved a few steps nearer to Mrs. Lithgow, and held out her hands beseechingly. But the widow did not seem to see them. “Goodbye,” she

said, and walked rigidly across the hall and out of the door.

Christine followed her half way and then, as the door closed, turned back and looked up at the "Joy in the House" that still dangled inanely from the stair-rail. She was sure now that her husband had known of Jeff Lithgow's death. How could he not have known of it? Even if he had not been the most careful and conscientious of newspaper readers, the house must have been besieged by reporters. Everybody in Stokesburg knew that she and Lithgow had gone off together; though they had slipped on board the steamer unnoticed the papers had rung with their adventure for days afterward. And of course the man she had caught Devons amiably banishing that morning was a journalist who had come to see how she had taken the news of the suicide. . . .

Yes; they had all known, and had all concealed it from her; her husband, her mother-in-law, Miss Bilk; even Martha and the cook had known. It had been Devons's order that there should not be a cloud on the horizon; and there had not been one. She sat down on a chair in the white shiny hall, with its spick-and-span Chinese rug, the brass umbrella-stand, the etchings in their neat ebony mouldings. She would always see Mrs. Lithgow now, a blot on the threshold, a black restless ghost in the pretty drawing-room. Yes; Devons had known, and it had made no difference to him. His serenity and his good-humour were not assumed. He would probably say: Why should Lithgow's death affect him? It was the providential solving of a problem. He wished the poor fellow no ill; but it was certainly simpler to have him out of the way. . . .

Christine sprang up with a spurt of energy. She must get away, get away at once from this stifling atmosphere of tolerance and benevolence, of smoothing over and ignoring and dissembling. Anywhere out into the live world, where men and women struggled and loved and hated, and quarrelled and came together again with redoubled passion. . . . But the hand which had opened that world to her was dead, was stiff in the coffin already. "He was buried yesterday," she muttered. . . .

Martha came out into the hall to carry a vase of fresh flowers into the drawing-room. Christine stood up with weary limbs. "You'd better take that down—the flowers are dead," she said, pointing to the inscription dangling from the stairs. Martha looked surprised and a little grieved. "Oh, ma'am—do you think Mr. Ansley would like you to? He worked over it so hard himself, him and Miss Bilk and me. And Mr. Chris helped us too. . . ."

"Take it down," Christine commanded sternly.

"But there's the boy—" she thought; and walked slowly up the stairs to find her son.

DIAGNOSIS

“Nothing to worry about—absolutely nothing. Of course not . . . just what they all say!” Paul Dorrance walked away from his writing-table to the window of his high-perched flat. The window looked south, over the crowded towering New York below Wall Street which was the visible centre and symbol of his life’s work. He drew a great breath of relief—for under his surface-incredulity a secret reassurance was slowly beginning to unfold. The two eminent physicians he had just seen had told him he would be all right again in a few months; that his dark fears were delusions; that all he needed was to get away from work till he had recovered his balance of body and brain. Dorrance had smiled acquiescence and muttered inwardly: “Infernal humbugs; as if I didn’t know how I felt—!”; yet hardly a quarter of an hour later their words had woven magic passes about him, and with a timid avidity he had surrendered to the sense of returning life. “By George, I *do* feel better,” he muttered, and swung about to his desk, remembering he had not breakfasted. The first time in months that he had remembered that! He touched the bell at his elbow, and with a half-apologetic smile told his servant that . . . well, yes . . . the doctors said he ought to eat more. . . . Perhaps he’d have an egg or two with his coffee . . . yes, with bacon. . . . He chafed with impatience till the tray was brought.

Breakfast over, he glanced through the papers with the leisurely eye of a man before whom the human comedy is likely to go on unrolling itself for many years. “Nothing to be in a hurry about, after all,” was his half-conscious thought. That line which had so haunted him lately, about “Time’s wingèd chariot,” relapsed into the region of pure æsthetics, now that in his case the wings were apparently to be refurled. “No reason whatever why you shouldn’t live to be an old man.” That was pleasant hearing, at forty-nine. What did they call an old man, nowadays? He had always imagined that he shouldn’t care to live to be an old man; now he began by asking himself what he understood by the term “old.” Nothing that applied to himself, certainly; even if he were to be mysteriously metamorphosed into an old man at some far distant day—what then? It was too far off to visualize, it did not affect his imagination. Why, old age no longer began short of seventy; almost every day the papers told of hearty old folk celebrating their hundredth birthdays—sometimes by re-marriage. Dorrance lost himself in pleasant musings over the increased longevity of the race, evoking visions of contemporaries of his grandparents, infirm and toothless at an age which found their descendants still carnivorous and alert.

The papers read, his mind drifted agreeably among the rich possibilities of travel.

A busy man ordered to interrupt his work could not possibly stay in New York. Names suggestive of idleness and summer clothes floated before him: the West Indies, the Canaries, Morocco—why not Morocco, where he had never been? And from there he could work his way up through Spain. He rose to reach for a volume from the shelves where his travel-books were ranged—but as he stood fluttering its pages, in a state of almost thoughtless beatitude, something twitched him out of his dream. “I suppose I ought to tell her—” he said aloud.

Certainly he ought to tell her; but the mere thought let loose a landslide of complications, obligations, explanations . . . their suffocating descent made him gasp for breath. He leaned against the desk, closing his eyes.

But of course she would understand. The doctors said he was going to be all right—that would be enough for her. She would see the necessity of his going away for some months; a year perhaps. She couldn’t go with him; that was certain! So what was there to make a fuss about? Gradually, insidiously, there stole into his mind the thought—at first a mere thread of a suggestion—that this might be the moment to let her see, oh, ever so gently, that things couldn’t go on forever—nothing did—and that, at his age, and with this new prospect of restored health, a man might reasonably be supposed to have his own views, his own plans; might think of marriage; marriage with a young girl; children; a place in the country . . . his mind wandered into that dream as it had into the dream of travel. . . .

Well, meanwhile he must let her know what the diagnosis was. She had been awfully worried about him, he knew, though all along she had kept up so bravely. (Should he, in the independence of his recovered health, confess under his breath that her celebrated “braveness” sometimes got a little on his nerves?) Yes, it had been hard for her; harder than for any one; he owed it to her to tell her at once that everything was all right; all right as far as he was concerned. And in her beautiful unselfishness nothing else would matter to her—at first. Poor child! He could hear her happy voice! “Really—really and truly? They both said so? You’re *sure*? Oh, of course I’ve always known . . . haven’t I always told you?” Bless her, yes; but he’d known all along what she was thinking. . . . He turned to the desk, and took up the telephone.

As he did so, his glance lit on a sheet of paper on the rug at his feet. He had keen eyes: he saw at once that the letter-head bore the name of the eminent consultant whom his own physician had brought in that morning. Perhaps the paper was one of the three or four prescriptions they had left with him; a chance gust from door or window might have snatched it from the table where the others lay. He stooped and picked it up—

That was the truth, then. That paper on the floor held his fate. The two doctors had written out their diagnosis, and forgotten to pocket it when they left. There were their two signatures; and the date. There was no mistake. . . . Paul Dorrance sat for a long time with the paper on the desk before him. He propped his chin on his locked hands, shut his eyes, and tried to grope his way through the illimitable darkness. . . .

Anything, anything but the sights and sounds of the world outside! If he had had the energy to move he would have jumped up, drawn the curtains shut, and cowered in his armchair in absolute blackness till he could come to some sort of terms with this new reality—for him henceforth the sole reality. For what did anything matter now except that he was doomed—was dying? That these two scoundrels had known it, and had lied to him? And that, having lied to him, in their callous professional haste, they had tossed his death-sentence down before him, forgotten to carry it away, left it there staring up at him from the floor?

Yes; it would be easier to bear in a pitch-black room, a room from which all sights and sounds, all suggestions of life, were excluded. But the effort of getting up to draw the curtains was too great. It was easier to go on sitting there, in the darkness created by pressing his fists against his lids. “Now, then, my good fellow—this is what it’ll be like in the grave . . .”

Yes; but if he had known the grave was *there*, so close, so all-including, so infinitely more important and real than any of the trash one had tossed the years away for; if somebody had told him . . . he might have done a good many things differently, put matters in a truer perspective, discriminated, selected, weighed. . . . Or, no! A thousand times no! Be beaten like that? Go slinking off to his grave before it was dug for him? His folly had been that he had not packed enough into life; that he had always been sorting, discriminating, trying for a perspective, choosing, weighing—God! When there was barely time to seize life before the cup that held it was cracked, and gulp it down while you had a throat that could swallow!

Ah, well—no use in retrospection. What was done was done: what undone must remain so to all eternity. Eternity—what did the word mean? How could the least fringe of its meaning be grasped by ephemeral creatures groping blindly through a few short years to the grave? Ah, the pity of it—pity, pity! That was the feeling that rose to the surface of his thoughts. Pity for all the millions of blind gropers like himself, the millions and millions who thought themselves alive, as he had, and suddenly found themselves dead: as he had! Poor mortals all, with that seed of annihilation that made them brothers—how he longed to help them, how he winced at the thought that he must so often have hurt them, brushing by in his fatuous vitality!

How many other lives had he used up in his short span of living? Not consciously, of course—that was the worst of it! The old nurse who had slaved for him when he was a child, and then vanished from his life, to be found again, years after, poor, neglected, dying—well, for her he had done what he could. And that thin young man in his office, with the irritating cough, who might perhaps have been saved if he had been got away sooner? Stuck on to the end because there was a family to support—of course! And the old bookkeeper whom Dorrance had inherited from his father, who was deaf and half-blind, and wouldn't go either till he had to be gently told—? All that had been, as it were, the stuff out of which he, Paul Dorrance, had built up his easy, affluent, successful life. But, no, what nonsense! He had been fair enough, kind enough, whenever he found out what was wrong; only he hadn't really pitied them, had considered his debt discharged when he had drawn a cheque or rung up a Home for Incurables. Whereas pity, he now saw—oh, curse it, he was talking like a Russian novel! Nonsense . . . nonsense . . . everybody's turn came sooner or later. The only way to reform the world was to reform Death out of it. And instead of that, Death was always there, was there now, at the door, in the room, at his elbow . . . *his* Death, his own private and particular end-of-everything. *Now!* He snatched his hands away from his face. They were wet.

A bell rang hesitatingly and the door opened behind him. He heard the servant say: "Mrs. Welwood." He stood up, blinking at the harsh impact of light and life. "Mrs. Welwood." Everything was going on again, going on again. . . . People were behaving exactly as if he were not doomed. . . . The door shut.

"Eleanor!"

She came up to him quickly. How close, alive, oppressive every one seemed! She seldom came to his flat—he wondered dully why she had come today.

She stammered: "What has happened? You promised to telephone at ten. I've been ringing and ringing. They said nobody answered. . . ."

Ah, yes; he remembered now. He looked at the receiver. It lay on the desk, where he had dropped it when his eye had lit on that paper. All that had happened in his other life—before. . . . Well, here she was. How pale she looked, her eyelids a little swollen. And yet how strong, how healthy—how obviously undiseased. Queer! She'd been crying too! Instinctively he turned, and put himself between her and the light.

"What's all the fuss about, dear?" he began jauntily.

She coloured a little, hesitating as if he had caught her at fault. "Why, it's nearly one o'clock; and you told me the consultation was to be at nine. And you promised

...”

Oh, yes; of course. He had promised. . . . With the hard morning light on her pale face and thin lips, she looked twenty years older. Older than what? After all, she was well over forty, and had never been beautiful. Had he ever thought her beautiful? Poor Eleanor—oh, poor Eleanor!

“Well, yes; it’s my fault,” he conceded. “I suppose I telephoned to somebody” (this fib to gain time) “and forgot to hang up the receiver. There it lies; I’m convicted!” He took both her hands—how they trembled!—and drew her to him.

This was Eleanor Welwood, for fifteen years past the heaviest burden on his conscience. As he stood there, holding her hands, he tried to recover a glimpse of the beginnings, and of his own state of mind at the time. He had been captivated; but never to the point of wishing she were free to marry him. Her husband was a pleasant enough fellow; they all belonged to the same little social group; it was a delightful relation, just as it was. And Dorrance had the pretext of his old mother, alone and infirm, who lived with him and whom he could not leave. It was tacitly understood that old Mrs. Dorrance’s habits must not be disturbed by any change in the household. So love, on his part, imperceptibly cooled (or should he say ripened?) into friendship; and when his mother’s death left him free, there still remained the convenient obstacle of Horace Welwood. Horace Welwood did not die; but one day, as the phrase is, he “allowed” his wife to divorce him. The news had cost Dorrance a sleepless night or two. The divorce was obtained by Mrs. Welwood, discreetly, in a distant and accommodating state; but it was really Welwood who had repudiated his wife, and because of Paul Dorrance. Dorrance knew this, and was aware that Mrs. Welwood knew he knew it. But he had kept his head, she had silenced her heart; and life went on as before, except that since the divorce it was easier to see her, and he could telephone to her house whenever he chose. And they continued to be the dearest of friends.

He had often gone over all this in his mind, with an increasing satisfaction in his own shrewdness. He had kept his freedom, kept his old love’s devotion—or as much of it as he wanted—and proved to himself that life was not half bad if you knew how to manage it. That was what he used to think—and then, suddenly, two or three hours ago, he had begun to think differently about everything, and what had seemed shrewdness now unmasked itself as a pitiless egotism.

He continued to look at Mrs. Welwood, as if searching her face for something it was essential he should find there. He saw her lips begin to tremble, the tears still on her lashes, her features gradually dissolving in a blur of apprehension and incredulity. “Ah—this is beyond her! She won’t be ‘brave’ now,” he thought with an

uncontrollable satisfaction. It seemed necessary, at the moment, that some one should feel the shock of his doom as he was feeling it—should *die with him*, at least morally, since he had to die. And the strange insight which had come to him—this queer “behind-the-veil” penetration he was suddenly conscious of—had already told him that most of the people he knew, however sorry they might think they were, would really not be in the least affected by his fate, would remain as inwardly unmoved as he had been when, in the plenitude of his vigour, some one had said before him: “Ah, poor so-and-so—didn’t you know? The doctors say it’s all up with him.”

With Eleanor it was different. As he held her there under his eyes he could almost trace the course of his own agony in her paling dissolving face, could almost see her as she might one day look if she were his widow—*his widow!* Poor thing. At least if she were that she could proclaim her love and her anguish, could abandon herself to open mourning on his grave. Perhaps that was the only comfort it was still in his power to give her . . . or in hers to give him. For the grave might be less cold if watered by her warm tears. The thought made his own well up, and he pressed her closer. At that moment his first wish was to see how she would look if she were really happy. His friend—his only friend! How he would make up to her now for his past callousness!

“Eleanor—”

“Oh, won’t you tell me?” she entreated.

“Yes. Of course. Only I want you to promise me something first—”

“Yes. . . .”

“To do what I want you to—whatever I want you to.”

She could not still the trembling of her hands, though he pressed them so close. She could scarcely articulate: “Haven’t I, always—?”

Slowly he pronounced: “I want you to marry me.”

Her trembling grew more violent, and then subsided. The shadow of her terrible fear seemed to fall from her, as the shadow of living falls from the face of the newly dead. Her face looked young and transparent; he watched the blood rise to her lips and cheeks.

“Oh, Paul, Paul—then the news is *good!*”

He felt a slight shrinking at her obtuseness. After all, she was alive (it wasn’t her fault), she was merely alive, like all the rest. . . . Magnanimously he rejoined: “Never mind about the news now.” But to himself he muttered: “*Sancta Simplicitas!*”

She had thought he had asked her to marry him because the news was good!

II

They were married almost immediately, and with as little circumstance as possible. Dorrance's ill-health, already vaguely known of in his immediate group of friends, was a sufficient pretext for hastening and simplifying the ceremony; and the next day the couple sailed for France.

Dorrance had not seen again the two doctors who had pronounced his doom. He had forbidden Mrs. Welwood to speak of the diagnosis, to him or to any one else. "For God's sake, don't let's dramatize the thing," he commanded her; and she acquiesced.

He had shown her the paper as soon as she had promised to marry him; and had hastened, as she read it, to inform her that of course he had no intention of holding her to her promise. "I only wanted to hear you say 'yes,'" he explained, on a note of emotion so genuine that it deceived himself as completely as it did her. He was sure she would not accept his offer to release her; if he had not been sure he might not have dared to make it. For he understood now that he must marry her; he simply could not live out these last months alone. For a moment his thoughts had played sentimentally with the idea that he was marrying her to acquit an old debt, to make her happy before it was too late; but that delusion had been swept away like a straw on the torrent of his secret fears. A new form of egotism, fiercer and more impatient than the other, was dictating his words and gestures—and he knew it. He was marrying simply to put a sentinel between himself and the presence lurking on his threshold—with the same blind instinct of self-preservation which had made men, in old days, propitiate death by the lavish sacrifice of life. And, confident as he was, he had felt an obscure dread of her failing him till his ring was actually on her finger; and a great ecstasy of reassurance and gratitude as he walked out into the street with that captive hand on his arm. Could it be that together they would be able to cheat death after all?

They landed at Genoa, and travelled by slow stages toward the Austrian Alps. The journey seemed to do Dorrance good; he was bearing the fatigue better than he had expected; and he was conscious that his attentive companion noted the improvement, though she forbore to emphasize it. "Above all, don't be too cheerful," he had warned her, half-smilingly, on the day when he had told her of his doom. "Marry me if you think you can stand it; but don't try to make me think I'm going to get well."

She had obeyed him to the letter, watching over his comfort, sparing him all needless fatigue and agitation, carefully serving up to him, on the bright surface of her

vigilance, the flowers of travel stripped of their thorns. The very qualities which had made her a perfect mistress—self-effacement, opportuneness, the art of being present and visible only when he required her to be—made her (he had to own it) a perfect wife for a man cut off from everything but the contemplation of his own end.

They were bound for Vienna, where a celebrated specialist was said to have found new ways of relieving the suffering caused by such cases as Dorrance's—sometimes even (though Dorrance and his wife took care not to mention this to each other) of checking the disease, even holding it for years in abeyance. "I owe it to the poor child to give the thing a trial," the invalid speciously argued, disguising his own passionate impatience to put himself in the great man's hands. "If she *wants* to drag out her life with a half-dead man, why should I prevent her?" he thought, trying to sum up all the hopeful possibilities on which the new diagnostician might base his verdict. . . . "Certainly," Dorrance thought, "I have had less pain lately. . . ."

It had been agreed that he should go to the specialist's alone; his wife was to wait for him at their hotel. "But you'll come straight back afterward? You'll take a taxi—you won't walk?" she had pleaded, for the first time betraying her impatience. "She knows the hours are numbered, and she can't bear to lose one," he thought, a choking in his throat; and as he bent to kiss her he had a vision of what it would have been, after the interview that lay ahead of him, the verdict he had already discounted, to walk back to an hotel in which no one awaited him, climb to an empty room and sit down alone with his doom. "Bless you, child, of course I'll take a taxi. . . ."

Now the consultation was over, and he had descended from the specialist's door, and stood alone in the summer twilight, watching the trees darken against the illumination of the street-lamps. What a divine thing a summer evening was, even in a crowded city street! He wondered that he had never before felt its peculiar loveliness. Through the trees the sky was deepening from pearl-gray to blue as the stars came out. He stood there, unconscious of the hour, gazing at the people hurrying to and fro on the pavement, the traffic flowing by in an unbroken stream, all the ceaseless tides of the city's life which had seemed to him, half an hour ago, forever suspended. . . .

"No, it's too lovely; I'll walk," he said, rousing himself, and took a direction opposite to that in which his hotel lay. "After all," he thought, "there's no hurry. . . . What a charming town Vienna is—I think I should like to live here," he mused as he wandered on under the trees. . . .

When at last he reached his hotel he stopped short on the threshold and asked

himself: "How am I going to tell her?" He realised that during his two hours' perambulations since he had left the doctor's office he had thought out nothing, planned nothing, not even, let his imagination glance at the future, but simply allowed himself to be absorbed into the softly palpitating life about him, like a tired traveller sinking, at his journey's end, into a warm bath. Only now, at the foot of the stairs, did he see the future facing him, and understand that he knew no more how to prepare for the return to life than he had for the leaving it. . . . "If only she takes it quietly—without too much fuss," he thought, shrinking in advance from any disturbance of those still waters into which it was so beatific to subside.

"That New York diagnosis was a mistake—an utter mistake," he began vehemently, and then paused, arrested, silenced, by something in his wife's face which seemed to oppose an invisible resistance to what he was in the act of saying. He had hoped she would not be too emotional—and now: what was it? Did he really resent the mask of composure she had no doubt struggled to adjust during her long hours of waiting? He stood and stared at her. "I suppose you don't believe it?" he broke off, with an aimless irritated laugh.

She came to him eagerly. "But of course I do, of course!" She seemed to hesitate for a second. "What I never did believe," she said abruptly, "was the other—the New York diagnosis."

He continued to stare, vaguely resentful of this new attitude, and of the hint of secret criticism it conveyed. He felt himself suddenly diminished in her eyes, as though she were retrospectively stripping him of some prerogative. If she had not believed in the New York diagnosis, what must her secret view of him have been all the while? "Oh, you never believed in it? And may I ask why?" He heard the edge of sarcasm in his voice.

She gave a little laugh that sounded almost as aimless as his. "I—I don't know. I suppose I couldn't *bear* to, simply; I couldn't believe fate could be so cruel."

Still with a tinge of sarcasm he rejoined: "I'm glad you had your incredulity to sustain you." Inwardly he was saying: "Not a tear . . . not an outbreak of emotion . . ." and his heart, dilated by the immense inrush of returning life, now contracted as if an invisible plug had been removed from it, and its fulness were slowly ebbing. "It's a queer business, anyhow," he mumbled.

"What is, dear?"

"This being alive again. I'm not sure I know yet what it consists in."

She came up and put her arms about him, almost shyly. "We'll try to find out, love—together."

III

This magnificent gift of life, which the Viennese doctor had restored to him as lightly as his New York colleagues had withdrawn it, lay before Paul Dorrance like something external, outside of himself, an honour, an official rank, unexpectedly thrust on him: he did not discover till then how completely he had dissociated himself from the whole business of living. It was as if life were a growth which the surgeon's knife had already extirpated, leaving him, disembodied, on the pale verge of nonentity. All the while that he had kept saying to himself: "In a few weeks more I shall be dead," had he not really known that he was dead already?

"But what are we to do, then, dearest?" he heard his wife asking. "What do you want? Would you like to go home at once? Do you want me to cable to have the flat got ready?"

He looked at her in astonishment, wounded by such unperceivingness. Go home—to New York? To his old life there? Did she really think of it as something possible, even simple and natural? Why, the small space he had occupied there had closed up already; he felt himself as completely excluded from that other life as if his absence had lasted for years. And what did she mean by "going home"? The old Paul Dorrance who had made his will, wound up his affairs, resigned from his clubs and directorships, pensioned off his old servants and married his old mistress—that Dorrance was as dead as if he had taken that final step for which all those others were but the hasty preparation. He *was* dead; this new man, to whom the doctor had said: "Cancer? Nothing of the sort—not a trace of it. Go home and tell your wife that in a few months you'll be as sound as any man of fifty I ever met—" this new Dorrance, with his new health, his new leisure and his new wife, was an intruder for whom a whole new existence would have to be planned out. And how could anything be decided until one got to know the new Paul Dorrance a little better?

Conscious that his wife was waiting for his answer, he said: "Oh, this fellow here may be all wrong. Anyhow, he wants me to take a cure somewhere first—I've got the name written down. After that we'll see. . . . But wouldn't you rather travel for a year or so? How about South Africa or India next winter?" he ventured at random, after trying to think of some point of the globe even more remote from New York.

IV

The cure was successful; the Viennese specialist's diagnosis proved to be correct; and the Paul Dorrances celebrated the event by two years of foreign travel. But Dorrance never felt again the unconditioned ecstasy he had tasted as he walked out from the doctor's door into the lamp-lit summer streets. After that, at the very moment of re-entering his hotel, the effort of readjustment had begun; and ever since it had gone on.

For a few months the wanderers, weary of change, had settled in Florence, captivated by an arcaded villa on a cypress-walled hill, and the new Paul Dorrance, whom it was now the other's incessant task to study and placate, had toyed with the idea of a middle life of cultivated leisure. But he soon grew tired of his opportunities, and found it necessary to move on, and forget in strenuous travel his incapacity for assimilation and reflection. And before the two years were over the old Paul Dorrance, who had constituted himself the other's courier and prime minister, discovered that the old and the new were one, and that the original Paul Dorrance was there, unchanged, unchangeable, and impatient to get back to his old niche because it was too late to adapt himself to any other. So the flat was re-opened and the Dorrances returned to New York.

The completeness of his identity with the old Paul Dorrance was indelibly impressed on the new one on the first evening of his return home. There he was, the same man in the same setting as when, two years earlier, he had glanced down from the same armchair and seen the diagnosis of the consulting physicians at his feet. The hour was late, the room profoundly still; no touch of outward reality intervened between him and that hallucinating vision. He almost saw the paper on the floor, and with the same gesture as before he covered his eyes to shut it out. Two years ago—and nothing was changed, after so many changes, except that he should not hear the hesitating ring at the door, should not again see Eleanor Welwood, pale and questioning, on the threshold. Eleanor Welwood did not ring his door-bell now; she had her own latch-key; she was no longer Eleanor Welwood but Eleanor Dorrance, and asleep at this moment in the bedroom which had been Dorrance's, and was now encumbered with feminine properties, while his own were uncomfortably wedged into the cramped guest-room of the flat.

Yes—that was the only change in his life; and how aptly the change in the rooms symbolized it! During their travels, even after Dorrance's return to health, his wife's presence had been like a soft accompaniment of music, a painted background to the

idle episodes of convalescence; now that he was about to fit himself into the familiar furrow of old habits and relations he felt as if she were already expanding and crowding him into a corner. He did not mind about the room—so he assured himself, though with a twinge of regret for the slant of winter sun which never reached the guest-room; what he minded was what he now recognised as the huge practical joke that fate had played on him. He had never meant, he the healthy, vigorous, middle-aged Paul Dorrance, to marry this faded woman for whom he had so long ceased to feel anything but a friendly tenderness. It was the bogey of death, starting out from the warm folds of his closely-curtained life, that had tricked him into the marriage, and then left him to expiate his folly.

Poor Eleanor! It was not her fault if he had imagined, in a moment of morbid retrospection, that happiness would transform and enlarge her. Under the surface changes she was still the same: a perfect companion while he was ill and lonely, an unwitting encumbrance now that (unchanged also) he was restored to the life from which his instinct of self-preservation had so long excluded her. Why had he not trusted to that instinct, which had warned him she was the woman for a sentimental parenthesis, not for the pitiless continuity of marriage? Why, even her face declared it. A lovely profile, yes; but somehow the full face was inadequate. . . .

Dorrance suddenly remembered another face; that of a girl they had met in Cairo the previous winter. He felt the shock of her young fairness, saw the fruity bloom of her cheeks, the light animal vigour of every movement, he heard her rich beckoning laugh, and met the eyes questioning his under the queer slant of her lids. Some one had said: "She's had an offer from a man who can give her everything a woman wants; but she's refused, and no one can make out why . . ." Dorrance knew. . . . She had written to him since, and he had not answered her letters. And now here he was, installed once more in the old routine he could not live without, yet from which all the old savour was gone. "I wonder why I was so scared of dying," he thought; then the truth flashed on him. "Why, you fool, you've been dead all the time. That first diagnosis was the true one. Only they put it on the physical plane by mistake. . . ." The next day he began to insert himself painfully into his furrow.

One evening some two years later, as Paul Dorrance put his latch-key into his door, he said to himself reluctantly: "Perhaps I really ought to take her away for a change."

There was nothing nowadays that he dreaded as much as change. He had had his fill of the unexpected, and it had not agreed with him. Now that he had fitted himself once more into his furrow all he asked was to stay there. It had even become an effort, when summer came, to put off his New York habits and go with his wife to their little place in the country. And the idea that he might have to go away with her in mid-February was positively disturbing.

For the past ten days she had been fighting a bad bronchitis, following on influenza. But "fighting" was hardly the right word. She, usually so elastic, so indomitable, had not shown her usual resiliency, and Dorrance, from the vantage ground of his recovered health, wondered a little at her lack of spirit. She mustn't let herself go, he warned her gently. "I was in a good deal tighter place myself not so many years ago—and look at me now. Don't you let the doctors scare you." She had promised him again that morning that she wouldn't, and he had gone off to his office without waiting for the physician's visit. But during the day he began in an odd way to feel his wife's nearness. It was as though she needed him, as though there were something she wanted to say; and he concluded that she probably knew she ought to go south, and had been afraid to tell him so. "Poor child—of course I'll take her if the doctor says it's really necessary." Hadn't he always done everything he could for her? It seemed to him that they had been married for years and years, and that as a husband he had behind him a long and irreproachable record. Why, he hadn't even answered that girl's letters. . . .

As he opened the door of the flat a strange woman in a nurse's dress crossed the hall. Instantly Dorrance felt the alien atmosphere of the place, the sense of something absorbing and exclusive which ignores and averts itself from the common doings of men. He had felt that same atmosphere, in all its sombre implications, the day he had picked up the cancer diagnosis from the floor.

The nurse stopped to say "Pneumonia," and hurried down the passage to his wife's room. The doctor was coming back at nine o'clock; he had left a note in the library, the butler said. Dorrance knew what was in the note before he opened it. Precipitately, with the vertical drop of a bird of prey, death was descending on his house again. And this time there was no mistake in the diagnosis.

The nurse said he could come in for a minute; but he wasn't to stay long, for she

didn't like the way the temperature was rising . . . and there, between the chalk-white pillows, in the green-shaded light, he saw his wife's face. What struck him first was the way it had shrunk and narrowed after a few hours of fever; then, that though it wore a just-perceptible smile of welcome, there was no sign of the tremor of illumination which usually greeted his appearance. He remembered how once, encountering that light, he had grumbled inwardly: "I wish to God she wouldn't always unroll a red carpet when I come in—" and then been ashamed of his thought. She never embarrassed him by any public show of feeling; that subtle play of light remained invisible to others, and his irritation was caused simply by knowing it was there. "I don't want to be anybody's sun and moon," he concluded. But now she was looking at him with a new, an almost critical equality of expression. His first thought was: "Is it possible she doesn't know me?" But her eyes met his with a glance of recognition, and he understood that the change was simply due to her being enclosed in a world of her own, complete, and independent of his.

"Please, now—" the nurse reminded him; and obediently he stole out of the room.

The next day there was a slight improvement; the doctors were encouraged; the day-nurse said: "If only it goes on like this—" and as Dorrance opened the door of his wife's room he thought: "If only she looks more like her own self—!"

But she did not. She was still in that new and self-contained world which he had immediately identified as the one he had lived in during the months when he had thought he was to die. "After all, I didn't die," he reminded himself; but the reminder brought no solace, for he knew exactly what his wife was feeling, he had tested the impenetrability of the barrier which shut her off from the living. "The truth is, one doesn't only die once," he mused, aware that he had died already; and the memory of the process, now being re-enacted before him, laid a chill on his heart. If only he could have helped her, made her understand! But the barrier was there, the transparent barrier through which everything on the hither side looked so different. And today it was he who was on the hither side.

Then he remembered how, in his loneliness, he had yearned for the beings already so remote, the beings on the living side; and he felt for his wife the same rush of pity as when he had thought himself dying, and known what agony his death would cost her.

That day he was allowed to stay five minutes; the next day ten; she continued to improve, and the doctors would have been perfectly satisfied if her heart had not shown signs of weakness. Hearts, however, medically speaking, are relatively easy to deal with; and to Dorrance she seemed much stronger.

Soon the improvement became so marked that the doctor made no objection to his sitting with her for an hour or two; the nurse was sent for a walk, and Dorrance was allowed to read the morning paper to the invalid. But when he took it up his wife stretched out her hand. "No—I want to talk to you."

He smiled, and met her smile. It was as if she had found a slit in the barrier and were reaching out to him. "Dear—but won't talking tire you?"

"I don't know. Perhaps." She waited. "You see, I'm talking to you all the time, while I lie here. . . ."

He knew—he knew! How her pangs went through him! "But you see, dear, raising your voice . . ."

She smiled incredulously, that remote behind-the-barrier smile he had felt so often on his own lips. Though she could reach through to him the dividing line was still there, and her eyes met his with a look of weary omniscience.

"But there's no hurry," he argued. "Why not wait a day or two? Try to lie there and not even think."

"Not think!" She raised herself on a weak elbow. "I want to think every minute—every second. I want to relive everything, day by day, to the last atom of time. . . ."

"Time? But there'll be plenty of time!"

She continued to lean on her elbow, fixing her illumined eyes on him. She did not seem to hear what he said; her attention was concentrated on some secret vision of which he felt himself the mere transparent mask.

"Well," she exclaimed, with sudden passionate energy, "it was worth it! I always knew—"

Dorrance bent toward her. "What was worth—?" But she had sunk back with closed eyes, and lay there re-absorbed into the cleft of the pillows, merged in the inanimate, a mere part of the furniture of the sick-room. Dorrance waited for a moment, hardly understanding the change; then he started up, rang, called, and in a few moments the professionals were in possession, the air was full of ether and camphor, the telephone ringing, the disarray of death in the room. Dorrance knew that he would never know what she had found worth it. . . .

VI

He sat in his library, waiting. Waiting for what? Life was over for him now that she was dead. Until after the funeral a sort of factitious excitement had kept him on his feet. Now there was nothing left but to go over and over those last days. Every detail of them stood out before him in unbearable relief, and one of the most salient had been the unexpected appearance in the sick-room of Dorrance's former doctor—the very doctor who, with the cancer specialist, had signed the diagnosis of Dorrance's case. Dorrance, since that day, had naturally never consulted him professionally; and it chanced that they had never met. But Eleanor's physician, summoned at the moment of her last heart-attack, without even stopping to notify Dorrance, had called in his colleague. The latter had a high standing as a consultant (the idea made Dorrance smile); and besides, what did it matter? By that time they all knew—nurses, doctors, and most of all Dorrance himself—that nothing was possible but to ease the pangs of Eleanor's last hours. And Dorrance had met his former doctor without resentment; hardly even with surprise.

But the doctor had not forgotten that he and his former patient had been old friends; and the day after the funeral, late in the evening, had thought it proper to ring the widower's door-bell and present his condolences. Dorrance, at his entrance, looked up in surprise, at first resenting the intrusion, then secretly relieved at the momentary release from the fiery wheel of his own thoughts. "The man is a fool—but perhaps," Dorrance reflected, "he'll give me something that will make me sleep. . . ."

The two men sat down, and the doctor began to talk gently of Eleanor. He had known her for many years, though not professionally. He spoke of her goodness, her charity, the many instances he had come across among his poor patients of her discreet and untiring ministrations. Dorrance, who had dreaded hearing her spoken of, and by this man above all others, found himself listening with a curious avidity to these reminiscences. He needed no one to tell him of Eleanor's kindness, her devotion—yet at the moment such praise was sweet to him. And he took up the theme; but not without a secret stir of vindictiveness, a vague desire to make the doctor suffer for the results of his now-distant blunder. "She always gave too much of herself—that was the trouble. No one knows that better than I do. She was never really the same after those months of incessant anxiety about me that you doctors made her undergo." He had not intended to say anything of the sort; but as he spoke the resentment he had thought extinct was fanned into flame by his words. He had forgiven the two doctors for himself, but he suddenly found he could not forgive them for Eleanor, and he had an angry wish to let them know it. "That diagnosis of

yours nearly killed her, though it didn't kill *me*," he concluded sardonically.

The doctor had followed this outburst with a look of visible perplexity. In the crowded life of a fashionable physician, what room was there to remember a mistaken diagnosis? The sight of his forgetfulness made Dorrance continue with rising irritation: "The shock of it *did* kill her—I see that now."

"Diagnosis—what diagnosis?" echoed the doctor blankly.

"I see you don't remember," said Dorrance.

"Well, no; I don't, for the moment."

"I'll remind you, then. When you came to see me with that cancer specialist four or five years ago, one of you dropped your diagnosis by mistake in going out . . ."

"Oh, *that*?" The doctor's face lit up with sudden recollection. "Of course! The diagnosis of the other poor fellow we'd been to see before coming to you. I remember it all now. Your wife—Mrs. Welwood then, wasn't she?—brought the paper back to me a few hours later—before I'd even missed it. I think she said you'd picked it up after we left, and thought it was meant for *you*." The doctor gave an easy retrospective laugh. "Luckily I was able to reassure her at once." He leaned back comfortably in his armchair and shifted his voice to the pitch of condolence. "A beautiful life, your wife's was. I only wish it had been in our power to prolong it. But these cases of heart failure . . . you must tell yourself that at least you had a few happy years; and so many of us haven't even that." The doctor stood up and held out his hand.

"Wait a moment, please," Dorrance said hurriedly. "There's something I want to ask you." His brain was whirling so that he could not remember what he had started to say. "I can't sleep . . ." he began.

"Yes?" said the doctor, assuming a professional look, but with a furtive glance at his wrist-watch.

Dorrance's throat felt dry and his head empty. He struggled with the difficulty of ordering his thoughts, and fitting rational words to them.

"Yes—but no matter about my sleeping. What I meant was: do I understand you to say that the diagnosis you dropped in leaving was not intended for me?"

The doctor stared. "Good Lord, no—of course it wasn't. You never had a symptom. Didn't we both tell you so at the time?"

"Yes," Dorrance slowly acquiesced.

"Well, if you didn't believe us, your scare was a short one, anyhow," the doctor continued with a mild jocularly; and he put his hand out again.

"Oh, wait," Dorrance repeated. "What I really wanted to ask was what day you said my wife returned the diagnosis to you? But I suppose you don't remember."

The doctor reflected. "Yes, I do; it all comes back to me now. It was the very same day. We called on you in the morning, didn't we?"

"Yes; at nine o'clock," said Dorrance, the dryness returning to his throat.

"Well, Mrs. Welwood brought the diagnosis back to me directly afterward."

"You think it was the very same day?" (Dorrance wondered to himself why he continued to insist on this particular point.)

The doctor took another stolen glance at his watch. "I'm sure it was. I remember now that it was my consultation day, and that she caught me at two o'clock, before I saw my first patient. We had a good laugh over the scare you'd had."

"I see," said Dorrance.

"Your wife had one of the sweetest laughs I ever heard," continued the doctor, with an expression of melancholy reminiscence.

There was a silence, and Dorrance was conscious that his visitor was looking at him with growing perplexity. He too gave a slight laugh. "I thought perhaps it was the day after," he mumbled vaguely. "Anyhow, you did give me a good scare."

"Yes," said the doctor. "But it didn't last long, did it? I asked your wife to make my peace with you. You know such things will happen to hurried doctors. I hope she persuaded you to forgive me?"

"Oh, yes," said Dorrance, as he followed the doctor to the door to let him out.

"Well, now about that sleeping—" the doctor checked himself on the threshold to ask.

"Sleeping?" Dorrance stared. "Oh, I shall sleep all right tonight," he said with sudden decision, as he closed the door on his visitor.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Human Nature* by Edith Wharton]